

Keep it Real

Hip-Hop Fiction and the African American Literary Tradition

By

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To every self-identified non-reader who fell in love with *The Coldest Winter Ever* and
has been reading voraciously ever since.

Acknowledgements

What began with a simple observation in the African-American literature section of a bookstore has turned into a body of work that I never imagined possible.

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ABSTRACT

African-American literature has grown exponentially since the first documented slave narratives, and the current explosion of hip-hop fiction, or street literature as the genre is also called, is quickly becoming more than a publishing fad. Marked by the incredible success of *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the genre of street literature has become a controversial topic amongst publishers, bookstore owners, authors, librarians, and readers. However, all of the dialogue is focused on the crudeness and vulgarity of the genre, and whether or not these books actually have any literary value, which is unimportant in my estimation. Street literature, precisely because of its popularity with a previously untapped demographic, needs to be examined more carefully as a genre for what it offers the African-American literary tradition as well as for its insights into hip-hop culture. This thesis will explore what I see as the more important questions: why are these authors writing in this form, and what does the genre's undeniable popularity among African-American youth tell us about contemporary African-American culture?

The introduction will introduce the two novels examined within this thesis, K'wan's *Street Dreams* and Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*, as well as an overview of what the typical novel includes, what the conversation surrounding this genre has been thus far, and will also show how street literature is really a "rift on an old song" in the African-American literary tradition.

Chapter one provides historical context for the emergence of this genre, outlining the three literary movements in the African-American literary tradition, and how they set the stage for the materialization of hip-hop fiction. The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement were inextricably linked to the social atmosphere for African-Americans at the time, yet the African-American literary rebirth that occurred a decade prior to the wide-spread publishing of street literature paid little attention to the deindustrialization of African-American cities, and I argue that this disconnect between the literature and the contemporary time period during this renaissance predicated the appearance of street literature.

Chapter two provides an analysis of hip-hop culture and rap music's impact on the genre, and the ways in which the two are indelibly interconnected. In order to understand hip-hop fiction, one first has to understand the politics of the culture, many of which are a deviation from mainstream mores. This analysis will help the reader to not only understand the appeal of this genre to fans of hip-hop culture, but it will also help to contextualize the content of these novels.

Chapter three is an examination of both *Street Dreams* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* from a naturalist perspective, because it is common for writers of this genre to produce novels in this form. The purpose of this chapter is not to prove that naturalism is the only way to read hip-hop fiction, but rather to illustrate how the genre can be carefully examined and scrutinized for meaning in a traditionally academic format.

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Introduction

In the spring of 1999 there was a quiet, largely unnoticed season of change in African-American literature. Selling one million copies of the first edition alone¹, the now highly-recognized hip-hop novel², *The Coldest Winter Ever*, went with few critical reviews in 1999, and was certainly unnoticed by major critics. The one figure to proclaim the importance of the novel on the back cover of the text was Sean “Puffy” Combs, not in the least known for his ability to critique works of fiction³.

Written by rapper and self-proclaimed hip-hop activist Sister Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever* is the raw and vulgar tale of sixteen-year-old Winter Santiago, the daughter of a drug dealer. Neither the narrative nor the authorial style were noteworthy in the literary world, yet amongst young black Americans, this novel was the book they’d been waiting to read. The dialogue seemed to be taken from their daily conversations, the plot titillating and suspenseful, and the characters recognizable either from personal experience or from the stories told in the lyrics of rap songs. As one reviewer writes – in retrospect, of course – readers from the ages of 15 to 40 “were awestruck by Souljah’s ability to fill the pages with such brutal truth and reality. In *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the Bronx-born author gave the streets of New York a brand-new voice, and they screamed at a volume previously unheard of in the literary world.”⁴

Indeed, Souljah’s purposeful yet short-lived foray into fiction – she has yet to publish another novel – was the catalyst for subsequent novels depicting the fatality of the black ghetto,

¹ Arin M. Lawrence, “After a Season,” *Black Issues Book Review*. 7, 2 (May/Apr. 2005): 46.

² Throughout this work I refer to the genre I am examining as both street literature and hip-hop fiction. Neither term has prevailed as the definite name for the genre because all reviews and criticisms of this genre use both of these terms interchangeably, and I will do so as well

³ I should note, however, Sean Combs’ versatility in the entertainment field; he was featured in a recent Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. To say that he was the only figure to proclaim the novel’s greatness is not to demean Mr. Combs’ critical ability, but rather to acknowledge that this novel was widely read within the hip-hop community and not within literary circles.

⁴ Arin M. Lawrence, “After a Season,” *Black Issues Book Review*. 7, 2 (May/Apr. 2005): 46.

which is an astronomical shift from the historical fictions of Toni Morrison and the feminist prose of Alice Walker, authors that dominated *The New York Times* bestseller lists nine years prior to Souljah's fictional awakening. Just as reputed historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. proclaims the emergence of another black renaissance, with articulate and highly educated authors confirming the dominance of black culture within the American mainstream in 1997, two years later this renaissance is eclipsed with the dramatic increase in the publishing of street literature.

Judging by the lack of criticism and evaluation, much of the black literary world is unsure of what to do with the emerging genre. It is easy – too easy – to ignore these novels, as well as the novelists, on the grounds that the genre's hip-hop culture base inherently ensures that the produced fiction has no meaning or use for readers beyond keeping them occupied for a few hours. Yet the seemingly unquenchable hunger on behalf of the readership is reason enough to question this assumption, and more importantly, one should question why these novels are proliferating in the first place. Can it really be as simple as the commercialization of hip-hop culture has lead opportunistic businessmen and women to seek other lucrative venues to peddle an a lifestyle? Perhaps; but it has never been so cut and dry in the tradition of African-American literature. This genre, more than anything, is a new rift on an old song, occurring as the literary response to a sociological call, something that has happened time and time again with black authors. In the Harlem Renaissance, for example, the attempt was to bring humanity to the black person, to show that a "New Negro" had been born, and in the nationalist movements of the sixties and seventies, the literature was the voice of the separatist philosophy of the time. It is understandable then, that authors like Souljah, who take steps "into the formerly silent streets of literature's ghettos and back alleys,"⁵ can be seen as attempting to bring visibility to the long-

⁵ Ibid.

ignored stories of the still existent – if radically transformed - black ghetto. So if American literature was in the midst of a black renaissance in 1997, *whose* renaissance was it?

“What defines this renaissance, unlike the others,” says the novelist Jamaica Kincaid, “is that people like us are just getting started. Somebody told me recently that literature is dead. But it’s not that *literature* is dead; it is that *English literature* is dead. It is as if someone has removed the hands from over our mouths, and you hear this long, piercing scream.”⁶ How ironic that Kincaid’s words are also so applicable to this “renaissance” of street literature, yet she was referring specifically to her middle-to-upper-class contemporaries. “People like us,” for Kincaid, were highly-successful authors, many of whom were also professors, not the “raptivists”⁷ and reformed prisoners who author street literature novels. Kincaid’s imagery of a hand being removed from a previously silenced mouth is eerily relevant, because the long, piercing scream can be read from a wide selection of novels available in the African-American fiction section of your nearest Border’s Bookstore.

But what exactly are they screaming about (or screaming *for*)? Throughout history, the former slaves and their descendants have always relied on literature as an artistic platform where they could present the injustices of American life. “The problems of the race were considered so desperate that to use one’s skills for anything other than protest, group assertion, or amelioration was considered wasteful, escapist, and perhaps treasonous.”⁸ This is not a suggestion that all black literature is inherently political, but rather an insistence that literature, especially for black Americans who have endured a history of segregation and discrimination, has been an artistic platform on which to rebel against the incongruence of America’s promise of justice and the

⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr, “Harlem On Our Minds,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, 1 (Autumn 1997): 8-9.

⁷ Sister Souljah defines herself as a raptivist, or an politically conscious and active rapper.

⁸ Keith Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 2.

racist reality. As Bernard Bell suggests, any attempt to separate the cultural and political experience of black Americans from the literature that is born from that experience is futile.⁹

Thus, this tradition arguably began with the slave narratives and then the novels of Charles Chestnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar, who both focused on the disjointed and directionless black community post-emancipation, yet the Harlem Renaissance displays a wider array of authors who found literature to be the prime artistic display for the birth of the “New Negro.” The term was coined by the “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke, and was also the title of the manifesto – edited by Locke – that extolled the new dawn of black people and black art. “For Locke and his fellow authors, the function of a cultural renaissance was inherently political: the production of great artworks, by blacks, in sufficient numbers, would lead to the Negro’s ‘reevaluation by whites and blacks alike.’ And this reevaluation would facilitate the Negro’s demand for civil rights and social and economic equality.”¹⁰ The ultimate goal of the black novelist in the 1920’s was to humanize the image of the black American. Capitalizing upon the primitivist ideology that was already prevalent in the American mainstream, the New Negro writer according to Locke, forecasted “in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow”¹¹ by reappropriating “the nineteenth century image of Africa as a primitive land, a source of shame and self-hatred for many black Americans,” transforming it “into a symbol of pride by many developments...Seeking to identify with the folk, race-conscious intellectuals and writers began to tap the roots of their ethnic heritage...New Negro artists...began their literary careers by looking to Africa for inspiration.”¹² The literature produced in accord with this inspiration fell into many categories, from poetic

⁹ Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 3.

¹⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Harlem On Our Minds,” *Critical Inquiry* 1, 4 (Autumn 1997), 4.

¹¹ Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Traditions* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1987), 94.

¹² Ibid.

realism to historic romanticism, but regardless of its form, none of the novels of the Harlem Renaissance actually accomplished the goal of the movement, and it soon faded with the stock market crash of 1929.

What the Harlem Renaissance *did* help to intensify, however, was a desire to explore the political and social needs of black America through art, and this tradition was continued and strengthened in the 1960's with the Black Arts Movement. "[T]he Black Arts movement... lasted from 1965 to the early seventies. Defining themselves against the Harlem Renaissance and deeply rooted in black cultural nationalism, the Black Arts writers saw themselves as the artistic wing of the Black Power movement...[and] black art as fulfilling a function, primarily the political liberation of black people from white racism."¹³

Although the artistic intent was the same as the Harlem Renaissance, the content was radically different. The Harlem Renaissance writers created art that was *inherently* politically, whereas the Black Arts Movement's artists genuinely believed in creating fiction, drama, and poetry that was *explicitly* political. By doing so, these artists promoted notions of a black aesthetic completely separate from what they considered to be Western art and artistic theory. "The young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of a black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience."¹⁴ Although this movement was the most short-lived and also the least productive for works of fiction¹⁵, it has clearly had a significant influence upon the current genre of street literature.

¹³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Harlem On Our Minds," *Critical Inquiry* 1,4 (Autumn 1997), 4.

¹⁴ Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 9.

¹⁵ The Black Arts Movement is best known for the poetry and drama produced during this period, as will be discussed further in Chapter One.

The essential tenet of the Black Arts Movement – embracing as well as speaking to and for the masses, the holders of counterculture – is still alive and well in street literature. Black Arts Movement writers had charged themselves with the task of rejecting white culture and adopting this new form of black artistry, the Black Aesthetic. As Addison Gayle, one of the chief theorists, insists, “For those of us who read and write books and plays and poetry, the Black Aesthetic has to do with both love and killing, and learning to live, and *survive*, in a nation of killers, so that our children may breathe a purer and freer air...Let another generation deal with the niceties of beauty and art. This generation of black men and women has its work cut out for it.” Yet it seems obvious from the texts emerging on bookstore shelves that the subsequent generations are still not free to focus solely on the “niceties of beauty and art,” and are still consumed by a need to learn to live and survive within their environments, as is expressed in the fiction.

Thus, what occurred within those three decades between the Black Arts Movement and the emergence of street literature set the stage for the genre’s appearance. It has been coined a fourth renaissance by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and is a bit of an anomaly in the history of black literature. For the first time in the 1980’s, black literature was no longer something to be seen as outside of the American literary canon; it was on *Oprah*, in *The New Yorker*, and was being added to college course reading lists. The root of this change can be found in the dramatic growth of the black middle class. “The rise of the black middle class, is, thus, simultaneous with the rise of black art, especially the black novel.” With new economic power came the power to control which pieces of black art were prominent and representative of this generation. Unlike the Harlem Renaissance, when writers were dependent upon white patronage for publishing and support, in the 1980’s, “black writers [had] black agents and black editors, and their books

[were] reviewed by other black authors, assigned by black teachers, and sold in black bookstores.”¹⁶ Because of this social climbing, the black middle class was seen everywhere well into the 1990’s, from *The Cosby Show* on television to *Fences* on Broadway to Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, in addition to the novelists that were, for the first time, writing about everything but the current state of the lower-class black American. “In their openness, their variety, their playfulness with forms, their refusal to follow preordained ideological lines, their sustained engagements with the black artistic past, the artists of this renaissance seem as determined to define their work freely within a black tradition as they are to consolidate a black presence within America’s corporate cultural institutions.”¹⁷

It was thought that because these works were largely accepted by the American mainstream that this movement would last the longest, but the publication of novels such as *The Coldest Winter Ever* put a halt to black literature’s sole focus on anything but the current state of African-America. The entrance of Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* pulled the hand away from the mouth of the black underclass, a sector of the black community that was either written about by someone outside of that world, or was ignored all together. Prior to these 21st century rifts on the street, there were few that actually examined the street from the black perspective, aside from reformed pimps Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, who wrote the first novels that have any resemblance to what we currently see in street literature. The genre imbues the same vulgarity and raw, brutal honesty of the violence and mental desolation that occurs within black inner-cities that placed Slim and Goines on the map within urban African-Americans.

¹⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Harlem On Our Minds,” *Critical Inquiry* 1,4 (Autumn 1997), 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

It is because of street literature's ability to enter the African-American literary tradition with the goal of speaking to and about the masses that I find worthy of examination. Street literature is indeed filled with crude, slightly pornographic, violent novels, but it is also aiming to accomplish a goal that has been in existence since Charles Chestnutt first began to put a pen to paper: examine and critique the common black experience in America through fiction. Hip-hop fiction is not only popular because it embraces the culture of hip-hop, or because it is sensationalistic, but because the genre is invested in telling the stories that the current generation of African-Americans have lived, witnessed, heard about. The immense success of this genre indicates that a change happening in African-American literature, and whether this is a positive change or a negative change is not the question. The conversation surrounding this new genre is too often concerned with whether or not there is any value in these novels, or simply that this genre sells incredibly well, and neither point is getting to the heart of the matter. What is most important, and what I will examine within this work, is why hip-hop fiction is speaking to such a large audience, and what this says about the current state of African-American culture. As with the movements that came before, hip-hop fiction is filling a need, and it would be foolish to overlook this emergence on the grounds of its unsavory aspects.

The two novels I chose to closely examine, author K'wan's *Street Dreams* and Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* are by no means representative of the extent of hip-hop fiction. Souljah's novel was a must because of the impact it has had on creating a genre, and K'wan's novel retains multiple examples of the influence hip-hop has had on his fiction.

Thus, I will begin the examination of these two texts with a more in-depth analysis of the African-American literary tradition in Chapter One. Street literature enters this tradition at an interesting point; it follows a literary renaissance in which African-American authors felt they

could write about any topic under the sun, without having to focus explicitly on issues still affecting the black community. Indeed, authors such as Terry McMillan, Eric Jerome Dickey, and E. Lynn Harris have had long-running and lucrative careers writing fiction for and about the middle-class. Thus, a return to focusing exclusively on the lower-class and the tragedies that come along with it is stark. In order to properly see the pretext for hip-hop fiction, I will illustrate how the previous literary movements in African-American culture have influenced this new genre and paved the way for its emergence.

The second chapter demonstrates the deep-seated ties between the hip-hop fiction and the culture it is rooted in. The extent to which hip-hop culture and rap music has influenced and produced this genre is incredible; recall that this implosion of street literature began with a rapper and hip-hop activist. The connection to the culture is so strong, it is virtually impossible to read these texts without simultaneously focusing on theory and criticism of the culture as well. The literature was not born of itself, but is rather reflecting a culture that has been growing exponentially for two decades now. Almost everything from hip-hop culture has been attributed to these characters, from the dialogue to their understandings of gender roles. It is a culture of “keepin’ it real,” and that is exactly what these authors intend to do in their novels, to paint a picture of what they believe to be reality with literally brutal honesty.

Lastly, I will turn my focus to naturalist theory, and the ways in which it can be applied to street literature. While not an obvious connection, and certainly not the only theory that can be used when critically examining hip-hop fiction, the purpose of this chapter is to show the value in looking past the vulgarity. The connection between street literature and literary naturalism becomes most clear after examining the effect that literary naturalism had on African-American naturalistic authors such as Richard Wright and Ann Petry in the novels *Native Son* and *The*

Street, respectively. The theme of environmental determinism is key in all naturalistic fiction, but its intersection with race is more apparent in Wright and Petry's novels. For the 19th century naturalist, it was the change from the agrarian lifestyle to the urban that sparked the idea of fatalistic fiction, but for the black author in the 1930's and the 1940's, it was the depressing state of race relations and social injustice that brought about a return to this approach. For the street literature writers, then, one can infer that there is once again a sociocultural impetus for their fiction, the vast majority of which is written in the naturalistic vein. As will be explained in Chapter Three, neither of the authors examined here specifically state that they draw their inspiration from either African-American naturalist writers or white American ones. It is the dominant theme that was exhibited by naturalistic writers of the past, who looked at the fated world around them and, believing that the individual could do little to change the ways of society, wrote novels that reflected this philosophy. It is at this juncture that naturalism and street literature collide.

For such a prominent contemporary genre, it is disheartening to see the lack of critical attention it has received. None of these authors are writing dense or complicated prose; in fact, most of the novels don't embrace the standard form of the English language. Yet and still, is this reason enough to not glean from these texts their purpose and their effect on African-American literature and culture? These novels are evidently speaking volumes to their readers, and it is pertinent for the literary world to take notice of what they are offering to a generation as well as a literary tradition.

Chapter One: The Many Births of a Tradition

In the new millennium, now that African-American authors are regularly published by the mainstream publishing houses, are taught in collegiate literature classes and frequent the *New York Times Bestseller List* with regularity, it may appear that the African-American literary tradition has turned into an American literary tradition, with the boundary of race fading fast. However, even if Richard Wright is more of an American icon now than he thought he would ever be, the works of African-Americans *do* belong to a culture-specific tradition, because the vast majority of African-Americans are still writing novels concerned with black identity, past or present.

To ask the question of what exactly is the African-American literary tradition is to invite a more than century-long expose of socially impacted fiction, but there is a need to understand at least the three major movements in African-American literature to provide context for the current eruption of hip-hop fiction. It is questionable whether any of the writers in previous generations could have foreseen what is occurring in literature today, but there are certainly pretexts that set the stage for this contemporary genre to emerge, although none of the previous movements explore the poor, urban African-American space in the same manner as street literature.

In the Harlem Renaissance, The Black Arts Movement, and again in the literary renaissance of the 1990s, one can see the same questions being mulled over. The role of the African-American writer, the impact of the African descent, and the notions of black authenticity and aesthetic are three issues that one can find in every movement of literature, including hip-hop fiction. However, even though all three of these literary movements examined many of the same questions, they differed dramatically in the way they treated “the masses,” or the lower-class. For 1920s Harlemites, the masses provided the inspiration for their art, yet this art was

consumed by mainly white audiences. In the 1960s, literary revolutionaries once again believed that by embracing the masses they had found the black aesthetic, yet the expectation that literature and poetry could improve this group's socioeconomic and political circumstances was overreaching and soon failed its own mission. The generation preceding hip-hop fiction authors – comprising primarily middle-class college graduates and distinguished professors – produced so much quality fiction it seemed to be another literary renaissance. However, this generation of fiction writers was most concerned with looking behind them, so much so that they failed to address the deindustrialization and waste of urban ghettos that lay before them. Thus, while “the masses” have always been central to the black aesthetic, never before have the questions of the role of the African-American writer, the identity of the African descendent in America, and the question of black authenticity and aesthetic been represented in ways that both address and appeals *directly* to them, as well as to other classes in the black community. By highlighting these characteristics, as aforementioned, that were evident in these three previous movements, one can see that the current explosion of contemporary street literature – as well as the reaction to it – is appropriating these same issues not only for a different generation, but is perhaps accomplishing a task that black fiction writers have been attempting to do for years: reaching the masses.

The Hope of a Renaissance: Harlem Saves the Race

The first images that tend to come to mind when one thinks of Harlem in the 1920s are people such as Josephine Baker, flappers, and cigarette girls at locales such as the Cotton Club. For African-American intellectuals post-WWI, Harlem was proof that the race was developing, and for the southern migrants searching to get away from the sharecropping, Harlem was a beacon of opportunity. Harlem was also a creative greenhouse for those African-American

intellectuals, who had begun to develop the idea of a black aesthetic – originally wrought by W.E.B. DuBois¹⁸ – into a new identity, that of the New Negro. Literally a text published and edited by scholar Alain Locke, the *New Negro* was a collection of essays, art work and creative writing by both intellectuals and developing young artists who believed as Locke did that “all classes of a people under social pressure are permeated with a common experience; they are emotionally welded as others can not be.”¹⁹ By embracing their African heritage and past, the New Negro was to shun the hegemonic artistry of the past and look to embrace both the rural past and the urban future into one artistic reality. “Writing out of the depths of their group and personal experience, the talented few...spoke with a particular representativeness.”

While Locke and other Harlem Renaissance writers recognized the commonality between the classes and colors that composed the African-American race, they were unable to recognize that having the select few intellectuals speak for them may not lead to the kinds of race advancement they hoped for. Poet and author Langston Hughes, who purposefully wrote about the ordinary, lower-class black American in his works, made this clear when he stated, “The ordinary negroes hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any.”²⁰ The fact of the matter was that the individuals who were producing in the Harlem Renaissance were “[b]y family background and education...second-generation members of the middle-class black intelligentsia, a group whose color and class ambivalence was more intense and complex.”²¹ Thus, those who were actually participating in the Renaissance, while having the intentions of representing for the whole race, were in actuality speaking only for the upper echelons of black society.

¹⁸ See Victor A. Kramer, *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined* (New York: AMS Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Bernard Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 97.

²⁰ Ibid., 129.

²¹ Ibid., 106.

This fact, however, did not deter authors from their primary artistic goal of writing: to sway white American opinion from benign or active racism to acceptance and recognition of the beauty and richness of black American culture through fiction. "Literary images of African-Americans [was to be] emotionally liberating to white Americans...by awakening white American society to the passionate side of human nature...those black literary works...would humanize mainstream white American culture and make it responsive to conducive racial reform."²² While some critics find this idea absurd, it made perfect sense in the 1920s, when prominent white writers such as Sherwood Anderson, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway were becoming nostalgic "for the simple...and unmechanized existence" as a result of the "commercialism and standardization that followed industrialization."²³ It seemed to white artists, both in the US and abroad, that no race of people represented the simple beauty of pre-industrial life more than African peoples and their descendants. Primitivism was born, and the American 'negro' came into vogue. Thus, writers such as Locke, Arna Bontemps, and James Weldon Johnson thought it to be the perfect time to take advantage of the focus on black American's ancestral beginnings and embraced primitivism as a part of the New Negro.

According to Bernard Bell, "An oversimplification of the resiliency and vitality of black character and culture, literary primitivism exalted instinct over intellect, simple forms of social organization over more complex forms, and nature over art."²⁴ Primitivism has been interpreted in a more or less binary fashion since its debut in the 1920s. Similar to street literature, it has been referred to as "an unusual success...clearly [indicating] an eagerness for works exalting the

²² Robert E. Washington, *Ideologies of African-American Literature* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield), 25.

²³ Amiritjit Singh, "Black-White Symbiosis: Another Look at the Literary History of the 1920s," in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*, edited by Victor A. Kramer, (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 34.

²⁴ Bernard Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 94.

exotic, the sensual, and the primitive”²⁵ as well as “the New Negro artists project[ing] their vision as honestly as they could: to discover a usable past, to define and explore their culture, not exploit it.”²⁶ Thus, the contradiction that existed in primitivism is one that resonates within African-American literature today: when African-American authors embrace the stereotype of the uninhibited, sexual, exotic creature as the definition of their past and present, are they participating in the exploitation of their race? This question is particularly laden when it is understood that those who were embracing the stereotype and writing about it believed they were depicting “lower-class blacks as the chief bearers of primitive instinctualism, manifested in their carefree and hedonistic lifestyles,”²⁷

Thus, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance are not far removed from the writers of street literature today. The problem of representation – specifically, *what* they were representing – seemed to be torn between an affirmative sense of an African-American literary aesthetic and exploitation. There are two distinct differences, however. First, as I’ve suggested, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance felt a literal duty to change the state of race relations with their fiction, and secondly, the audience and benefactors of the vast majority of Harlem Renaissance literature were white Americans.

Again, a large part of the African-American literary tradition has been the attempt to conquer racial injustice through art. Although it is true that during the Renaissance the focus of the writers “was more aesthetic and philosophical...than political,”²⁸ there is no denying the truth that writers hoped – idealistically, perhaps – that their writing would make a significant difference in the treatment of African-Americans. The usefulness of the primitive image was that

²⁵ Amritjit Singh, “Black-White Symbiosis: Another Look at the Literary History of the 1920s,” in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined* edited by Victor A. Kramer, (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 36.

²⁶ Bernard Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 113.

²⁷ Robert E. Washington, *Ideologies of African-American Literature* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001), 42.

²⁸ Bernard Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 95.

it “led to an unprecedented artistic activity that focused on the depiction of the Negro in fiction,”²⁹ yet when the stock market crashed and the Depression came into effect, the negro vogue became an indulgent habit that was tossed from the American mind along with sexual uninhibitedness and luxurious lifestyles, leaving African-Americans in the same second-class citizen boat they were in prior to the Renaissance.

The ease with which African-American literature came in and out of popularity is due to the amount of control those African-Americans had over their own literary Renaissance. Although there was a proliferation of talent, and the decade was a spectacular first for the amount of African-American achievement in poetry, drama, and fiction, the Renaissance could not have happened had there not been an appetite for the black American as “the unspoiled child of nature, the noble savage – carefree, spontaneous, and sexually uninhibited.”³⁰ Harlem in particular was seen as the epitome of the primitive ideology, and thus white patrons spent time as well as money uptown, allowing venues and artists to flourish in ways that would not have happened if not for this interest. As one critic pointedly asks, “who else was there but white readers in the 1920s?”³¹ To reiterate what Langston Hughes emphasized, the ordinary, working-class African-American was not reading *Nigger Heaven*, or even *Cane*. These works were written specifically for white audiences, not only in hopes of changing racist viewpoints, but also because they were the [only] consumers.

With the contemporary genre of street literature, on the other hand, there has yet to be any solid proof that any of the authors writing this fiction have any inherently political motivations; their goal instead is simply illuminating the experience of the young, urban African-

²⁹ Armiritjit Singh, “Black-White Symbiosis: Another Look at the Literary History of the 1920s” in *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined* edited by Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1987) 32.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 36.

American, and secondly, consumers of this fiction are virtually all young African-Americans³², which radically changes the discussion of exploitation. However, despite these dissimilarities, one can still see the African-American literary tradition, beginning with the Harlem Renaissance, in contemporary street literature. African-American authors of both eras stood behind the notion that it was the lower-classes of African-Americans that were authentically black, and both explored what they perceived to be authentically black in a fashion that was viewed alternatively as exploitative as well as showing pride in one's culture. The common themes that are found here between street literature and the Harlem Renaissance are manifest within the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, when African-Americans authors – for the first time since the Renaissance – once again flourished.

The Revolution was to be Written: The Black Arts Movement

The most short-lived and also the most impactful movement, especially on the authors of contemporary street literature, the Black Arts Movement considered itself to be the artistic wing of a political ideology. “Defining themselves against the Harlem Renaissance and deeply rooted in black cultural nationalism, the Black Arts writers saw themselves as the artistic wing of the Black Power movement...black art as fulfilling a function, primarily the political liberation of black people from white racism.”³³ It is important to note that the writers of the Black Arts Movement defined themselves against the Harlem Renaissance in the sense that they denounced the acceptance of stereotypes as a form of black aestheticism, not in their purpose of using

³² This has not been documented in statistical form, but all articles from *Black Issues Book Review* consulted for this work confirm a large following of African-American youth, although it is safe to assume that any individual ascribing to hip-hop culture, regardless of race or ethnicity, is also reading hip-hop fiction.

³³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Harlem On Our Minds.” *Critical Inquiry* 1,4 (Autumn 1997), 4.

literature as a means to a political end, because the writers of the Harlem Renaissance certainly attempted this feat, although perhaps not as explicitly or uniformly.

In the period from 1965 to 1975, writers such as Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Addison Gayle promoted the divorce of the American from the African with the creation of the black aesthetic. Similar to the New Negro, the black aesthetic was both a philosophy as well as a publication. A collection of creative writing and essays by African-American self-proclaimed revolutionaries, the *Black Aesthetic* – edited by Gayle – is the defining publication of the era. Infused with nationalistic rhetoric, those featured in the *Black Aesthetic* as well as those who subscribed to its philosophy indeed saw themselves as creating a new literary movement that would erase the failures of the previous renaissance. While the writers in the Harlem Renaissance may have seen their definition of the New Negro – an African-American who embraced an African past as well as Southern folk roots – as progressive, the writers in the Black Arts Movement saw this as an acceptance of hegemony. Thus, the black artist in the Black Arts Movement believed that “there [was] a discernable element in black art... that [was] new... The Negro revolt is as palpable in letters as it is in the streets. Change revolt to war, and the characteristics that distinguish the old art from the new are readily apparent. The serious black artist today is at war with American society.”³⁴ To be at war with American society was to be at war with any American conceptions of the identity of the black American, and here is where one can find the strongest divergence from the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, even this emphatic insistence that the Black Arts Movement was a new resistance, the writers who encapsulated this revolutionary artist identity still retained the African-American literary tradition of examining the African-American author’s role, as well as questioning what it is he represents in his or literature.

³⁴ Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 18.

Similar to the writers in the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement artists thought it imperative that the black writer wholly accept his or her being as a black American, and write about this experience alone. In addition, the notion that all African-Americans share a common socio-psychological experience in the United States that allows African-American writers to relay this experience whether having actually lived it or not resonates strongly with the philosophy of the Renaissance. The Black Arts Movement writers thought that “[the business of making revolution] the Tom Joneses and Janis Joplins cannot steal, and will not imitate. For deep in their guts they cannot feel what we have felt... Their eyes cannot see what our eyes have seen, and what the eyes of all those generations of dead and dying black men and women say, from slave ships to cotton fields to ghetto obsolescence; the crushing of manhood spirit in childhood, the destruction of what is pure and beautiful and godlike in ourselves before *we* could see it,”³⁵ which sounds exactly like the beliefs of the writers who subscribed to the New Negro philosophy.

As far as representation, the writers of the Black Arts Movement believed as well that the authentically black experience lay within the experience of the masses. As one black writer professed in an essay on the role of the African-American author, “The black writer at the present time must forgo the assimilationist tradition and redirect his art to the strivings within the race – those strivings that have become so pronounced, here, in the latter half of the twentieth century. To do so, he must write for and speak to the majority of black people; not to a sophisticated elite fashioned out of the programmed computers of America’s largest universities.”³⁶ Again, in the Harlem Renaissance, the majority of writers during the time period were the “sophisticated elite,” although one would find it difficult to get a revolutionary

³⁵ Larry Neal, “You Touch My Aesthetic, I’ll Touch Yours,” in *The Black Aesthetic* edited by Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 31.

³⁶ Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 418.

writer to admit this fact. Therefore, there is the similar issue of representation; although the focus was on the masses specifically, the writers, once again, were not actually of the masses. The question remains, then, where this redirection in literary focus came from, because it has been a part of the African-American literary tradition to focus on the masses, the “strivers” – the southern migrants, as they were in the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Hence, the writers of the Black Arts Movement reiterated many of the themes that one can see in the Harlem Renaissance, and thus, and in those ways the impact this movement of African-American literature had on contemporary street literature is similar to that of the Harlem Renaissance.

However, the most important addition to African-American literary tradition that the Black Arts movement made is the insistence of writing about black Americans *for* black Americans only. The key difference between the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance is the actual achievement of a black aesthetic that was recognized by a large number of black Americans. It was believed at the time that while every African-American may not have been a nationalist, “black people of all classes and levels of education shared in common a general disenchantment with the professed goals of American democracy, a new sophistication about power...and a new feeling of pride in the strange and wonderful beauty of being black.”³⁷ The fact that nationalist rhetoric reached African-Americans of all classes, as well as the basis of the rhetoric itself, meant that the Black Arts Movement was the first literary movement in the African-American tradition to have mainly African-American readership. White America was turned off by the separatist ideology, but as I mentioned earlier, many African-Americans recognized and respected the intent of the Black Arts Movement. This widespread recognition

³⁷ Sandra Holland Flowers, *Pens of Fire: African-American Nationalist Literature of the 1960s* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 10.

laid a foundation for the literary renaissance of the 1990s, as well as the contemporary genre of street literature, because African-American consumers had been found for black art.

Other than establishing of a unified black aesthetic, the Black Arts Movement adds very little literature to the African-American literary tradition. While the Harlem Renaissance begat Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Nella Larsen's *Passing* and *Quicksand*, and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, all of which are still widely read to this day, the Black Arts Movement left behind little more than an ideology. Part of the reason is because the ideology is so separatist, it doesn't seem relevant outside of the time period. Also, as a result of the ideology, many artists felt that literature wasn't suited for the urgency of the rhetoric. "Once committed to the printed page, the work of fiction was fixed in time and space...In contrast to this static form, poetry and theater, with their greater interpretative latitude, could be used by nationalists as either the focal point of or reason for an occasion." In addition, "novelists dependent on publishing houses were at a disadvantage because of the length of time required to produce a finished work and the subsequent time lag between writing and publication."³⁸ As a result, there are few novels that are identified with the period and philosophy, aside from Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Thus, it is not the actual fiction itself that sets the stage for the contemporary emergence of street literature, but rather the concept of a black aesthetic, the idea that black authors are to write about black people – specifically the masses – for black people only. Although the contemporary street literature authors never explicitly state their use of such an aesthetic, it is clear by their topic choice that they are writing mainly for African-Americans. While writers in the Black Arts Movement may view some of the topics covered in street literature today as a return to a Harlem Renaissance-like use of stereotypes, they

³⁸ Ibid., 131.

could not disagree with the fact the contemporary street literature writers are still producing fiction in a nationalist vein.

The Renaissance that has No Name: Self-Definition and Black Literature in the 1990s

The transition from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement may have appeared to be a quantum leap to the writers in the 1960s, yet in actuality, the goals of both movements was the same. During both eras, the concern was how to define and then write about that which is “authentically” black, and to establish political gains as a result. To reiterate, the essential difference between the two movements is a change in the consumer: during the 1960s, there was no longer a need to have a strong dependence upon a white audience, because other blacks were reading the nationalist fiction and supporting it. Both literary movements participated in the African-American literary tradition of writing about that which exalted the common man and spoke of and to the masses, but it was only the writers of the Black Arts Movement who actualized this goal. As a result of the success of an established give-and-take between the fiction authors and their readers by the time the Black Arts Movement became obsolete (strongly separatist literature, with a readership or not, still needs to find a mainstream publisher), black authors – free from the constraints of writing to appease rhetoric – began to examine all the internal aspects of African-American life with no real political agenda in mind.

Following the civil rights movement, it almost seemed as though dreams of racial justice were finally being realized. Authors such as “Ntozake Shange, Michele Wallace, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison; these women and their successors were able, simultaneously, to reach a large, traditionally middle-class, white female readership plus a new black female audience that had been largely untapped. The growth of this community of readers has resulted in an unrivalled

number of novels by and about black women...as well as an unprecedented large African American market for books.”³⁹ In the shadows of the Black Arts Movement, African-American authors began to flourish while still writing specifically about the African-American race. Two occurrences chiefly contributed to this prosperity, namely the growing African-American middle-class, who were both reading and writing these novels, as well as the topic of the novels themselves.

“Post-war children of college and university educated ‘negroes’ who had survived the Great Depression, made their way out of the working class, and determined that the US – slavery, poverty, segregation, and racism notwithstanding – was their home,”⁴⁰ were the ones that developed to be prominent African-American authors and scholars. The expanding African-American middle-class only furthered the precedent set by the writers in the Black Arts Movement; while the writers in the 1960s enforced a strict rule of writing only for black Americans and separating their work from white America both in content and consumption, the writers of the 1990s renaissance did not have to make such emphatic claims. “The nature and size of the new black middle class is significant here because of what it implies about patronage and the economics of black art: whereas the Harlem Renaissance writers were almost totally dependent upon the whims of white patrons who marketed their works to a predominately white readership, the sales of some of the most phenomenally successful black authors, such as Terry McMillan, the Delaney sisters, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, are being sustained to an unprecedented degree by black consumers.”⁴¹

For the first time, African-American authors were writing about what they chose to – and, granted, the vast majority stayed within the tradition of examining black American identity and

³⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Harlem on our Minds,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Autumn 1997), 4.

⁴⁰ Houston Baker in *Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 1990s* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 44.

⁴¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Harlem on our Minds,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Autumn 1997), 6.

authenticity – without any specific aesthetic to guide them, and still sold remarkably well not only amongst white audiences, but black ones as well. This freedom from ensuring appeal to white American audiences, as well as the freedom from restrictive black nationalist philosophy to sell solely to African-American ones, allowed for a wider focus in African-American literature. “[B]lack novelists...seem[ed] to owe a large part of their appeal to their capacity to express the desires and anxieties of this new middle class more freely from the inside than any previous generation could possibly have done.”⁴² Yet, in spite of this freedom that was another first in the literary tradition of African-Americans, one can identify an interesting trend in the literature of the 1990s. For this group of authors, what was most important was “the theme of...dispersal... [the] diaspora.”⁴³ Most concerning to writers in the 1990s was not the growing gap between the middle-class and the lower-class, but rather the issue of self-identification. Perhaps because they prepared no specific edict by which to craft their literature, they felt the need to turn to the past – the Middle Passage, African ancestry, slavery, and the post-bellum period – in order to learn how to identify the self. These authors felt that the writing process was “always about either seeking to free, to define, to realize, to reclaim, to heal, or to create the self.”⁴⁴

This belief is not odd or out of context, because indeed, as has been covered within this chapter, the African-American literary tradition is centered the seeking, understanding, and defining the African-American literary identity. What is notable is the way in which the authors of this fourth renaissance chose to attack the issue of black American authenticity; in order to “reclaim” the self, writers such as “[Ernest] Gaines, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, and Gloria Naylor, among others, [chose] to (re)construct the past rather than tell stories of the present..In

⁴² Ibid., 6

⁴³ Paule Marshall in *Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 1990s* (New York, Peter Lang, 1999), 31.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

this choice, they distinguish themselves from earlier generations of African-American writers.”⁴⁵

The previous two movements have always focused on the here and now, and in the case of the Black Arts Movement, the now was focused on with such a sense of urgency that it seemed the fictional form was too slow to contain the passion and the need. And yet, less than ten years later, the focus becomes strictly on the past of the African-American identity.

This changed focus is crucial to understanding the emergence of street literature because at the exact time that the African-American authors of the 1990s were writing, there were race riots happening in Los Angeles, Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.) was rapidly becoming one of the most prolific rap groups in the country, mainly because of their unapologetic descriptions of decaying urban centers, and the imprisonment rate of black men was at an all time high. “It is not especially obvious how stories of black women who kill their children (*Beloved*) or of slave suicide pacts (*The Chenysville Incident*) speak to those circumstances.”⁴⁶ Yet, these authors felt the purpose of this renaissance was to “do what no other great nation in the history of the world has had to do, which is to try and make some sort of sense of this incredible mix of peoples and cultures,”⁴⁷ meaning again, that African-American authors in the 1990s – because they could afford to – should examine in literature the diasporic reality of African-American history, and to reconcile self-definition with the selves they saw in the past in fictional form. It is quite possible that “in the frame of the American grand narrative of individual achievement in defiance of the odds... Those who succeed are encouraged to forget; part of what they are to forget are those who have not succeeded.”⁴⁸ Being that the authors of the 1990s were, by a large majority, highly

⁴⁵ Keith Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African-American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁷ Nunez, Elizabeth and Brenda M. Greene, *Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 1990s* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 118.

⁴⁸ Keith Byerman, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African-American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 4.

educated professionals, the question is not so much why they chose to focus exclusively on writing a literature of the past – perhaps that seemed to be the best way to reclaim the African-American identity – but why they chose so adamantly to ignore the future that was happening right before their eyes.

By choosing to focus on the diasporic experience of African-American history in their literature, the authors of the 1990s accomplished an unprecedented feat: they were selling more books than ever to both black and white audiences, so much so that it appeared to be a fourth renaissance of African-American literature. Yet, in creating this renaissance, these authors also neglected to even address the present, alienating an entire generation of curious African-Americans who felt that the literature of the past did not speak to them. Who *did* speak to them were Ice Cube and Biggie Smalls, rappers whose lyrics offered montage after montage of an urban lifestyle.

Regardless of whether or not the African-American youth listening to these artists actually lived the lifestyle isn't as relevant as the fact that these youth saw these artists as helping to define their identity, and representing what was soon to become the definition of black authenticity. As a result, the writers of the 1990s, due to their negligence to pay attention to the present and by insisting to look behind them always, paved the way for “the grandchildren of the Bigger Thomases and the Bessie Mearses of *Native Son* to write their way into their own literary explosion.

Chapter Two – Street Journalism

A result of postindustrial urbanity and a sense of malaise inner-city minority youth, hip-hop culture has gone from a late seventies pastime to the definition of an entire generation. Few born after 1987 are unaffected by this all-encompassing lifestyle. What began as a way for primarily black and Latino youth to voice their frustrations of joblessness and poverty [footnote?] has transformed into a global culture that both the affluent and the destitute identify with. For some, this transformation is indicative of hip-hop selling its soul, abandoning the very philosophy that birthed the movement: to “keep it real.”

Yet, for a culture so obsessed with presenting reality and truth at all costs, it is paradoxical that the forms through which this truth are presented is chiefly make-believe: fantastical raps performed by even more fantastical rap personalities; movies; television shows; fashion; and now, fiction. Street literature itself is not a phenomenon; the authors studied here are pulling entire pages from the novels of Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, who were the grandfathers of this pimp pulp fiction. The difference is that authors like Sister Souljah and K’wan have a following that rivals some of the greatest African-American literary figures. Street literature is not popular only among those familiar with the lifestyles portrayed, but is also a mainstay on both *Essence* magazine’s bestseller list as well as on *Publisher’s Weekly*, speaking to their ability to cross class lines.

This ability has proven to be a double-edged sword; on one hand, it has shown the literary community that, yes, African-Americans do read – and voraciously – but on the other hand, it has also proven that the literary marketplace is not big enough for both “serious” literature and the urban novel. With the advent of the Vickie Stringers, the Shannon Holmes, the K’wans, and the Y. Blak Moore’s, more respected authors such as Toni Morrison, Ernest Gaines,

Octavia Butler, and new author Nick Chiles (who has been surprisingly vocal considering the silence of other authors) may still be reviewed in *New York Times Book Review*, but they are not as popular among the readers as hip-hop fiction.⁴⁹

Chiles is one of the very few African-American authors who has been verbal about the affront to African-American literature that he feels exists in the genre of street literature. In a *New York Times* editorial, Chiles bemoans the decline of literary standards, expresses his fears about the fictional representations of African-Americans, and blames both the authors and the publishing world for printing only that which is most profitable. Chiles, who is the co-author of the novel *A Love Story*, found himself “thoroughly embarrassed and disgusted” as he browsed the selection at a Georgia Borders Books store. “On shelf after shelf, in bookcase after bookcase, all that I could see was lurid book jackets displaying all forms of brown flesh, usually half-naked and in some erotic pose, often accompanied by guns and other symbols of criminal life...smut is being produced by and for my people, and it is called ‘literature.’”⁵⁰

Interestingly, this smut was okay by Chiles as long as it stayed within the African-American community; however, when Border’s begins to sell “stories that glorify and glamorize black criminals,” it becomes a problem. “... [T]he placard above this section...didn’t say ‘Street Lit,’ it said ‘African-American Literature.’ We were all represented under that placard, the whole community of black authors – from me to Terry McMillan and Toni Morrison, from Yolanda

⁴⁹ Of course, I have to acknowledge that there was a period in African-American literary time prior to the publishing of *The Coldest Winter Ever* that can’t be – if only because it never was – considered “serious” African-American literary fiction. This period, stretching from the early nineties into the new millennium, was chock-full of what can be categorized as “upscale urban dramas,” as Seattle librarian David Wright calls them. These novels, written by prolific authors such as Terry McMillan, Eric Jerome Dickey, and E. Lynn Harris, were certainly more rooted in pop culture than the likes of Gaines or Morrison, but they are separate from the literature examined in this study because the focus of this type of fiction was on the middle-to-upper-middle class exploits of thirty-ish African-Americans. While admittedly sexually explicit, the “upscale urban dramas” were no were near as purposely unpolished, violent, and crass as what can be found in the current street literature, nor did these texts focus specifically on the limitations that young adults in urban areas face.

⁵⁰ Nick Chiles, “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut.” *New York Times* January 4, 2006.

Joe...to Edward P. Jones...”⁵¹ In Chiles’ mind, what is currently being produced is in no way deserving of the title “African-American literature” because it is not “quality writing.” “After all,” Chiles concludes, “how are we going to explain ourselves to the next generation of writers and readers who will wonder why they have so little to read of import and value produced in the early 21st century, why their founts of inspiration are so parched?”

While Chiles’ claims are certainly valid and should be duly noted, negative assertions of this kind are not unexpected, given the subject matter of the novels. The crude, the violent, and the hypersexual have always been taboo in American society, and with the exception of Martin Scorsese, few artists have been able to turn these taboo subjects into widely-appreciated art. For the authors of street literature, the goal is not to write the next Great American Novel, but rather to write fantastical accounts of real-life events, some of which are semi-autobiographical.

Popular street literature author Vickie Stringer is often cited as an author who – much like a respected rapper – has lived the life she writes about in her fiction. Her first novel, *Let That Be the Reason*, was published just weeks before she was released from a ten-year prison sentence for money laundering and drug dealing. Formerly known as Columbus, Ohio’s cocaine queen, Stringer has become a three-time bestselling author, book publisher (she started Triple Crown Publications when her first novel was turned down 26 times by mainstream publishing houses) and a fierce protector of the genre.⁵² For Stringer, her motivation comes less from a desire to produce great art, and more from her personal experiences. “I really wasn’t paying attention to the market. It was more from the personal experience that motivated me to want to share my urban experiences, my experiences in the street game...I want to inspire other young women...so

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Debbie Elliott and Vickie Stringer, “Triple-Crown: A Literary Empire of Hard Knocks.” NPR, November 25, 2006.

that my mistakes wouldn't have to be theirs."⁵³ In response to critics such as Chiles, Stringer invokes a familiar refrain that any critics are conservative members of the black bourgeoisie who would rather this "type" of lifestyle was erased from the mainstream's view. "... [P]eople who make those comments, they are ashamed of our experiences and they want us to go away. But I think people who are living in the projects, I think women who have baby daddies and people who are incarcerated, they have a story that needs to be told..."⁵⁴

It is not only the stories themselves that pose problems, but also the way in which the stories are told. "These hard-edged, street-based tales often burn up the pages with explicit crime-and-sex scenes, topped with graphic violence and seasoned with ghetto slang... The books are comparable to 'the worst gangsta rap in print' according to Fanta Mutota, owner of Atlanta's African Spectrum Bookstore,"⁵⁵ writes one concerned African-American novelist. TaRessa Stovall, in *Black Issues Book Review* argues that street literature – or "gangsta" literature, as she calls it – is dangerous because of the effect the coarse content has on the young adults that buy them. Yet even Stovall admits that if the readers of street literature weren't snatching up paperback fictions about being a drug-dealer's girlfriend or about being the drug-dealer himself, they would receive the same story in spoken form from rap music. "I was left wondering how [to handle]... the question of what is 'appropriate' reading in a world where sex and violence constantly bombard us from every medium and hip-hop sensibilities influence many African American teens."⁵⁶ Thus, the criticism that street literature is infecting growing minds with vulgarity, despite its accuracy or fallacy, is irrelevant since the same topics are now heard on any Top 40 countdown across the nation.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ TaRessa Stovall, "Parental Guidance: Gangsta Lit," *Black Issues Book Review* 7,4 (Jul/Aug 2005), 56.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The values, style, and themes exhibited in hip-hop culture and rap music parallel almost exactly the values, style and themes in street literature. It would be easy to write this genre of fiction off as a fad, another selling point in the commodification of hip-hop culture, or to not view these texts critically because they aren't as "serious" as works by, say, a Nick Chiles. However, these arguments are feather-weight when one considers that they are the very same arguments that developed when hip-hop and, more specifically, gangsta rap began to explode culturally. It is now commonly known that hip-hop and gangsta rap are clearly artistic reflections of an oft-ignored demographic and the world in which this sector of society lives, and street literature can be viewed in the same light. Granted, these novels are increasing the profitability of the hip-hop cultural lifestyle (which, in essence, *is* the lifestyle, to use one's culture for monetary gain), yet these authors are also having lasting effects upon African-American literature as a whole. Street literature is reigniting questions of literary representation that haven't been examined since the 1970s; the authors are quite possibly the sesquipedalian descendants of Richard Wright, writing fictional accounts of a quieted, urban truth that has never been so unapologetically prevalent in literature (categorically African-American or not); and, most importantly, these novels are capturing the attention of an entire generation in a way that only rap and R&B music videos have been able to do.

The more pertinent question is why artists, whether they are writing novels or music, are choosing to create art within this culture. Additionally, what *is* it about these novels that is so appealing to working women in their thirties', prisoners, college students, and tweens alike? In order to comprehend the answers to these questions, one must first understand the environment that spawned the culture and its evolutions since its creation.

The Making of a (De) Industry

The impact of deindustrialization post-civil rights on the black community was devastating, leaving urban environments bereft of housing, employment, or social services. Both cultural critics Robin Kelley and Eithne Quinn view Los Angeles⁵⁷ as the prime example of a perverse environmental fertility that made hip-hop and rap music's cultural entrance more than natural. "Along with the social and economic disintegration of black urban life, the combination of joblessness and poverty under Reagan-Bush, the growing viability of the crack economy and other illicit forms of economic activity, and the intensification of racist police repression, the general erosion of notions of justice, law and order"⁵⁸ all created more than enough material from which to create artistic expression. "Rather than attempt to explain in global terms the relationship between joblessness, racism, and the rise of crime in inner-city communities, gangsta rappers construct a variety of first-person narratives to illustrate how social and economic realities" affect African-American youth.

In the beginning, hip-hop culture – break dancing, graffiti, DJ'ing, vernacular – were all coping mechanisms, tools for youth who had no other available creative outlets. Rap music, which acts as the voice of the culture, is encompassed by lyrics that discuss almost to the point of exclusivity the trials of the poor black ghetto. Critic Tricia Rose defines rap as "the distinctive, systematic use of rhythm and sound, especially the use of repetition and musical breaks, are part of a rich history of New World black traditions and practices... Rap music revises black cultural

⁵⁷ Interestingly, while almost all hip-hop criticism points West for the source of the kind of deindustrialized survival system that is so integral to street literature, there are next to no authors placing their characters in West Coast settings. These novels are almost exclusively set on the East Coast: if not in Harlem, then in Brooklyn, and if not in Brooklyn, the next closest borough. Two notable exceptions are Nichelle D. Tramble's mystery *The Dying Ground* and Danyel Smith's *More Like Wrestling*, both of which focus on the Oakland/Bay Area post-crack cocaine. However, neither of these novels truly fits into the street literature genre, because the style and intentions of both authors was more for the sake of creating literary fiction rather than reflecting real experiences.

⁵⁸ Robin D.G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Post-Industrial Los Angeles," in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap music and Hip Hop culture*, edited by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 124.

priorities via new and sophisticated technological means...Noise on the one hand and communal countermemory on the other.”⁵⁹

While the duality that rap music possesses – both innovative and engaging in countermemory simultaneously – is also characteristic of street literature, what is more important contextually is rap’s usefulness for black urban youth found in rap in the late 1980s. Rap music became a way to not only unabashedly critique the societal ills around them, but it also became a way to rebel against representational expectations of the larger community by expressing the identities of urban youth.

It may now seem trite in today’s time to reiterate that another foundational aspect of hip-hop is its disparate origins since the majority of successful artists in this genre no longer reside in the neighborhoods (hoods) they claim, but this feature is crucial to the culture. “It satisfies poor young black people’s profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated.”⁶⁰ As the world around them was deteriorating, black youth created an art form through which to express what they saw. And what they saw, as critic Eithne Quinn describes, was “gangsta.”

Authenticity is a State of Mind

“Gangsta mental,” vernacular for having a gangster mentality, is a philosophy that street literature writers infuse in their tales. As is almost everything within hip-hop, the embracing of a ghettocentric⁶¹ ideology is old hat; to borrow a phrase from critic Tricia Rose, being young, poor,

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.64-65.

⁶⁰ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 11.

⁶¹ Ghettocentric, according to Quinn, “expresses the focus on poor and working-class urban identity, culture, and values, which increasingly pervaded black youth culture in the 1980s and 1990s – in no small part as a result of gangsta rap. Ghettocentric identity – its roots deep in African American history... - provided an expressive response

and black was nothing new by the time gangsta rap developed. As discussed in chapter one, the story of the masses had not gone untold before hip-hop fiction emerged; writers such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Amiri Baraka paid strict attention to the plight of the young and poor African-American in the urban space. Similarly, the characters that frequent rap songs - the pimp, the badman, and the hustler - are also no strangers in the African-American community (nor are they strangers to the larger American community either).

There are two clear reasons for the identification of hip-hop culture with the “hustler” figure: the effect of the deindustrialized urban environment and the obvious financial gains to be made from embracing the hegemonic view of the black male. Gangster “is simultaneously a kind of dissident, everyday political culture...and ironically, a hypervisible commercial form. It both contains the common subversions of authority predicated on a history of discrimination and offers a highly commodifiable brand of youth and race rebellion.”⁶² The juxtaposition of these two modes of thinking about art - that which is revolutionary, naturalistic, and nationalistic, versus that which is profitable, exploitable, and commercial – is a characteristic of hip-hop that places the fiction examined here squarely within this genre. The quality of being both subversive and lucrative is one that is unique to the genre of hip-hop fiction, as well as to other facets of the culture. “Keepin’ it real” is a two-fold task; it involves a naturalistic comprehension of the world of the lower-class, young African-American, as well as a keen understanding of the monetary gain in relaying this world to an audience.

to the deindustrialization, rightwing policies, and market liberalization that had been draining away productive resources from America’s urban centers since the 1970s.”

⁶² Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 23.

The concepts of “keepin’ it real” is most obvious in the way that the narratives discuss police authority, justify criminal activity, and construct “the ghetto as a living nightmare.”⁶³ In *Street Dreams*, the problem of police brutality and corruption is presented almost in every chapter. In the music, “police brutality, racism, and harassment form the political core of male rappers’ social criticism, and lyrics that effectively and cleverly address these issues carry a great deal of social weight in music.”⁶⁴ K’wan is not as deliberate in delivering a political message as would be a rapper, but what is clear is the lasting impact these types of philosophies – which have been around since the mid-80s when rap was forming as a genre – have on those who identify within the hip-hop community.

By the time the reader encounters the first image of police officers, he or she already knows that the protagonist Rio, and virtually everyone he associates with - save for his girlfriend, Trinity – is involved in some sort of criminal activity. As a result of the justification of the alternative lifestyle, the legal system is depicted as something to be avoided at all costs, and can barely play a positive role in the novel as that would relegate crime to the status of delinquency. Thus, by the time police officers enter the narrative, K’wan incorporates a lengthy scene, as narrated below, that seems to have no other purpose other than showing the reader the hidden criminality of the New York Police Department.

“As Rio crossed Manhattan Avenue, he spotted two of New York’s finest muscling some of the home boys. Rio hated the police...because of what they were doing to hoods all over the globe. They were supposed to be the protectors, but they were more like overseers. N.Y.P.D. became more like the S.S.”⁶⁵ Needless to say, the N.Y.P.D. /S.S. comparison is extreme, but

⁶³ Robin D.G. Kelley “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p.136.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁵ K’wan, *Street Dreams* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 37.

what is most interesting about the passage is the division that it sets up between Rio and “the hoods around the globe” and the police. Rio’s anger because of what police officers do in other urban areas echoes the N.W.A. song “Fuck the Police,” in which the rappers rhyme in the first stanza, “Fuck tha police/Comin straight from the underground/Young nigga got it bad cuz I’m brown/And not the other color so police think/They have the authority to kill a minority,” Both the music and the text speak to a sort of urban unity against the justice system, particularly the police.

K’wan’s narrative continues with Rio being awarded the opportunity to play the hero, coercing the dirty cops into leaving the younger boys alone by utilizing his knowledge of the legalities of police interrogation. Here K’wan employs another well-known tenet of hip-hop culture, that of the outlaw. In the novel, Rio approaches the situation, initiating confrontation with the police. “The neighborhood elders just kept it moving, while the police were slapping the youngsters up. Rio had a few minutes to kill, so he decided to have a little fun. He calmly walked over to the stoop and took a seat. When the police noticed him sitting there, he pulled out his cell phone and began scribbling something on a paper bag.”⁶⁶ Rio – whose propensity to have negativity towards police is emphasized on the basis of his status as a young black male – clearly seeks attention from the police, seeing the obstruction of their brutality to two other young black men as “fun.” His desire to draw attention, be it negative or positive, from the police officers, as well as to rebel against their authority, is suggesting an “implicit acceptance of an ‘outlaw’ status.”⁶⁷ Through the character of Rio, K’wan emphasizes a role that many who identify with hip-hop culture assume. Even the clothing style that is associated with the culture, underscores K’wan’s emphasis on rebelling against what is lawful. “[K]eep in mind...the degree of self-

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture*” edited by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 134.

consciousness with which black urban youths – most of whom neither belong to gangs nor engage in violent crime – insist on wearing styles that tend to draw police attention.”⁶⁸ This insistence is because those styles are associated “with criminality, violence, and (indirectly) police repression” by the mainstream culture, and thus those who wear these styles view themselves as presenting “images...of rebellion.”⁶⁹

Sister Souljah also incorporates the viewpoint that law enforcement – as well as governmental authority in general – has no positive role within the black community and is disliked and disrespected in a myriad of ways, yet this aversion is most explicitly expressed in the chapters chronicling the arrest of her father, drug kingpin Ricky Santiago. Within these passages, police, lawyers, and social service workers are not depicted as professionals who serve and protect, but as individuals who are conniving, dispassionate, corrupt, and destroyers of families. The police who arrest the protagonist’s father are described as “big, Long-Island white-boy, by-the-book cops” who can enter a home and be “in everything like roaches.” The protagonist learns of her father’s arrest from her mother, who tells her, “Of course they had his hands cuffed, locked tight in back of his body like he was some kind of criminal,” which is obvious irony since Santiago *is* a criminal. Yet, that statement is indicative of the viewpoint that the characters hold. *They* are not the criminals; the individuals populating law enforcement and governmental authority are, an opinion that encourages the characters to assume the outlaw position.

The protagonist’s mother emphasizes their position as victims of the police raid by saying, “Then one of them smart-ass cops, not the one in regular uniform, one of them feds or something, said it would be a long, long, long time” before Santiago would be released from

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.133-4.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

custody. She continues, “‘That’s what you think,’ I told them bastards. ‘That’s what you think.’ The next cop picked up [Winter’s] picture and was like woo wee that’s a fine ass.” Within this conversation, it’s evident what outlook the protagonist’s mother has on police: they are hypersexual, harassing “bastards” who are insensitive enough to make snide comments about her own daughter. From her perspective, all governmental authority does is make life worse for her, which is a perspective that the protagonist shares as well.

After the police raid leads to the loss of the family’s home and possessions, Winter asks a police officer “How is it that you people can take people’s property, steal their house, and not even allow a woman to get her clothes out or her baby sister’s bottles?” After the police responds that he was simply abiding by the law of America, Winter thinks: “I wanted to spit in his face...*Hats off to the motherfucking police....* They had the best hustle in town. They were the real criminals.”⁷⁰ This reversal of identification is a trend within hip-hop culture. Part of the aversion to police comes from the understanding that they and not those that they arrest were actually the real criminals. “Their ambivalence toward capitalism notwithstanding, gangsta rappers consistently trace criminal behavior and vicious individualism to mainstream American culture. Contrary to the new ‘culture of poverty’ theorists who claim that the life-styles of the so-called black underclass constitute a significant deviation from mainstream values, most gangsta rappers insist that the characters they rap about epitomize what America has been and continues to be.”⁷¹ Having a gangster mentality means possessing the alternative perception that what is lawful and American is actually the supreme gangster regime.

This detail is reiterated in the perception of crime offered by gangsta rappers – and thus, hip-hop fiction writers. In both the rap songs and in the novels, crime is normalized as a wholly

⁷⁰ Sister Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), 70.

⁷¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics,” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* edited by William Eric Perkins (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 130.

American activity (which strips crime of its abnormal label), that offers a viable way for a young, urban African-American to make a sizeable amount of money, with the latter reason being the principle one. In both *Street Dreamz* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, crime – specifically theft, murder, and drug trafficking – is normalized and is seen as merely an ends to a monetary goal.

Sister Souljah's protagonist, Winter, believes crime is the only way to achieve an affluent lifestyle. After her father's arrest, 17-year-old Winter has, for the first time, only herself to rely on for money, food, and shelter. Finding a minimum-wage job or turning to state assistance aren't viable options for her; the first thing she thinks of when she realizes that she is cut off from her livelihood is to engage in the very same activity for which her father was imprisoned for. She tries various avenues, but because of her age and gender, she never is able to go into business with some of the more notorious drug traffickers in her neighborhood. Undeterred, she insists: "There was no way I was gonna be standing around in some polyester McDonald's suit saying May I help you, sir?" The mentality that equates low wage service-industry jobs with failure is exhibited with consistency in rap songs and within hip-hop culture. "For the inner city black youth with high aspirations and real doubts about...prospects in the labor market, low-paid service jobs are easily viewed as 'dead-end'....This frustration with employment prospects – social immobility in the 'land of opportunity' and in the age of supposed 'color-blindness' – helps to explain the huge appeal of ghetto entrepreneurs...who reject menial work and spectacularly 'get over' outside of the system."⁷² Souljah emphasizes the drug kingpin fantasy that many rappers themselves exploit. And if the story that Souljah concocts – that of a two-parent family living an affluent life as a result of the father's control over cocaine trafficking in the area – is highly unlikely, it echoes a story that rappers depict in lyrics with frequency; listen to Biggie Smalls "Ten Crack Commandments" or any of Ice Cube's work, and one would find a

⁷² Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 51.

fantasy that serves as motivation for the young adult who didn't want to don the McDonald's polyester suit.

This fantasy isn't completely unfounded however. For both protagonists in the two novels examined here, crime is normalized in their fictional world, because it literally *is* the norm in the real environments on which the fictional settings are based on. With a lack upwardly mobile job opportunities, most street literature writers feel that it would be implausible and unrealistic for their characters to *not* becoming involved in illegal activity. "The exploding crack trade...opened up potentially lucrative business ventures for the poor...Despite the huge social costs of crack, this illegal trade also generated wealth, redistributing income into impoverished communities."⁷³ Illegal activity is not only used as a fantastical way to achieve an opulent lifestyle, but also as a means of simply surviving. In K'wan's *Street Dreams*, the principal reason that the formerly-imprisoned protagonist does not desert illegal activity for less deviant employment is survival. "I want more for myself...I can't see myself working a job for five-something an hour and being content," the character Rio says. "I don't advocate hustling, but it's keeping a roof over my mother's head and food in our bellies...I...believe in survival."⁷⁴ While the definition of survival is markedly different for Winter and Rio, the justification of their illegal activity is convergent: both protagonists see drug trafficking as the only viable option to "survive," whatever that may mean to either character, given the lack of desirable employment opportunities available to them. Thus, while street literature fiction may overemphasize or present a fantastical version of crime (which, in all honesty is not inexcusable seeing that it is indeed fictitious), the truth is that these fantastical representations are based on real experiences, which is what hits home with the readership. Recall that Vickie Stringer, one of the best-selling

⁷³ Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 50.

⁷⁴ K'wan, *Street Dreams*, (New York: St.Martin's Press, 2004), 36.

authors in this genre, was imprisoned for her own involvement in the drug trafficking of crack cocaine.

However, this refusal to take on minimum wage service positions is only one justification for the crime of drug trafficking, and all of the crimes that come along with it. In addition to monetary reasons, hip-hop fiction's normalization of crime is a result of the reality that in many of the places in which the fiction is set, crime literally is the norm. The entire premise of *Street Dreams* is that the urban environment predicates crime. Throughout the novel, the protagonist of Rio reiterates consistently that he didn't *want* to live a life of crime – all he wanted was to become a middle-class citizen with a law-abiding career. However, because he couldn't afford to leave the housing project in which he lived, he ended up “married to the streets,” as K'wan describes it. As a result, Rio's propensity to engage in violent and criminal acts escalated because of the environment in which he lived. If it weren't for the deviant activities of those around him – virtually every single character is associated with some form of abnormal behavior, namely the father of Rio's girlfriend, whose continuous rapes of his daughter drive Rio to murder him – Rio may have actually achieved his dream of living a life without crime.

For her part, Souljah reiterates this naturalistic view of the urban environment with her characterization of Winter Santiago. While Rio wasn't able to leave his environment, which served as the primary reason for his involvement in criminal activity, Winter was able to leave her environment frequently, but nevertheless chose to engage in criminal activity. Her ability to be nonchalant about murder and casual about thievery is evident of the ways in which her environment, which was rife with illegal activity, shaped her identity. Finding herself in the outskirts of New Jersey without any access to money, Winter assaults an elderly woman in order to gain access. While in a bar chatting with the bartender, Winter emphasizes to the reader that

she has cultivated the ability to “survive” even if that means purposefully committing criminal acts. Speaking to the bartender, she says, “He was just passing the time, but I was taking in everything that surrounded me...There was an elderly woman who entered the bar...She caught my interest [because] she was wearing a Versace blouse [and] expensive earrings, and some fine slacks...[S]he fumbled with her wallet and accidentally dropped some loose twenty-dollar bills on the bar top.”⁷⁵ After giving the reader a thief’s perspective of what to look for when seeking out a potential victim, Winter follows the woman to her parked and proceeds to assault her. “The [car] keys...were already in her hand ...In a split-second she didn’t know what hit her...It was my stone-filled sock up against her head...She withered like a flower and fell to the ground [and] I [took] two-hundred dollars in cash, the American Express gold card, two diamond rings, and [her] Gucci shoes...I was smart enough to leave her car and that Nordstrom bag right there.”⁷⁶ In having Winter feel absolutely no remorse for her crime, Souljah is emphasizing within this passage the detrimental effects that a criminal environment can have on emerging youth. In this case, “survival” is not achieved solely through drug trafficking in one’s own neighborhood, but rather one can “survive” by murdering and stealing outside of that environment as well. Once one adheres to these modes of living, these novels seem to say, one cannot step out of that life, because the nightmarish world of urbanity never leaves one’s being.

The construction of the ghetto as a nightmare is paradoxical if only because it is at once necessary in order for one to be considered “real” by peers, and yet at the same time is a space in which no rapper or author desires to stay. This paradox is pushed further by the fact that rappers as well as street literature authors are keenly aware that the American appetite for “ghetto tales” is large, and thus both groups capitalize upon the ghetto which they feel they have been wrongly

⁷⁵ Sister Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), 224.

⁷⁶ Sister Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), 225.

placed in due to race and class barriers. "When rap came out...People thought, 'That shit's crazy,' and ignored it. Then [rappers] came and yelled, [they] yelled about it...People said, 'Oh, that's just kids making a buck.' They didn't realize...that a good deal of gangsta rap is a window into, and critique of...the ghetto as a war zone."⁷⁷

In both *Street Dreams* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, one can see this construction of the ghetto taking place on every page. The purpose is of course to remind the reader of the type of overpowering environment the characters live within; K'wan does this via the protagonist who cannot escape the ghetto despite his best efforts, and Souljah by emphasizing the characteristics that the protagonist of *The Coldest Winter Ever* retains regardless of her environment. Phrases such as "the streets can bring out the worst in a person"; "When you're married to the streets, you can't get a divorce"; and "the price you paid when you slept with the streets" are all virtually interchangeable in *Street Dreamz*. In his novel, K'wan develops a harrowing dimension to what is known as city-life. He purposefully repeats terms and phrases that depict an environment of complete darkness. The number of times the sun shone or the characters laughed or smiled from happiness or joy totals five. While it certainly may be overkill to present to the reader an atmosphere in which nothing is ever pleasant, calm, or loving, it is also incredibly effective in emphasizing that the protagonist's point of view is exactly that: nothing is ever pleasant, calm, or loving in his world, which is the same view that many rappers have as well.

Part of the appeal of Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* was the setting: Brooklyn is one of many hip-hop Meccas. The protagonist's consistent referencing of the housing projects and lifestyles of Brooklyn is an obvious lure for hip-hop music fans. The distinct difference between K'wan's depiction of the ghetto and Souljah's is evident, because the very first sentence

⁷⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics" in *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 118.

in the novel [following a brief preface] states in Winter's defiant tone: "Brooklyn-born I don't have no sob stories for you about rats and roaches and pissy-pew hallways." The reason for Winter's lack of "sob stories" is her father's initial financial success, however – despite Winter's seeming inability to acknowledge the type of environment that she's in – Souljah is adept at providing the reader with enough narrative information to create the same nightmarish construction that K'wan creates.

A prime example of this is the living situation Winter finds herself in after her father is imprisoned. The effect of Winter's first-person narration is that the reader doesn't always get an accurate picture of whether the situation is dangerous because Winter's comfort level in her own environment prohibits her from relying such information to the reader. Thus, when Winter narrates that she would be staying with an aunt after all of her father's assets were taken, the reader expects for her to find safe surroundings. Instead, Winter explains, "I woke up...to Aunt B wanting a loan. Since I wasn't crazy, and Aunt B's husband was locked up with my father, I knew that if I gave her any money I'd never get it back....I went over to my Coach bag and emptied my stuff onto the bed...I left [my money] pinned to my bra."⁷⁸ Even in her Aunt's house after her father had been incarcerated, Winter knows that she can't trust anyone, not even her own family. By the end of the chapter, when Winter's carelessness allowed her Aunt to find the money Winter she had kept pinned to her body, and to call the Bureau of Child Welfare to come and take Winter into custody for retribution. As Winter accuses her Aunt of this, her Aunt responds: "Don't be stupid...You think I'ma call some authorities into my crib; Now this white lady knows all our business...She know I got too many people living in this apartment to be on Section 8; she know Alvin's locked up; She know your mother's on drugs; *She's looking at my*

⁷⁸ Sister Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), 105.

*arms checking for tracks.”*⁷⁹ In this passage the reader gains a better understanding of Winter’s situation. From the description given by Winter’s Aunt, the reader now understands that Winter was being housed in a housing project with an Aunt who was using drugs, because she could not stay with her mother, who was also searching for permanent residence and using drugs as well. By examining the nuances of description and dialogue that Souljah provides within Winter’s first-person narration, one can see the same construction of the ghetto nightmare discussed earlier.

Both of the artistic mediums of hip-hop culture – rap and fiction – critique police authority, examines the criminalization of black youth, and depict the ghetto nightmare for profit. By examining the characteristics in these two art forms concurrently, it becomes evident that rap music birthed a new literary genre. Yet, it is also important to recognize that while rap music may have helped to bring about the genre of hip-hop fiction or street literature, the novels are pushing into an artistic and socially polemical boundary that music cannot, and has not. A novel can expand upon the discussions of sexuality, governmental authority, and black identity simply because it is a larger format and is richer in detail. Sister Souljah can take the premise of a three-minute Public Enemy song and stretch it to upwards of 250 pages, filling in the holes with rich detail and raw imagery. While both mediums focus on the same thing – the rappers’ standpoint “is that of the ghetto dweller, the criminal, the victim of police repression, the teenage father, the crack slanger, [and] the gang banger”⁸⁰ – a rapper normally can only subsume one character at a time, while the street literature writer can fully develop a multitude of characters and examine them in-depth.

⁷⁹ Sister Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), 120-121.

⁸⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics” in *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 122.

In addition, while the rappers role as a “street journalist” has been essential to the development of black identity within contemporary American culture, street literature can expand upon this role. “When gangsta rappers do write lyrics intended to convey social realism, their work loosely resembles a street ethnography of racist institutions and social practices, told more often than not in the first person...In some ways, these descriptive narratives, under the guise of objective ‘street journalism,’ are no less polemical (hence political) than nineteenth-century slave narratives in defense of abolition... [rapper]Ice-Cube...explained, ‘We call ourselves underground street reporters. We just tell it how we see it, nothing more, nothing less.’”⁸¹ However, what these “street journalists” have seen is no longer underground, but it is still misunderstood. The issues of poverty, drug trafficking, black male identity, and penitentiary culture are still hot topics in academia as well as within black communities, and hip-hop fiction writers can help further this dialogue in the same ways that Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Walker have facilitated rich discussion on topics that plague the black community.

Unfortunately, however, none of these texts are currently being examined in the detail that *A Raisin in the Sun* or *The Color Purple* are interrogated. Certainly, if one compares the works stylistically, street literature does not measure up. Yet, this should not be a reason to dismiss the novels and not analyze what the authors *are* accomplishing. By adopting a “street journalist” point of view, street literature writers are writing in the same naturalistic vein as predecessors Richard Wright and Ann Petry. Thus, by positioning street literature novels within this framework – that of a contemporary spin on African-American folklore and naturalism – one can see the value in this genre, outside of the profit margin it brings to publishing companies.

⁸¹ Ibid, 121.

Chapter Three: Words on the Street

The genre of street literature, for all of its popularity and nouveau appeal, has gone largely ignored by critics because of one nagging question: does hip-hop fiction, as a result of its crude use of language, insistence on vulgarity, and rudimentary navigation of novelistic conventions (such as plot, character development, symbology), actually qualify as literature? The resounding answer, gleaned from the lack of responsiveness by of the elite literary and academic worlds, is that hip-hop fiction is not to be considered literature; at least, not in the same sense that works by such authors as Ernest Gaines are. However, while the genre's texts may indeed be vulgar and crude both in its forms and its use of language, it is important not to dismiss them as unworthy of critical examination. As discussed in the previous chapter, hip-hop fiction authors are at a unique position in the African-American literary tradition, because the texts retain concerns that can be found within earlier African-American literary movements – issues of black authenticity and identity, exploitation of that identity, and the role of the black fiction writer within the race – and yet these novels are distinctly deviating from the works being published by highly respected African-American authors just a decade before. However, in spite of the callous nature of the tone and the raw content in many of its texts, and especially because of the obvious exuberance African-American readers have for street literature novels, hip-hop fiction is begging for a careful examination of its purpose in African-American literature today.

While street literature adheres to an aesthetic that is ingrained in hip-hop culture and rap music, it is fiction written by African-Americans who are relaying their perception of the black American urban experience. This juncture between a quasi-journalistic expression of reality and the fictionalization of that reality is not new in the white American or the African-American literary tradition. These novels are strongly reminiscent of tragicomic works that have been

written by both white Americans and African-Americans, in that they invoke a sense of social captivity and determinism that allows them to be squarely viewed through a naturalistic lens. By understanding the framework that naturalism provides for contemporary street literature followed by examining specific passages from both *Street Dreams* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, readers will be able to better contextualize hip-hop fiction in the larger schematic of African-American literature.

The Natural City: Naturalism in the American Literary Tradition

The concept of the naturalistic novel actually began overseas with theories crafted by Emile Zola, but what is of concern in the context of contemporary street literature is the American adaptation of naturalism. Functioning with many different definitions as a result of its malleability, the most useful theorist of naturalism for our purpose is scholar Donald Pizer. "Naturalism has been in America a literature in which the writer depicts man under pressure to survive because of the baleful interaction between his own limitations and the crushing conditions of life."⁸² In addition, according to Pizer, while the naturalistic writer essentially sets his or her character up for failure by means of a socially deterministic plot, the writer also creates characters that have "a compensating humanistic value in [themselves] or in their fates that affirms the significance of the individual and of his life."⁸³ Thus, while there are social factors that prevent the naturalistic protagonist from living a life that is culturally desirable, he or she does retain redeemable qualities. Usually, these qualities are those that are "associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion that involve sexual adventure or bodily strength" that normally "culminate in desperate moments and violent death."⁸⁴ Granted,

⁸² Donald Pizer, *The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 168.

⁸³ Ibid, 87.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 87.

none of these qualities are supremely moral, and thus the association on behalf of the reader of the protagonist with the hero who goes against all odds is what is most important to retain regarding the naturalistic character.

The naturalistic novel, both because of such necessarily vague and all-encompassing definitions – “naturalist writers have refused to constitute themselves into a school...they...write with distinctive personal individuality about ‘hard times’ in America”⁸⁵ – and the fatalistic viewpoint that is often told in a sensationalistic and slightly vulgar manner, has been a literary form that is avoided by many literary scholars. Within the American literary tradition, naturalism has remained a primary stronghold for writers looking to examine and critique the social structure of the American urban environment. “Because of its documentary method, the naturalistic novel, it is argued, has concreteness and circumstantiality particularly congenial to the American temperament.”⁸⁶ Thus, the naturalistic novel, in the American eye, while beloved fiction because of its journalistic – or “realistic” – style, has also been considered distasteful because of the premise of naturalistic novels as well as the sensationalistic tone.

In this form, naturalism and urbanity are not mutually exclusive; after the industrialized cities provided potential for poverty, crime, and loss, naturalism emerged as a literary way to examine and critique the new urban space. The 1890s brought about a “rapid shift from a predominantly rural, agrarian civilization to an urban, industrial society, and the transition from traditional religious faith and moral belief to skepticism and uncertainty.”⁸⁷ Writers such as Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser recorded this contributed to this shift in fiction, choosing to depict the urban space as they saw it: as a place in which man had no control over his own fate, and instead was at the mercy of the whims of social forces. The beginnings of

⁸⁵ Ibid, 168.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 17.

the naturalistic novel featured the tragic hero, the character whose potential for growth is evident but who fails to develop because of the circumstances of life.”⁸⁸ This characterization of the individual, whose potential is stunted by a social system in which the powerful and rich always champion over the weak and the poor, and yet the individual still retains a form of personal dignity that makes the naturalistic novel a staple in the African-American literary tradition following the Harlem Renaissance. What is most important in the context of contemporary street literature are the ways in which the conception of naturalism, as defined here, can be applied to African-American literature. While it may seem futile to draw a distinction between the two, since essentially both American and African-American naturalistic novels feature the same type of tragic hero, it is essential to realize that the African-American naturalistic novel is impacted by race, which is the fundamental social force that prohibits the potential growth of characters in these novels. The prime example of this is of course Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, whose naturalistic tendencies are recognized both by investigators of the African-American literary tradition and by scholars of American literary naturalism.

Second Nature: Naturalism in the African-American Literary Tradition

According to scholars of African-American literature, “The predominance...of naturalism in the narratives...of black novelists is closely related to the prevailing hope or despair of blacks ever fully realizing their racial and national identities in America.”⁸⁹ For the African-American naturalistic author, it is not simply the urban space that determines a fatal outcome for his or her characters, but also the layering of race, gender, and poverty within that urban space in cases like those of Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas. The root of his despair and malaise is clearly tied to race.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 20.

⁸⁹ Bernard Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 78.

Naturalism first made its appearance in African-American literature in the novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt, who examined the socially deterministic relationship between African-Americans and American society. However, their novels, such as *Sport of the Gods* and *Marrow of Tradition*, exemplify more so a dual vision of naturalism, in that their novels are posited in the “romantic belief of nineteenth-century black Americans in moral responsibility and free will, in a world of purpose and meaning, which contradicted deterministic philosophy and mechanistic despair.”⁹⁰ Writers such as Dunbar and Chesnutt too often imbued a sense of hope in their novels that was completely absent from truly naturalistic works by authors such as Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Chester Himes. By the time these latter writers began to publish in the 1930s and 1940s, it was on the eve of an intensely political period that culminated with World War II, when American was rife with questions of allegiance to an economic democracy that had failed so many with the Depression. Within this environment, writers such as Wright found naturalism to be entirely relevant to the social context for African-Americans. The reason why works like *Native Son* are so notable is because characters like Bigger Thomas were and are “symbol[s] of America’s failure to provide the freedom and security necessary for all individuals regardless of race”; these authors emphasized “the belief that the character and history of man can be completely explained by biological and socioeconomic facts,” which seemed to be nothing more than reality at the time.

No other black naturalistic novel has achieved the notoriety that *Native Son* has, although all of them are clearly emulating naturalistic themes found within Wright’s novel. Thus, the influence of African-American literary naturalism on contemporary street literature writers is not extensive; what is most interesting to note here is not the fact that there is a precedent for literary naturalism, but rather that despite the absence of influence by this pattern, African-American

⁹⁰ Ibid, 81.

authors are still utilizing its conventions to convey their social reality in fiction. This fact reinforces my view of the usefulness of the naturalistic form to fictionally examine “hard times,” which, for the contemporary street literature authors, are captured in the deindustrialized urban space.

The Streets Keep Calling: Naturalism in *Street Dreams*

What is most intriguing about the third novel by hip-hop fiction author K’wan is that while all of his novels have socially deterministic plots, the premise of *Street Dreams* reads makes it seem like a quintessential example of naturalism. The protagonist, Rio, an African-American male in his early twenties, is “a good kid...smart, well educated, and soft-spoken,” who, because of his criminal background, can’t achieve upward mobility. As a result, he maintains a life of crime as a “manager” for a neighborhood drug dealer. While remaining in this position, Rio fantasizes of the simplicity of a middle-class lifestyle, which makes his inability to attain even the most basic of means because of oppressive surroundings all the more tragic.

Narrated in the third person, K’wan punctuates the sad tale of Rio’s criminal downfall with fatalistic phrases such as “that’s just the way it went in the hood” and “survival [wins] out over morals,” creating almost an alternate universe for his readers to enter. While the setting isn’t entirely novel to the intended audience – recall that hip-hop fiction’s readership is more than familiar with ghetto horror stories, courtesy of rap music’s lyrics – the irreversible and unrelenting cruelties of living in these projects appear to be especially nightmarish. The neighborhood never seems to be touched by any sunlight, and almost all activity the novel records takes place late in the afternoon or at night, enhancing this image. In addition, the characters that populate the housing project are invariably drug dealers, thieves, alcoholics, or crackheads; Rio’s own mother, due to her addictions, is described as “looking damn near

skeletal...At one time a beautiful blues singer...Now she looked more like a walking corpse.”

This emphasis on decay, dying, and death are the foundation of the novel; the tension lies within the juxtaposition between Rio’s youthful ability to dream of a better life at the start of the novel and the urban waste that steadily destroys his sense of possibility.

K’wan’s emphasis on death is clearly representative of the deindustrialization of America’s inner cities, but what is most affecting is his focus on the decomposition of the individuals living within these environments, specifically the previous generation. Hip-hop is certainly a youth-focused culture, but the lack of parental stability is stark in the novel, providing the reader with an image of children trapped in a nightmare without a parent to provide safety. Indeed, K’wan reiterates through dialogue the concept of “survival”; the resulting depiction is of youth attempting to survive in a rotting environment without assistance, unless it comes from themselves. The character of Trinity, who is Rio’s girlfriend, sole motivation, and also the reason for his demise, is most emulate of this image. Trinity dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen because of her mother’s death from HIV, leaving Trinity with the responsibility of subsuming her mother’s role, taking care of her alcoholic father as well as her brothers. “Trinity tried not to feel sorry for herself most of the time, but she was only nineteen and life had seen fit to thrust her into the role of homemaker way before she was ready...When her mother was alive...they were still poor and her father still drank uncontrollably, but at least there was someone in the house who actually cared about her.” K’wan worsens an already desolate situation by creating an incestuous father who rapes Trinity repeatedly from the time of her mother’s death. Throughout the novel, Trinity tries to take her own life more than once because she couldn’t understand “how anyone’s God could let something like [that] go on.” By

highlighting the lack of protection that Trinity has outside of Rio – no mother, father, police officer, nor God – could save the still teenaged character from her own personal nightmare.

The only adult/parent figures in the novel are two of the neighborhood's most powerful drug dealers, and even they end up murdered and replaced by younger criminals. The story of Rio's father – a Black Panther whose political beliefs lead to his death before Rio gets a chance to know him – is indicative of the unfulfilled promises of previous generations. The writers of the Black Arts Movement were the last generation of writers to attempt to tackle this level of African-American discontent, and with the death of the movement came the death of the possibility of change. Thus, Rio is not just a representation of a young, urban, African-American male, but of an entire generation of young adults that are left to fend for themselves.

Street Dreams takes the traditional naturalistic trajectory: Rio attempts to find a job, but because of a gun charge for which he served a year in prison, he isn't hired at any marketing firms despite his possession of a college degree. By the middle of the novel Rio learns of the horrific sexual violence his girlfriend, Trinity, was enduring, and the frustration of not having the agency to find a job that could rescue himself as well as his girlfriend culminates in the murder of Trinity's father. With this murder being the apex of the novel, Rio from then on is no longer "the poetic young man...only the monster Rio had tried so hard to keep at bay." From that point on, Rio becomes fully involved in drug-trafficking, with the hopes of the money accrued from the criminality to be a way out of the environment that had turned him into a monster. However, K'wan – like other authors in this genre – has only a fatalistic end for the young man who sees drug trafficking as the answer to social ills. As a result of his decision to "turn to the streets," Rio attracts the attention of rival drug dealers who kidnap and then murder Trinity, leading Rio to believe that "the streets had claimed another promising life and shattered yet another dream."

After this realization, Rio then puts a pistol into his mouth and ends his own life. The incredible tragedy of the ending is reinforced by the narrator's insistence that the story of Rio and Trinity's deaths would be "just another sad story in the daily news."

The consistent emphasis on the character's inability to leave the nightmare that was their home is the quality that makes *Street Dreams* and other hip-hop fiction novels examples of naturalism in African-American fiction. Similar to the novels by naturalistic writers such as Wright and Petry, contemporary street literature writers offer depictions of "the prototypical urban black American...driven to violence in rebellion against, and, paradoxically, in affirmation of his dehumanization...the black American as the victim of modern America."⁹¹ However, the distinct difference between a novel such as *Native Son* and *Street Dreams* is the failure of other black Americans, specifically the previous generations, to offer and extend survival strategies to African-American youth. Whereas Wright created a character who was "obsessed by a fear and hatred of white people,"⁹² hip-hop fiction authors create characters for whom white America has become the term for the overarching system that creates the social ills that prevent the characters in these novels from getting out of their oppressive environments. But white America is not the most immediate problem, rather other African-Americans *within* the oppressive environment. Contemporary street literature writers are revamping the naturalistic form in the African-American literary tradition because they are no longer examining solely the racist interaction between white Americans in power and the subordinate but violently rebellious black American; the focus has shifted to the struggle to survive within the black community itself. One can see this trend repeated more strongly in Sister Souljah's best-selling novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

⁹¹ Bernard Bell, *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987), 186.

⁹² Ibid.

Soul on Ice: Naturalism in *The Coldest Winter Ever*

In my estimation, Sister Souljah's seemingly simplistic novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, which has won the hearts of young African-American men and women across the US, can and should be examined for its thorough and complex discussion of African-American male-female relationships as well as black female identity development in an urban space. In order to examine the novel through a naturalistic lens, I want to emphasize the viewpoint that is quite similar to that of *Street Dreams*; as both authors emphasize the sense of individual survival that African-American youth are struggling to obtain in America's inner cities. The story of Winter Santiago's criminal demise is not as sensational as that which was depicted in *Street Dreams* – and a large reason for this can be attributed to the nonchalant tone adopted by the first-person narration of the principle character, Winter Santiago – but it is just as tragic. To relay the misfortune of Winter's life, Souljah utilizes a different tactic than *Street Dreams* author K'wan. Whereas K'wan reiterated on almost every page the animalistic destruction “the streets” reaped upon his characters, Souljah juxtaposes the evident destruction the environment has on Winter as well as her family and friends with Winter's refusal to see her environment and/or her lifestyle as negative or problematic.

With the start of the first sentence, Winter assures her readers: “Brooklyn-born, I don't have no sob stories for you about rats and roaches and pissy-pew hallways... We lived in the projects but we were cool with that.” As a result of the lucrative drug-trafficking empire that Winter's father controlled, Winter's family and home life is starkly different from that depicted in *Street Dreamz*. As a result of the wealth her family accumulated, it seems that Souljah does not have the opportunity to relay a naturalistic story because her characters are not initially poor or suffering under the weight of social ills. However, it is this preliminary sense of security that

actually reinforces the naturalistic theme: “the streets,” which predicate a life of crime in order for one to be successful, always lead to a tragic ending.

Although Winter Santiago lived for seventeen years in a two-parent, fully functional household without a want or worry in the world, it was only her father’s criminal success that separated her from the harsh realities of living in such an environment. As soon as her father is incarcerated, Winter’s mother begins to use drugs, and she and her three younger sisters all become wards of the state. At this juncture, Winter begins to realize the power that money held for her. “Between the money that I took out of my mother’s pocketbook, plus my own cash, I had a total of \$1,480, a diamond necklace, a diamond bracelet, diamond earrings, and the clothes on my back...I was cool on the outside, but on the inside I was in a state of panic...Normally I’d be plotting on a party...Now I was plotting on survival, something Santiago [her father] always took care of for me...If nothing else was clear, the fact that I had to take care of myself was.” Here, again one can see the author highlighting the plight of the urban black youth as one of individual survival.

Without family protection, Winter has to fend for herself in an environment that was devastatingly callous and unsympathetic. “Brooklyn-born” as she was, even the detached Winter admitted having to depend on herself and herself alone in the projects of Brooklyn was a frightening thing. What made the environment so nightmarish for her at this stage was her vulnerability; she could no longer count on family or friends to protect her from her surrounding elements. The reader learns this as the novel continues, depicting scene after scene where Winter is betrayed, tricked, and threatened by family, friends, as well as strangers, and is always escaping these situations within an inch of her life. Souljah clearly packed the plot with so many near-misses to create incredible suspense, but Winter’s anxiety over being able to survive within

the very place she once felt so at home in is indicative of Souljah's use of naturalism within this novel.

Winter mainly uses her sexuality and physical appearance to stay afloat and "survive" in her environment. Winter, like Rio, is representative of African-American youth struggling to develop in such a caustic environment after other African-American survival strategies have been erased, but she is also more specifically a representation of what this kind of environment instills in a young, African-American female. Winter sees no other outlet to success aside from either selling drugs herself, or being the girlfriend of a drug-dealer, the latter decision one that leads to her destruction. After being caught by police alone in a vehicle registered in her name transporting her boyfriend's drugs as well as guns, Winter ends up serving a fifteen-year prison sentence. Winter insists that she "didn't do shit" and that she's "serving fifteen years for having a bad attitude." She explains to readers, "they wasn't my drugs...they wasn't my guns...But since I was sitting in the car I rented, with the stuff concealed inside the teddy bears in the backseat, they considered me guilty." Souljah enhances her naturalistic view of the criminal demise of women raised in this type of environment, where they are solely focused on individual survival, with Winter explaining that in prison, "a bunch of Brooklyn girls got a crew...Everybody got drug-related charges stemming from their own little situations...But we wasn't nothing but the girlfriends to niggas moving weight...I got family and friends on the inside; That's why I don't get no visits...Everybody's already here." Souljah is suggesting with *The Coldest Winter Ever* that for Winter and the young women she represents who are left similarly without any sort of protection from their environment, the end result is prison. This concept is reiterated in the very end when Winter, shackled and wearing an orange jumpsuit, sees her younger sister at her mother's funeral (who dies by the end of the novel from years of crack cocaine abuse). As

Winter observes her sister, who is dripping with the spoils of an obviously opulent lifestyle, she recalls the decisions she made to achieve that level of financial status that she sees her sister currently enjoying, as well as the result of those decisions. Her sister does not acknowledge that she is destined for the same fate, but Winter certainly does. She tells the reader, "I wanted to warn her about certain things in life...But I didn't feel good enough to tell her what I really thought...I knew what she would think: Winter, you're just saying that because you're old...ugly...jealous...So instead of saying I had learned...I said nothing at all...She'll learn for herself; that's just the way it is." With this final sentence in the novel, Sister Souljah imbues the story with the kind of objective ambivalence that is distinct to naturalism. Instead of trying to prevent her younger sister from ending her life in the same place that Winter does, Winter instead transforms from one of the youth that is focused on individual survival to one of those of the previous generation who have decayed to the point of not caring. For each young woman to learn on her own seemed natural to Winter, because "that's just the way it [was]" when a young woman developed in that kind of environment. Thus, while *The Coldest Winter Ever* has much more to offer other than a straightforward, naturalistic view of the urban environment, it indeed retains the kind of pessimistic social determinism that is a key characteristic of the naturalistic form.

Conclusion

In literature – as with most art – the question of artistic value aspires to be abstract and malleable, but is in actuality often cut and dry, with the assumption being that the more commercial the fiction the lower it is in literary value.⁹³ By clearly marking hip-hop fiction as outside the realm of the “literary,” one is already demarcating its value and underestimating the opportunities to look at this genre critically. Within this work, therefore, I never sought to answer the question of whether hip-hop fiction deserves to be called literature, but rather strove to highlight the ways in which the fiction can be examined outside of publishing figures.

The attention that hip-hop fiction has gotten thus far has been for its ability to sell incredibly well by both self-publishers and publishing conglomerates, and for being able to reach a previously untargeted demographic: young black men and women.⁹⁴ However, I believe it is precisely because of these two characteristics that the genre needs to be examined more closely in order to understand the meaning behind its explosion. It is no longer a question of whether or not books entrenched in hip-hop culture will sell well, but rather *why* they are selling so well, and what this means within the African-American literary tradition.

Unfortunately, this question could not be answered fully within this work. Because of the incredibly contemporaneous nature of these novels, the academic and non-academic conversation surrounding this genre is still fairly quiet; its rapid-fire popularity is being noted in library and publishing trade magazines, and it is frequently discussed in *Black Issues Book Review*, but even then the discussion is still limited to its value. Thus, the critical examination of

⁹³ I’m drawing this conclusion from the three areas of African-American fiction as outlined in the article, “Street Lit: Readers Gotta Have It” published in the December 13th, 2004 edition of *Publisher’s Weekly*. Author Judith Rosen states that there are “two other African-American [fiction] trends: mainstream commercial fiction – Erica Kennedy’s *Bling* and Tonya Lewis Lee and Crystal McCrary Anthony’s *Gotham Diaries* – and literary fiction – Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*” outside of street literature.

⁹⁴ See previously mentioned article, “Street Lit: Readers Gotta Have It.” *Publisher’s Weekly*, December 13th, 2004.

the contemporary street literature genre clearly does not, and should not, end here. Exploring the connections between the literature and hip-hop culture and rap music helps to establish a concrete understanding of how and why these authors choose to write hip-hop fiction, and situating this growing genre within previous African-American movements helps to clarify what kind of literary tradition these novels are entering into, but probing further into the connection between these novels and penitentiary culture or why they have such an appeal primarily with young, African-American women would help to expand the comprehension of this genre.

In addition, naturalism is only an offering of what kind of critical analyses can be done with these novels. My naturalistic reading shows more than anything the potential for these novels to be examined carefully and intentionally, instead of being used only as entertainment. While the authors do provide a good story and often a fast read, I believe that because of the politics surrounding the culture they are writing in, hip-hop fiction can offer an eye into the minds of African-American youth in the same ways that the Black Arts Movement offered insight into a revolutionary culture, and the New Negro brought to light the hope of progression amongst the descendants of recently freed slaves.

I hope the conversation surrounding this genre continues to grow with the rapidity the genre itself has, and with the same tenacity. Whether it is fad or a lasting imprint, whether it is true art or something a tad more commercial; these are not the questions to ask of contemporary street literature. Rather, our focus should be solely on its voice, which is loud and clear, if only we listen.

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