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# Prison Life Writing, African American Narrative Strategies, and *Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr*

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## Abstract

This essay argues that James Carr's autobiography *Bad* (1975) breaks the rules of prison life writing by hybridizing conventional autobiography with an African American storytelling mode called “lying.” Lying—which is much like the call-and-response of the African American tradition of the toast—has rules different from life writing about who can and cannot function as speaking subjects in autobiographical discourse. Like the toast, lying often celebrates the predatory violence of what Jerry H. Bryant calls “hard men,” such as the folk antihero, Stagolee. Carr reconstitutes what is able to be said in autobiography because the rhetorical setting of lying allows him to bring memories of violence into discourse by speaking from the position of the hard man—memories of brutality otherwise unspeakable in conventional autobiography, like the memories of a prison rapist. *Bad* incorporates the subject position of the hard man into the discursive field of autobiography; in so doing, it registers troubling complexities of prison life that cannot be conveyed within existing autobiographical conventions that define what prisoners’ memories can be shared in print. In *Bad*, the ethical quandaries of the American prison system and the often ethically tricky stories of prisoners are represented rather than narratologically resolved. By exploring the representation of violent crime in *Bad*, this article identifies and questions the unexamined rules of prison life writing and the African American autobiographical tradition and interrogates how working-class African American folkloric traditions might engage a more mainstream, predominantly white reading public.

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