



Article

'A Whole Other World than What I Live in': Reading Chester Himes, on Campus and at the County Jail

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Abstract: This essay first briefly examines African American novelist Chester Himes' genre-defying position as prison writer turned detective writer, whose influence is clear not only in the usual suspects such as Walter Mosley but also in the Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s, and in the urban fiction tradition from Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim on down through today's Triple Crown books and others. I then look at how Himes' work has been received by the college students and incarcerated people who each spring for the past 20 years have worked together in reading groups set at the local county jail in a project linked to a class I teach, in order to raise questions about genre, audience and pedagogy. The two groups of readers, who may come to see each other as one group over the series of meetings, often develop readings of Himes' novel that push back against the analysis I present in the classroom.

Keywords: crime fiction; detective fiction; prison education; pedagogy

"He do the police in different voices." Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) and T.S. Eliot, (not) *The Waste Land* (1922)

"All in all, the new law-and-order *geste* transmutes the fight against crime into a *titillating bureaucratic-journalistic theater* that simultaneously appeases and feeds the fantasies of order of the electorate, reasserts the authority of the state through its virile language and mimics, and erects the prison as the ultimate rampart against the disorders which, erupting out of its underworld, are alleged to threaten the very foundations of society." Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Wacquant 2009)

Roughly a century after Dickens' character Sloppy's animated read-aloud of the crime news, and roughly halfway between T.S. Eliot's decision not to use Dickens' phrase describing that performance as the final title for his great poetic dissection of the anomies of modern life and Loïc Wacquant's diagnosis of the "social insecurity" produced in the performance of power that is the American carceral state, African American writer Chester Himes produced a body of work that bridges these texts and their arguments. While Himes' nine "Harlem Cycle" novels (1957–1969) do feature two Black detectives at work, they are "police procedurals" only in the loosest sense and their ideological work is vastly more complex than the "copaganda" one finds in most texts in the genre. This essay will first briefly examine Himes's genre-defying position as prison writer turned detective writer whose influence is clear not only in the usual suspects such as Walter Mosley but also in the Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s, and in the urban fiction tradition from Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim on down through today's Triple Crown books and others. I will then look at how Himes' work has been received by the college students and incarcerated people who each spring for the past 20 years have worked together in reading groups set at the local county jail in a project linked to a class I teach, in order to raise questions about genre, audience and pedagogy. Ultimately, the reading practices of those two communities may be seen to offer challenges to disciplinarity, both carceral and academic.



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i. Chester Himes, From Prison to Paris

Himes wrote his first stories while spending 7 years in an Ohio penitentiary (1929–1936). These stories, primarily naturalistic accounts of prison life, found an audience immediately—his first, “Crazy in Stir”, appeared in *Esquire* in 1934. On the strength of that success, after release he moved to LA to be a screenwriter but was locked out of the racist studio system and worked in a shipyard during WWII. His first published novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), depicts protagonist Bob Jones’ struggles with racism in the defense industries (Himes 1986). Graham Hodges notes that “Though [the novel’s] fury may reflect a nod toward Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, published six years before, Bob Jones’s character has more in common with the cool, remorseless killers of the detective novel” (Hodges 1986, p. viii), and Himes’ style is also more *Black Mask* (where he discovered Hammett and Chandler while reading in prison) than it is *Crisis* (for which Wright wrote frequently in the 1930s). After winning some acclaim for that work, Himes’ second published novel, *Lonely Crusade* (1947), which added a critique of unionism and communism to the first’s attack on racism and industrialism, was denounced from the left, right and center, Black and white alike, though Wright did publish a modest defense of the work (Muller 1989, pp. 37–38).

Himes persisted nevertheless with his longtime project, a fictionalized chronicle of his prison experience that he chose to recast as the story of a white hustler, Jimmy Monroe. After a series of rejections, the novel was finally published as *Cast the First Stone* in 1953 only after Himes agreed to change the race of the protagonist, reset the point of view from limited omniscient to first-person, and cut many passages of description and contemplation, leaving a hard-boiled “race novel” of prison life. Not surprisingly, Himes’ tender and explicit (for the time) depiction of same-sex love was also significantly cut—and what remained still outraged reviewers. Even the positive review in the *Crisis* referred to those sections as “repulsive degeneracy” (Franklin 1998, p. 30). It was not until 1998 that Himes’ original work was published under its original title, *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* (Himes 1998b). While both versions feature as their centerpiece an account of the prison fire Himes experienced in Ohio in which 330 men died (a tale he had first published in the 1934 short story “To What Red Hell” (Himes 1998a)), *Cast the First Stone* strips away much of Himes’ scathing account of the calumny of the prison officials as well as incidents of both brutality and heroism among the incarcerated people. This experience led Himes to the bleak conclusion “that human beings—all human beings, of whatever race or nationality or religious belief or ideology—will do anything and everything” (Himes 1972, p. 3).

The bitter experience with his prison novel compounded Himes’ sense of the impossibility of living in the U.S. and he emigrated to Paris in 1953, both to join Wright and the many other Black artists and intellectuals there, and because his work had always been better received in France. There, he built a relationship with Marcel Duhamel, a surrealist poet turned editor for Gallimard. Duhamel, recognizing the hard-boiled qualities of Himes’ work, contracted with him for an entry in their series of *romans policier* (police novels), and, buoyed by the recognition and especially the cash advance, Himes set to work on what would become *A Rage in Harlem* (1957). When Himes presented Duhamel with 80 pages of hustlers running an elaborate con in Harlem, Duhamel responded favorably, but reminded Himes that a *roman policier* should probably contain a policeman (Muller 84). This led to the invention for which Himes is best known today, Black NYPD detectives Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson, who would be featured in the nine novels of his “Harlem Cycle.”¹

While there are clear links between these novels and other “police procedurals” (not least Georges Simenon’s, which sat on French bookstalls alongside Himes’ works), Himes defies the conventions of the genre in at least two ways relating to the unique biography I have briefly surveyed. First, as the opening section of *A Rage in Harlem* suggests, he spends as much time with the “Harlemites” being policed as he does with his policemen, cross-cutting between the investigation of crime(s) and the world being investigated in ways that reveal both surprising connections and extensive disconnection/incomprehension. The latter resonates with the second significant difference in Himes’ version of the police novel,

the foregrounding of absurd and grotesque characters and situations, particularly in terms of interpersonal violence. Himes builds from his early prison experience that “anyone is capable of anything” a growing philosophical understanding of the particular nature of the absurdity generated by racism. He titled the second volume of his autobiography *My Life of Absurdity* (Himes 1989) because, he argues, “If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life” (1). Jonathan Eburne suggests that this sense of absurdity goes beyond the negation of meaning manifest in the “theater of the absurd” and toward a surrealist politics that critiques the naturalist assumptions of what Himes called his “social protest novels”: “Far from a merely formal conceit, Himes’s sense of absurdity thus pertains specifically to the conditions of black life in America, through which African Americans are interpolated into racist relations independently of their will, even in spite of their recognition of its effects” (Eburne 2005, p. 814).

Himes’ over-the-top representations of violence often begin inexplicably for both readers and the novels’ policemen, though in the end they generally are revealed to have been motivated by either inter- or intra-racial exploitation across the steep grids of power and privilege in Harlem. That violence frequently escalates irrationally, absurdly. Although his Black protagonists are much better at reading and intervening in the social world they police than their white counterparts, they are also damaged by their histories, personal and collective. This is most manifest in Coffin Ed’s “hideous” “acid-burnt face” (*Real Cool Killers* 19), the result of a con man throwing a glass of acid at him in the first novel of the series, which leads him to overreact to perceived threats in subsequent novels. While more rational than their racist fellow cops, Himes’ heroes are inescapably caught in the absurdist matrix of their surroundings and their history, in ways quite distinct from the hard-boiled tradition or its other inheritors. Despite the oft-cited connection to current writer Walter Mosley in terms of the use of detective fiction to indict American racism, by comparison Mosley’s more realist fiction seems cautious and genre-bound. However, Himes’ influence is very evident in two other popular genres—unsurprisingly, ones with even less cultural cachet in dominant literary studies than detective fiction—Blaxploitation films and urban fiction. It is beyond the scope of this essay to trace these connections in any depth, but it is worth noting that Ossie Davis’ adaptation of Himes’ *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965 novel, 1970 film) is often cited as the first Blaxploitation movie, influencing Melvin Van Peebles (who knew Himes) to make the most explicitly anti-racist film in the genre, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971). Himes’ influence is equally clear on fellow formerly incarcerated writers, Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck) and Donald Goines, whose work has in turn been broadly influential on hip hop culture, including the current wave of urban fiction writers.

The many detractors of this new wave of publications that has spawned imprints and special shelves in public libraries include Terry McMillan, who rants about “exploitative, destructive, racist, egregious, sexist, base, tacky, poorly-written, unedited, degrading books” in a widely circulated letter to Simon and Schuster urging them to abandon a new series (qtd. in Broyard 2002). These commenters would do well to realize how precisely their objections echo those raised to Himes’ novels in their moment (and to Blaxploitation, Goines, “gangsta rap”, and so on). In each case, the objections tend to miss the irony, absurdity, and signifying that Houston Baker and others have shown to be central to African American literary and oral culture from its inception, in favor of an anxiously literal reading of such texts as realist narratives of urban life. That such objections arise in response to literary texts alongside their more prevalent expressions in response to music, film and TV is in keeping with that critical tradition, as Baker’s inheritors have traced the roots of pop cultural irony and play back through the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.² However, it is important to note that alongside McMillan’s assumptions about race in urban fiction lie assumptions about gender, class and aesthetic weakness that slide from the texts and their writers onto the “degrad[ed]” audience. Hence it is almost *too* ironic that rapper Sister Souljah is now one of the most widely read authors of urban fiction.

Souljah first gained notoriety when Bill Clinton willfully misread her comments about the 1992 LA uprising in a bid to show himself to be a different kind of Democrat—the kind who would go on to support the 1994 Crime Omnibus Bill that contributed significantly to mass incarceration. One imagines that Himes would have been unsurprised that her books produce equally absurd misreadings.

ii. Chester Himes, From Campus to Jail

Similar dynamics and similarly divergent responses emerge when college students and incarcerated people (hereafter, “MCF students”³) at Monroe Correctional Facility, a county jail, read Chester Himes together, as they have been doing each spring for the past 20 years. One can see tension even in the framing of the endeavor for the two audiences. While on campus the reading groups are the “Jail Project”, a service-learning option for students in a general education literature class, at the jail they are the “Nazareth book club.” I find this to be a productive tension, inviting participants into both the seriousness of purpose of an academic project and the casualness and social connectivity of a book club. However, it is fair to say that for me on campus, and for the Education Coordinator at the jail, those labels are also useful in obtaining permission to run the program at all.

The tension in the different framing, however, is only the beginning, opening as it does onto broader questions about authority, prestige, communities of readers and the power to fix literary meaning that echo through the reception of Himes and his followers’ work that I have explored above. Just as Himes’ fiction defies easy generic and ideological categories, so too do the readings that emerge from MCF and Nazareth students gathered in the jail classrooms complicate the usual dynamics of hermeneutic power in the campus classroom. As a result, for me and for many participants, the Jail Project has led to a much broader rethinking of whose interpretations of literary texts matter, and in what ways.

The Jail Project arose from a class originally focused on detective fiction that I broadened to include prison writing and retitled “Crime and Punishment in the USA” when I added the project in 2001. Through a college grant, we provide 30 MCF students with the books for the course and arrange for them to meet weekly in small groups in jail classrooms with small groups of students from the class. The groups’ sizes vary depending on classroom availability and how many sign up, but we strive to keep them under 12 participants, about half from each community. Demographically, the Nazareth student groups are mostly white, middle-class, and mixed gender; the MCF students, like the jail as a whole, are about half African American, one quarter Latinx, and one quarter white, and are gender segregated. Both groups keep journals recording their reactions to the readings and the meetings, and at the end of the project most participants agree to allow me to keep an anonymized copy of those journals. I attend the first few minutes of the first meeting of each group to help Nazareth students through security and answer participants’ questions, and I attend the last few minutes of the last meeting to recognize the MCF students’ efforts with certificates honoring their participation. In between, it is just the two groups of students in a room with a book to discuss (for more detail about the project and its outcomes, see my “Doing Time in College”, [Wiltse 2011](#)). It is embarrassing now to think that my original assumption was that the Nazareth students would bring academic perspectives on the literary texts while the MCF students would bring lived experience of the criminal legal system. While there is at least some truth to that assumption, I have met so many system-impacted Nazareth students, MCF students with advanced degrees, and such myriad other varieties of background and expertise among project participants that *any* assumptions about who is bringing what to those jail classrooms seem more likely to arise from bias and stereotypes than from actual insight into the participants. In particular, at MCF, in addition to students with formal higher education, I have met many students who have benefited from the informal networks of organic intellectualism that Joy James, Dylan Rodriguez and others have shown to exist throughout the U.S. carceral state ([James 2003](#); [Rodriguez 2006](#)).

The Jail Project, like the on-campus class, usually begins with a few Sherlock Holmes stories to illustrate how “Golden Age” detective fiction works to contain social disruption

and reinforce existing racial, gender and class hierarchies, before entering the murkier waters of the American hard-boiled tradition. As suggested above, Himes' "Harlem Cycle" novels reveal both similarities to that tradition and the distinct differences generated by his infusion of the genre with "African American sensibilities . . . , double-conscious detection, [and] black vernaculars" (Soitos 1996, p. 125). After discussing Himes, the groups shift focus to literature written by incarcerated authors, using the anthology *Doing Time* (Chevigny 2011) and Jarvis Masters' memoir *Finding Freedom* (Masters 1997), before concluding with a more recent, revisionist take on the detective fiction form, such as Denise Mina's *Garnethill* (Mina 2007).

I have generally used Himes' second "Harlem Cycle" novel, *The Real Cool Killers* (Himes 1988), which focuses on the killing of a white man who is attacked in a bar and then chased through the streets of Harlem. While both the white police and the "Harlemites" seeking to avoid their extra-judicial and judicial violence are eager to portray the killing as random, Gravedigger tracks the crime to its source in the wealthy white man's history of sexual predation in Harlem. The white police lash out frantically in an effort to give the media a plausible account of the high-profile crime, leading them to falsely accuse first a shoeshine boy, and then the leader of a group of teen wannabe gangsters. Gravedigger finally learns the actual killer is a girl in the group who, having been sold by her boyfriend to the predator, is trying to prevent another girl—who happens to be Coffin Ed's daughter—from suffering the same fate. Disgusted by all of this, especially by what he perceives as Black complicity in the white man's sex crimes, Gravedigger hides the evidence so that the girl will not be prosecuted.

The Real Cool Killers is discussed several meetings into the project to give the groups time to build some cohesion and trust before taking up what is often one of their most intense discussions. A typical Nazareth student account emphasizes the ways in which this text often leads to open questioning of police tactics, as well as the complex negotiation of individual and collective identity in the group setting:

A couple MCF students shared with us that they have also been beaten by cops and also that many of them have never heard Miranda rights read to them, they have only heard that on TV and in movies. This sounds so crazy to me and so unjust and it is hard to believe that maybe some of the stuff in *The Real Cool Killers* does really continue today. It seems like these guys are from a whole other world than what I live in. But at the same time [an MCF student] shared that he is from [a local suburb] which is also where I grew up. He graduated from the same high school as me two years before me. How could his life be so different than mine? It is so crazy and makes me wonder what he is in for.

In a similar vein, from an MCF student's perspective we see an account of a different group's discussion of the novel that also emphasizes its relation to the world he comes from, and the group's evolving collectivity:

We had a good discussion on how the system is today, compared to the time of when *Real Cool Killers*, took place. It was interesting to find out that people really don't think things like what happened in the book still happen. We (the other inmates) told them stories about how corrupt the depts⁴ can be some times and even more we shared our personal stories and things that we have witnessed while being here in jail. Don't get me wrong, there are good depts too, there are ones who would break their backs for you and there are those would rather break your back. I am very grateful to have this program, but more importantly I am glad to have good conversations with good, honest people who are not afraid to come to my "house" to talk.

In both responses one finds a complex mix of negotiation of the verisimilitude of Himes' text against lived experience, consideration of the differing backgrounds of group participants, and, crucially, *proximity* of their lives despite their present locations. While most of my work in this arena in the last decade has focused on building academic programs

in prison settings where the longer length of stay means we can offer credit-bearing courses and degree programs, the Jail Project has the great value of reminding participants that their “whole other world[s]” are a few miles apart. In Rochester NY, as in so many American cities, many residents, especially suburbanites, never consider that the large building in the city center with the blacked-out windows is a reminder that mass incarceration is not elsewhere, it is in the center of and constitutive of the place where we live.

Of course, the downside to using texts like Himes’ novel in a reading group setting, in which participants are likely to relate characters and events to their own experiences, is that even as MCF students may have more and better context for that discussion, they may purchase that authority at the price of further objectification. This MCF student’s nuanced response to the problem clearly illustrates this danger:

We talked about the book and how we could relate. Surprisingly it was quite realistic. A lot of the girls started talking about their experiences on the streets or in prison. How they could relate to the book or just how street life is in general. I have my own stories and could relate yet found myself embarrassed of them. It was like I could read the faces of these college girls and they just listened on with shock. I know we all have our own stories. Everyone (including young college girls) have their skeletons in the closet. But today I was ashamed of mine.

The complexity of group participants’ differing backgrounds and relationships to Himes’ characters and setting is further complicated by the issue of the texts’ realism or verisimilitude. As I have suggested above, in my classroom on campus I am careful to set up the idea that while Himes represents and critiques real racism, he does so using tactics that destabilize simple notions of referentiality. In a classroom full of mostly white, mostly middle-class students, it seems important to give them some vocabulary for talking about texts from *Real Cool Killers* to “Cop Killer” (to choose another text with related themes and a related complexity with regard to irony and the real [Body Count 1992]). Of course, that picture becomes doubly confusing when elements that my Nazareth students may come to see as part of Himes’ literary strategy of absurdism are discussed at the jail as “quite realistic”, in the words of the above-quoted MCF student. Questions of authenticity and authority are productively opened as my students balance their professor’s (borrowed) ideas about signifying and “playing the dozens” against the sometimes resonant, sometimes dissonant ideas of a group of people who, at the very least, know what it feels like to be convicted of a crime and live in a jail.⁵

Those questions of authority are further complicated by the fact that the MCF students often are very familiar with Himes’ inheritors in the urban fiction tradition, which, as Megan Sweeney shows, is among the most popular reading material in jails and prisons. Sweeney has, with laudable nuance, traced incarcerated readers’ “writerly reading practices” in response to urban fiction, as a complex dynamic of identification, “intuiting connections between their own and the characters’ behaviors and attitudes”, and “disidentification”, a phrase she borrows from José Esteban Muñoz who defines it as “tactically and simultaneously work[ing] on, with, and against a cultural form” (qtd. in Sweeney 2010, p. 162). That active, “writerly” process is fully apparent in the two MCF students’ responses to *The Real Cool Killers* quoted above, revealing the inherent weakness of the above-cited objections to such fiction by McMillan and others. That freewheeling and unpredictable meaning-making process is equally apparent in the following response, in which the MCF student moves from the novel to its generic connections to Triple Crown publications (the primary publisher of urban fiction) to her own identification and differentiation from the Harlem underworld Himes represents:

I looked at everything about the book the author the title other books by different authors in the back. I noticed the publisher Vintage Crimes, I compared the publisher to Triple Crown. Oh! Don’t get me wrong. I somewhat enjoyed the books, but doing this little time my mind has yet to rest. Rest from the novels about crime in the 5 boroughs [of New York City]. All blacks are not drug dealers, prostitutes, killers, etc.

The insistence here on the materiality of the Himes text (which Sweeney also notes among members of her reading groups), its relation to other texts, and its tenuous relation to reality is negotiated in a self-conscious relation with her reader who is not to “get [her] wrong.” She goes on to illustrate her final point with a page-long list of successful African Americans that ranges from Oprah and Jay-Z to her own children. Here, we see the student strategically drawing connections and insisting on disconnections among Himes’ characters, those she has encountered in urban fiction, and the real people in her life, from celebrities to relatives. The time and space of the Jail Project must be understood in light of the “little time” she is “doing” at the jail, and the characters in a course on the theme of Crime and Punishment in the USA must be mapped against the actual diversity of Black experience.

A similar dynamic of dis/identification also emerges frequently in MCF students’ responses to the end of the novel, a sudden and implausible twist in which the falsely accused shoeshine boy steps forward and proposes to the pregnant girlfriend of the now-dead gang leader. I present this in class as further evidence of Himes’ absurdist method, implicating readers who still somehow want a “happy ending” out of the grim, violent world we have encountered by giving us one that is too hasty and unlikely to satisfy anyone. Frequently, MCF students read it differently, as one Nazareth student reports: “The inmates thought the ending was optimistic, realistic, believable, and even hopeful.” Similarly, an MCF student from another group writes with touching sincerity, “It was nice to hear Sonny wanting to get married and father Sheik’s child. I give him a lot of credit for wanting to do that. I hope all works out for them.” To be sure, there are also MCF students who read the ending as ironic, or simply implausible and weak. However, the recurrent “hopeful” readings confront my Nazareth students and me with some truths that I keep coming back to, ones that echo through the story of Himes’ life as well as through his novels.⁶

It is tempting to dismiss such optimistic responses to Himes’ denouement, as well as those that treat his chaotic, violent version of 1950s Harlem as gritty realism, as simply naïve. “Come back after you’ve read Michael Eric Dyson and André Breton’s Surrealist Manifestos”, the College Professor in me wants to say, “and then we can talk.” One need not deny the usefulness of those academic contexts, however, to recognize other contexts at work, to see how readers in our classrooms and in the world around those classrooms put narrative to work for them in ways that defy systems of control that seek to contain their readings. When I hear administrators at the jail and sometimes at the college talk about the collaboration between MCF and Nazareth students that has been conducted for the past two decades, it is generally in terms that echo the long tradition of “bibliotherapy” in U.S. jails and prisons (for a good account of that history, see [Sweeney 2010](#), pp. 19–53). While I am certainly hopeful that books may be as “therapeutic” in the lives of project participants from both sides of the razor wire as they have been in my own, I am equally certain that the administrators and I have different ideas about the nature and goals of that therapy, and about what needs correcting in our “correctional facilities.” The active, writerly reading practices of MCF students, as they decide for themselves which writers are “keeping it real” and in what ways, reveal the power both of the materials they are reading, and of the meaning-making process in relation to self and world. That those readers, from Chester Himes and Jimmy Santiago Baca to the women and men at MCF, frequently go on to become writers takes that negotiation of authenticity and authority a step further.

One of my favorite moments in the Jail Project arises with some frequency in the classroom on campus, when a student raises her hand to object that while I have said X about the novel we are reading, the guys at the jail said Y, and she is not sure what to think. That is a productive confusion, I think, leading as the project does more generally to questions about power, privilege, and authority, and about how factors of race and class (among others) inflect the social processes that determine the project participants’ locations, questions that redound through the life and work of Chester Himes. Asking such questions may indeed lead to thoughts of “correction” and “rehabilitation”, not of the MCF students but of the systems and conditions that produce their incarceration.

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Notes

- ¹ For a more detailed account of this publishing history see (Sallis 2000, pp. 270–72).
- ² Landmark texts in this tradition include Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* and Elijah Wald’s *Talking ‘Bout Your Mama: The Dozens, Snaps, and the Deep Roots of Rap* (Rose 1994; Wald 2014).
- ³ Following the practice of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange, on which this program is loosely based, I encourage participants to refer to each other as “MCF students” and “Nazareth students.” While I haven’t been able to provide college credit to the MCF students I have found that the incarcerated participants value being referred to as students, and the project is intentionally equalizing in roles, with both groups of students taking responsibility for providing discussion questions, and discussion facilitation arising spontaneously from whomever in the room takes on that role at any given moment.
- ⁴ Rank and file corrections officers in New York State jails and prisons are frequently “deputies” or “deps.”
- ⁵ For most of its existence the Jail Project has been set at a dedicated facility in our county for sentenced people serving less than 1 year at the county jail. This more stable population has facilitated the creation of groups that can have (mostly) common members for the 6 weeks of the project—something that would be harder to achieve in the turbulent environs of the main county jail where most people are unsentenced.
- ⁶ I address the complex dynamics of hope, in Jail Project readers’ responses to the literature and in their lives more generally, in “Hope Across the Razor Wire.” (Wiltse 2010).

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