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Marginalized-Literature-Market-Life: Black Writers, a Literature of Appeal, and the Rise of Street Lit

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Marginalized-Literature-Market-Life:  
Black Writers, a Literature of Appeal, and the Rise of  
Street Lit

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
English  
by  
Keenan Franklin Norris  
June 2013

Dissertation Committee:  
Dr. Erica Edwards, Chairperson  
Dr. Tiffany Lopez  
Dr. Toby Miller

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The Dissertation of Keenan Franklin Norris is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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This dissertation is the product not only of formal but informal exchanges, conversations and relationships. So I thank my whole Ph.D. cohort, but most especially Regis Mann. I look forward to Regis' scholarship and friendship for many years to come. The same is true of my Mills classmates, especially Laleh Khadivi.

Lastly, let me take a moment for two good brothers now passed on, Dr. Lindon Barrett, and Reggie Lockett, West Oakland's poet laureate.

## Dedication

To my mom and dad, Hiawatha and Calvin Norris

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Marginalized-Literature-Market-Life:  
Black Writers, a Literature of Appeal, and the Rise of Street Lit  
by

Keenan Franklin Norris  
Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, June 2013  
Dr. Erica Edwards, Chairperson

This dissertation examines the relationship of the American publishing industry to Black American writers, with special focus on the re-emergence of the street lit sub-genre. Understanding this much maligned sub-genre is necessary if we are to understand the evolution of African-American literature, especially into the current era. Literature is best understood as a combinative process, produced not only by writers but various mediating figures and processes besides, at the combined levels of content, commercial production and distribution, and social and literary context. Therefore, offered here is a critical intervention into what has until now largely been a moralistic and polarizing high art/low art argument by considering street lit within the vast flows of literature by and about Black Americans, writing about urban areas, the market forces at work within the publishing industry and the writer's place in the midst of it all.



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## PREFACE

My study takes as its subject the relationship both historical and current of the publishing industry to Black American writers, with special focus on the advent of and recent developments in street lit. The study asserts that this sub-genre, despite being unpopular within critical circles, is important to understand if we are to appreciate the evolution of African-American literature in its totality. Street lit (and literature by and about Black Americans more generally) needs to be understood at the combined levels of commercial production, distribution, content and literary context. The study, thus, marks out a unique critical intervention into what has basically been a moralistic and dichotomous high art/low art discussion around street lit by considering the lit[erature] within the vast flows of Black American letters, the publishing industry's changing market forces and the artist's evolving positionality.

In terms of form, this work is both critique and story. I'm not sure, then, what verb to use as I start to explain the form that I've undertaken. My dissertation is both "told" and "argued," "narrated" yet also "explicated." The dissertation holds in tension two perspectives, that of a father and that of his son. The father, a stalled intellectual and state employee, was first inspired to read extensively during the late 60s with the initial rise of such street narrativists as Donald Goines, Chester Himes and Claude Brown. After being stymied in his own attempts as a novelist and academic, the father initiates the dissertation's discussion not only of street lit narratives but of the relationship of African-American literature to the market apparatus that has been its traditional means of conveyance. The father historicizes the study in the Introduction, which is written entirely from his perspective. We also learn significant details about the man's childhood experiences and his adult life, all of which informs his literary concerns and, implicitly, those of his son. In Chapter One, the father initiates the critique on visual rhetorics, citing Barthes,

Rohrbach and other critics. The objects of analysis range from his old, frayed pictures of Jesse Owens to the frontispieces of slave narrative texts. At a certain point in the chapter, the father somewhat formally introduces his son's published essay on street lit cover art as a means to bridge the generational chasm between his analysis of visuality and more up-to-date analysis applied to contemporary texts. At various points (indicated by changes in font, not to mention tone) throughout the remainder of the chapter, the father intercedes into the son's essay, editing and commenting upon it.

Chapter Two displays a dramatic shift in narrative control, with the son at first the principle, and eventually the sole controller (i.e., the only author) of the text. This change is commented on at different points within the chapter by both father and son. The father would like to play a greater role in Chapter Two, but understands that his son is establishing firmer control not only over his analysis of contemporary street lit but of the sub-genre both as a type of African-American literature and urban American literature. Essentially, the intense focus that the son's scholarship allows him to bring to the study is outpacing the father's vast but haphazard experience in the field. Basically, the son is coming into his own as a scholar. Miscellaneous comments that the son makes in Chapter Two about his work as an instructor and his experience as a writer indicate a growing breadth of experience around the subject matter. The father realizes this shift in textual control, which is also a shift in form, not without some mixed emotions. Sadly, the shift is not only intellectual in nature, but also suggests the father's declining health. The fact that the process of the dissertation has required a half-decade of work and spans the course of his diabetic breakdown is subtly evident in his interwoven commentary in this section.

At the outset of Chapter Three, the son reports that his father has passed away. The son takes the study forward, in fact to its conclusion: It is the son who fully contemporizes the discussion around street lit's production and distribution and the book industry's current conditions of commerce. It is the son (in Chapter Four) who links this modern day subject to the work of David Walker, emphasizing Walker's role as entrepreneur, self-publisher and distributor. It is also through the son that the reader comes to understand the creative impulse underlying the entire project—explained in a brief dream-like encounter with his father. In this brief section, much about not only the form of the dissertation, but its flaws as well, its breaks in tone, its very recourse to such a strange and difficult style, is explained.

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In the Introduction, the claim that "[t]he slave narratives, in their appellate approach and in the material relation of the black writers to the white publishers that saw these stories into public existence, replicate Wedgewood's design and maintain the basic white-over-black power relation fundamental to antebellum ideology and commerce" is advanced and supported. Furthermore, the Introduction marks out how the slave narratives, as well as "publisher/audience-controlled" Harlem Renaissance writing (Ikonne, xi), and the severely one-sided negotiations over editorial control and publication that Nella Larsen, Chester Himes and Richard Wright endured all perpetuate the appellate position of the black writer. This historical reality has allowed "the serious writer no agency except that which would be mediated by their capitulation." The Introduction argues that this fundamental relation is only interrupted in a significant way with the market incursion of Terry McMillan and, subsequently, the street lit narrativists who are a primary focus of my study. Gerald Early is cited at length for his writings on this market phenomenon:

"First... there is a young, mass, black reading audience of such size that a black author can write for it exclusively without giving a thought to being highbrow or literary or to crossing-over for whites. Second, the taste of the masses is distinct from, and troubling to, the taste of the elite..." (Early).

The valid concerns and critiques against street lit are taken up in the Introduction and given their due. However, ultimately, the study argues that the divide between "serious" black writing and street lit is the artistic manifestation of a class-stratified Black America.

The Introduction calls for a critical approach that will analyze street lit and other subaltern genres with greater subtlety. Critiques that lean on latent classism, moralizing or ceaseless interpretation of everything black as some sort of resistance politics are deemed insufficient. Rather, conceding street lit's deficiencies, perhaps "street lit's lack can be held in productive and forward-looking dialectic with the loss attending many previous iterations of urban and African-American literature."

Chapter One "The Content of the Cover" looks specifically at the pictorial representations of the ex-slave authors featured in slave narrative frontispieces and contrasts these representations with the 1848 frontispiece for Walker's *Appeal*, then complicates this submission/dominion dichotomy by analyzing Jacob Riis' infamous "Bandit's Roost" photograph, and finally looks to several examples of street lit cover art. This critical focus on cover art renders an analysis of the visual politics surrounding slave, slum and street literature. The materialist and structuralist analysis of Barthes in *Image-Music-Text* is engaged. The major critical text in this section is Rohrbach's *Truth Stranger Than Fiction*, which links the slave narratives to the advent of American literary

realism on the grounds of a shared "humanitarian realism" and explicitly analyzes slave narrative frontispieces as intentionally presented verifications of the existence of black slaves and freedmen to white Northerners. With this backdrop, the study examines Jacob Riis' manipulation of the photographic image to elicit sympathy and scandalize viewers in his classic text of journalism-as-sociology *How the Other Half Lives*. Lurid street lit cover art (the subject of the son's essay, which is interwoven into the chapter's larger text) occurs in the problematic context of these prior appeals to progressive reformism, scandalized virtue, and the verification of "real" blackness.

Chapter Two "Reading Street Lit Closely and Comparatively:" focuses on close readings. The first of these is an analysis of Omar Tyree's *The Last Street Novel*, a meta-fiction that presents an internal critique and death-warrant upon the genre. A revised and truncated version of this piece has previously been published as part of "The Black Market" essay. In the dissertation's analysis, Tyree's novel is primarily a meditation on a male writer's anxieties around masculinity and hyper-masculine self-presentation and how these social pressures and conventions inform the creation of street lit. This focus on masculinity bookends nicely the second movement of the chapter, which extends the critique of gender norms within street lit to the female subjects (particularly Winter Santiago) in *The Coldest Winter Ever*. This section analyzes how these conventions read against Toni Morrison's first major work, *Sula*, and the main character in that novel, Sula Peace. *Sula* is, in my view, far more important a work than Morrison's prior novel *The Bluest Eye* for its expression of black female life. First of all, it is about women living through the stages of their lives, from girlhood, through womanhood, to the grave. Whereas *The Bluest Eye* is mostly about a girl who is a tragic victim of her society, Sula and the other Peace women form the heart of Morrison's second novel and live as complete individuals. They live through victimization, but experience many other realities as well. Second, the text evidences

greater formal control over plot, pace and readability than does Morrison's first novel, which, for me, really only rises out of its turgid plot complexities at the points of climactic drama. Third, *Sula* is situated at, or at least near the forefront of a radically expanding literary movement taking seriously the lives of black women. The 1970s sees the rise not only of Morrison's artistic and commercial power, but the emergence of Alice Walker, Shange and Gayl Jones as major literary figures in America. Morrison's 1987 lecture on *Sula* and her 2004 Foreword to the novel attest to her vision for the novel and its main character as a seminal social and artistic force. Therefore, *Sula* is an apt text to pair with Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* on a number of levels: Like *Sula*, *The Coldest Winter Ever* is a seminal text within its sub-genre of African-American literature. Like *Sula*, *The Coldest Winter Ever* is focused around the life of a memorable female lead character. Like *Sula*, *The Coldest Winter Ever* portrays a variety of black women in different social roles, living out a range of ideologies, from the hyper-materialist Winter, to the activist Sister Souljah, to the studious doctor. The formal differences between these two novels—Morrison is poetic, impressionistic and experimental; Sister Souljah is a realist and determinist storyteller—suggest differences in intent on the part of the two authors, as well as differences in the social context that the two novels are formed within. Morrison's novel is dually the product of an old world full of country folk ways and an emergent black feminism. Souljah's novel is situated within a contemporary urban world beset with inner-group violence, drug abuse and mass incarceration. These different contexts not only inform the formal differences between the two books, but help to explain why gender works so differently in the respective texts. Whereas Sula Peace strains against the gender conventions of Medallion, Ohio in the first half of the twentieth century, by century's end Winter Santiago seems to have no problem with patriarchy. This is counter-intuitive, as one might expect progress, not social regress; I believe Winter's incredibly bleak Brooklyn world, however, has dramatically limited her vision of her potential as a woman,



as well as her interest in the human capacity of the girls, women, boys and men with whom she engages. It is important to read my analysis of *Sula* with an incoming understanding that it is offered purely in dialogue with my analysis of Sister Souljah's novel. Far from taking a moral or ethical position vis-à-vis Sula and the other characters in the novel, my central conclusion about the novel is that Sula Peace is a transitional character, occupying a borderline between old and new African-American social worlds, value systems and gender norms. Sula's disruptive activity can best be understood (within the bounds of this dissertation's larger argument) as a point of artistic and social breakthrough. Winter Santiago and the novel within which she lives present a striking contrast to Sula Peace and the story that surrounds her.

Next, the chapter examines the polemical non-fiction urban text, Geoffrey Canada's *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* in conversation with Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*. *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun* is an encyclopedia of New York City youth violence; it is well twinned with *How the Other Half Lives*, which likewise is a dire first-hand account of poverty and terror in the streets of New York. Each text functions as a political demand of, and an appeal to, respectively, curb youth violence in American inner-cities and re-create Manhattan's tenements as humane, sustainable spaces connected to the city's considerable educational, cultural and financial resources. Both texts are also premised upon an ideology of progressive reformism that takes for granted a certain level of social inequality and institutional incompetence and instead of seeking systemic change, rather attempt to change the behavior of the poor and socially mal-adjusted in order to be functional within their respective imperfect societies. For instance, Riis conceptualizes all reform of the tenements as structured by capitalist ideology and developers' profit motives. All such reforms, occurring within capitalism, necessarily privilege capital over labor and the rich above the poor. Canada, similarly, seeks out the counsel of Congressional and United Nations dignitaries in his

work to end youth violence. How political figures without specific experience of American inner-city life and without much success in ending violent conflicts the world over would be of help in his cause is beyond me. What it speaks to is a reverence for institutions and formalized power that is in line with polite reformism.

Chapter Three “Black History” most strenuously engages the dissertation’s reason for being—the history of black writers' relationship with their editors and publishers. John K. Young's 2010 *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth Century African-American Literature*, integral throughout the book, serves as the most important critical text in this discussion. Young successfully argues that while McGann's formulation of editorial theory is deservedly revered for its groundbreaking critical approach, that McGann's identification of the work of Pound, Joyce and Yeats as archetypes of contested authorship "highlights authors who maintained an extraordinary degree of control over their works' production" (Young 29). By contrast, black writers have (with a few notable exceptions, Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, Toni Morrison) historically been disempowered, their authorial authority continually contested in the editorial and production process. This analysis extends the study's original critique around the appellate position, loss and lack in the material relation between black writers and their editors and publishers.

Percival Everett and James Kincaid's *A History of the African American People by Strom Thurmond* serves as the integral creative text. Ostensibly a one-note joke about a senile segregationist Senator somehow still alive and still rambling incoherently in the 2000s, hell bent on publishing a history of African-Americans, the text is actually a satire on Simon & Schuster

and the mainstream publishing industry. The Senator, we find, is no more than a moveable unit in a dubious battle for corporate power, information control and petty gratification. The Senator's assistant, one Barton Wilkes, seems obsessed with the idea that Thurmond's book will be published by Simon & Schuster and negotiates within the publishing house to secure agreement on this. Wilkes is interested in his own personal and political gain, as well as re-invigorating an outmoded old South ideology. He manipulates a menial staffer, Juniper McCloud, imposing both professional and sexual control over McCloud. This allows Wilkes access to McCloud's boss, Senior Editor Martin Snell, another more concerned with personal gain than with the honorable profession of Alfred and Blanche Knopf, Max Perkins and Toni Morrison. Beyond these basic absurdities of the industry, the essay explores the depiction of the marginal writer through Everett and Kincaid's depictions of themselves as the Senator's benighted ghost writers. How this marginality is mediated by race (Everett is black, Kincaid white) is explored. Moreover, the intrusion of political and corporate interests as the dominant forces in the publication process is central to Everett and Kincaid's story. Andre Schiffrin's *The Business of Books: How the International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* is utilized to explain the advent of immense media conglomerates that have re-shaped and now over-determine the structure and objectives of all the major publishing houses. Ultimately, the value of Schiffrin's philippic to this study is that it accentuates the increased marginality of traditionally marginal authors.

The study narrates the life-cycle of two black bookstores in order to nuance this point: Phenix Books in San Bernardino, California, comes to prominence in the Southern California book community in the 1990s, only to close in financial distress during the 2000s. Its owner, Faron

Roberts, is interviewed about his experience as a marginal entrepreneur. Marcus Books in the Bay Area, due to its decades-long traction and inter-generational ownership possessing expertise both in the old media of community relations and word-of-mouth popularity as well as new media ability to team with other small businesses via change.org to fight amazon.com's price checker app, provides a more hopeful example. However, analysis of the conditions for entrepreneurship in black communities (essays by John W. Handy, Patrick L. Mason and other economists from *A Different Vision: African American Economic Thought* are critical here, as well as a variety of other socioeconomic analysts) define the difficulty of entrepreneurship and necessity for disorganized capitalism in inner-cities and other deprived zones. The implication here is that contemporary street lit writers and black writers more generally, who have historically operated at the margins of the literary world, actually constitute the canary in our coal mine, heralding methods of disorganized capitalism.

Finally, in Chapter Four David Walker's self-publication and covert distribution of the *Appeal* is narrated in all available detail to provide an historical example of the history of black entrepreneurship and independence in American media.

## Introduction

She saw Jesus every night she knelt down. At least that's what she said. Jesus, she prayed so loud my sisters and I could hear her through the wall, more clearly than we could hear the drunks hooting and hollering on the street below. Christ crucified, she cried. Said she saw him immaculate beyond his scars and tribulation not hung upon no wall, no cross but hovering in the firmament of a black righteous space held inviolate uncompromised away from a world of assaults and confinements. The nature, or "world", as she put it, of her vision was punitive. Down in the world shorn and severed Jesus was dying for our sin of weakness in the face of earth's hell, our selfish pride, our sudden rage, our inescapable past and un-consolable modern despair. He was dying for sin itself, white police and black criminal sin in the Kedzie Avenue street above which we all lived, over a bar that captured and emitted black men drunk and ragged and stumbling into a world that would barely have them smart and articulate in their Sunday clothes. He was dying for the neglected babies on the West and South Sides, the misled children entering the Vice Lords, Black Gangster Disciples, Wild Hundreds and all the other splintering street gangs. He was dying for our inability to save ourselves even as much as he saved his soul from his captors and killers. Shorn and severed: His body was flung, she shouted, flung from the cross and into the firmament, like a raft into water, tossing. It was justice to spare him our repetitions. Cain killed Abel, she prayed aloud, and the Lord marked Cain. Abel's line died, she said, with Abel, while Cain, his woman and his progeny walked out of Africa and spread throughout the world. On earth, we are not redeemed. Chicago was no Promised Land. It was no more than a promissory note that had come back marked insufficient love and faith. Christ, she said, whose death told us about ourselves in Resurrection redeemed us in the afterworld beyond these forsaken streets. He alone justified us beyond the judgments of this world where we were not wanted to begin with. The sinner kneels, she prayed. He confesses his belief, she prayed. He falls

prostrate before eternity and punishment is foresworn, in Christ's name. Amen. Jesus. Amen.  
Jesus. Amen. Jesus. Amen.

The prayers of our neighbor in the kitchenette next door were the first articulation I can remember of the danger of the world in which I lived in West Side Chicago. The next time I heard that voice it was in denial, when my daddy said he didn't want to talk it, the son he left in Cleveland on his way north. The boy was dead. Murdered, stabbed in a gang war. His picture was in the black newspaper. The boy's mother had sent daddy the clipping.

He was just a normal fifteen-year-old boy with strong, deep sloping shoulders, big eyes and a smile on his face. He was the color of shadows and sparse light in the black-and-white photograph. He looked like me. I remember thinking that over and over and over again. He looked like me. It was then that I first realized that one day I would die too.

When I read about Baldwin and Ellison's Harlem, I saw pieces of my reality in Chicago. When I read Chester Himes, though, writing about black men in utter personal and social strife from Los Angeles to New York City I saw something that both was and was not reality, that at once reduced and magnified and glorified and degraded my world and it was this alternative black netherspace of Bob Jones and the character in *Lonely Crusade* whose name I no longer remember<sup>1</sup> and the detectives and criminals in the Harlem crime novels that held my attention. I wanted to understand how a writer who came from a people who had been both systematically written out of the literature and the mythos of his land and only allowed in as a clown or an all-day whore or an insurgent savage could resist the obvious imperative to simply humanize and

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Gordon. (Himes, Chester. *Lonely Crusade*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press. 1947. Print.)

ethicize his people through his writings and instead impose a new set of myths, phantoms and devils upon their living reality. Himes was perverse, and perversely fascinating.

At first I tried to write about Himes. But then his work was joined by Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim. And there was also Claude Brown and Robert Dean Pharr, whose works reminded me of the more committed naturalist artistry of Himes' early post-prison period. Next, I tried to call on the elders and form my analysis through a letter series or dialogic campaign trying to explain what was becoming of our literature, letters to David Walker, to William Lloyd Garrison, to Ida B. Wells, to DuBois and Locke. This quickly became problematic, too: I was around twenty-five years old and yet had never actually written a letter or engaged in a literary correspondence of any length or value, ever. My written communication consisted of college term papers, which were all intellectually bled-out, irrelevant and useless to the world college had never released me from, and terse, apocryphal, Nietzschean memoranda sent to my mystified colleagues at the social work offices in Pomona.

Thus, I realized that I was bereft, with nothing but my arguments and theories and a library of books placed not on shelves but scattered like low-standing furniture or tangerine trees throughout my apartment. As I wrote in my chosen epistolary form, without the formal ability to do so, I saw how vampiric and doomed was my design: My words were taking life-force from a posthumous reservoir of other writers, their works and ideas, their passions, chances, successes, failures, and, unable to elicit their responsive dialogue, I was adding nothing to the extracted material but simply re-stating what had already been better written by the primary sources. I knew the project was doomed and threw it away.

And now time has passed and I am an older man, with a son who writes about the same subjects I was once so interested in, but in a contemporary context, and urged forward by his graduate school funding, his miscellaneous publications, his professorial ambitions. I have, only, the relic of an idea first realized in the days when Chester Himes and Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines and Robert Dean Pharr startled the publishing industry, the politicized Black Arts Movement and elite black literary circles alike, and now seen again in my son's work, which has been my stalking horse, really, on the phenomenon of contemporary street lit writers.

It is only now, as I acknowledge and accept as legible corollary to the chaos of the modern publishing industry and black writers' relationship thereto the chaos of my own reflections, that I realize that the letters I once attempted to write were already written within me. That the epistolary form that I had struggled so much to place etherized upon a page had appealed to me simply because it already existed within me in alliterate form. What could possibly be defined as a sort of schizophrenia wherein the mind reverberates not so much with voices but with the ghosted echoes of things read but no longer really remembered, the actual words sealed still within the coffin covers of so many books, had become a subtle form of thought and expression.

The tragic decline of the great Negro League catcher and home-run hitter Josh Gibson no longer seems a strange place for me to begin this study, now that I'm better attuned to the true intricacies of mental conversation. Gibson, some say, hit more home runs than any ballplayer in the history of the game<sup>1</sup>. More than Babe Ruth or Hank Aaron hit in the Major Leagues, more than Barry Bonds hit on steroids, more than Sadaharu Oh's 868 home runs delivered down those 250-foot



power allies over in Japan. While the actual number of professional-league home runs Gibson hit is under dispute, unquestioned is Gibson's transcendent ability and his tragic demise. In the early 1940s, as Jerome Charyn's biography of famed Yankee centerfielder Joe DiMaggio, *The Long Vigil*, recounts, the Washington Senators considered signing Gibson, which would have made him the first black Major League Baseball player. However, Gibson, now in his early thirties, was no longer the great power hitter of his youth and moreover suffered from an undiagnosed brain tumor that was the source of increasingly erratic behavior-- temper tantrums thrown in public and in private spaces, naked wanderings in the San Juan streets. In 1943 he was consigned to the same Washington D.C. mental ward that would soon confine Ezra Pound as punishment for the poet's rabid anti-Semitic pro-Mussolini radio diatribes during the war. It was there that Gibson found his ill eloquence, sitting in a chair and mumbling out a window "C'mon, Joe [DiMaggio], talk to me, why don't you talk to me?" This refrain, so visceral in its poignancy as to require little explanation, I find has metaphorical unity with the historical position of Black American writers to the American publishing industry. I can imagine Gibson's monologic query, which he thought, or at least hoped could become a dialogic interaction with the great DiMaggio winding in on itself in tighter and tighter coils of simultaneous request and recrimination, the very intensity of its appeal strangling away its own attempt to free itself upon his more esteemed and powerful counterpart. It is precisely this thematic of recurrent appeal and the concessions strategic and unintended associated with it that I find relevant to a discussion of the historical and contemporary relationship between Black American writers and the American publishing industry.

\*

The Appellate Position

In 1773, Phillis Wheatley, the Senegal-born American slave and freedwoman, became the first African American to publish her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in the United States. The publication of her book of poems was challenged on the absolutist premise that no black person possessed the mental capacity to write a book and therefore that the work constituted a fraud (presumably perpetrated by some white political dissident trying to prove a point). Wheatley had to go to court to prove her authorial ability. With this as a beginning point in the relationship between black writers and the formal world of letters and publication it is not hard to see that there was to be a fundamental opposition between the dominant ideology of a racial hierarchy situating "white" people at the top and "black" people at the bottom and the entreaties made by Black Americans for a more just system of things, these speech-acts tellingly as much at issue as the justice the speech sought to birth.

Black Americans used writing as a means to constitute themselves as intellectual beings able to produce a subjective literature that would prove their personhood and thus destabilize America's prevailing racial hierarchy. Just as the nation itself declared its existence through the Declaration of Independence and then negotiated the terms of that existence through the Constitution, black writers sought to leverage literature to make their own claims to equal personhood and freedom as national subjects. Elizabeth McHenry in *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literacy* writes of the particular uses to which free blacks in the urban North put their literacy: "Embracing the Enlightenment stress on the importance of the life of the mind, they turned to reading as an invaluable method of acquiring knowledge, and to writing as a means of asserting identity, recording information and communicating with a black public... [thus] they sought effective avenues of public access as well as ways to voice their demands for full citizenship and equal participation in the life of the republic" (McHenry 32). Gene Jarrett

elaborates upon this reality, stating that "Literacy was one major precondition for political citizenship" (Jarrett 53). At the direct material level, "Electoral and governmental officials routinely tested the literacy of African Americans to assess, and often to dismiss, their worthiness for political representation and government" (53).

David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, initially published in 1829, is another important early example: Walker worked as an independent businessman, a used clothes merchant, on the Brattle Street thoroughfare in the abolitionist hotbed of Boston, Massachusetts. Walker took the revenues from his work and financed and self-published his *Appeal* when William Lloyd Garrison decided that the most extreme of its contents were too radical and unfit for his self-conceived abolitionist strategy of non-violent moral suasion. As scholar James Turner points out in his Introduction to the 1993 Black Classic Press re-print of the third edition of the *Appeal*, "at this crucial moment, the White abolitionists faltered" (Turner 14). Garrison, William Lundy and other white anti-slavery activists "criticized Walker's sanction of self-defense and armed struggle to overthrow slavery" (14). Turner notes that this divergence along a line of critical dissent was to foreshadow "a historical problem Blacks were to have with liberals as allies, over who should set the direction and objectives of their liberation struggle" (14). Later reiterated in the conflicts between Civil Rights activists versus gradualists, as well as Black Power revolutionaries versus the American mainstream writ large, it has been a structuring conflict in the American political dialogue.

Lack of cooperation from white abolitionists that might publish his work necessitated a new strategy on Walker's part. It is telling that Walker employed himself as a used clothes merchant and that he leveraged this trade to self-publish the *Appeal*. Literally making a living and an

influential politics off the leavings of others interestingly foreshadows the guerilla publishing and distribution strategies of the street literature authors, in its economic if not political aspect.

Walker then colluded with a friend who happened to be the only black ship-outfitter licensed in Boston, James W. Stewart, to covertly transport the *Appeal* into the South, into the hands of slaves there. "It is expected," Walker writes in the opening to the third and final edition of his book, "that all coloured men, women, and children, of every Nation, language and tongue under heaven... will try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get some one to read it to them, for it is designed more particularly for them" (Walker 2). Walker was dead within the year<sup>2</sup>.

Wholly threatened by this literary insurgency, states across the South founded the laws that banned whites from teaching blacks to read. With it then illegal for blacks to be literate across a large swath of America, the relationship between Black Americans and the world of published words remained necessarily an oppositional one. Blacks could only achieve public sphere traction and influence through the adoption of more strategically persuasive appellate approaches. In the decades that followed, black writers, activists and other black public figures adopted approaches that favored radical reform over revolution and appeal before demand. Whereas Walker's brief emergence into public sphere debate around issues of slavery, abolition and American values can be characterized as revolutionary, the majority of his successors in the work for abolition and black freedom sought abolition through radical reforms such as voting abolitionists like Wendell Phillips into Congress and seeking to end slavery via the existing American political system. To observe this difference one need only contrast Walker's "by any means necessary" ethos in the *Appeal* to Frederick Douglass's slave narrative and other writings, which do not advocate direct

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<sup>2</sup> Walker's associates generally believed that he had been poisoned, however most scholarship on Walker agrees that it is more likely he fell victim to the cholera epidemic rampant in Boston in summer 1830. Walker's daughter had died of cholera a week prior to his death (Scriven 41).

violent rebellion against and overhaul of the American state. Moreover, Douglass' long career in the public sphere includes refusal to participate in John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry (*Africans in America: Judgment Day, 1831-1865*), decades of financial prosperity derived from savvy marketing of his writings (Rohrbach 30-31; 37), and even a stint as American ambassador to Haiti. One might also note the difference between the brief and volatile flare that was Walker's public sphere moment with the life and career of his own son, Edward Garrison Walker, a prominent businessman, lawyer and politician, who "was elected to the Massachusetts General [legislature] in 1866, probably becoming the first Black man in the United States to hold elective office" (Turner 19).

The publication of the slave narratives, through the auspices of various abolitionist publishing firms that also trafficked in a whole range of "free-labor goods", as chronicled in Augusta Rohrbach's *Truth Stranger Than Fiction: Race, Realism and the U.S. Literary Marketplace*, represents the first large-scale cooperative relationship between black writers and American publishers. Significantly, this cooperative was generally between the most marginal white and black members of society-- white abolitionists whose politics worked to divest them of a major pillar of white privilege and one of the material fundaments of the nation, the traffic in and exploitation of slaves; and black slaves and ex-slaves who, unlike Walker, were without the resources to run their own businesses and finance their own enterprises. This watershed in white-black relations and the history of this nation's struggle for justice must further be qualified: While David Walker dubbed his manifesto the *Appeal* and certainly spent much of the body of that text directly addressing white Americans, much of Walker's text, including the preamble to the third edition, explicitly addresses free blacks and slaves. Walker's text balances in relatively equal measure the appellate and didactic modes. Moreover, Walker acknowledges a third audience, that

being the white slaveholding south and those opponents of black freedom who would wish him dead. "I write without the fear of man," he states, disdainfully dismissive of threats made upon his life. "I am writing for my God, and fear none but himself; they may put me to death if they choose" (Walker 60). This rhetorical mode is distinctly tertiary in Walker's approach, yet as a revelatory articulation it is also the most memorable and powerful form that his writing takes.

The slave narratives, by contrast, because their intended audience was not as broad, were more confined in their modes of address. These narratives were generally not directed toward a black readership and appealed even more stridently toward the white Northerners who were their principle buying public. Harriet Jacobs opens her slave narrative with a strategic appeal: "But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage... I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is" (Jacobs "Preface"). Mary Prince closes her narrative with similar impassioned beseeching: "This is slavery," Prince writes. "I tell it, to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for evermore" (Prince 23). Both Jacobs and Prince, as well as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson and numerous other slave narrativists, either bookend or situate within their personal accounts of suffering and struggle similar appeals to the right morality and desire for a free society among their white buyership.

The problem inherent to this approach is the same one that faced Josh Gibson nearly a century later in his Washington D.C. mental ward. That Gibson needed to request a hearing from DiMaggio in the first place indicates Gibson's lack of wherewithal to affect his own deliverance

from anonymity. Like all appeals, this one presupposes the supplicant's subjugation and DiMaggio's power; necessarily, within this logic, it is at the great Yankee's discretion whether or not to acknowledge what is simply a matter of fact: Gibson's co-equal status to DiMaggio as an athlete. The slave narrativists requested to be treated as persons equal to other American citizens. But one's human equality simply *is*, and need not be conferred upon one in a just world. Where it is actively conferred, inequality and injustice are paradoxically reinforced. In commenting on Josiah Wedgewood's famous medallion of the chained slave on bended knee Saidiya Hartman avers that "once you have assumed the position of supplicant and find yourself genuflecting before the court or the bar of public opinion, then... you have conceded the battle. It is hard to demand anything when you are on bended knee or even to keep your head raised... Being so low to the ground, it is difficult not to grovel or to think of freedom as a gift dispensed by a kind benefactor or to imagine that your fate rests in the hands of a higher authority, a great emancipator...." (Hartman 168-169). Here Hartman renders physical and visible a major problem of all contestations for emancipation, for equal rights and for sympathetic audience.

The slave narratives, in their appellate approach and in the material relation of the black writers to the white publishers that saw these stories into public existence, replicate Wedgewood's design and maintain the basic white-over-black power relation fundamental to antebellum ideology and commerce. This critique does not slight the complexities, the ideological and material challenges internal to the narratives of Prince, Jacobs and others. However, it does acknowledge the basic transference of a power relation fundamental to transatlantic slavery into the world of abolitionist activism. Ultimately, this continuance of confinement must be held in tension with the fact that the dissemination of the slave narratives nevertheless marked a great watershed on the margins of American society and the publishing industry. This literary tension mirrors the legislative tension

that Black Americans would find themselves in after the Civil War and emancipation. Only nominally free even at the zenith of Reconstruction and increasingly less so thereafter due to the state by state denial of federally granted citizenship rights and the rise of Jim Crow restrictions throughout the South, "penalties [that during slavery had been] levied on anyone who taught African Americans how to read and write merely shifted their target onto the freed African Americans themselves. After African Americans were granted the right to vote... laws were passed raising the cognitive or intellectual standards from basic reading to critical sophistication" (Jarrett 55). In the main, such exams, mandated at the voting booth, proved too difficult for Black Americans to pass. That the vast majority of whites would have found the tests equally prohibitive was ignored. And, in any case, if Black Americans had passed the exams as they were administered; higher levels of qualification would simply have been instituted until a failing assessment could be rendered. Blacks, who had fought so long with pen and sword, for freedom, though the Civil War was won and emancipation inscribed into the Constitution, were in practical terms not free to vote, hold public office or exercise full citizenship rights. This paradoxical relationship to freedom in terms of American law and practice is roughly equivalent to the paradoxical relationship to the world of American letters that the slave narrativists faced. The American publishing industry simultaneously presented black people with the opportunity to publicly voice the need for abolition of slavery and full citizenship rights and yet re-enforced a structural bind wherein the slave narrativists were dually beholden to their white publishers and majority white readership. Even long after the Civil War, deep into the twentieth century, this double-bind persisted and appreciably mediated the work of even the most accomplished and acclaimed black writers.

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The Intervention of Black Arts and its Connection to Street Lit



The Black Power Movement's artistic wing, the Black Arts Movement<sup>3</sup>, arose in the early-to-mid 1960s and extended into the 1970s. Black Arts roundly contested and rejected the elevation of a small group of Black American writers in lieu of the commercial promotion of and intellectual engagement with more politically and culturally militant Black American literature, thought and experience. As it was at least nominally a collective artistic body with certain rhetorical, aesthetic and political ideals and goals in common, the Movement categorically rejected Ralph Ellison's politically irreconcilable individualist and Americanist ethos and James Baldwin's similarly irreconcilable spirituality and homosexuality. Phillip Brian Harper posits that the "divisional" logic of the Black Arts Movement "allowed for Black Arts judgments of insufficient racial identification to be figured specifically in terms of a failed manhood for which homosexuality, as always, was the primary signifier" (Harper 50). Seen from this vantage, Baldwin's generous attempts at the artistic and ideological rapprochement Ellison's thorny temperament would not allow him to seek were absolutely foredoomed. In California Newsreel's documentary *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey* Ellison's closest friend and literary confidante Albert Murray comments that Ellison did not feel that his Black Arts Movement antagonists had the requisite intellectual seriousness to engage his work and his ideas and that they lacked the artistic ambition to strive for the kind of literary achievement Ellison himself strove for. Thus, there was no point in attempting a rapprochement across black literary space. In the same documentary, R.W.B. Lewis notes that Ellison had "anticipated" his detractors in the character Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer. Ras's recourse to political violence in the face of impossibly long odds and the West Indian black power militant's rejection of more moderate methods of negotiation and calculated activism for many readers seems to foreshadow the most dubious political elements of

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<sup>3</sup> Codified as such by the 1968 publication of the *Black Fire* anthology. (*Black Fire*. Editors Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. Baltimore, MD: Black Classics. 1968. Print.)

the Black Power Movement<sup>ii</sup>. Though significant, the divide between Ellison and his Black Arts antagonists went well beyond political strategies aimed at ending white domination. On the essential level of human temperament, whereas the call to collective ideology and collective action voiced by many in the Black Arts Movement suggests a certain predisposition to collective work and group identity, Ellison's "true crusade," according to his biographer Arnold Rampersad, "was toward individualism, not group identity" (Rampersad 215).

Ellison advanced an individualist ethos in his essays beginning in the 1950s and continuing into the 60s. Ellison's critique of then-Leroi Jones's *Blues People*<sup>4</sup> is exemplary of the divide between Black American artists who saw themselves chiefly as musicians, writers, etc., their work chiefly expressive of individual and apolitical consciousness, the American experience, and formal artistic lineage to other artists in their genre, and Black American artists who saw themselves as chiefly part of a wider collective not of musicians nor writers but of *Black* musicians, *Black* writers, etc., their work an expression of *Black Diaspora* consciousness and art and political resistance to white supremacy.

Just as Ellison found fault with the Black Arts Movement and specifically with Jones's reading of the development of Black American music, black writers before and during the Black Arts Movement found fault with Ellison's promotion of individualism as a grounding artistic ethos and the investigation of Black American identity and not Black Diaspora, or simply Black identity as core to the sensibility of Black American artists. Lloyd Brown's June 1952 essay "The Deep Pit"

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<sup>4</sup> In the "Blues People" chapter in *Shadow and Act*. (Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York, NY: Vintage. 1964. Print. pp. 221-232.)

in *Masses & Mainstream* deems *Invisible Man* a "profoundly anti-Negro" text and asserts that "Ellison... shares with [Richard Wright and Chester Himes] their bitter alienation from the Negro people, their hatred and contempt of the Negro working masses, their renegades' malice and their servility to the masters. Cut off from the surging mainstream of Negro life and struggle and creativity, they stagnate in Paris, wander on lonely crusades, or spit out at the world from a hole in the ground" (Brown). Like many commentators within the Black Arts Movement, Brown places Ellison (as well as Wright and Himes) at odds with the "Negro people" and "Negro working masses." This rhetorical move essentially deems Ellison an artist without a cause, blithely unconcerned with the trials of his people. In the same vein, Ernest Kaiser's rejection of Ellison in his 1970 essay "A Critical Look at Ellison's Fiction & at Social & Literary Criticism by and about the Author" reiterates the claim that Ellison's work is detached from the black masses and essentially performs a function servile to an elite white publishing-academic-political hegemon. Kaiser's essay places Ellison's work, particularly his individualist aesthetic as expressed in *Shadow and Act*, within the critical context of Black Arts Movement propaganda, with all the dubious trappings of a fetishized black masses that must be spoken to and spoken for and a white supremacist hegemon that must be combated at all points and by all artistic as well as political vehicles available.

Even more than Ellison, James Baldwin was a target of Black Arts attack. The grounds on which the Black Arts Movement condemned Ellison are far different from those upon which they condemned Baldwin, yet the abiding similarity between these attacks is that both writers were deemed to have produced work that did not fit well, and in Ellison's case not even willingly, within the framework that the Black Arts Movement had deemed necessary for the work of black artists. That framework saw black arts as properly directed at black liberation, in the United

States and globally, and the measure of artistic worth estimable precisely by its fitness for this task. Ellison, because of the hero's tellingly total retreat from society which concludes his famous novel, because of his focus in the essays composing *Shadow and Act* on apolitical artistic intent and on Black American rather than Diaspora-consciousness, and finally due to his increasingly irascible dealings with younger black writers not only in print but also in person<sup>iii</sup>, was clearly not an artist producing an art fit for freedom struggle. Baldwin, while far more sympathetic to the artistic and political aims of the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, embraced aspects of a Christian ethic decidedly at odds with the militant and violent rhetoric of Black Power. This ethic is evident in Baldwin's crescendo in *The Fire Next Time*: Having met with Black Muslim leaders and followers and having considered their worldview, Baldwin finds himself persuaded by a different vision. "If we— and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others— do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (Baldwin). This vision of a cross-racial conciliation that works to avoid outright black-white confrontation ("the racial nightmare" of race war or civil war) and rather seeks to enhance a heterogeneous America (to "achieve our country"), extending a sort of American racial success and moral exceptionalism to warring states long locked in prejudice and violence all across the globe ("change the history of the world"), ultimately stands at odds with the wholesale rejection of the American national project that major figures such as W.E.B. DuBois and Kwame Ture acted upon by re-locating not only out of America— which Baldwin himself did for a time by moving to Paris—but out of the West entirely, by living out their days in Ghana and Guinea respectively. Although Baldwin was deeply sympathetic to the sentiments, if not the stated ideology of Black Power figures such as Ture, Floyd McKissick, Maulana Karenga and others, I believe that they would deem Baldwin's ethos

as expressed in his best-known work *The Fire Next Time*<sup>iv</sup> illogical in the face of persistent white racism, vigilante and police terrorism, and the self-interested and often aggressively violent nature of American foreign policy.

Even more powerfully, Baldwin's homosexuality was figured by Eldridge Cleaver and others who located their ideology within Black Power as anathema to the destruction of white supremacy and Western imperialism. In the logic of nationalist ethos generally, the Black Nationalist ethos particularly, and the Black Arts Movement insofar as it was party to the goals of Black Nationalism, women and homosexual men, represent lack and disempowerment, the women because they lack phallic power and the homosexual men because they have abdicated this power. In Isaac Julien's 1994 *The Darker Side of Black*, Cornel West locates the source of the homophobia that is freely expressed in certain spaces within black culture in Black Nationalist political ideology. West refers to the policing of sexual behavior in this strain of politics. Furthermore, he notes that a nationalist political ideology tends to "subsume" under a set of non-negotiable right and moral actions the heterogeneity of individual black people, thus scorning homosexuality as unacceptable behavior within the nationalist project. West ultimately argues that this sort of enforced homogeneity essentially replicates the ideology of slavery in that it sees all black people as essentially the same, no individual life of particular worth and each person substitutable at the point when they come to be seen as inefficient for any other person. To be strong instead of weak and to function in the service of the independence struggle on all its fronts, military, political and even literary, requires a reassertion of masculine form along these specific gender and sexuality lines.

Eldridge Cleaver's vile anti-gay attacks on Baldwin in *Soul On Ice* are of particular moment here. Informing Cleaver's intensely convoluted and disturbed argument is the deep-seated notion that black homosexuality is without productive value to a nationalist politics and may even carry, inherent in its nature, elements of complicity with the opponents of independence and freedom movements. Cleaver, figuring Baldwin as representative of all black homosexual men who take white lovers (or white editors, to touch the real heart of Cleaver's aggravation), variously interprets this "type" as follows: "The cross [Negro homosexuals] have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation" is not a half-white child, but only an increased neurosis that leads them to further "intake of the white man's sperm" (Cleaver 102). "The white man has deprived [the Negro homosexual] of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to this change and takes the white man for his lover as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on 'whiteness' all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against 'blackness'..." (103). Here, Cleaver is alleging that Negro homosexuals have been deprived, not exclusively, or even in the main, by their sexual activities, but by their psychosexual motivations, of their masculinity. This is why they are "castrated... in the center of [their] burning skull[s]" instead of in the center of their loins. From this focus on intellectual castration, I take that Cleaver's true target is not homosexuality as sex, per se, but homosexuality as a type of inferiorizing intellectuality. I believe that the sexual submission that Cleaver criticizes stands in for a literary judgment on Baldwin's submission to white male editors and their presumed status quo social vision. Cleaver's figuration of the black homosexual is of an author perpetually in-submission, touching his toes for some more powerful man and ultimately taking it in the ass from a racist publishing industry and genocidal state that he confusedly hates but also cherishes.

Black Arts is an umbrella term containing a heterogeneous body of writers, including authors as manifestly different as Nikki Giovanni and John A. Williams, Ishmael Reed and Sonia Sanchez. That these writers might be united under only the flimsiest artistic categorization seems odd. Yet their unity and significance as a literary movement lies essentially in their opposition to the white-run publishing industry's selection of such a small sub-set of black authors-- Wright, Ann Petry very briefly, then Ellison, then Baldwin-- as the representation of all Black American literature. This inherently oppositionalist artistic collective can, at least in a critical sense, be constituted around the consequent neglect, financial as well as critical, of the many other significant writers of the post-WWII period. This neglect silenced voices, hampered careers and embittered generations of black writers and artists against the mainstream publishing industry itself.

Also flowing out of the oppositionalism of the Black Arts Movement were the careers of Robert Dean Pharr, Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim. They came like a second line behind the Black Arts Movement, dancing in the deadly ghetto streets. Often cited erroneously as the sole progenitors of the current street literature phenomenon, these authors' popular appeal flowed out of a similar rejection of the white-run publishing industry, its awards, acclaim and sites of meaning, which was very much tied to the larger Black Arts Movement. While Dean Pharr, Goines and Slim may not properly be grouped with the Black Arts elite, their stories of street trifling, drug pushing, pimping, prostitution and random mayhem, stood as just as strong a rebuke of refined literary taste and the politics of the mainstream publishing world as did the politically-committed work of John A. Williams, John Oliver Killens, Ishmael Reed, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Cleaver and Baraka.

The Black Arts Movement and the early street literature of Himes, Goines, Iceberg Slim, Robert Dean Pharr and others, came out of a complex of feelings so oppositional and unyielding in rejection of the commercial, cultural and political American mainstream that Black Arts never had a chance to reach the broader readership that the work of previous and future black authors had and would find. By 1983, John A. Williams writes to the dying Chester Himes that he no longer knows many people in the publishing business and that the industry has become overwhelmed by "[a] whole new breed, it seems, with values and ideas about literature that now seem ten times as shallow as those held by people we used to know" (Williams 161). What Williams figures as the changing values of the industry are, at the least, a changing orientation to his and Himes' work and the work of other black male writers.

This changing orientation is significant not only for the way it has subsequently invisibilized many of the most compelling novelistic accomplishments of the Black Arts era<sup>v</sup>, but because it inaugurated a different relationship between black writers and the publishing industry. On the level of content, critical and also popular focus moved from literature that took as its central theme black characters' confrontation psychological and physical with white America, to novels more intent on the chronicling of black family life, male-female relationships between black people and stories set within predominantly and exclusively black neighborhoods having little interface with the white world. For instance, whereas John A. Williams' *Captain Blackman* involves an archetypal black soldier tilting against British colonial domination and, more subtly, against the American empirical project in each of America's wars up to and including the conflict in Vietnam, and whereas journalist Max Reddick in *The Man Who Cried I Am* finds himself in "a



cocked bear trap”<sup>5</sup> of political and media elitism, a covert C.I.A. plot to destroy black America the keystone of the narrative, the central characters in Toni Morrison’s 1970s novels are primarily concerned with their families, their friends and lovers and the dramas within their segregated neighborhoods. By this I do not mean that Morrison’s work is in some way less ambitious and more thematically limited than that of Williams and his (mostly male) peers and successors in the Black Arts era. In fact, I believe the opposite. But it is to note that the more expansive fictive and philosophical elements of Morrison’s early work inhere in each novel’s narrative and linguistic experiments and in the connotative power of each plot. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) are not only set within but almost wholly confined to the segregated rural communities of Ohio, and *Song of Solomon* (1977) is set in black ghettos in Detroit and in Danville, Pennsylvania. With the notable exception of Guitar’s murderous vigilantism in *Song of Solomon*, there are few instances where the characters in these books actually confront and oppose the American system of power and racial hierarchy. Rather, *Sula* confronts patriarchy and piety within the black community of Medallion, Ohio. Pecola is crushed by similar forces in the town of Lorain. And the inter-generational drama of ownership and greed, light skin privilege, male complacency, and the eternal trials of family and romance in *Song of Solomon* are played out far from the environs of the white communities in Detroit and Danville, let alone anything approaching the C.I.A. and the other elite institutions that characters such as Max Reddick and Captain Blackman confront.

Surely, novels like Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, Ann Petry’s *The Narrows* and poetry such as Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Annie Allen* represent earlier writing by black women that was not only major in artistic accomplishment but that was taken seriously

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<sup>5</sup> Hodges, Graham. Introduction to John A. Williams’ *The Man Who Cried I Am*. New York and Chicago: Thunder Mouth’s Press. 1967. Print.

within literary circles in prior eras. Brooks, as one example, won the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* in 1950. But, again, such works tended to focus significantly on the intertwined fates of blacks and whites, as in the dilemmas around slavery and lynching central to Hopkins' novel, the dramas of suspected and real mulatto femininity played out in both *Contending Forces* and in *Passing*, and the inter-racial romance that incites the major conflict in *The Narrows*. In the case of Brooks, both *Annie Allen* and her 1945 *A Street in Bronzeville* stand now primarily as historical prelude to her entry into the Black Arts Movement, where her work (*In the Mecca*) would increasingly take up the thematic touchstones characteristic of that body of literature.

This shift in the subject matter of critically acclaimed African-American literature that took place during the 1970s also re-centers African American literature around female, as opposed to male authors. Black feminist writers of the 1970s began to experience relatively more industry approval and commercial traction than their male peers. This is most obvious in the case of Morrison, who worked as an editor at Random House even before she published her groundbreaking novels and began to garner the attention of critics in America and abroad and the stamp of popular approval from television icon Oprah Winfrey. Morrison managed, through elite formal education, professional guile, artistic accomplishment and impressive self-marketing in the popular realm<sup>6 vi</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Morrison not only was an editor at Random House, but prior to that had been a professor at Howard University. Morrison was a graduate of Howard and Cornell, where she earned a Masters. (See Toni Morrison—Biography at [www.nobelprize.org/.../laureates/1993/morrison-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/.../laureates/1993/morrison-bio.html))

The critical acclaim, commercial success and wide-ranging name recognition of not only Morrison but peer black female novelists Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker and others was critical as historical development to the later florescence of urban literature even as it supplanted more militant, activist and black-male-centered narratives such as Baraka's *The Dutchman*, John A. Williams' *Captain Blackman* and *The Man Who Cried I Am*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Louisiana Red* and *Reckless Eyeballing* and John O. Killens' *The Cotillion*, works that characterized the long narrative fiction produced by the Black Arts Movement.

The commercially successful romance wing of post-Civil Rights era African American literature has primarily been produced by women and is represented by, among others, contemporary writers as diverse as Terry McMillan, the late Bebe Campbell Moore, Mary B. Morrison and Zane. Black male writers are not absent from this upsurge either. Primarily commercially successful due to female readership, Omar Tyree, Eric Jerome Dickey, Carl Weber and their peers are also representative of this trend in popular literature of the 90s and 2000s. The commercial impact of black romance fiction follows from the gains in mass appeal made by Morrison and her peers and is likewise an important aspect of the development of Black American literature. One cannot understand contemporary, popular black reading habits without having some idea of just how many black women have read Terry McMillan or Zane's novels<sup>vii</sup>. And one cannot really understand how these writers became so successful selling stories of black seduction, romance, marriage, betrayal and the like without first acknowledging the debt that they owe to the black feminist literature that came before and that re-directed the course of African American literature, taking seriously black women's minds, bodies and lives. It might not be difficult to think that a novel like *Tar Baby* presages *Waiting to Exhale*, which then opens the way

for the novels of Sister Souljah, Vicki Stringer and Teri Woods: Toni Morrison thus linked loosely to Teri Woods. However, it is my assertion that not only Morrison's more lightly regarded work, but her catalog itself, in entirety, with all its formal difficulty, its care for history, its singularly disturbing ethical quandaries (as well as the critical and commercial reception of Alice Walker and Shange), that *that* work is what allowed for Terry McMillan's commercial opportunity in the early 90s and the subsequent opportunities given black female street lit novelists and black male street lit novelists. The critical acclaim and commercial viability of black female writing dating back to the 1970s stands as absolutely crucial to the penetration of the publishing industry that has been so fully achieved in the last two decades by Terry McMillan, Zane, etc. al.

The rise of contemporary urban literature (i.e., street lit), a phenomenon of the 1990s and 2000s<sup>viii</sup>, was most significantly presaged by the novel marketing approach and subsequent commercial successes of Terry McMillan, whose work is at once characteristic of street lit and sharply diverges from many of the literature's more violent and raw themes. The 1992 novel *Waiting to Exhale* remained on the New York Times Bestseller List for eleven weeks and McMillan was able to sell the paperback rights for \$2.64 million. "For the publishing industry," writes Elizabeth McHenry in *Forgotten Readers*, "McMillan's success-- or what is still commonly referred to as the McMillan phenomenon-- was seen as nothing short of miraculous... [C]ommercial publishers have traditionally assumed that blacks don't read and that they don't buy books," McHenry asserts (McHenry 302).

This corporate misconception of Black buying and reading habits explains the paucity of commercially-backed Black writers and thus the preponderance of commercially under-successful Black writers prior to McMillan's enormous success. However, contrary to the continuing corporate misconception that McMillan's success was somehow "miraculous," McHenry, Paulette Richardson and a host of other scholars and journalists recount the material process by which an author with little to predict her rise actually accrued her millions of book sales and financial profits. Briefly: McMillan "[took] control of her own marketing," conducting a shadow marketing campaign independent of her publisher, targeting a specifically Black buyership and advertising her work in places the mainstream literary market had never thought to, beauty salons and churches, community centers and schools, Black-owned bookstores and Black radio stations. Instead of disregarding the possibility of a substantial Black readership, McMillan proved to a corporate elite how lucrative that market could be. While McMillan's novels and marketing methods constituted no more a new media or a new set of strategies without analogue in prior scenarios and forms than do current websites or blogs<sup>ix</sup>, the importance of her rise to prominence is in her effect on the mainstream marketplace.

Embracing the female-centered perspective of Morrison, Walker, Shange and McMillan, while entrenching her narrative deep within the modern urban complex of drug-trafficking, RICO prosecution tactics, and daily survival in a world of severe deprivation and self-destructive behaviors, Sister Souljah published *The Coldest Winter Ever* in 1999. In the wake of *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the early 2000s saw a fleet of young Black writers, male as well as female, model their work on the narrative template of Souljah and the marketing principles of McMillan, with the added implement of internet blogging, advertising and publishing, to great commercial success. Whereas in 1994 Leigh Haber, VP and associate publisher of Simon & Schuster,

commented that "The African-American community, through bookstores, black wholesalers and organization, have an extremely successful way of popularizing new and up-and-coming black writers that doesn't exist in the white community," McHenry's chronicle, published in 2002, testifies to the "diverse promotional tours planned for some black writers by their publishers, which are now as likely to include readings at sites central to black community life... as the prerequisite appearances at big chain superstores" (302). The result of this exacting focus on the material means of advertisement and circulation of literature in these communities has been the popularization of numerous Black writers and windfall publishing industry profit that only abated under the force of the global financial crisis.

In a 2004 essay on the phenomenon, journalist Mark Reynolds observes "... a new landscape in black literature. This landscape is called urban fiction (or "hip-hop fiction"), and it has publishing companies salivating. Through word-of-mouth and the same entrepreneurial street hustle that fuels the dreams of countless aspiring rappers, people with stories to tell have found a way, thanks in large part to self-publishing, to reach readers who otherwise might not have cracked open a book for years. They've gone — again not unlike a lot of rappers — from selling their wares from the trunks of their cars to major deals with publishers anxious to tap into new audiences" (Reynolds 1). In this essay, Reynolds narrates the re-emergence of a genre that first came to prominence in the 1960s, at the time emancipating a mass of black literary voices from the "king-making" dictates of *Time*, the *New York Times* and the other select outlets that typically elevated one or two black writers per decade and so appalled Chester Himes as to drive him from the country<sup>7</sup>. Nearly ten years after Reynolds' essays, and despite the rolling effects of the

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<sup>7</sup> Himes, Chester and John A. Williams. *Dear Chester, Dear John: Letters Between Chester Himes and John A. Williams*. Editors John A. and Lori Williams. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University

financial crisis, street lit narrativists retain their market among black readers and demand the attention of major publishers. It is no secret at this point that *Barnes & Noble* carries the critically acclaimed and canonized African-American fiction of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker but its African-American Literature shelves are dominated by diverse dime novels replete with sexual tricking, sordid romance and clandestine street culture.

In his essay, Reynolds observes that "Nowhere on the list of Hurston/Wright Award nominees were any of the slim trade paperbacks with alluring faces and bodies poised for action of some sort or another on the cover. None of the nominees can routinely be found for sale on sidewalk tables, alongside other tables hawking knockoff jewelry and bootleg DVDs" whereas novels by Zane, Vickie Stringer, and Omar Tyree (circa, 2004) certainly could be found there (Reynolds 1). This contrast in the material setting and marketplace situation of "high" versus "low" black literature is merely the physical and critical manifestation of an intense and now long-running debate. I find this break in black letters to be economic in origin, reflective of a stratified black economic and social situation. It is an ironic break in that the "low" literature, taking as its major subject economically devastated zones of black poverty and oppression, commands higher dollars than the "high" literature, with its more diverse settings. "The kind of work I'm writing," Ishmael Reed admits, "has a small audience, and a lot of African American writers are in the same position" (Romney 1). Street narrativists, by contrast, have relatively large audiences and sales.

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Press. 2008. Print. See Pages 24-28: Recounted in detail are Himes' experiences marketing and seeking remuneration for all the books he published while still living in America, as well as some of his experiences dealing with French publishers. Later in the text Himes states, "Well, the main reason I moved to Europe was the discrimination in the American publishing business... I left the U.S. because I felt I would have a better chance to survive in some other country" (92).

Reynolds takes an aesthetic approach, comparing the break in black letters to "the smooth jazz/serious jazz dichotomy," which is an apt artistic corollary, although one that I have not the experience to seriously explore (Reynolds 1). Reynolds' larger point is the same as mine, which is that the break requires attention, whether it is journalistic, critical or socioeconomic. "Many booksellers and critics can't stand the stuff," Reynolds notes, whereas others see street lit/hip-hop fiction as a gateway literature into "high" black literature and "high" literature and art more generally. Reynolds is ambivalent, remembering that neither smooth jazz nor even *Bitches Brew* was any gateway into "serious" jazz, but rather stole the market. Reynolds, as I do, inaugurates this break in black taste by breaking both ways along a line of decision on street lit/hip-hop fiction, seeing it as at once expressive of dire phenomena within Black American culture and American culture writ large, including the drop in patronage of heritage museums, theater companies, bookstores and other venues for serious art, but nevertheless as a genuine vitalization of a mass readership.

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#### The Controversy around Street Lit

In an October 3rd, 2007 email to publishing executives Carolyn Reidy (Simon & Schuster), Karen Hunter (Karen Hunter Publishing) and Louise Burke (Gallery Books), Terry McMillan excoriates not only the immediate recipients but "the other publishing houses" for their "relentless publication" of what McMillan characterizes as "exploitative, destructive, racist, egregious, sexist, base, tacky, poorly-written, unedited, degrading books" (McMillan). The immediate reason for McMillan's email was the publication of Karrine Steffans' memoir *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, wherein the former music video model recounted her unromantic affairs with Jay-Z, Ja Rule, Shaquille O'Neal, Kool G Rap and others. McMillan, whose work, ironically, inspired much of the trend she so despises, promises that in concert with "a number of Black bookstores"



and "other Black literary organizations" she will begin to make her disquiet at the publishing industry trend toward trash black literature known to the public. McMillan's missive even wonders at the fact that whereas literary luminaries Walter Mosley, Edwidge Danticat and then-Senator Barack Obama were not in the running for publishing house imprints, those writers who market tales of black super-squalor have been "allowed in the Big Publishing Houses['] Little Rooms enough to FINALLY get [their] own imprints" (McMillan).

In a similar vein, critically celebrated novelist Bernice McFadden's June 2010 *Washington Post* article "Black Writers in a Ghetto of the Publishing Industry's Making" recounts McFadden's interface with the publishing industry upon release of her debut novel, *Sugar*, in 2001. "The original cover depicted a beautiful black woman standing behind a screen door. *Sugar* was marketed solely to African American readers. This type of marginalization has come to be known among African American writers as 'seg-book-gation.' This practice is not only demeaning but also financially crippling." The marginalization of her work was not solely the result of her publisher's race-based stratagem but was also the product of bookstores' separation of titles by black writers: "Walk through your local chain bookstore and you will not see sections tagged British Literature, White American Literature, Korean Literature, Pakistani Literature and so on. None of these ethnicities are singled out or objectified the way African American writers are," McFadden writes. She notes the deep internal divisions between different works by and about Black Americans: "... the work of many African American authors, myself included, has been lumped into one heap known as 'African American literature.' This suggests that our literature is singular and anomalous, not universal." This division and ghettoization, McFadden argues, allows for the crowding out of more intellectually and artistically ambitious novels in favor of street lit

texts that "[reinforce] the stereotypical trademarks African Americans have fought hard to overcome" (McFadden 1).

Viewed from the perspective of a writer that considers their serious efforts impeded by the crass market strategies of street lit writers and promoters, McMillan and McFadden's conclusions are true. In particular, the castigation of street lit and its publishing industry backers bears witness to the reincarnation of a history of white-over-black industry hierarchy, corporate manipulation and cowardly black opportunism. McMillan and McFadden, figuring themselves as the serious and responsible bearers of the black literary flame, stand outside the debacle that they critique, disenfranchised but unsoiled. However, the problem here is that such a set-up allows the serious writer only two options, either to remain unsoiled and largely unrewarded for his or her efforts, or to capitulate to increasingly degrading market demands. Such capitulation seems to re-enact the appellate position this introduction identifies. Against this history of capitulation and conditionally granted agency which characterizes much of black writers' interface with the publishing industry and literary marketplace, street literature's novel market position might actually provide a welcome alternative. Gerald Early makes precisely this case in "What is African-American Literature?" Here, Early specifies three primary points of light in what McMillan, McFadden and most Black writers whose work aspires to seriousness consider the lowering cloud of street lit:

"First... there is a young, mass, black reading audience of such size that a black author can write for it exclusively without giving a thought to being highbrow or literary or to crossing-over for whites. Second, the taste of the masses is distinct from, and troubling to, the taste of the elite in large measure because the elite no longer control the direction and purpose of African-American

literature; it is now, more than ever, a market-driven literature, rather than an art form patronized and promoted by cultured whites and blacks as it had been in the past. The fact that blacks started two of the publishing houses for these books, Urban Books and Triple Crown, underscores the entrepreneurial, populist nature of this type of race literature: by black people for black people. Third, African-American literature no longer has to be obsessed with the burden or expectation of political protest or special pleading for the humanity of the race or the worth of its history and culture as it had to in the past" (Early 1).

In this way of seeing things, the advent of a black pulp fiction is actually a positive development for it signifies the breadth of the black reading audience and the diversity of its tastes. The presence of serious black literature, in this view, is not in question. It exists and has existed. "[M]arket-driven literature", pulp fiction in other words, is actually evidence of greater agency among the masses of black readers and black people who are no longer subject to the taste-making dictates of a publishing enterprise that has historically deemed the direct patronage and promotion of "cultured whites and blacks" as necessary to the publication, distribution, commercial success and critical acclaim of Black American literature. Now, the black reading public has a wider selection from which to choose and is naturally empowered by this choice. This set of choices, I would add, is more in line with general trends in the publishing industry across race and ethnicity. In Gideon Lewis-Kraus' 2009 *Harper's Magazine* essay "The Last Book Party: Publishing Drinks to a Life After Death" agent Ira Silverberg laments that "Our roots are in literary books... They're not our day-to-day business; our day-to-day business is disgusting. You'll be hearing a lot about vampires this year. But here is where we can at least remember what we think differentiates us from widget salesmen." Silverberg is referring to the *Twilight* book series, which has sold in huge numbers to the same discerning teenage fandom that prefers

whatever teen pop star has achieved international nova-star status as you read this to Cassandra Wilson. The essay's setting is the 2008 Frankfurt Book Fair, the world's largest trade fair for books. Silverberg has stepped out of "the Hessischer Hof hotel to have a smoke with a beautiful woman of indeterminate European origin." Few scenes in all of world literature, let alone book-market-journalism so thoroughly bypass blackness. Surely one or two black writers or agents or editors are to be found at the Frankfurt Book Fair, however they receive only passing mention in Lewis-Kraus' essay—Zadie Smith's blurbs draw notice, as does the fact that Lewis-Kraus' publisher uncle Bob Miller is marketing 50 Cent's business-advice manual *The 50th Law*. This near-omission is of little consequence, however: The essay tellingly illumines a set of essential tensions in mainstream book markets similar to those that prevail between different branches of the black literati. Silverberg's complaint is not that different from those who malign street literature (Lewis-Kraus 41-51). Vampire books are "disgusting", in his eyes, as, in the eyes of many, are the works of street lit narrativists. Born in "literary books", the literature of Black Americans has evolved, expanded and diversified. Is it simply that this black pulp fiction is no more than vampires for the mass of black readers, particularly young black readers who now have books that fit their age-defined interests? And, as such, would it not be true that such a literature, however unsophisticated on its face, actually constitutes market sophistication in so far as no body of literature should be dependent for its vital existence solely on its elite product, its genius writers, its masterpiece poetry, novels, memoirs and essays?

In a May 2010 interview on the *Do The Math* blog-site Early goes so far as to state that the phenomenon of popular street lit novels and the whole development of black buying and reading habits in the contemporary literary marketplace is not indicative of intellectual devolution, but rather that "Over time, the African-American audience has gotten to be more sophisticated about

the things it wants. That audience has also become more differentiated and more nuanced. It's a complex, complicated and more sophisticated audience than people give it credit for"<sup>8</sup>.

In thinking through all this, I've asked a number of black writers the same questions: Are they more aligned with Bernice McFadden's indictment of the "seg-book-gation" that she alleges the publishing industry practices when marketing novels written by black authors, which, as her logic goes, accounts for the resultant elevation of the most self-segregating aspect of our literature, street lit, a form that situates itself within well-worn spaces of black disempowerment, poverty and vice crime; or are they more attuned to Robert Dean Pharr's character in *The Book of Numbers* who states that "We need Negro criminals just as badly as we need doctors and lawyers... the day a Negro successfully robs a bank instead of a chicken coop we can honestly claim to be emancipated" (Dean Pharr)? Given a single choice in this binary opposition, perhaps Early would prefer Kelly's counterintuitive uplift theory, or something closer to it, than McFadden's more conventionally premised position. Early's argument points up the binary opposition that street lit and more "serious" black fiction are typically placed within in popular editorials and literary criticism alike. In this case, the binary is not entirely unwarranted: What is generally classified as "street lit" is typically characterized by different formal qualities, different intents and effects than is more "literary" or "serious" writing.

Still, the fact of difference does not mean that difference is absolute and in this case there is quite a bit of overlap between, for example, the plot of Ann Petry's *The Street* and the plot of Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

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<sup>8</sup> Early, Gerald. Interviewed by Seth Iverson. *Do The Math* blog. Web. July 14, 2010.

Proposing definitions of street lit and "urban literature", which I see as a better genre context within which to understand street lit, might seem to run counter to this last point. However, I think it important to show just what kinds of works that street lit is really kin to outside of its commercial labeling and outside of knee-jerk attempts to place it simply as African-American Literature. Though written by and about African-Americans, these works are more accurately pulp fiction and urban literature. Nick Chiles' much discussed 2006 essay "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut" objects to placing street lit within African-American Literature and not as an "urban" or "street" literature. African-American literature is a far more comprehensive descriptive that, in Chiles' view, when inundated by street lit, takes in all of Black literature under its lurid sign and subsequently crowds out more sensitive, nuanced and intellectual works for the benefits of market-exploitation. This is a sensitive issue for every black writer with aspirations to the artistic wherewithal achieved by Ellison, Morrison and our other signal craftspeople. In this vein, Early notes that "[t]he sensitivity on this point is not by any means wholly or even mostly a matter of snobbery. It has taken a very long time for African-American literature to reach a level of general respectability, where the general public thought it was worth reading and the literary establishment thought it was worth recognizing. Now, for many blacks, blacks themselves seem to be denigrating it by flooding the market with trash novels no better than Mickey Spillane" (Early 1).

The crude sociological justification for "flooding the market with trash novels" is that street lit narrativists are simply depicting an inarguable reality. Like similar arguments deployed by hip-hop performers and entrepreneurs, this rationale is true only so far as it goes. The desperate realities of certain ghetto neighborhoods, certain black families and individuals are hardly a black-universal. In fact, *The Economist* reports that teenage pregnancy among black women

decreased by a factor more than half between 1990 and 2010, thus alleviating one of the principle markers not of short-term recessionary poverty but of far more important intransigent long-range poverty.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Sowell presents research that shows that in fact married black couples and married couples with one black partner on average have incomes slightly higher than those of white married couples and education levels above the national average.<sup>10</sup> The reality that so many black teenagers make responsible decisions with their bodies and lives, and likewise the reality of materially prospering black households, doesn't jibe with narratives of perpetual black depravity, but that is a problem for the narratives, not the research. Black Americans, as a group, cannot be confined within a super-extended and super-deprived ghetto, but more appropriately should be divided and tiered. While a rhetorical collectivity, Black America is not one, but is, rather, internally segregated between families and individuals with rates of material success not dissimilar from those of similarly educated/trained non-black Americans, and another class that has very low rates of income, education, health and well-being.<sup>x</sup> The fluidity that these sub-sets exhibit does not, in its self, invalidate them as categories. Rather, the economic divisions between black people are having all kinds of real social fallout, from increased rates of interracial marriage to the classism inherent in the artistic line-drawing that I have just narrated.

I am in one sense encamped with Chiles and McFadden and Martha Southgate, all of whom have written essays strongly critical of the publishing industry's unabashed promotion of street lit above and before more "literary" and "serious" work authored by black writers past and current. I am a writer whose work is crowded out, prematurely foreclosed upon, and simply not invested in,

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<sup>9</sup> "Baby Bust: The birth rate for teenagers in America falls to a record low." *The Economist*. 30 Nov. 2011. Web.

<sup>10</sup> Sowell, Thomas. *Economic Facts and Fallacies*. New York, NY: Basic Books. 2007. Print.

forwarded, and published explicitly in relation to the dominating market force that is street lit. I have more than once righteously inveighed against the extensivity of its market-share and the preconceptions about the black-buying market that seem to regulate publishing house decisions. As Lewis-Kraus observes "what's at stake [in the book business] is not only the usual business credibility but a credibility of *taste* [his italics]. Relationships here are built not only on the promise of profit but on the history of joint sensibilities, in some cases over decades... you are holding yourself accountable not only to commercial but to aesthetic standards. This dual standard is fundamental to how book people see themselves. Each deal is a mutual act of aesthetic-commercial catechism; devoutly observed is the ideal junction of the remunerative and the good" (Lewis-Kraus 41-51). Lewis-Kraus' formulation is one to which I will return: For now, we can note his insistence on the passionate nature of the book business transaction, its personal nature, and, lastly and most importantly, the duality in Lewis-Kraus' employment of the word "good", at once signifying an aesthetic valuation and an economic and productive fact. In the book business, then, books are never simply business, but there is rather an insistence, or at least a strong compulsion for these goods to be aesthetically and even ethically worthwhile. The aesthetic and ethical components of these transactions, from writer to agent, agent to editor, editor to publisher, publisher to reading public, are never simply indifferent market phenomena; rather, they demand personal engagement and personal valuation.

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#### Freeing the sub-altern

Personally, the lurid narratives produced out of urban chaos are enough a part of my memories and seething mind to not much attract me as novelistic entertainment: I've known ghettos like Langston knew rivers. Those internal colonies set away from the cities that they lie within. I've witnessed the colonized turn on each other, the hustling and tricking and stealing, the dispute



murders over next to nothing, the yellow tape barriers that cordon off blood-black messes, the smell of gunpowder thick on the air like a late-night cookout, the sequin-skirted girls and ragged pimps and dopeboys all prostituting themselves on street corners for the freaks from across town in search of their girl (cocaine) and boy (heroin) and off-brand merchandise. You see, it's easy to fall into the generic and by now popularly familiar rhythms of street lit writing. These descriptions are unoriginal and present specious affirmation of a certain vision of modern urban experience. The affirmation is specious because, in the familiar reiterative description even of dissolute urban nether-spaces, and the implied status of the narrator as survivor and subjugated-knowledge-holder, implicitly there is conveyed an avowal of that experience and knowledge and the tragic continuities that reinforce it. Why, after all, recall and reiterate something if one truly would like to leave it behind, see, hear and think of it no more? Even if one desires to engage that world in order to change it, why continuously re-create it in its unchanged state? The seemingly endless reproduce-ability that marks street lit narrative production and the ease with which we fall into it is problematic precisely because it continually recreates, as a kind of fact-tion, the ghetto and re-enacts its torments.

That I know the stinking tropical smell and wet sweat heat of impoverished Midwestern summers cramped incapacitated in kitchenettes, that I know how fast government-food turns, lettuce blackening, bread molding, cheese so sharp it can cut, that I can choose to spare you from or tell you all about what you dream when you have rats running in the wall behind your headboard, all of this I consider a subjugated knowledge not necessarily deserving liberatory display upon bookshelves from California to the far East Coast. I've spent my time in West and Southside Chicago, in Gary, in East St. Louis, in Chester, Harlem, Southeast in the District, down the coast to the Southwest Atlanta "SWATS" and New Orleans and East Texas and West Phoenix, and Los

Angeles and Oakland. I know the external differences of these places, specifically the utter crowding that characterizes some Eastern and Midwestern slums, the fetid, trapped feeling of the projects. I know how superficially distinct it seems from the de-populated matrix of neighborhoods that make up South-Central Los Angeles and other Far Western ghetto spaces. I also know how below these surfaces, upon deeper material and immaterial investigation, all the ghettos are devastatingly similar: All are de-industrialized, all suffer from business community disregard. The same ideologies around violence as a means of conflict resolution and neoliberalism as a redemptive force ruthlessly applied by the bereft upon the bereft are alive and well in some of the most broken sections of this most wasteful of nations.

I know, further, the limits of my sympathies. I am married to a woman from a small rural California farm town; the segregated part of it. She did not sit in a restaurant until she went to college. She did not drive a car until she was almost thirty years old. The itinerant laboring community she grew up in makes most housing projects look like extravagantly corrupt estates, Roman in their graceless forfeiture to vice and idleness. She doesn't have much to say about urban spaces. I do remember her saying, once, that at least projects have toilets in the apartments instead of a hole driven into the earth. The ghetto has buses and in some places even subways. The hood is part of a metropolitan connectivity with public space at least nominally dedicated to the use of all, public libraries, public parks, open-door youth centers. Democrats, for whatever they're worth, form majorities in most of America's major cities and have at least retained for their constituencies bare vestiges of the welfare state, like San Francisco's universal healthcare system, like New York's vast networks of public housing and public schools. My wife is from an utterly privatized world where every grape grown is already and forever in the pockets of the

growers. In the Oppression Olympics, I think she beats a Cabrini Green<sup>11</sup> resident in a photo finish, by an indignity or two. Waking up to this woman reminds me of the diversity and malleability of even the most seemingly intractable subaltern experiences.

Curiously, the Left and the Right tend to reduce and in a sense forget this diversity and malleability and I think this forgetting has its origins in foundational Enlightenment thought. If the notion of an uncomplicated subaltern space does not actually begin with Rousseau's concept of the noble savage and the idealizing rhetoric of Locke and Paine around the uncompromised primitive state of pre-contact Native American peoples, it is at least given its most vivid modern expression. Locke, in his treatises, provides a kind of origin-myth of the world that is necessary to understanding the *tabula rasa* concept and the supposed evolution of humanity from these blank slate beginnings. "Thus, in the beginning," Locke theorizes, "all the world was America" (Locke Chap. 5, Sect. 49, Book II). With America figured as an open, uncreated and innocent space, the people that Europeans met upon entrance to that land could consequently be understood as exponents of that ostensibly primitive state. In this same vein, Thomas Paine writes in *Agrarian Justice* that "To understand what the state of society ought to be, it is necessary to have some idea of the natural and primitive state of man; such as it is at this day among the Indians of North America. There is not, in that state, any of those spectacles of human misery which poverty and want present to our eyes in all the towns and streets in Europe" (Paine 331). In America, everything begins with the notion of an uncomplicated because uncultivated original land and the supposedly primitive Native Americans upon it, who bear popular-imaginative relation to the shackled Africans eventually to arrive.

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<sup>11</sup> North Side Chicago housing project demolished in March 2011. See: Austen, Ben. "The Last Tower: The decline and fall of public housing." *Harper's Magazine*. May 2012. Print.

Both certain liberal-humanist approaches and a sort of crude materialism reduce the subaltern with the same revelation: Namely that the subaltern, which street lit ostensibly portrays, is the uncomplicated oppressed. That it is *the real* and that the real is forever "poor, monotonous, immediate... quasi-unable to lie" (Barthes 137). If lying, as Barthes' proposes, is "a richness" that presupposes modes of intransitive property that require explanation and defense, institutionalized ideologies and "truths" that cannot be maintained without a mythos, then the subaltern perspective, in this logic, is a simplistic one bereft of such elaborate creations, bereft of myth, bereft of an imaginative literature. By contrast, as McFadden's essay notes, street literature is largely a glorification. It is lie and myth. The finesse and intrigue of this literature, both in prior and current instantiations, is that it is both lie and reality, it is both glorification and realism, and it is generally much more concerned with maintaining itself as intransitive myth than it is with transitive emancipation.

At once made myth and simultaneously authenticated in soldiers' rags told after children are asleep, underground home-truths spelled out to make boys into men, sunlit lies said by boys so as to appear to be men, as barbershop and corner-store bullshit, the talk reserved for the drunken stupor, the alleyway argument, the addict shooting gallery, the converting criminal poised upon his last legitimate dollar or his first step into a corrupt church; of late risen, emerged, sold hand-to-hand in trains and along ghetto corners by unlicensed street solicitors, now marketed in mass at chain bookstores, street literature speaks to the intransigence of stereotypes, ideology and class structure, and the fluidity of our social world.

Enlightenment thought surely owns much responsibility for the still-influential notion that the subaltern expression remains invested with a more limited range. But this notion is also implied by the accepted progressive history of African-American literature that sees the slave narratives and Walker's *Appeal* as early evolutionary signposts, the work of Chesnut, Hopkins, Dunbar and others as presaging the Harlem Renaissance writers. Ralph Ellison, in the transcribed interview with which *Shadow and Act* opens, casts his own development as a writer in evolutionary relation to the "parochial limitations of most Negro fiction", particularly the work of Richard Wright (Ellison 23). In the interview Ellison rhetorically situates Wright at not only a chronological but also a literary-evolutionary point prior and inferior to his own advent as a novelist: "...I think I felt more complexity in life, and my background made me aware of a larger area of possibility. Knowing Wright himself and something of what he was doing increased that sense of the possible. Also, I think I was less interested in an ideological interpretation of Negro experience... I, for instance, found it disturbing that Bigger Thomas had none of the finer qualities of Richard Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sense of poetry, none of the gaiety... [which directs you back to Wright's] conception of the quality of Negro humanity" (31-32). Here, Ellison differentiates Richard Wright's experience and sense of possibility from his own, and he differentiates Wright as a human being from the most famous product of Wright's work, Bigger Thomas. In this evolutionary scale, Ellison and his work is of primary significance, followed by Richard Wright as the fully achieved human being that he made himself into, and finally there is Wright's determinist representation of Negro life, Bigger Thomas, whom Ellison characterizes as without imagination, poetry or gaiety.

Though arguing in direct contradiction of Ellison's aesthetic affirmations in *Shadow and Act*, Ernest Kaiser's 1970 essay "A Critical Look at Ellison's Fiction & at Social & Literary Criticism

by and about the Author" nevertheless figures the subaltern voice, where it expresses itself genuinely, as similarly reduced to ideology and revolutionary intention. In this way, Kaiser manages simultaneously to disagree and, to some extent, agree with Ellison. Ellison's literary ideal, Kaiser inveighs, "is a cop-out and an escape in the heartbreak house of a dying, exploiting, murdering capitalistic society. It is the antithesis of progressive writing and art committed to and concerned with the people's problems and struggles and dedicated to throwing some light on helping to solve the people's problems and to ushering in a better society shaped to human needs rather than to exploitation, profits, poverty and wars" (Kaiser). My kid tells me that hip-hop critic Andrew Matson positions himself similarly. In a review of De La Soul's *Stakes is High* album, I see that Matson has written that "In hip-hop, every album should be a mission statement or a call to arms" (Matson 1). "If you ain't talkin' 'bout endin' exploitation," Boots Riley tells him, "Then you're just another Sambo in syndication" ("Busterismology").

Here, hip-hop is either declaration of resistance, or minstrelsy.

Where the Left and especially the Black Americans that are Left-oriented reduce themselves, whether in music or in print, to their emancipatory rhetoric, they especially reduce the subaltern sphere to an even more constricted range of expected and respected expression. The inevitable complexities, contradictions and corruptions that are also true depictions of Leftist ideology and the lives of the poor (which that ideology professes to represent) are rescued from inattention only by a political Right that too often seeks to marginalize and demonize the poor. We must claim and understand our complexity, our contradictions and corruption, in order to claim ourselves. However counter-intuitive it may appear, this, it seems to me, is the most important reason that artists should express a full range of black experience, even where it is elitist, even

where it is in the gutter and doesn't want to get out, as well as a full range of subaltern experience more generally.

I in no way mean to underplay lines of eloquent resistance rhetoric, let alone discredit them. In the separate cases of Ellison, Kaiser, Matson and Boots, their critical texts all construct opposition and revolution as not merely political or material, but as aesthetic as well, understanding much of Black American writing and hip-hop as revolutionary in the transformation of conventional artistic domains. But the point is that all these analyses, whatever their particular subject, assume a simplicity of motives and objectives, as well as a limitedness of expression as characteristic in the main and in the particular when it comes to protest literature, street lit and similarly-themed literature and music. They all claim that the representative achievement of such art is the time-bound and artistically limited expression of an emancipation call from whatever controlling and unjust institutions and ideologies the art contextualizes itself within. By contrast, we have the language of the oppressor and those resourceful enough to master the master's language, which is "everything... rich, multiform, supple, with all the possible degrees of dignity at its disposal... plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical... eternalizing" (Barthes 138).

Barthes writes with full consciousness of the co-opting of the oppressed voice by the oppressor so as to suppress the emancipatory call of what Barthes sees as the true expression of the subaltern. The *Paris Match* cover of the saluting black soldier in French uniform that Barthes interrogates in *Mythologies*' second phase (*Myth Today*) is, perhaps, not so dissimilar from the men and women luridly displayed on the outer covers of many street lit novels. Barthes asserts that the soldier will be read by the average Frenchman as saluting and thereby approving and justifying to the French

populace the French flag and French colonial mission even as that mission oppresses black people the world over. Thus, the oppressed identifies with his oppressor and justifies his oppression. The challenge here is to preserve what we can of the power of this critique while acknowledging that the oppressor/oppressed binary is not fully applicable to our present conditions and subject.

That street lit is complicit in the oppression of its narrative subjects is a familiar critique made, in various ways, by Bernice McFadden, Nick Chiles, Martha Southgate, Omar Tyree, Mark Reynolds and Broyard Bliss in their essays on the topic. These critiques are important for, despite the latent classism and the moralizing tone they take on, they suggest the *lack* that attends street lit's popularity with young black and brown readers. That lack can be seen in the morally, ethically and even monetarily bankrupting materialist logic propelling Winter Santiago downward through her degradations in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, it can be seen in the phantasms that occupy potentially fertile creative and political space in the ostensibly realist crime novels of Himes and Kenji Jasper<sup>12</sup>. Just as surely as the appellate nature of the content and commercial life of the slave narratives, abolitionist literature, slum literature and many "protest" novels from the Great Depression up through the Black Arts Movement speaks to a *loss* of black agency, street lit may speak to a void that is just as complex in its irony and tragedy. If street lit's lack can be held in productive and forward-looking dialectic with the loss attending many previous iterations of urban and African-American literature, perhaps this discussion can move further than liberal-humanist and crude materialist critiques have thus far gone when they have confronted the street lit phenomenon. A main concern here will be to place representative street lit texts in conversation with their literary kin.

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<sup>12</sup> Jasper is the author of *Snow* and several other street lit novels



Following from this notion, it is important to define street lit, first, as a type of urban literature. This classification defines more of street lit's primary characteristics than does understanding it only as one of many mutations in the literature by and about Black Americans. This move also allows the critic to class street lit with those writings by black people to which it is actually closest thematically, structurally and in terms of its intentionality: Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy/American Hunger*, Petry's *The Street*, Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and his Harlem novels, novels by Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Dean Pharr's *The Book of Numbers*, Geoffrey Canada's *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun: A Personal History of Violence*, Walter Mosley's Socrates Fortlow books, and some of Mat Johnson, Victor LaValle and Jeffrey Renard Allen's works. The sociological analyses and treatises on inner-city culture that can contextualize these post-WWI works are also part of this literature and explain the context<sup>xi</sup> in which urban literature post-WWII becomes, in the main, a kind of Black or Minority American literature.

Urban literature, then, is: A body of American literature that traverses racial and ethnic lines, as well as typical genre-defining barriers such as those separating fiction from non-fiction, sociology from literary criticism, to historicize and contemporize our understanding of urban spaces as dynamic intellectual sites for the formation of narrative techniques (in particular, the advent of American realism and determinism, the dialectic opposition between radical and progressive politics, and the dramatic narration of issues critical to the American-democratic experiment from racial co-existence, to immigration, to class conflict). I recall John A. Williams' assertion in the afterword to *Dear Chester, Dear John* that "[Chester] Himes is perhaps the single greatest naturalistic American writer living today. Of course, no one in the literary establishment is going to admit that; they haven't and they won't" (Williams 181). I am in the second bedroom not the

literary establishment and have no problem acknowledging the place of Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* among the great works of naturalism set in the modern urban world, exemplary of not only naturalism but urban literature as cross-racial and cross-ethnic genre powerfully concerned with the major problems of the post-WWII American city. Primary works in the urban literature domain include, as well, Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, DuBois' *Philadelphia Negro*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Frank Norris' *The Pit*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *American Tragedy*, the work of all of the previously mentioned black-authored "urban" texts, the Moynihan and Kerner Commission Reports, the work of Chicago-based sociologists at least dating from William Julius Wilson forward, through Kotlowitz (*There Are No Children Here*), Lemann (*The Promised Land*), Duneir (*Slim's Table*), and Suddhir Alladi Venkatesh (*Off the Books*), Robert Self's *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* and Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*.

Within this field, we can identify street lit(erature) as a body of American literature produced by post-1990 black and Latino writers and deriving its formal structure, narrative technique and themes from the determinist and naturalist fiction of past epochs in African-American and American literature. Specifically, the work of writers such as Omar Tyree (*Leslie, The Last Street Novel*), Terri Woods (*True to the Game*), Sister Souljah (*The Coldest Winter Ever*), Toure (*The Portable Promised Land*), Yxta Maya Murray (*Locas*), Cupcake Brown (*A Piece of Cake*) and 50 Cent (*From Pieces to Weight*), is derived out of the narrative techniques and, where present, the social concerns of Dreiser, Crane, Norris, Hammett, Chandler, Petry, Himes, Claude Brown, Robert Dean Pharr, Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim. This work can also be defined as derivative (in terms of plot) of the work of American crime-dime novelists such as Hammett and Chandler

yet representative of the shift from predominantly white to predominantly black and Latino inner-city spaces in the post-WWII period that first Petry and Himes and then an increasing number of black writers of the 1960s and 70s portrayed<sup>13</sup>.

In closing, let me add a couple more shadows to this study: Not only Josh Gibson, but other ghosts: Jesse Owens shaking my hand, Tommie Smith raising his fist. Moreover, my son casts himself across this entire enterprise. And ultimately, the justificatory coda to this exploration will find its inspiration in my wife, her Socratic, skeptical nature. I imagine her asking me important questions, challenging my design in specific ways, if I dare leave this thing insular and incomplete. "How does this apply to the world outside the ghetto?" I hear her asking. "Why does this matter to anybody other than poor black and brown people and those who decide to write about them?" She hasn't literally asked these questions, nor any other questions related to my project. She probably thinks I'm trying to sell her Christmas gifts on that Meg Whitman website<sup>14</sup> right now. But if she did know what all this hammering away in the next room was about, her perspective would expand this work in ways that I alone cannot.

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<sup>13</sup> One might just as well apply Vanessa Irvin Morris' definition of street lit: Contemporary Street Literature, Irvin Morris writes, can be defined as a literary genre "where the stories, be they fiction or non-fiction, are consistently set in urban, inner-city enclaves. Street Literature of yesteryear and today, by and large, depicts tales about the daily lives of people living in lower income city neighborhoods. This characteristic spans historical timelines, varying cultural identifications, linguistic associations, and various format designations" (Irvin Morris 2).

<sup>14</sup> Ebay (<http://www.ebay.com/>)

## The Content of the Cover

*"The materiality of an embodied text is the interaction of its physical characteristics with its signifying strategies. Centered in the artifact, this notion of materiality extends beyond the individual object, for its physical characteristics are the result of the social, cultural and technological processes that brought it into being"-- N. Katherine Hayles, My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*

I have two photos where I am with him. In one, I'm accepting a Chicago City Champion plaque. He is handing me the plaque with one hand, shaking my free hand with the other. In the second photo, my teammates and I are lined up in a row, tallest to shortest. I'm at the end of the line, furthest from the great sprinter. I don't remember what this second ceremony had to do with, but I do remember him making it all the way down the line, saying a little something to each boy and finally coming to me and saying "How'd you get all the way from Ohio and Chicago out to here?" In the background is visible the low stadium wall and above it, stretching away into a sunlight that is now just the tattered yellowed edge of this Polaroid, a Fresno field. A grape field, probably. By this time, I am a California kid.

Barthes writes that the photograph holds a multiplicity of connotations: Perceptive. Cognitive. Ideological-ethical. "Its signs," he determines, "are gestures, attitudes, expressions, colors, or effects, endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practice of a certain society: the link between signifier and signified remains... entirely historical" (Barthes 200-204). Seconding this sentiment, the American Social History Project/ Center for Media and Learning and the Center

for New Media's "History Matters" website states that "If we are to determine the meaning of a documentary photograph we must begin by establishing the historical context for both the image and its creator"<sup>15</sup>.

A photograph is a heavy thing held on a thin sheet of film, loaded as it is with perceptions, cognitions, ethics, and most of all, history. Take the first photograph where I shake Jesse Owens' hand. He is dressed in a black gown as if he is about to give a commencement address. He projects austere dignity in the manner of a statesman or a university head. If the viewer was unaware of his career or the setting of the ceremony they might think him a politician or academic administrator. Because the photo is black-and-white the viewer would assume correctly that it occurs either during or prior to the modern Civil Rights Movement. The viewer might associate Owens with Adam Clayton Powell, Edward Brooke or whoever was running Morehouse or Fisk in the 1940s and 50s. Such a viewer would be either deeply ahistorical in their perspective or simply unconcerned with the exponents of black popular culture. I am constantly surprised by how little white people know about black people and knowledge that is common among black people. As a rule, most white people do not know where the ghettos in their home city are. I live in California, yet know where the ghettos in Connecticut and Toronto are. White people are often oblivious even to the names of major black political figures (Mayors, Congressmen, Senators, prominent activists) if they aren't in their specific jurisdiction. I have even found that with the gradual decline of hip-hop's popularity that many popular black

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<sup>15</sup> I found the American Social History Project/ Center for Media and Learning and the Center for New Media's "History Matters" website at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu> surprisingly helpful in my analysis of Riis' "Bandits' Roost" photograph and thus reference it at some length. (The American Social History Project/ Center for Media and Learning and the Center for New Media. "Who Took the Photograph?" *History Matters*. Web. n.d.)

musicians seem increasingly to be black phenomena, without the crossover appeal that the Billboard-topping performers of the 80s and 90s routinely garnered.

If the viewer of the photograph is conversant in popular black history, however, they will recognize Owens and the "link" that they make with Owens will be historical in nature, understanding his position within the photo contextualized within a matrix of common knowledge about Owens, from his quadruple-gold medal performance in the Olympics in Berlin in 1936, to his ranking as the world's fastest man and America's most acclaimed athlete during an era when Black Americans were struggling for full recognition of their personhood and Black American men were engaged at home and abroad in an attempt to legitimate themselves as recognizably strong, brave, persevering and masculine. That Eulace Peacock was arguably the world's fastest man, having routinely beaten Owens throughout 1935 and 1936 before an injury kept him from qualifying for the Olympics and that Owens came increasingly to represent an outdated accommodationist "Negro" approach to the struggle for civil rights are the kind of unpopular historical points that are conveniently evacuated from the viewer's perceptive and historical cognition.<sup>xii</sup> The photo positions Owens as an authority, fully capable of conferring upon the younger and less accomplished man his wisdom and approval, as symbolized by the Chicago City Champion plaque that he hands me. Because of his age relative to mine, his august attire contrasted with my plain white t-shirt and track shorts, and the quantity of historical connotation attached to his presence, as opposed to my total anonymity, Owens is centralized and idealized within the logic of the photograph. The wealth of connotative power associated with him is key. He is eternalized within this framework of reinforcing popular perceptions as a man of great accomplishment, dignity and authority.

In the second photograph Owens is older, his gray hair a little patchier, his shoulders a bit more sloped, all that time and age coming in, bearing down upon him in a way that even at the time scared me. If anybody could live forever, you figure it would be a supremely dedicated, self-built athlete. We see them at work, captured forever at the moment of their wonder in the preserving glass of some filmed, recorded, sketched video, audio, pictorial object, and eternity doesn't seem quite so long. But meeting Owens that second time when he was still sturdy but now a visibly aging man told me about the force of time. Here he is wearing a standard-issue black suit. It is clear from the lean of his body, especially his head and presumably his gaze that he is making his way down the line of runners. Our relay team is stationed one after the next in order of descending height that belies our relative ability as sprinters. Owens himself is not large, just taller than us kids and in his relative stature seems to substantiate our arrangement, even as the facts would prove this basic visual valuation false. (In fact, Owens' modest build simply belied his surpassing agility, speed, strength, explosiveness and endurance.) The Fresno fields fall out behind us, a vision of the hard killing-hot labor that has made us the physical specimens we are. The whole thing is not simply picturesque but consciously glorifies itself, the scene, and, by extension, we, as well as Owens. The unperceived context, the shadow that is not seen, informing the entire *raison d'être* of this photograph is those fields, not only the hard work that harvests them and the physicality that that work compels forcefully into being, but the poverty and human degradation that shadows the entire enterprise. Only desperate people pick grapes in hundred-plus degree weather. Only desperate people submit to work conditions that leave them almost as poor at day's end as they were before they began.

Hardly systematic, these readings of my weathered memorabilia nevertheless rely upon Barthes' scale of visual connotation in *Image-Music-Text*, wherein the central connotative value of the

"photographic message" is its contested history. I always assumed that the study of a text must begin within its pages, deep inside its plot, symbolism and characterization. It did not occur to me until I was long past my days as a student that there might be more to the analysis of literature, just as it wasn't apparent to me until I was done running that there was more to each race than what happened on the track. Of course, I always understood that conditioning for better stamina and practicing to improve reflexes and reactions was important. But there is something different between knowing that—which everyone knows—and understanding what intangible aspect allowed Jesse Owens to beat Eulace Peacock only in the Olympics—the most important races the rivals ever ran. Such deep, often hidden aspects of competition only revealed themselves to me after I was too old for the knowledge to matter anymore. Likewise, a book is hardly limited to



Figure 1 Josiah Henson. Image courtesy of *Documenting the American South*, an initiative sponsored by the University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



that which lies between its covers. Hence this chapter will explore not only the book covers themselves, but the connotative significance of these covers. More than simply physical objects, their value is chiefly in these connotations.

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From Rohrbach I learn that "[s]ix out of ten slave narratives published in the United States between 1845 and 1870 provided a portrait of the author as a frontispiece" (Rohrbach 31). These frontispieces, Rohrbach states, serve two important functions: They provide proof that the author is real, "and in this case," she adds, "that means: *really* black." Second, the frontispiece functions "to identify and mark the former slave as *author*" (31). Directing the reader to the specifics of the frontispiece of William Wells Brown, Rohrbach notes that "perhaps what is most striking about the portrait is the presence of Brown's signature directly below it. Among slave narratives, the signature asserts Brown's literacy... the signature calls attention to his status as not just the author of this work, but as an author within the larger context of mainstream culture" (33). So, the frontispiece provides verification of the author's existence and race, while the signature proves literacy and literary and social status. The need for proof that underlies this entire effort is related to realism, and particularly the humanitarian realism deriving out of the slave narratives, taken up by the city/slum writings of Dreiser, Crane and Riis, and that is characteristic of both the proscriptive modern urban literature of activists like Geoffrey Canada and Grace Lee Boggs<sup>16</sup> and the commercially-oriented street lit stylists. Realism exposes and verifies specific problems faced in the world. Realist urban literature exposes and verifies the problems that people face in the city. The need for proof is so universal to such texts because they claim to depict a real and very desperate world. Othello's demand for ocular proof is, here, the consumer's demand: They want it

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<sup>16</sup> Lee Boggs, Grace. *Living For Change: An Autobiography*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 1998.

made real, to paraphrase Rohrbach's terminology. Without first-hand experience of the situations described, the reader must settle for those forms of proof that the composition, editing and production process provide. The need for proof and the satisfaction of that need, in fact, presupposes that the reader has not and in all likelihood will not involve themselves with the characters, conflicts and harsh realities that the humanitarian realist text depicts. If first-hand experience were available and welcomed by the reader, proof would not be so necessary. The readers could simply leave their comfortable middle-class existence and go South to the slave auctions. They could notify local abolitionist cells that theirs is a safe house for escaping slaves on the way to Canada. They could explore the windowless hot tenements themselves. They could spend their time in the more desolate streets today.

In the absence of even the barest expectation of reader-involvement in the actual conditions inspiring the narrative, the relationship of reader to book is unquestionably altered. John Cheever, when he wrote his miniature dramas of suburban New York and New England could expect that much of his audience was actively engaged in the lifestyle that they were reading about. The same could be said of any number of writers and their characteristic audiences. To take a more extreme example, the WWII novelists had the benefit of a reading audience that was drawn from an America where the entire economy had been enfolded into the war effort and the population as a whole had lent itself to the industries and the fighting of the war. The work of Mailer, Jones, Shaw and others was more than mere theory or conjecture for its audience. Take my daddy as example: A WWII veteran with a sharecropper's education, he was an avid reader of the great war novels of the time, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*, and James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line*. Without this basic connection between reader and text, the narrative that the text conveys is weighted with the responsibility of

portraying itself as authentic as opposed to depicting scenes from a familiar world. The affect of this portrayal must be distinguished from its effects. While the portrayal might affect a certain authenticity and might have the effect of making the viewer feel it to be an authentic representation of a soldier or escaped slave, no portrayal can actually alter the truth or falsity of the ex-slave's narrated experience. To the extent that objective reality exists, that reality predates and is unaltered by its representations. Nevertheless, what the slave narratives of Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Josiah Henson and so many others do is represent, not enact a set of experiences, emotions and ideas. Therefore, the totality of this representation, including the means of production and publication, are worthy of examination.

Through the display of the frontispiece and signature, Josiah Henson and other ex-slave narrativists are produced as real simultaneous with the true-to-life narrative itself. Narrative and person are dually authenticated. Moreover, these dually produced and authenticated entities are wedded upon the page as author and authored text. The black ex-slave and the narrative that he or she produces become inseparable with the publication of the text. Understanding the text, therefore, depends on more than mere close reading of the narrative itself, but rather holistic understanding of those things that coalesce around the narrative, from the cover art and dust jacket to the binding and paratexts such as copyright materials, and the entire production process that begets the narrative as a commercial object and finally brings what we call a book into being. This is a version of editorial theory unique from but ultimately springing out of the work of John K. Young and, well before Young, from Jerome McGann's *The Textual Condition*. Young takes McGann to task, noting that McGann states that "the most important 'collaboration' process is that which finds ways of marrying a linguistic to a bibliographic text. We confront such marriages most forcefully when we read texts which, while 'written by' certain writers were never

'authorized' by them" (McGann 61). The critical race theory critique here is obvious: Faulkner and Byron, the writers McGann cites here, in attempting to maintain or regain authority over their texts, never had to struggle against anything approaching the resistance at all points in the publishing process faced by black writers as diverse as Phillis Wheatley, David Walker, Harriet Jacobs, Nella Larsen, Chester Himes and Richard Wright.

While duly citing McGann's work as foundational in the field of editorial theory, Young nevertheless notes that McGann's focus on literary icons like Pound, Yeats and Dickinson "highlights authors who maintained an extraordinary degree of control over their works' production" (Young 29). By contrast, the typically appellate position of the Black American writer has not afforded such agency at the editorial level and thus theory around the editorial processes that works by black and other disempowered writers undergo is logically even more necessary and potentially more fruitful.

Young writes of *The Textual Condition* that "The revolutionary theoretical import of McGann's account of textuality... lies in the understanding of the linguistic and bibliographic codes as mutually constitutive of meaning... Editorial theorists, by insisting both on the interpretive importance of a text's particular physical manifestation and on the inherent instability of those physical forms, find the book-text relationship to be both fundamentally meaningful and unreliable at each level" (23). Though divided over preferred authorial subjects, McGann and Young are equally concerned with including in their analysis of literature the textual and editorial elements that inform and even help to create the text before us at the bookstore. If I substitute for the "book-text relationship" the *book-commerce* or *book-publicity* relationship, thus distinguishing not the narrative text from the surrounding textual elements of cover, jacket,

binding and paratexts, but rather the narrative texts from those other textual elements and the publicity/commercial processes of workshopping agenting, marketing, editing, publication and distribution, Young's statement is in line with my ideal theoretical approach. To go to Hayles: "*The materiality of an embodied text is the interaction of its physical characteristics with its signifying strategies.* Centered in the artifact, this notion of materiality extends beyond the individual object, for its physical characteristics are the result of the social, cultural and technological processes that brought it into being" (Hayles 103). For my purposes, the "signifying strategies" of the works here under discussion include all the means by which they signify to the public they seek to reach their existence, their "realist" veracity, their entertainment value and social importance, and ultimate efficacy as documents seriously concerned with healing the broken worlds they depict.

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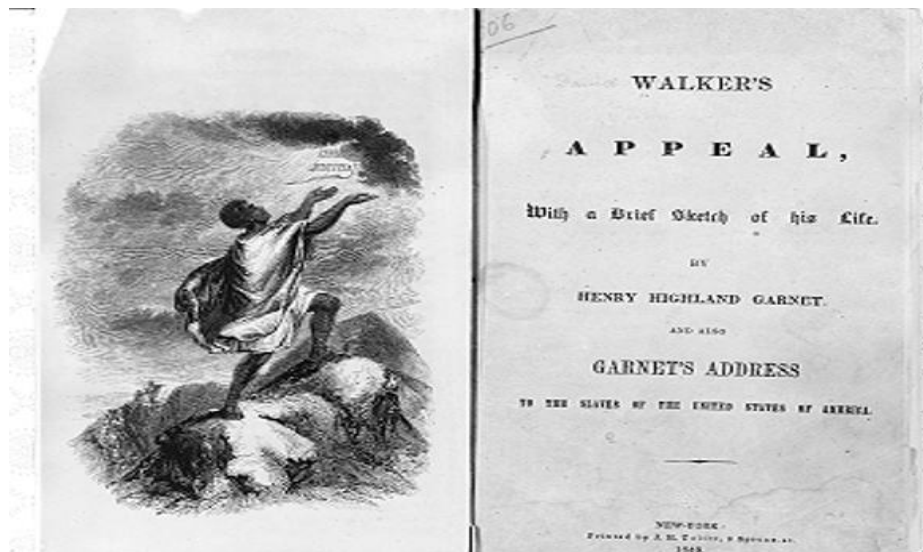


Figure 2 "Walker's Appeal," frontispiece—with the words "libertas justitia" appearing in the sky—and title page of an edition published in 1848 (archived at Library of Congress).

The frontispiece for the 1848 publication of David Walker's *Appeal* is markedly different in design and apparent intent. Depicting a black man atop a mountain peak hands outstretched to the heavens, the illustration certainly portrays an appeal; however, its appellate nature, while indisputable, is significantly different from that of the frontispieces that promote the slave narratives. Whereas the frontispiece that adorns the typical slave narrative serves the dual purpose of verifying the authentic existence and authentic blackness of the authorial subject, here the author is not pictured. John Edgar Wideman<sup>17</sup> notes that "The slave narratives of the 1800s posited and then worked themselves out in a bifurcated either/or world. The action of the story concerns moving from one world to another. The actor is a single individual, a featured star, and we watch and listen as this protagonist undergoes his or her rite of passage. South to north, rural to urban, black environment (plantation) to white environment..." This narrative logic is foreshadowed by each slave narrative's frontispiece, its formerly enslaved author rendered not only centrifugal but solitary upon the book's cover. The effect, Wideman argues, of this emphasis on the individual actor is that the "fate of one black individual is foregrounded, removed from the network of systematic relationships connecting, defining, determining, undermining all American lives. This manner of viewing black lives at best ignores, at worst reinforces, an apartheid status quo. Divisive categories that structure the world of the narratives- slave/free, black/white, underclass/ middle class, female/male- are not interrogated. The idea of a collective, intertwined fate recedes" (Wideman).

If Wideman is correct about the perspectival impact of the slave narrative's logic and I am correct about the perspectival impact of its pictorial logic, then what is the impact of the 1848

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<sup>17</sup> Wideman, John Edgar. Introduction to *Live From Death Row* by Mumia Abu-Jamal. New York, NY: Harper Perennial. 1995. Print.

frontispiece on the way readers and viewers will understand Walker's *Appeal*? It would seem that the "divisive categories" Wideman enumerates would not be so easily ignored. The heroic featured star seems, here, to be replaced by an anonymous black man who might as well be any (and perhaps every) black person questing not only for basic freedom from slavery but for the kind of spiritual enlightenment that the portrait also suggests. Note how different, for example, is the dress of the man featured in the frontispiece for this edition of the *Appeal*, as opposed to the appearance of the slave narrativists on their frontispieces. The slave narrativists are dressed in double-breasted suits if they are men, and in ankle-length dresses if they are women. Each is the black embodiment of bourgeois fashion and propriety. The anonymous man fronting Walker's *Appeal* is dressed in a flowing white garment more out of Near Eastern or African style than anything approaching American or British custom. He seems to have scaled this mountain alone and as he reaches its heights seems to reach heavenward for yet more of whatever it is he seeks. His legs are almost fully exposed, as are his arms. His hands extend out flat, palms up, as if presenting an invisible platter. The portrait asserts the man's physicality, his physical existence, his bodily striving, offering and desire. In short, his presentation is far more elemental and more physically prepossessing than the portraits that promote the slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Josiah Henson or Frederick Douglass, to take just a few prominent, representative examples. The anonymous black man. These contrasts suggest deeper differences between the *Appeal* and the slave narratives, not the least of which is that the *Appeal* is authored by a free born Black American with all the sense of possibility for advancement within America and, more crucially, beyond the prevailing constructs of the nation that such a status allows. According to Walker historian Darryl Scriven, the author of the *Appeal* was "a stalwart man, a loyal American, a venture capitalist, a successful entrepreneur, a persuasive salesman... a passionate evangelist, an aggressive intellectual, a sought-after journalist, a subversive theologian, an insightful cultural

critic" and far more besides (Scriven 2). Where the slave, insofar as he is constituted by his slavery, does not exist outside of the legal structure of his nation and thus is the creation, the subject and the dependent of his nation, where the former slaves who wrote slave narratives are almost entirely concentrated upon the reform of the social system and the abolition of slavery, Walker and other free blacks of his time were by contrast freer agents, able to construct identities that foreshadowed an American future unfettered not only from physical slavery but from spiritual, ideological and economic subordination. In holding up Haitian revolution and self-governance as a model to Black Americans, Walker's *Appeal* suggests "much more than the end of property in slaves" (Hartman 170). It requires the total reconstruction of the New World, and the flourishing of a new black world within the Americas that reaches far beyond the inherently flawed American form.

The anonymous man's outstretched hands appeal to a higher power, and this higher power is clearly not a worldly power. He stands upon the highest peak available, nothing above him but the heavens. Unlike Wedgewood's kneeling slave, he appeals to no man-made law, no worldly currency, no political program. Rather, the frontispiece foreshadows President Lincoln's admonition that the newly freed slaves should not kneel before him but only before God. It foreshadows, too, Malcolm X's admonition that the Negro revolution will be controlled by foxy white liberals, but the black revolution will be controlled only by God. Neither Malcolm, nor Lincoln, nor Walker and his literary executors, dismiss the appellate position: Rather, they redirect the appeal. This is a vision of appeal emphatically removed from the position assumed by Wedgewood's slave. Wedgewood's slave is in chains; he kneels and appeals to the legal and political bodies of the nation to free him. The man featured on the frontispiece to Walker's *Appeal*



does not kneel at all. He does not grovel. And he is not chained. He is well beyond basic freedom and, rather, presents himself before the eternal scene ready for revelation.

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Figure 3 See “*Bandits’ Roost*” photograph (from *The Jacob A. Riis Collection*) on additional page

*“...literary fictions have been telling uncompromising stories of marginalized Americans for centuries. In the late nineteenth century, the genre mainly focused on the ghetto lives of European immigrants in New York City’s inner-city slums”—Vanessa Irvin Morris, “From Moll Flanders to The Coldest Winter Ever: A Historical Timeline of Street Lit”*

By the late 1880s Jacob Riis had embarked on the use of flash photography, leveraging this technological innovation to enhance his exposé on New York City’s Lower East Side slums. Much as DuBois would use the advent of sociological study in Europe and in an isolated study of a Men’s House in Chicago as the template for his copious detailing of Negro life in Philadelphia less than a decade later, Riis’ use of flash photography is exemplary of the technical innovations that have sometimes sprung from work around urban American street life<sup>18</sup>. While usually criticized, by yours truly and seemingly everyone else, for its lack of narrative complexity and for its formal backwardness, the realist mode that urban literature adopts from the slave narratives actually involves certain innovative extra-narrative techniques. Two examples of this are the

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<sup>18</sup> The best example of this is DuBois’ *Philadelphia Negro*, which pioneered many methods now common to research and writing in the social sciences (DuBois, W.E.B. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Publications of the University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, PA. 1899.) More recently, Dalton Conley’s work on race and wealth inequality (which, predictably, takes among its foci the economic prospects of impoverished inner-city blacks) has led to creation of “a formal model for the inclusion of assets into statistical models of socioeconomic attainment and family processes” (Conley 7).

sociological approach taken and popularized by the *Philadelphia Negro* study and Riis' adoption of flash photography as the visual element that decisively differentiated his polemic against the slums from the multitude of newspaper accounts of crime, vice and poverty in New York's slums. Moreover, Riis' photographs have memorialized his subjects and his book so much so that *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890, seems to presage DuBois' *Philadelphia Negro*, as well as the determinist novels set in New York and Chicago written by Crane, Dreiser and Norris. Riis' photographs bear witness to a tenement building-style largely replaced in poor urban districts by the infamous housing projects erected during the 1930s, 40s and 50s and a scale of white/European inner-city poverty that is difficult to imagine in the America we know today.

The setting for the "Bandits' Roost" photograph is 1888, New York, New York. Lower East. The Mulberry Bend neighborhood, a raucous and deadly stretch of tenements, saloons, vice and violence. The photograph is taken of a particular Mulberry Street alleyway. It is unclear whether it is Riis himself or a photographer-associate that actually meets with the idle men in the Bend, on Mulberry, offering money for the opportunity to record their images. The American Social History Project/ Center for Media and Learning and the Center for New Media's *History Matters* website notes that in the caption to the photograph in *How the Other Half Lives* "Riis argued that the alley, like the tenement, was a breeding ground for disorder and criminal behavior" (The American Social History Project/ Center for Media and Learning and the Center for New Media).

Riis writes:

"Abuse is the normal condition of "the Bend," murder its everyday crop, with the tenants not always the criminals. In this block between Bayard, Park, Mulberry, and Baxter Streets, "the Bend" proper, the late Tenement House Commission counted 155 deaths of children in a specimen year (1882). Their per centage of the total mortality in the block was 68.28, while for the whole city the proportion was only 46.20. The infant mortality in any city or place as compared with the whole number of deaths is justly considered a good barometer of its general sanitary condition. Here, in this tenement, No. 59 1/2, next to Bandits' Roost,

fourteen persons died that year, and eleven of them were children; in No. 61 eleven, and eight of them not yet five years old. According to the records in the Bureau of Vital Statistics only thirty-nine people lived in No. 59 1/2 in the year 1888, nine of them little children. There were five baby funerals in that house the same year. Out of the alley itself, No. 59, nine dead were carried in 1888, five in baby coffins" (Riis 49).

Mulberry Bend is thus marked with murder, early adult mortality and horrific rates of infant mortality. The pervasive theme here is premature death as a reality encompassing the Bend and its inhabitants. In particular, the preoccupation with the deaths of children, a preoccupation that shadows Riis' entire text and nearly all his book-length and editorial polemics against slum creation and slum life, signifies life's premature end and thus hope's inevitable foreclosure. This focus is determinism in its extreme iteration: The suggestion that simply being born in this section of the city already forecloses the opportunity for even the basic fundamentals of existence, let alone a more livable, peaceful and productive world. It is a sentiment echoed in the plot dynamics and over-arching rhetoric of works about predominantly black inner-city zones, from *American Hunger* to *The Street, always outnumbered, always outgunned* to *The Coldest Winter Ever*. With this as foundational premise for the nature of the Bend, its alleyway doings, and for the life-degrading effect of urban poverty more generally, the photograph of the men in the alley is pre-set as a microcosm of all that death and foreclosed hope. The photographic subjects are preemptively arranged by force of Riis' rhetoric as reinforcing and authenticating of that judgment.

"At first glance, the foreground figures [the men] in the photograph underscore the aura of menace created by Riis' caption." Two men appear at the head of the alley and seem to bar, or regulate entrance to it. One is casually holding what looks like a thick cane of wood, not unlike a baseball bat. This visual, *History Matters*' "Who Took the Photograph?" article observes, "underscore[s] the aura of menace" associated with the New York tenements, Mullberry Bend,

and the rough men that purportedly inhabit it. The article continues: "Perched on the railing of the right-hand staircase is a third man who has assumed a casual, yet commanding, pose. Perhaps he is the ringleader of this gang" (The American Social History Project/ Center for Media and Learning and the Center for New Media).

However, on closer and more comprehensive inspection this initial impression is complicated and even possibly negated:

"[W]hat of the other ten figures in the image, the women leaning out the windows, the young child in the right background, the three figures on the opposite porch?" the website article asks. These are strong rhetorical questions that reposition the viewer's gaze, directing his/her attention to the seemingly ancillary figures in the photograph. In fact, these "other ten" compose the vast majority of the characters in the photograph and the viewer's recognition of them is crucial to understanding the undertone and subtle environment of the photograph. It reminds me of the moment in Geoffrey Canada's *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* when Canada shows up in the Harlem neighborhood that will eventually be the first home of his now famous Harlem Children's Zone. He and his colleagues form a triad of professionally-attired black men who move through the desolation of an obviously impoverished neighborhood. They go to the school which will be the site of their after-school program. At the entrance to the elementary school, leaning, are two drug addicts on a sofa that has somehow gotten from a living room to the street. There are more desolate details that I've forgotten or that are too similar to other scenes of deprivation that I've seen, read, written or otherwise encountered for me to tell you exactly what awaited the three black men in their suits. I know that various vice-related refuse litters the grounds directly surrounding the school. But what Canada notices, and this is what is important in the anecdote, is

subtler: Many porch stoops are dirty, but many stoops are also clean. Most of the people in the area are not intoxicated or visibly addicted to anything. There is a certain amount of care and order at the fringes of this purportedly ungovernable city-space. Canada, who is from the Bronx and knows his way around more than one rough East Coast neighborhood, is able to discern the complexities of inner-city spaces in ways that go beyond editorializing, propagandizing or pandering. Jacob Riis had a keen eye, especially when one considers that he didn't have one hundred years of street literature behind him to build upon, hold his work in conversation with and reference in order to refine it to its essence. Riis was working with new tools both photographic and literary.

After noting that the “other ten” in the Mulberry Bend photograph hardly appear menacing, the “Who Took the Photograph?” article continues, asking even more pointed and revealing questions. “If [the figures in the photograph] were indeed part of a notorious gang, why would they be so willing to pose for the camera, especially since members of the police force often accompanied Riis on his photographic forays? How did Riis secure the cooperation of all these individuals? Certainly not by telling them that he wanted a picture of notorious criminals. Is this really a den of iniquity, as Riis would have us believe?” (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu>).

I remember once, I think it was around '90. I was in Oakland, at the intersection of 50th and East 14<sup>th</sup>.<sup>19</sup> People have been kicking up dust there since who knows when. Anyway, this is an area that especially two decades ago was almost exclusively black except for the employees at randomly dispersed taquerias, donut shops and nail shops. It also was and remains a major thoroughfare for every kind of open-air illegality from bootlegged albums to drug deals. If white

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<sup>19</sup> i.e., International Boulevard

people were cars you could have lain down in that intersection for a month and not been run over. Yet one afternoon I saw these two white folks, clearly European (I don't know why this was so clear to me, it just was), cradling camera equipment as they stepped out of their small beat-to-dust Datsun. They made their way over to a group of people, men and women, loitering by a bus stop. It was clear no one was waiting for the bus, and less so for foreign-looking white people looking to make visual record of them. I've never seen property change hands so quickly without protest. The guerilla photographers were too much in shock at the daylight heisting skills of their potential filmic subjects, who were equally in shock that even stupid rich entitled motherfuckers with dreams and no sense would come down to the streets and try to take pictures of them. It is one thing to bootleg, prostitute and deal drugs in broad daylight in the middle of a busy thoroughfare in full view of your uncle, your granmere, the police, the sunshine and the Lord, it is quite another to have someone openly video or photograph the goings on. This, plus my common sense, tells me that if Riis really had attempted to photograph several fugitives from justice, some of the men wanted for murder, he would have been likelier their next victim than the first flash-photographer of the American inner-city. In fact, what Riis is showing us in "Bandits' Roost" is not purely or even primarily a "den of iniquity" but rather a microcosm of a community, impoverished and bereft, true, but also dignified, accommodating and respectful and resilient. As easily as the two men at the photograph's forefront and the four others directly behind them perched on the outdoor porches could be read as foreboding presences, these men could also be understood as protective gatekeepers. Oftentimes this is the dual role of the man everyone in my West Fresno neighborhood called "Unc", that when I came back home jobless from college they briefly appended to me, calling me "Butch" in a sign of some sort of respect. I'm talking about the brother between twenty-five and thirty-five, today stereotypically appareled in baggy pants, white muscle shirt and do-rag who might be unemployed, might have a weed habit or an issue

with alcohol, and may even have a prison record but who is trusted on people's front porches most days, fixing their cars, their fences, drinking beers and bullshitting late nights, always present, known and trusted in the community's semi-intimate spaces. There is a reason such a man is trusted: He is honorable in that particular space, no matter what anyone outside that space thinks about it or about him. The other figures in the photograph might be seen not as inconsequential bystanders to the mayhem purportedly unleashed by the thugs in front, but rather as the constant forces of the community, the quiet counter-intuitive centerpieces of the story that the picture tells: The mothers, the children, the street vendors and the junkmen.

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The descriptions of Mulberry Bend and the rhetoric deployed throughout *How the Other Half Lives* are laced with the recriminations, excoriations and exhortations of a firebrand reformer. Riis' language comes closer than that of any of the subjects of this study to Barthes' characterization, "poor, monotonous, immediate... quasi-unable to lie" (Barthes 137). In Riis' case, the language employed is only "quasi-unable to lie" because, in fact, the photographs which are perhaps the most memorable aspect of his seminal exposé are presented not as the product of community members posing for pay but as unmediated glimpses of the lives of the poor. While the people photographed are almost surely impoverished and are obviously representative of the appearance, bearing and environment of the Lower East side community members Riis chronicles, they are nevertheless consciously representing a certain set of life-ways. They are posing and acting. Their representation of the real is not fully "immediate", and the poverty, monotony and immediacy of these photographs *as images* is complicated by their probable production process: Riis, or one of his assistants, had to find people in Mulberry Bend and other slums who looked a certain way or had to suggest adjustments to their clothes or stances or facial

expressions to get them to look a certain way, maybe *more destitute*, maybe *more desolate*; Riis, or one of his assistants, probably had to pay the photographic subjects; Riis may have taken multiple shots of his subjects in different poses, at different angles, in different lights; Riis, finally, would write his book and organize text and photographs around each other, thus adding literary mediation on to these other forms of image-mediation. Thus, Riis' process is at once that of the agent finding and negotiating with the talent, that of the editor consciously refiguring the given thing, and that of the writer mediating reality through written description, argument and appeal.

If the implications of Riis consciously seeking out his subjects and paying them to pose for his camera are the possibility of inaccurate representation, the certainty of overtly manipulated representation, and the consequent instability of the "truth", or realism, that the photograph ostensibly portrays, then the pose itself engenders stereotyped viewer responses to the instability of truth already acknowledged.

"...[I]t is the very pose of the subject which prepares the reading of the signifieds of connotation," Barthes writes in *Image-Music-Text*. "The photograph clearly only signifies because of the existence of a store of stereotyped attitudes which form ready-made elements of signification" (201). That which the photograph denotes, Barthes argues, must be separated from what it connotes: "Bandits' Roost" denotes the six men paired in twos at the head of the alleyway and the assorted other figures wandering through the alley's back end, sticking their heads out windows, and the like. The photograph connotes, through pose (as well, I would say, as its particular socioeconomic and historical connotations), "a store of stereotyped attitudes... ready-made elements of signification." In the case of "Bandits' Roost" these stereotyped responses might



include popular associations of the Bend with crime, vice and squalor, the fear of and disdain for tenement dwellers, the sense that the lives and concerns of such people are inevitably remote from those of people with enough leisure and luxury to buy and read books.

Lastly, we have Riis' mediation of the visual image by his text, in this case his introduction and figuration of Mulberry Bend, which is formed dually of a rhetoric of distress ("Abuse is the normal condition"), and statistics both mundane (street addresses) and tragic (on infant mortality and "baby coffins"). "Formerly," Barthes writes, "the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination... today, there is amplification [from text to image]" (Barthes 205). Disregarding Barthes' timeline, whatever it might be, I have no idea what it might be, I think that his description of the modern relation between image and text well describes the impact of Riis' under-remembered text upon his famous photographs. His statistics, moral inveighing and proscriptive diatribes do "load" his text with a specifically Center-Left Progressive morality and imagination. While *How the Other Half Lives* is popularly remembered for its photographs, the vast majority of the book is a prose text. This prose shapes and re-defines our understanding of Riis' photographs even as we forget that it exists in such quantity.

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Street lit cover art is at the heart of my boy's "Black Market" essay, which he told me was published in something called *The Journal of American Ethnics* or *Ethnic Journal of Americans*, maybe. That information may be wrong, either because I've misremembered it, or because the journal no longer exists; that seems to be the typical fate of anything literary these days. Everything that is born must die within three months, so it's been decreed in the literary marketplace. Something like that. I suppose publishing, or re-publishing his work here is a form

of plagiarism. But I figure, I still open his mail and that's illegal, too. I'm not worried about laws, just work, and the ways in which I can re-purpose and comment on his analysis will, I think, enhance both our attempts at comprehension of current developments in Black American literature.

Compared to what the boy's been writing the past few years, I'm a hack. I can't pen an essay or a poem or a story to save my black skin. My problem, I've figured out, is that I'm a big thinker in a medium-sized, well-made and maintained and safely pensioned world. I think in volumes, not chapters, but the world that I've lived in since leaving Chicago's streets has been one of many small economical chapters characterized by incremental monetary ascendance, solid education, home ownership and proper standing in my various communities. This, truthfully, is why I've never written anything substantive; I became too involved becoming this person outside the ghetto, living a life sighted on security, sustaining my son, pleasing my wife. The television was on too much, with me trying to figure what the housing market was doing, how many jobs the prevailing political situation was creating or destroying, which fibers or chemicals or floating wisps of nothing might give me cancer, to sit down and fully concentrate on the literature I wanted to write. One day, I retired and things went quiet and I was like Hemingway's surrogate on Mount Kilimanjaro realizing that I'd not written about the dull stable boy in Spain or the hot-blooded Armenian slut or the taste of hot pennies in one's mouth during a long hard scared run. Now, I see how I've eluded myself, in a way. I've survived upward enough at everything from athletics to academics to corporate and social work that I've truly come to this blessed life-moment whereupon I can receive without qualm some of the last pension benefits the state of California will ever issue. I am beyond proud, as is my son, who loves irony more than his future, that I've managed to tear from the beast these shreds of social welfare before our public sphere is

wholly devoured, its last rewards auctioned off by the Chamber of Commerce. And now that I have the time to actually enjoy this little wedge of security in the dwindling middle of what is no longer a neatly maintained college-educated and well-employed world, I can look up the contracting funnel and down at its expanding depths and see things for what they will be. My son will probably be a better writer than me if for no other reason than the brutal truth is that a desperate writer is a good writer and it will be almost impossible for writers and other intellectuals not to be desperate in the privatized future. They will not have quite the same illusions of safety, solvency and status. They will not know what it's like to have themselves and their work respected where they go, or to look ahead in life with knowledge or expectation. They will not have the safety that helped me raise him and keep him in clothes and shelter and fresh food. The teaching jobs will be computerized and standardized to a few stock syllabi. The social work will be the province of charities run from churches and their make-believe. But that insecurity will create a few books, I think. These will not be neatly rendered stories workshopped to three-hundred pages exactly. They will not be books taught how to show the rifle by page ten and shoot it by page fifty, or whatever that saying says. Not work that never knew it was foredoomed failure. Not work that never knew it was work. But, instead, the kind of disaster on the page that is Bob Jones already thinking murder on the Harbor Freeway on page one; Lutie Johnson in that last line headed to hell realizing niggers should never read or write. I'm awaiting the new generations' manifestos against the sunrise and jeremiads against their organs. Indefensible dissertations. Bad books. Books so bad they mess people over and they know it only when it is too quiet and they realize that now it is harder to be alone with themselves.

And this, too: On top of angling for my pension and achieving some sensible state-sponsored security, there was another generationally-determined issue: That prior to the present instantiation

of street lit that the publishing houses didn't want us black folk, or at least didn't want us in any relevant number. Calvin Reed, an editor at *Publishers Weekly* reveals in McHenry's *Forgotten Readers* that "For years, the stereotypical response from publishers for not publishing black books was, 'blacks don't read, there's no market because they don't buy hardcover books' " (McHenry 298). Operating within and against this ill-informed logos, black writers consistently found our work prematurely foreclosed upon by the mainstream publishing industry. The alternative presses, such as Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press, established in 1967, have typically functioned on small budgets with consequently foreshortened book lists, publication schedules and advertising and distribution budgets. Beyond these small, black, urban, Southern or political-resistance-oriented presses, you had Ellison and Baldwin and Wright and a stray classic from a lesser-known writer like Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* or Petry's *The Street*. Then you had Morrison and Alice Walker and maybe, perhaps some early work by Gayl Jones. You had Langston and Zora Neale Hurston's major works and maybe Nella Larsen's *Passing* as representation of the entire New Negro/ Harlem Renaissance. You had Paul Lawrence Dunbar. And you had the best known of the slave narrativists. The publishing houses, the acquisitions editors, even some agents I expect thought that this was *doing* much more than it was. In reality, the inclusion of these writers on bookstore shelves and in the popular canon of American fiction was doing little more than recognizing writers of such artistic and cultural significance that if disregarded would have been the equivalent of French readers passing over Balzac and Stendahl. The wider body of our literature went unrepresented.

The closest I ever came to breaking through this matrix of premature foreclosure born of unremarkable stereotype was also the moment that I realized the intransigence of that simple but impermeable barrier. It was a long time ago. I was more impressionable and more easily swayed

by acceptance and rejection then. Twenty-five years old, I was still young enough to care what this world thought of me. It was after I submitted a couple pretty good writing samples that I was granted nominal acceptance to what was probably the most prestigious conference for up-and-coming writers at that time: The Wheatcake Conference in Vermont. Wheatcake was and I think remains among the major writers' conferences in the country. At least back then it was seen as a gateway and point of real access for all of us, no matter our racial, ethnic or socioeconomic background.

But Wheatcake was a mixture of the meritocracy and the aristocracy that seemed to go two ways at once. While, on the one hand, it really was an avenue for obscure writers to access the major editors and agents, it nevertheless imposed a hierarchical system that belied that open access as soon as we began our week's stay: We were broken into two groups. There was the over-class of writers whose work was most prized. The agents had come for them. The editors were looking through their wine glasses at them. The over-class spent time drinking, eating and mingling; searching out opportunities for publication. Then there was the under-class: I was accepted at this level and was made part of the Wheatcake wait-staff. They gave me a kitchen smock and told me to make sure to wash my hands properly and put me in the kitchen. There I was, along with ten or fifteen other untouchables. Our gig was to serve the conference faculty and the more prized admits. I had bussed tables and done menial labor in order to have time to read and write, not the other way around, but maybe, I figured, this was just the way business got done on the East Coast, by a sort of oppressive progressive tiering wherein agents and writers discussed high art and Palestinian self-determination over wine, cheese and my sweat. Maybe I just didn't know how things worked in the real world. However, as the week went on and I washed and dried dish after dish after dish, and I took orders and brought meals to all the people who would one day

publish and blurb each other's novels, the whole design started to anger me. I wanted to wonder aloud about Wheatcake, to question its mission and the implications of its routinized hierarchies.

But I was torn: I genuinely liked that place, save for the kitchen. Everything at Wheatcake had a kind of handcrafted artisan quality, even when it was plastic. I don't know how to achieve custom-made plasticity, but Wheatcake knew and did it. Thought had gone into the simple details of door frames and nightstands and gorgeous placards with quotations from the transcendentalist poets. The surrounding nature was unequivocally lovely. The little town in Vermont, I forget its name, had that idyllic pastoral feel to it that apparently towns along the mid-Atlantic seaboard possess when they aren't lassoed into a ghetto, or wedged into a megalopolis, or incarcerated within concrete downtowns, uptowns, financial districts and project buildings. The conference itself was plentiful with artistic and commercial opportunities for those truly chosen and not simply flitting menial around its perimeter. Agents scoured the premises, ambitious writers did everything short of cutting each other for a sit-down with a representative of a publishing house. There were over one hundred promising new novelists, story writers and memoirists there, counting the kitchen folk. There might have even been a poet or two for all I know. What I definitely do know is all but four of the aspiring writers were white. There was me, black and in the kitchen. Then there were two Indian-American men and one Latina. I think she was part of the wait-staff, too. This was the whitest environment I'd ever entered, even whiter than graduate school. For a while I wondered if Scandinavia was in Vermont; maybe I'd just walked through the wrong back door. Then I started thinking that maybe I'd wandered into a corporate boardroom and didn't know it, that perhaps I hadn't even left San Francisco and instead simply migrated up a chain of influence to a space more exclusive than my seat in class at Santa Clara University. But eventually I accepted the reality before me, that my chances as a commercially viable writer were

slimmer than the starving white artists I was feeding. After the farewell banquet ended and the dining hall emptied, I stacked all the chairs and turned out the lights and locked the doors and went to bed and woke in the morning and packed away my synopsis and manuscript and caught my flight back to California. It was time for me to find salaried work with benefits.

That the commercial ascendance of Terry McMillan was the turning point where Black American writers became widely recognized as commercially viable has already been delineated in some detail. My son's essay, which, by the way, he now reports was actually published in truncated form in that American ethnic literature journal, details this commercial history. But what I want to publish here is not what he published there, but rather what was not published. His essay, newly mediated by my editorship, is the last movement of my first chapter: The essay and my riffs cloaked within it examine street lit cover art as both art object and commercial object and, in so doing, expose the complex psychic and cultural problematics of the former and the potent agency of the latter. Similar to the slave narrative frontispieces, street lit images of pornographically posed, bare-skinned black men and women, indecorously arranged, attempt to verify the existence and "blackness" of the stories' subjects, if not the authors themselves. Similar to Riis' "Bandit's Roost" street lit cover art attempts via a certain pose that entails the mediation, objectification and sensationalization of the viewed to attract attention within the literary market and gain an astounded audience that can then be exposed to certain truths of inner-city existence. In a sense, this is simply the old fiction tactic of getting at the truth through a lie. However, the problematics arise in the nature of the "lie" and the "truth" on display. It is my contention that whereas Riis' photographic subjects were representatives of oppressed deprived communities, these European immigrants were not subject to the same degree to the cultural tropes around excessive violence, depravity and sexuality that the black subjects of street lit cover art are. Thus,

othering, segregation and distancing did not impact them or their audience to the same nullifying degree. The majority white viewership and readership identified with Riis' photographic subjects in ways that they do not when it comes to the subjects of street lit cover art. They extended themselves in terms of money spent on public works such as New York City's many park spaces, and ultimately in terms of substantive integration of European immigrants at all levels of the society. To the extent that street lit texts have a muckraking mission to expose the horrors of the ghetto, that exposure confines itself to a public that is already familiar with these conditions not as horrors but as realities. In other words, street lit's initial commercial representation, that is, its cover art, represents black inner-city life to black people in a form that is at once familiar to us and yet is also sensationalized, at once realistic and yet degraded below the real lived world. Whereas slave narrative frontispieces display ex-slave men and women in stately, dignified poses that not only verify their existence and blackness but also verify their dignity retained in the face of slavery, vigilante terrorism and the law's caprice, street lit cover art verifies a black reality that is neither stately, nor dignified. Nevertheless, this cover art is also a tangible vehicle, a sort of spot-lit marquee that suggests, or symbolizes, a space of commercial opportunity for black writers traditionally excluded from the world of letters. Black male writers especially, whose works generally do not sell as well as their female counterparts, are granted an opportunity for publication by this problematic form.

Anyway, I'm off on a tangent, off and sprinting. Before I forget, here's his essay, "Black Market: The Dark Role of Excess in the Literary Marketplace and the Genesis and Evolution of Urban Literature":



*"The materiality of an embodied text is the interaction of its physical characteristics with its signifying strategies.* Centered in the artifact, this notion of materiality extends beyond the individual object, for its physical characteristics are the result of the social, cultural and technological processes that brought it into being," Hayles avers (Hayles 103). This statement centers literary analysis not solely upon the textual artifact but extends beyond this essential object to the preliminary nodes of analysis, the signifying social, cultural and technological objects informing the object's creation. "A more accurate perception [of literature production]," Hayles asserts, "would focus on the editorial process of choice, which is always contextual and driven by 'certain interests,' although these reside not exclusively in the text but in the conjunction of the text, editorial process, and cultural context... There is no Platonic reality of texts. There are only physical objects such as books and computers, foci of attention..." (97). Hayles' contention that the Platonic notion of ideal forms has no place in discourse around text-production is an important rhetorical move because it works to de-mystify a process of production that, in its turn to digital forms, risks appearing to the lay person even more mysterious and immaterial. The editorial process of choice, undertaken variously by authors, agents, editors and book cover designers, among others, is universal to literature-production. This process of choice eventually results in a text that is physical, material. Thus, Hayles attempts to make material and vividly complex a process that has largely been mystified and made to seem immaterial by the publishing industry's intentional focus on and elevation of the individual genius of authors and sole focus on text, thereby obscuring the material processes by which a book is made. Thus, this essay takes as among its subjects the disregarded issue of book cover design as constitutive in the literary process.

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Chester Himes' work is the forerunner to the blaxploitation film genre and to gangster rap music. Even the entertainment object that heads a Himes novel, its book cover, speaks to the complex relationship of Himes' Harlem novels to the literary marketplace. Tellingly, Himes, in the second volume of his autobiography, *My Life of Absurdity*, remembers the process by which he began to write his Harlem crime novels as markedly strange and surreal. "I was writing some strange shit. Some time before, I didn't know when, my mind had rejected all reality as I had known it and I had begun to see the world as a cesspool of buffoonery. Even the violence was funny. A man gets his throat cut. He shakes his head to say you missed me and it falls off. Damn reality, I thought... I didn't know what it was like to be a citizen of Harlem; I had never worked there, raised children there, been hungry, sick or poor there... *The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man*" (Himes 126). The strange shit that festers in Himes' mind and runs over, staining the page, is the muck from which urban literature is born. Himes' shit is strange because it is neither derived from nor intended to mimic reality, but is instead a fantastically violent description of a famous/infamous Black neighborhood that seeks to rest control of that neighborhood *as an imagined artifact "from the white man."* By "*the white man*" Himes is referring, however crudely and simplistically, to the dominant culture, which has maintained the power to define Harlem and, by extension, to define Black culture, according to its own designs and for its own purposes. The Harlem at stake here is an imagined zone, a product of White and Black imagination alike. Therefore, while the real uptown Manhattan neighborhood called Harlem is not actually being discussed or fought over here, the ownership of the fictive, imagined Harlem is at stake and the power of the collectively imagined Harlem is such that its description determines popular understandings of the real Harlem, and its ownership determines the recipients of material reward from the real Harlem.

While Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim and later Walter Mosley are perhaps more typically cited as precursors to the rise of urban literature, it is Himes whose Harlem crime novels predate those other authors' first works by a full decade. *For Love of Imabelle* was published in 1957, *The Real Cool Killers* and *The Crazy Kill* in '59. By contrast, Iceberg Slim published his first novels, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* and *Trick Baby: The Story of a White Negro* in 1967 and Goines published his first novel, *Whoreson*, in '71. Himes had published fully eight crime novels (*For Love of Imabelle*, *A Rage in Harlem*, *The Real Cool Killers*, *The Crazy Kill*, *The Big Gold Dream*, *All Shot Up*, *Run Man Run*, *The Heat's on*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*) before either Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines or Walter Mosley had published their first novel.

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Let me break in here!

Look, I read Chester Himes' Harlem novels when they were first published in America: I liked them because they were fast and easy reads and because they were set in a world full of black people, black talk, black problems and ways. The wedding of blackness to pulp fiction appealed to me in my downtime in much the same way that current-day street lit appeals to the black girls I've noticed reading on the BART train as they're transported from one social demand to the next. The graphic violence of the novels made mundane through sensory saturation, Himes' stories paradoxically eased my mind. Taken individually, the novels had no lasting impact, no retaining wall wherein my memories of them could find still and peaceful harbor. It was only later that I realized that the man had written these books to make money. In the "Publishing Business" interview with John A. Williams, Himes recounts how after finishing work on *The Primitive* in 1955 he was unable to find a publisher and became "very

broke and desperate for some money.” He sent the novel to Victor Weybright, co-founder of the New American Library, and Weybright wrote Himes back agreeing to pay him a small thousand-dollar advance “because we feel it’s best for the author to have a small advance and have substantial accruals. [Laughter.] I’ll never forget that phrase. I never got any accruals, substantial or otherwise, from that book [laughter], until five or six years later they brought out a new edition for which they paid a fifteen-hundred-dollar advance. That’s why I began writing these detective stories, as a matter of fact. Marcel Duhammel, the editor of *Serie Noire*, had translated *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. The *Serie Noire* was the best-paid series in France” (184).

After years of fighting to find publishers in America for his controversial naturalist novels and seeking out and negotiating successfully and unsuccessfully with his American publishers to re-publish certain of his works (particularly *Pinktoes*, which Stein & Day refused to cede subsidiary rights to) via overseas presses, only to see them sell the rights to those same works with contracts that awarded him no profits, Himes simply gave in, packed bags, moved to Paris and rendered up to the French the fantastical tales of black Harlemites cops and criminals that Duhammel told him would sell well. Europeans, at least, confined him only on the page and not in his pocketbook. It had been the British, after all, that had published his first and best novel, *If He Hollers*, anyway and Himes had concluded that there was no sustainably profitable space for a Black American writer who set his works in contemporary America and wrote naturalist narratives about ordinary Negroes and whites working, fucking

and fighting in shipyards, in labor unions, in federal prison. Himes' American career seems to have proven true Zora Neale Hurston's contemporaneous claim in the 1950 essay "What White Publishers Won't Print" that "the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America" (Hurston). Both Himes himself and his novels' major characters fall, more or less, into this unblessed categorization. Himes' work was either disregarded or unknown by the vast majority of American readers, as evidenced by his modest sales figures. His most memorable lead character, Bob Jones, was no image of surpassing grandeur nor depravity but rather a college-educated and graduated shipyard foreman with a new car, a pretty but demanding girlfriend, a facile, cajoling white supervisor, and racial animus internal and external to deal with. Even Himes' most significant white main character, the convict Jimmy Monroe whose prison days are the centerpiece of *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, is no master criminal, just a petty crook and prisoner struggling to survive the Ohio State penitentiary. In the end, neither Himes nor the creations of his early career proved commercially viable here and for decades afterward his novels remained amongst American literature's most neglected works.

Himes published the first of his Serie Noire Harlem crime novels, *For Love of Imabelle* (also entitled *The Five-Cornered Square* and now popularly known as *A Rage in Harlem*), in 1957. While Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim are perhaps more typically cited as precursors to the current street lit phenomenon, it is Himes whose Harlem crime novels predate those authors' first works by a full decade. After *Imabelle*, *The Real Cool Killers* and *The Crazy Kill* were

published in 1959. Himes had published fully eight Serie Noire novels (in addition to the three novels already cited, *The Big Gold Dream*, *All Shot Up*, *Run Man Run*, *The Heat's On*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*) before Iceberg Slim published his first novels, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* and *Trick Baby: The Story of a White Negro* in 1967 and Goines published his debut book, *Whoreson*, in 1971.

*The Heat's On* is a novel in the middle of Himes' crime series, closer to the end of the series than to its beginning. The plot follows the iconic, vicious Harlem detectives Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones as they brutalize criminal suspects, killing one with a punch to the stomach, as they deal with a fabricated announcement of Jones' death, as they chase after an albino in the blackest neighborhood in the Northeast, as they attempt to corral a payload of heroin before it makes its prospective distributors rich. As surreal and awful and entertaining as this all is, it is basically average for a Himes Harlem narrative and occupies an unremarkable position within Himes' personal canon and a minor status relative to detective classics *A Rage in Harlem* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. What distinguishes Himes' Harlem novels, ultimately, is no singular scene, no sole story line, confrontation, killing, or solution to the mayhem in his fictional ghetto, but rather just a constant accumulation of criminal narratives, police cruelties, hustler dreams and destructions stacked one on top of the next heavenward. Single texts, ultimately, lose their particularity and disappear into the sky.

The visual marketing strategy that attends the Vintage Crime series re-issue of *The Heat's On* as good as any place to begin.

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The cover of *The Heat's On*<sup>20</sup> pictures a phantasmagoric portrait of two almost oppositely shaded faces, one shaded darkly in black and purple, the other softly lit, mostly in yellows and reds. Both heads seem to rise from a common source, a mutually owned torso. Both faces, while differently hued, possess typical Negroid features. Their broad noses, full lips and ample cheekbones signal that the illustrator and perhaps Himes too want the viewer to understand that this is a book concerned with black people, or at least with black men. One face is elevated and stands above the second face, which is, in terms of its physical relation, lower down and apparently subordinate. The elevated face is upturned, the subordinate face turned down. The upturned face is cast in far lighter color and his look is happier, the down-turned face is shaded darkly and the countenance is unmistakably angry. This contrast in the trajectory of each gaze, the dominant and inferior position of each face, is suggestive of a simplistic binary symbolism. The man whose gaze has achieved upward trajectory would, in this formulation, be the man destined to better prospects in life, while his darker, lowlier counterpart would be moving toward a base existence. In this formulation, black maleness is represented as having two possible destinies, one good, one terrible, one light, one dark, etc. While this is an unrewarding interpretation in terms of economic and status mobility, not to mention a simplistic melodrama, it is an interpretation easily understood and happily consumed by an audience less interested in social fluidity and complexity and nuance than in easily understood visual and narrative cues, like color-coding.

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<sup>20</sup> This is an image you will need to take my word for as Vintage does not grant re-print privileges in a timely manner.

The melodrama of such an interpretation is encouraged by the cover of the book. "Vintage Crime" the print to the side of the cover art reads, and below that the recommendation of *The Sunday Times (London)* proclaims the novel among the "toughest crime stories in print" (Himes, *The Heat's On*). Another interesting aspect of the cover art is the physical relationship between the two faces. They seem to emerge from the same torso. But they also are represented as having risen from that shared body into an apparent physical separation. Separating the faces is a jaggedly etched skyline of high-rise buildings, lofts, projects towers, factory facades and skyscrapers. Aside from again reminding us of the phantasmagoric, surrealistic, anti-representational nature of Himes' entire Harlem project, this separation of the two faces, the two men evokes curiosity-- why and how, exactly, are these two black men so suddenly separate? Is their separation the cause or the result of hardship, or a necessary and positive evolution? Perhaps the ruthless system of New York itself, the city's claustrophobia, its multiplicity of squalid housing projects, its abandoned industrial sector and incredible expressions of power and wealth, have separated the men from one another. Perhaps this is an unjust, horrible separation, or perhaps it is a socially acceptable, even appropriate separation. Conversely, perhaps the urban phenomena-- high-rise buildings, lofts, projects towers, factory facades and skyscrapers-- have bound the men together. Perhaps, because of their shared locale in Harlem, as well as their shared blackness, the men must co-inhabit one another's destinies, so that black poverty and black wealth, black luxury and black squalor become indissoluble in the claustrophobia of a crowded, essentially segregated city. These differing interpretations have at their root the attempt to understand the relationship between the two faces. There is no one correct interpretation. The value, instead, of these different ways of seeing is that the possibilities and, more to the point, the conceptual limitations of Himes' Harlem project, bounded by the tropes it accepts, become evident. Finally, the viewer of the cover art is moved toward melodramatic interpretation by the



absence of variety. Interpretive possibility is apparently limited, is constrained and dual. There seems no third way, in interpretive terms, for the picture to be understood. As is often the case with the depiction of black subjects in arts and entertainment, the seeming absence of interpretive options, the reliance on familiar tropes, encourages excessive interpretation of those options that are readily understandable and familiar. Thus, the faces become sites of excess, of tremendous light and terrible darkness, hope and despair, optimism and rage.

The cover art for *The Heat's On* appeals to the trope of color-coded destiny by which blacks become happier by becoming less dark and less angry. It also appeals to the trope of black anger, the casting of the black urban male as permanently infuriated. These are popular tropes. They are easily consumable and play into many notions familiar to their audience. There is, however, another interpretation of the cover art that, while not contradicting the above stated interpretations, does speak to the residual complexity that Himes carried over from his social protest novels to his Harlem cycle. The heavy use of black and purple to define the face of the subordinate black man on the cover of *The Heat's On* is interesting in that, at a basic level, it seems like a counter-productive use of color. Moreover, the cityscape separating the subordinate man from his upward-inclined counterpart is shaded in a dissipating purple and a fervent shade of blue. A gangster drama, one would think, would not be shaded using purples, blues and blacks, colors that each in their own way conveys a sense of cool, of grace and *elan*. This color palette, however, also connotes a sense of mystery and this sense of mystery is the familiar trope that allows for the cover art's experimentations with coolness. Bright blue verging into black and purple carries a sense not simply of cool but of dangerous cool, of subtle threat and potential violence. Still, the subtle, potential nature of the threat is different from a more overt violent representation. The non-aggressive affect of this color palette makes more subterranean the hint

of danger, makes more ambivalent and complex the range of tropes conveyed. Without engaging in too much speculation as to artistic intent, I can assert that the cover art for *The Heat's On*, which is much like the cover art for the American versions of Himes' other Harlem novels written in France and first published by Librairie Plon, introduces the theme of coolness that marks Himes' Harlem cycle. In fact, the construction of cool that Himes takes up is a way of alleviating the hardships of racism and poverty, even as it also casts a cynic gaze on grandiose attempts at community improvement. The cover art sets the tone for Himes' narrative style, a matter-of-fact, routinely callous and hilarious take on Harlem's underworld. In constructing coolness, Himes is suggesting a way to avoid the wrenching internal and external conflicts blacks face in America, conflicts hinted at in the two black male faces in the cover art. According to the tactic of coolness, black people can elide the seemingly inevitable confrontation with white economic dominance by constructing a meta-culture inside American borders but beyond the American way of life that is based not on prevailing economic and status valuations but on the assertion of social and cultural cool. Coolness derives its power largely via its disregard for conventional sites of cultural importance. It is cool toward and disengaged from these sites or tropes. The familiar trope that anchors the visual rhetoric is virulent black masculinity, which, of course, necessarily is coded as cool.

Very much in this vein, the visual rhetoric heading Himes' work, its cover art, suggests an essential disregard for the tropes and sites of importance in the dominant culture. Interestingly, the Himes cover art achieves this coolness not by erasing or hiding away the negative tropes (i.e., the dark/light binary, the suggestions of claustrophobic inner-city life and black male disempowerment and despair). No, the tropes remain visibly present. The pictures of the two black male faces are front and center in the cover art. The cityscape clearly divides them. The

blurb on the cover speaks to Himes' reputation for gritty, brutal dramas of black urban life. The tropes associated with such an existence, these tropes that bear so much negative psychological weight, are allowed visibility. The construction of cool, suggested in the dark blue color palette, is all the more startling and subtly impressive for the fact that it shares space with tropes of black disempowerment. Instead of requiring that these tropes, obviously prevalent in the society at large, be hidden from sight on the cover of his book, Himes' cover art suggests that a cool, detached disregard for conventional economic and social concerns can co-exist with and remain unaffected by those conventional economic and social concerns.

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Street literature is currently sought-after and valued within the mainstream publishing industry. Paradoxically, it is also de-valued by the perception that it is not serious literature. The most succinct evidence of this de-valuation may be the difference in the referents by which, for instance, a Woods novel is distinguished in the industry as opposed to, say, a novel by Philip Roth or Edward Jones. The Woods novel is referred to by writers, agents and editors not even as "urban street literature" but as "street lit." By contrast, the Roth or Whitehead novel is referred to as "literature" if the novel meets with standard amounts of acclaim and criticism and as "Literature" if it is nominated for national awards. The novel written by the industry-respected author is *a priori* understood and referred to as serious literary work. However, the novel that is written by a writer in Woods' sub-field is not called *literature*, but a partial and exoticized version of that ideal form, *street lit*. The primary term of "literature" is abbreviated to represent the genre's inferiority and the addition of the adjective "street" adds an additional exoticism to the referent. Here, too, we can see the trope of black urban excess present, for where this genre in question is not completely "literature" it is also more than "literature." It is excessive in its

ancillary, unnecessary, extravagant traits, being, in its visual rhetoric, more "urban" and more "street" than the typical, industry-respected novel.

Giroux, in *The Terror of Neoliberalism*, argues that the ethic of continual consumerism, promoted endlessly by an economic elite, has replaced social understanding. Sandel corroborates this analysis: "A market society," Sandel writes, "is a way of life in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor. It's a place where social relations are made over in the image of the market" (Sandel 66). All things, including the lives of black and brown people at the social and economic margins, are approached solely with their market potential in mind. Thus, images, persons and narratives are *troped*. A half century ago Hannah Arendt, in "The Crisis in Culture", argued that "those who produce for the mass media ransack the entire range of past and present culture in the hope of finding suitable material. This material, moreover, cannot be offered as it is; it must be altered in order to become entertaining, it must be prepared to be easily consumed" (Arendt 204).

According to Giroux, Sandel and a flood of other social critics, philosophers and Leftist pundits this mass media strategy has only intensified in recent decades. The chief source of entertainment within modern culture is, in Arendt's formulation, itself, the culture's present and its past. This present and past material cannot be portrayed as is but rather is altered and re-presented in newly entertaining form. The implications of this strategy for representations prevalent in street lit are worth considering.

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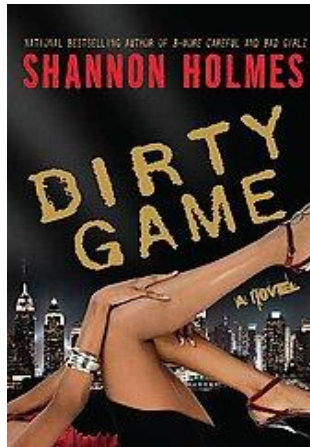


Figure 4 Cover art for Shannon Holmes' *Dirty Game*. Cover design by Michael Storrings. Cover photograph of woman by Haitem Oueslati. Cover photograph of cityscape by Getty Images.

*"...slim trade paperbacks with alluring faces and bodies poised for action of some sort or another on the cover"—Mark Reynolds, "The High and Low of Black Literature"*

Look at Shannon Holmes' *Dirty Game*: Published in May 2007, its cover pictures, below the graffiti style etching of the author's name and the title of his book, a background of a brightly lit city skyline. The office buildings and skyscrapers stand out against a gloriously dark night. This could be Chicago, or Los Angeles, or any other major city in the United States. Superimposed before the city, the disproportionately large appendages of a black woman, her bejeweled hands run the length of her incredibly long legs. A black dress barely enters the picture, but the dominant image here is those legs, incredibly, inordinately long, appealingly sleek and nakedly inviting. The physicality of the black female body is here not simply emphasized, which, perhaps, might be the effect of any picture that foregrounds a scantily clad black woman, but is over-emphasized to the nth degree. The woman *lies* before the city as impressively as Godzilla *bestrode* Tokyo. But here the suggestion is not that this human figure, at least as large as the city itself, might conquer or destroy the city. No, though her face and upper torso are left out of the

picture, it is evident by her position that she is flat on her back, one leg kicked carelessly into the air. Her dress falls away, out of the picture. She is virtually all legs. The suggestion is that of sexual invitation and sexual availability. Not only that: The suggestion extends further, for it is not only that the pose accentuates her sexuality, it is that the frame excludes the rest of her body and, therefore, associates her solely and entirely with her physicality and sexuality. Far from conquering the city, the black woman is here magnified in order to over-emphasize her physically subordinate pose, flat on her back, and to magnify the sexual-physical connotations deriving there-from.

The shining, glam jewelry on the woman's arm speaks to the financial excesses of street culture, the desire to show off one's possessions, to flaunt and style. The jewelry seems to be a succession of thin bracelets. The bracelets, if that is what they in fact are, slip carelessly down the woman's arm. This may indicate the lack of necessity associated with jewelry and ornament generally. Extravagance is suggested in the presence and position of the jewelry on the woman's arm. Conventionally, the purchase and possession of unnecessary, extravagant items is seen as the right of the rich and evidence of waste and stupidity among the middle-class and poor. The bracelets act as a trope, but they are a trope of excess bound in negative connotations only in the context that they are here figured. The fact that the woman's skin is mahogany in color, that Negro-ness is popularly associated with poverty, as well as with acting outrageously and spending ridiculously beyond means (in a country where average savings rate across races are minimal<sup>21</sup>), makes the jewelry a trope of excess. The jewelry itself is not even especially extravagant. No shining diamonds, no gold. It is not the actual worth of the jewelry, whatever that

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<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce: Bureau of Economic Analysis. "Personal Saving Rate." 8:03AM, Apr. 30, 2012.

would be, that determines its status as trope, but the context in which it is rendered and the connotations that this particular rendering deliberately brings to the fore.

Another arm of this marketing is its rhetorical presentation through its dust jacket and the comments provided for it on internet vehicles, principally amazon.com. For example, under "Editorial Reviews" at amazon.com, *Dirty Game* is accompanied by a "Book Description" and an "About the Author" section. The "Book Description" comes first and reads, in part: "Kenny 'Ken-Ken' Greene left his days as a hustler when his wife was killed during a scam gone bad, leaving him with a baby daughter. Now he's a cab driver, doing what he can to put food on the table and give his daughter, Destiny, everything she needs"<sup>22</sup>. Already some of the tropes of black urban crisis, which urban street lit draws almost exclusively upon, are in evidence: There is the "hustler," or in this case ex-hustler figure; there is the cliché about having to "put food on the table" and the additional platitude that the hero must give his daughter "everything she needs." Note that the absence of the child's mother is thus far uncommented on. Like roughly seventy-percent of black households, Kenny and Destiny's is apparently a one-parent, one-income household, with the twist here being that the father, not the mother, remains to raise the child. Consequently, the economic pressures that Kenny faces are essentially the same as if Destiny's mother had been left to raise Destiny. The absence of a second income is a major detriment to maintaining a family in an urban setting and accounts for the mass dispersal of low-income families out of urban cores such as Chicago, Los Angeles and Harlem. But the marketing of the Holmes book is not sociological or investigatory; its affect is at once more sensational and more mundane. The linguistic poverty of such phrases as "put[ting] food on the table" and giving one's

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<sup>22</sup> Holmes, Shannon. *Dirty Game*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press Griffin. 2007. Print. "About the Author" and "Book Description." Amazon.com. 1 May 2007. Web.

child "everything she needs" is indicative of the broad, generalized, indefinite, populist marketing tactic. The specific conditions pertaining in the West Side Chicago ghetto for an unmarried, single black father and his daughter are of such particularity and such pain that their narration might not even appeal to a significant black readership. Thus, Kenny is cast as an everyman, the language used to market him common, unmannered and anti-particular. The stupid notion that children should be given everything they need, an elusive and ultimately undesirable goal in practice, is not investigated. Nor does the phrase putting food on the table speak with real urgency to the generally unacknowledged economic conditions, including food scarcity, which originally inspired the Black Panthers' Free Children's Breakfast Program and that in 2007 resulted in UCLA's Center for Health Policy Research finding that an estimated 957,000 adults in L.A. County alone experience food insecurity. Additional research by the Center found that under the pressure of recession in 2008 food insecurity in the county rose by 30% and that in 2009 it rose by an additional 40%<sup>23</sup>.

At the same time that the presentation of *Dirty Game* is determinedly mundane, it is simultaneously sensationalist. The "Book Description" continues: "But when [Kenny] is shot and paralyzed during a robbery while on the job, Destiny knows that she has to step up to the plate to take care of the father who has provided for her." Destiny becomes a street hustler, the summary continues, and "the longer she stays in the game, the deeper into the game she falls." The improbability of the plot is not at issue. It is improbable that violence, child mortality and even poverty on a nearly Third World scale should prevail in vast sections of the major urban centers

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<sup>23</sup> UCLA Health Policy Brief. "Food Security Among California's Low-Income Adults Improves, But Most Severely Affected Do Not Share in Improvement." By Gail G. Harrison, Matthew Sharp, George Manalo-LeClair, Anthony Ramirez and November McGarvey. June 2007. Print.



of the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. The critical point is the divergence between the wild vividness of the action described here, the potentially fascinating plot dynamics at work, and the determinedly common language that describes these actions. Looked at closely, the Book Description revels in tired turns of phrase: "put food on the table," "step up to the plate," and unmemorable references to "the game." As marketing, the double-function here is to at once gesture at the relative nearness of the text to the audience and to also signal essential difference. This divergent double-function is indicative of a psychic misalignment on the part of the target audience (who are the true subject here from the point-of-view of the marketers) that desires co-existent identification with and difference from the object perceived. Recall Gerald Early's definition of street lit texts as "a kind of pulp fiction... they are actually about fantasy, as their readers are attempting to understand their reality while trying to escape it" (Early 1). Knowing that the market desire they cater to is a complex of needs, for identification, for veracity, for fantasy and escape, marketers subtly play to these apparently contradictory requirements.

*Dirty Game's* amazon.com "About the Author" caption performs the same function, both drawing close and creating distance between product and audience. Here, the product is not the book but the author. "Shannon Holmes wrote his first novel, *B-More Careful*, while in prison." In one clean sentence the radically different worlds that street lit courts are drawn together in what amounts to a parable of logical advertising. Holmes is his subject, the criminal, the convict, the ex-con. Simultaneously, he is the reformed spokesman, the industry-established author and thus productive of his self-same subject. The incompatible realities of the black ghetto that produces the main population of the U.S. prison system and the mainstream literary marketplace that

produces intellectualized entertainments for the American middle-class can only be brought into productive synthesis by a subordination of one world to the other, the ghetto, the prisons and the slow violence of that world rendered as an interest secondary to that of the marketplace. Thus, the author's description continues on with a delineation of his published works and the branding of the author as "a major name in a new generation of hip-hop fiction." More significant, the literature itself is re-positioned away from its social particularity, its specific narrative and the social implications therein and is presented as imminently reproducible within the established economy and society, productive as commercial maintenance.

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In the segment of this chapter that belonged to me, I wrote that it is my contention that Riis' photographic subjects were not bent at the mercy of cultural tropes around excessive violence, depravity and sexuality that the black subjects of street lit cover art are. Therefore, othering and distancing did not rise to the relevance that they do when we look to street lit and its audience and social impact. *How the Other Half Lives* found a place in the progressive public sphere precisely because the public identified with and wanted to help its subjects. Street lit, for better and worse, courts and satisfies, a different audience, which seeks in unequal measure comfort from and confrontation with the problems of inner-cities and ex-urb ghettos. Kristina Graaf reminds us, moreover, that "these are fictional works, whose popular appeal is largely drawn from hyperbolic descriptions and the transgression of social norms, designed also to satisfy the readers' longing for escapism and entertainment" (Graaff 2). Street lit's audience, it is important to remember, so far lacks the moral cohesion and

resultant political wherewithal to affect social change on the scale that *How the Other Half Lives* inspired. Yet street lit is, nevertheless, a complicated public sphere of its own that I think will accommodate works of increasing complexity and ambition.

## Reading Street and Urban Literature Closely and Comparatively

### Masculinity in Street Lit: Tyree's *The Last Street Novel*

Evidence of literary complexity and ambition is present at the margins of the street lit sub-genre. This chapter showcases one street lit text that employs a variety of narrative devices in order to raise a host of artistic, ideological and economic issues vital to the discussion of street lit, African American literature and the African American experience. Omar Tyree's novel is an important keystone text in this chapter because it makes vivid the stakes involved in the attempt to raise to the level of critical concern an entire sub-genre of literary work. Tyree's text is ambitious: It takes on the issue of masculine identity, and in particular black masculine identity as it is frustrated within literary space both by the popular perception of writing and reading as feminized endeavors and by the unyielding market demand for sales and profits. The novel takes on street lit itself, placing the literary movement upon the contested ground of its fictional drama, so that its validity and the possibility of its material rewards are all argued over and fought for by the characters themselves. All this, my son sees in a book I haven't even read; but I've talked to him about it and learned enough about it to prepare you for what we're both about to read. (I think it would probably help to read Tyree's novel, too, now that I think of it. So much in the world to read.) Anyway, I know I'm better at this sort of thing, announcing purposes, both mine and his, than he is. That and a certain protectiveness over his enterprise keep me from simply vanishing from these pages, allowing him to totally take over. As our discussion moves into the 2000s, this becomes far more his

project than mine, for though it's not the nicest thing to know about oneself I do recognize that I'm of an earlier era and these last few years have not been good to my abilities and energies. I look back at the kid in the photograph: Chicago City Champion, 100-yard dash. That's many summers gone. And the world that was then, including Chicago and cities like it that serve as the overarching subject and contested ground of street lit, has changed greatly. Current-day street lit speaks to not only the continuities in American ghettos but also how black flight and gentrification have come to alter these spaces in ways that I would never have imagined when Jesse Owens handed me that plaque. A newer mind better sees and understands these things, I think. I gather that Omar Tyree's novel is, in part, about an assessment of Harlem not as a constant black cultural domain over time but as a changing and dynamic space, very much affected by current economic and cultural shifts.

My boy reads more, writes more and perceives more about the way things are now. Anyway, I've always been a dreamer-type. He's like his mother; not so much interested in explaining himself, but good when it comes to the follow-through on meditations such as this and the ones subsequent to it that will lay out the necessity for each section of our upcoming chapter together. Ultimately, it's that follow-through that will give this chapter its body and elaborate upon these general points I set out. The three essays that follow were not originally written as a single chapter, but they were written one after the next, along the same methodical line of thought. Thus, he's of the opinion that each essay links to the next on a number of implicit levels. For example, if Tyree's *The Last Street Novel* primarily concerns itself with the

interaction between masculine ideals, black culture and street lit, *The Coldest Winter Ever* is a sustained vision of black girlhood and womanhood within the crisis of urban culture, mediated by the strictures of determinist realism that the author (Sister Souljah) imposes. The novels not only book-end a gender analysis of street lit, but form roughly chronological book-ends to the recent re-emergence of street lit as a popular phenomenon, with *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) a seminal text in the genre's resurrection and *The Last Street Novel* (2007) a late meta-commentary on the problematics posed by a decade and more of street lit's domination of black book sales. I'll have to actually read this essay, as well as the one after it that apparently links both these novels to a discussion of the non-fiction polemics authored by urban crusaders Jacob Riis (*How the Other Half Lives*) and Geoffrey Canada (*Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.*) to decide whether these connections are actually credible.

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#### An Analysis of *The Last Street Novel*

Omar Tyree's *The Last Street Novel* is a meta-fictional contemplation of and commentary on street literature as a burgeoning market-force, as a purveyor of popular tropes relating to black folks, and as a self-cannibalizing entertainment genre. The novel's main character is Shareef Crawford, a figure who bears at least initial superficial resemblance to Omar Tyree: Like Tyree, Shareef Crawford is a best-selling writer of black romance fiction, like Tyree, Shareef Crawford desires to write books that appeal to men as well as women, and like Tyree, Shareef Crawford is frustrated by the lack of support that his unromantic writings receive. In his open letter straightforwardly titled "An Urban Street Litertuare Retirement", Tyree identifies as a

"hardcore fact" the "urban audience's preference for denigration." He further opines that "... [A]fter trying to educate and uplift the same young, urban readership who fell in love with *Flyy Girl* with the sequel book, *For The Love of Money*... the positive and progressive voice that I [had] become so proud of, had lost me the support of my young urban audience" (Tyree). In less elaborate and more definitive terms, Tyree's surrogate in *The Last Street Novel*, Shareef Crawford, makes the same point: "*Nobody wants to learn shit... They want blood. They want violence. They want death*" (Tyree 298). The disillusionment and cynicism at the state of the publishing market and street literature's place within it drives both Tyree's statement of retirement and the novel that is, for now, his curtain call.

Shareef Crawford, a successful romance writer who fears an obsolescence akin to that of his real-life creator, is torn between attempting to ride the rising wave of gritty, violent urban literature, keeping to his stock-and-trade romance writing, or trying his hand at commercially risky, intellectually substantive black fiction. On the current state of black popular fiction, Crawford makes this assessment: "... weak character development, weak dialogue, weak plot points, with a weak buildup, weak chronology, uneven climaxes, and a weak resolution" (32). To an adoring female fan (whom he happens to be engaged in an extramarital affair with), Crawford goes even further in his diatribe: "Mos Def, on his first album, he made the comment that the state of hip-hop depends on the state of the people. He said if the people are doing good, then the hip-hop will reflect it. But if the people are doing bad, then so is the hip-hop. And it's the same thing with books. You can't push something on the people that they don't want and they don't feel." Mimicking the stance of major publishers prior to the rise of street lit, Crawford even says of black people "...books... That's too much work for 'em." He adds the caveat that "if they do read, they only want to read shit they can swallow. Soul food..." (59).

The "soul food" desired by a broad black readership, Crawford again and again states, consists of ample doses of titillating romance and ultra-violent crime stories. Urban literature novelists can write about street crime or salacious sex, street lit writers are limited to street crime stories, but either way, according to Crawford, it's all the same unhealthy "soul food" served up repetitiously.

Crawford identifies his audience and the audience for street lit as wholly Black American. Moreover, he identifies black buying practices as at the root of the salacious and rapacious content of the fiction. Instead of placing blame with the publishing industry, he blames the audience ("You can't push something on the people that they don't want and they don't feel") for dictating the content of the genre. While acknowledging Crawford's general accuracy as regards the genre's black buying base, it should nevertheless be noted that, first, the appetite and even preference for the salacious and rapacious is prevalent in reading communities of all races and ethnicities, and, second, that after a particular group's buying practices have been identified and pigeonholed, industries have a tendency to assume those practices are unchanging and are quite often interminably slow to respond to altered buying habits.<sup>xiii</sup> This historical lack of corporate foresight suggests that the black book-buying audience's habits can and probably will change, given time, and that the black book-buying audience's habits are not the sole or even main explanation for the narrowness of the subject matter found in black popular fiction. The immediate demands of commercially-motivated authors and profit-driven publishers obscure this longer-term reality.

Endlessly hectored by black men who either insult his manhood or his work, Shareef Crawford eventually decides to transition from writing romance novels to pinning a street lit novel.



After initially toying with the idea of writing under the pseudonym "The Street King" he is prevailed upon by his New York mistress to visit convicted drug dealer Michael Springfield in prison and interview Springfield for a possible novel based on Springfield's crimes and prison renaissance. Springfield's proposal provides the writer with everything he desires: A true-to-life crime saga, a ready-made sequence of events and a provocative back-story to create buzz for the book's writing and release.

Crawford decides to spend time in Harlem to research the site of his new book idea, leaning on his friends for local contacts and word about the latest hot spots in town. He goes to the penitentiary up North, accompanied by his mistress Cynthia, to speak with Springfield.

The writer is a Harlem native but has not lived in the Manhattan neighborhood in decades. In the narrative's present tense, he, his estranged wife and his two children live in a ritzy South Florida enclave. Additionally, Crawford has a South Beach villa that he uses to entertain another of the "disrespectful bitches" whom he now prefers to his wife, this one a Dominican-American mistress named Jacqueline.

Obviously, the writer has moved far from the hood where his grandparents raised him and his simple knowledge of Harlem as a living, evolving urban organism is diluted. In the time of the novel, Harlem is ground zero for gentrification of older urban cores. As Jurell, a childhood nemesis-turned-suave-adult, tells Shareef, "A lot of things are changed in Harlem now... It's about moving on up. And if you're not moving on up, then you're moving on out of Harlem" (144). Once simply a crime-ridden ghetto, "Harlem, New York," an omniscient third-person narrative

voice that Tyree fitfully employs in order to relay necessary sociological information explains, "was the most significant microcosm of American economics, culture, and social status... in a square radius of less than five miles" (171). In addition to not understanding the extent of Harlem's changes, the writer also has forgotten just how fast rumor, reportage, innuendo and speculation can spread in the hood's insular space. Less than twenty-four hours after his conversation with Springfield on the prison yard, Crawford is warned by his childhood friend Trap to leave Harlem as soon as possible. Dangerous criminals, Trap says, have heard about the book idea and are nervous that Springfield will divulge their names and deeds given the public forum to do so. Therefore, they are threatening Trap in an attempt to stop his friend from writing his book.

By this point, Tyree portrays his mouthpiece with self-deprecating grandiosity thinking of his unwritten book as "his Harlem masterpiece," and is unwilling to bow to the rumored threats against himself and his friends (206). Instead of leaving Harlem immediately, the writer roots himself in his childhood home, choosing against advice to stay in his low-grade hotel on Frederick Douglass Boulevard. Indeed, his intransigence is doubly born of the incredulity at the idea that men who do not read books and mock his romance novels would kill him over a book he has yet to actually write, and from a kind of birthright pride. "Harlem don't scare me," he tells his friend Spoonie, "I grew up here" (204).

Spoonie's rejoinder, that "ten thousand motherfuckers who died of bullet wounds in Harlem" could claim similar nativity, falls on deaf ears (204). Likewise, Trap's admonition that street thugs read work where their vital interests are involved and will stop at nothing to protect those interests goes unheeded.

The next morning Cynthia calls Shareef, sobbing, totally distraught: Michael Springfield, she tells him, is dead, he's been murdered, shanked on the prison yard for his anticipated treachery. Suddenly, the speculative has become the real. The jailed drug kingpin is dead and Shareef Crawford's life and work are under threat. Cynthia begs the writer to re-locate downtown as soon as possible and to go back to his wife and family in Florida on the first plane flying. But the writer, stubborn and recalcitrant, seeks out Jurrell, the bully from his youth who now seems to be a reformed businessman. After spending the day with Jurrell scouting Harlem's newly-constructed high-priced condominiums and lofts, the writer insists on returning to his hotel. At the hotel, he's confronted by some of the thugs who want to dissuade him from writing Springfield's story. They want to question him about his intentions with the unwritten chronicle. Despite the fact that Springfield hasn't told Crawford enough information to write an editorial, let alone a novel, the confrontation quickly degenerates into chaotic violence with the thugs chasing after the fleeing writer, shooting at him in the middle of the crowded boulevard.

Almost inexplicably, Shareef Crawford is saved when the thugs are met by a separate group of thugs coming from the opposite direction, returning fire. Suddenly, a luxury car drifts up alongside the running writer and he is made to understand that its driver and passengers are with the crew that has just saved his life and his potential novel. The crew drives Shareef Crawford downtown, where a young hustler fresh to the game named Baby G proposes that Crawford write his life story, the story of a living and free Harlem gangster, instead of the narrative of the dead and irrelevant Michael Springfield.

The writer quickly identifies baby gangster as a boastful but minor Harlem character not worthy of a novel. While he listens patiently to the kid's stories of street mayhem and attention-catching antics, he doesn't seriously consider writing his story. With Springfield dead and his own life in immediate danger, the stubborn writer has almost been compelled to give up on his crime novel project. He is not in the mood to consider new subjects for his novelistic designs. At this point in the novel, Tyree seems to be engaged in a thorough mockery of urban literature as a genre. A rival black writer derides Crawford, informing him that "[Springfield] tried to get other writers to tell his story too, and nobody would go anywhere near him. Until you came." Thus, Shareef Crawford is the "sucker" fascinated enough by the allure of imagined ghetto glory and masculine bravado to risk his wealth, reputation, literary career and very life for the opportunity to novelize commonplace thuggery. As the rival writer tells him, "You should have stuck to writing romance" (255). Indeed, when the confused and conflicted, set-up and hunted romance writer lectures a young black journalist on the false totems of hood status, he seems to unconsciously critique his own decisions and his own predicament. "And you a damn college student, gettin' caught up in the same bullshit these young rappers get caught up in" (257). Shareef Crawford is, by this point in the tale, a damn bestselling novelist, a man of wealth and prestige, wholly "caught up" in a "bullshit" quagmire of misunderstood motives, fearful and vengeful men. "As much as he talked about the nonsensical lure of urban street life, the danger of it all was compelling him to stick around and prove that something could happen" (272). It can be inferred that among the internal commentaries that *The Last Street Novel* makes is that street lit's purveyors could do so much more with their work than repeat the "bullshit" that "young rappers" have placed in the cultural mainstream, but instead they are prisoners to the compelling dangers of the streets just as thoroughly as the kid who could be studying at home but chooses to sell rocks or pimp girls on the corner. Street lit novelists are figured as "suckers" re-telling a set of powerfully overworked

stories that have primarily functioned to stigmatize and degrade the black people that are the objects of such narratives.

Tyree implies that the writer's motivation for pursuing his story at such risk to himself is base and simple: Shareef Crawford wants to be respected as a man by other men. When his childhood nemesis, Jurrell, praises Crawford's commercial successes, noting that "You a million-dollar nigga with no ball or microphone," the writer nevertheless manages to construe this encouragement as a negative. "...[Y]ou know what I honestly feel like after you say all of that shit to me, man... I feel like the guy playing jump rope with the girls while all the guys are playing football and slap boxing." Figuring the feminine (jump rope) as inferior to or incompatible with the masculine (football, boxing), the writer senses a distance between his profession and the popular tropes of masculinity. To write is to distance oneself from popular understandings of masculinity and thus to feminize oneself. The only remedies are either to give up writing or to masculinize the writing process through re-figuring the basis of literature around popularly understood tropes of masculinity and black masculinity. Shareef Crawford's writing career is far too lucrative to walk away from, leaving him with one masculinizing option: To write street lit. Unfortunately, the tropes of street lit seem inseparable from prior figurations of black men as irrational, animal and ultra-violent.

Crawford confides in Jurrell, "It's like you can't really talk to women, man. I feel like I'm talkin' at 'em half the time... So why can't I talk to other guys about the shit that I do as a writer, like an athlete would, or a rapper would, or a thug would? You feel me? That's why this shit is important to me, man" (273-274). Here, the novelist speaks to realities difficult to acknowledge in the formal space of academic critique. Phillip Brian Harper, in his investigation of the anxieties that

attend expectations of African-American masculine identity, *Are We Not Men?* uses the term "physicalization" (Harper 120). For Harper, this term describes the way black men's identities are so deeply wedded to our physical attributes, that in fact these attributes, or the social perception of them, often constitute our social selves. I find Harper's terminology very useful, yet I want to take a different angle in my critique.

Crawford wants to connect with men across precisely the space that his identity as writer seems to shutter him from. The writer is a trope, as is the athlete, the rapper and the thug. Each is a trope expressing desire. The thug and the athlete use physicalization as conduit between the subject and the desired object, while the rapper and writer use the abstractions of language. The immediacy and power of athleticism and thuggery make expression visceral. Rap obscures the abstract nature of language through forcefulness of delivery and the raw assertion of prerogative. By contrast, fiction writing, however forceful and raw its real origins, is recognized popularly as a sophisticated form resistant to immediacy, resistant to the visceral. The fundamental distance between every man and the tribe of men is eased by the physical and intensified by the intellectual. Shareef Crawford seeks to negotiate and ultimately erase this division through literary re-enactments of violence.

Upon waking in a swank Manhattan hotel with his luggage lying neatly before him (all courtesy of Baby G's intrepid crew), Shareef's tribal prerogative still compels him: "I'm a street nigga," he thinks to himself. "I was *born* to the streets. *Harlem!* I don't even know my parents. So if I die fuckin' with this book, then that's my legacy. But I'm not running..." (Tyree 305). The writer is many things. He is a bestselling romance novelist, an aspiring street lit novelist, an owner of expensive waterfront properties, a father and husband and playboy, an orphaned son, a child of

the ghetto. If he is a "street nigga" that is only one aspect of his self. It is a self-imposed and senseless self-reduction.

After a final confrontation with his pursuers in which the writer discovers that it is his "friend" Trap who has orchestrated the whole thing, a gun battle in St. Nicholas Park, the deaths of Trap, Spoonie, Baby G and various "soldiers", not to mention the revelation that Jurrell, far from being a reformed businessman, is actually the deadliest gangster in Harlem, Shareef is yoked into a Faustian business deal with his childhood nemesis. To atone for all the killing he's caused, the writer must write Baby G's story as well as Jurrell's. He must become "The Street King" of his idiotic ambitions and he must descend into the depths of Harlem's perpetual underworld even as he pens his bestselling tales from the luxurious haven of his South Beach villa and Fort Lauderdale home. Distributing his street lit via Jurrell's "Underground Library" imprint, he will line the pockets of Harlem's chief thug. This is one fate of street lit and hip-hop in microcosm: Both genres, as they experience commercial success, become materially disconnected from the actual poor and distressed in the inner-cities while remaining dependent on the poverty, distress and subjugation of those subjects for continued profits. The parasite degrades the host *from a distance*.

Far from the nostalgia that he had earlier nursed for his childhood home, the writer now knows that "Harlem [is] one of the most vicious communities not only in America, but in the world" (341). Yet he is contractually obligated both by his corporate publisher and by his underworld boss, Jurrell, to perpetuate and lionize this viciousness in the form of his crime novels. His books, written under pseudonym, detailing the exploits of Baby G and the machinations of a supposed "square" who runs Harlem's underworld from behind the scenes are instant street classics. Along

with the new romance novel that the writer also pens, under his real name, these narratives of violence and premature death elevate him to unparalleled commercial success. But the writer is no longer his own man and his books are no longer the product of his dreams and desires. Shareef Crawford is on the plantation, as it were, and Jurrell and the publishing company are his overseers. As his one surviving friend, Polo, puts it, "that boy Jurrell ain't gon' let you slow down... ma-fucka gon' want a private jet off ya' ass next year" (400). The writer decides to console himself with the small victories: The Underground Library might end up employing ten or twenty or thirty previously unemployable persons and keep their families in clothes and fed. He has reconciled with his wife and can see his children on a daily basis again.

Beyond that, the book ends in platitudes: Shareef Crawford can't "stop [his] shine for nobody." He always had been and always would remain "a winner." He was "born to do what he had to do and be who he had to be... there was no turning back from it" (399-401). These last assertions of self ring hollow and even the small familial and economic victories that the writer can count pale in comparison to the devil's bargain he unwittingly finds himself in. He is, finally, the prey of forces more rapacious and all-encompassing than his mere literary talents and there is no way out of his contractual obligations.

*The Last Street Novel* satirizes the psychological and commercial forces behind street literature. The novel derides the fan base, the writers and the corporate and criminal partners that together form the supply and demand for this literature. As self-commentary of the genre upon itself, perhaps the novel stands too far outside and too much in condescending judgment of the form to be a truly internal critique. However, it is an important book within the genre in that it does more than simply perform the basic tenets of the genre, going beyond the plot dynamics that



characterize street fiction. Even the novel's title seeks to assert control over the genre, claiming its place at the end-point of the literary phenomenon. A hubristic move largely ridiculed by street lit writers and readers alike, Tyree's title categorically states that the street lit genre is in its death throes and that the novel and its author have the power to bring it to its end. However, in so far as the title is of a piece with the narrative and the allegorical suggestions of the narrative (the Faustian bargain, the stories of ghetto squalor, the novelist trapped in his self-made misguided design), the claim is a serious one. How can a genre premised dually on representation and degradation of ghetto communities not write itself out of existence? How can such a genre find release from its anarchic motivations and present a more self-sustaining and life-extending story?

Interestingly, Tyree himself intended to title the novel *The Writer*, not *The Last Street Novel*, but was informed that his chosen title was simply not edgy enough.<sup>24</sup> Unable even to title his own books, the bestselling novelist seems much like his fictional creation, Shareef Crawford, in this instance. Perhaps *The Last Street Novel*, title and all, is less an assertion of Tyree's control over the street lit genre than a statement on the writer's bondage to controlling corporate and audience demands. The writer has literally lost the power to name. He is, then, no longer father to his own work but more the necessary adjunct in a complex process of creation. Bent to the whims of forces stronger and more rapacious than he, the writer is wrenched from his historical role and his moral centrality within the logic of the text and placed on the plantation with all the other workers who contribute to the crop.

The crop is a continuous narrative of urban decay and black despair. At the amoral center of the work is money itself, its flows, its gain and loss. Circling round this center are the things that

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<sup>24</sup> Tyree, Omar. "An Urban Street Literature Retirement." *The Daily Voice* 19 June 2008. Web.

people will do for money, their romances and their crimes. Attached to these romances and crimes and controlled by their desperate desire for romance, crime and fortune is the audience. And the writer is here, too, co-equal with the audience and at the mercy of romance, crime, money and its controllers. The writer is now a controlled force in the logic of the street lit text.

It is telling that Shareef Crawford never comes to grips with the changes that his childhood friends and the neighborhood of his formative years have undergone. Equally telling is Jurrell's early admonition to Shareef that "A lot of things are changed in Harlem now... It's about moving on up. And if you're not moving on up, then you're moving on out of Harlem" (144). Just as Shareef has developed into a successful romancer, Trap has turned from a friend into a vicious street criminal; similar to this class cleavage between Shareef and his friends is the fact that Harlem has changed from a declining ghetto into a place that while still characterized by blight is also full of problematic prosperity. Gentrification is re-purposing Harlem, altering formerly dangerous and decrepit urban space in economically dynamic ways that draw in wealthier residents and compel the dispersal of poorer residents. Unlike Shareef, Jurrell is at essence a capitalist, not a romantic, and has chosen Harlem as his base of operation not because it still contains some of New York's most degraded neighborhoods but because it presents fresh opportunities for capital acquisition and investment. Among his principle investments is his publishing business, focusing on street lit novels. Jurrell's literary enterprise is indicative of and in fact mirrors the changed reality of Harlem itself and urban cores across the country: The works he covertly sponsors at once create economic opportunity and cater to Harlem's underserved reader markets, and yet also stratify black readership along economic lines. It is the capitalist understanding of the dynamics of gentrification in his hometown, and the writer's comparative cluelessness, that allows Jurrell to take advantage of Shareef in order to exploit the book market.

There are immense profits to be made from narrativizing and gentrifying the black poor and the poor in general. But exploitation of the vulnerable, though naturalized out of visibility by conservative rhetoric about free markets, profit imperatives and self-reliance, is ultimately cowardice in the face of an elemental human reality. It simply re-founds all power relations and re-enforces all manner of hierarchy and division. It displaces poverty out of fear of the fact that poverty is more enduring than any enterprise or capital dream. Expelled out of now gleaming urban cores by university expansion or stadium design or what have you, poverty merely re-locates to ex-urban ghettos.

One irony of *The Last Street Novel* is that the book's narrative close signals not an end for street lit, as its title promises, but endless reproduction of the genre's most base aspects, all sourced from a wealthy black man's pen. Shareef Crawford can't stop, won't stop. The more surprising irony is that, despite its castigation of street lit, the novel nevertheless is street lit, the very title, however unwanted, speaking to that reality. As such, it speaks to the genre's great potential for investigation of black male subjectivity and the social pressures placed on black masculinity. This street lit text also stands as likely the most technically innovative novel in what is characteristically a sub-genre reliant on determinist and realist narrative structures. This formal point alone hints at the evolving complexities of this emergent popular form.

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Comparing the Available Female Roles and the Social Contexts of  
*Sula* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*

"Female freedom," Toni Morrison writes in her 2004 Foreword to *Sula*, "always means sexual freedom... especially when it is seen through the prism of economic freedom" (Morrison, xiii). "Outlaw women are fascinating," she asserts, "not always for their behavior but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status is an illegal one from birth if it is not under the rule of men" (xvi). Morrison, here, has triangulated a set of assertions as regards womanhood and autonomy generally which can be applied specifically to the conflict at the heart of *Sula* (the fundamental opposition between Sula's absolutely disruptive and inviolable individuality and the superstitions and prejudices deeply rooted in the customs of Medallion's black community). The first of these assertions is that female freedom and sexual freedom are inseparable. The second is that women have historically been seen at essence as disruptive beings whenever they act as individuals as opposed to mechanisms within a marriage, family or community. The last is that women have been accorded status as illegal when not under the rule of men. All three statements, when examined in their proper contexts, are true: 1) Because most societies are not only administered by a primarily male government and economic hierarchy but because the governing ideology of our societies, as expressed in our religious documents and cultural faire, is typically centered around the concerns of men, women's roles in their social worlds are defined by men at the level of ideology and generally at the level of governing practice. Men have separated ourselves from women and raised ourselves above women economically, politically and ideologically. Therefore, female freedom is inseparable from a radical relationship to the female sexual role. More specifically, the female sexual role must be changed for women to be free from male authority. 2) Because Western ideology largely derives from a book wherein the world's first woman breaks the bond between man and God, women are historically seen as disruptive figures. Moreover, because men have a freedom of movement, decision and economic autonomy that is universally accepted, the disruptions that men bring

about are not understood as disruptions but as the way of the world; because women have relatively less freedom, their disruptions are seen as discordant with the way of the world and women are identified with that which is problematic to human societies. 3) Because women are understood as naturally disruptive and because men generally maintain ideological, economic and political control over determining social systems, women who do not accept male rule place themselves outside the governing principles of their social worlds and become anathema to those worlds.

Morrison writes that she conceived of the women of *Sula* spatially: "Hannah, Nel, Eva, Sula were points of a cross... The nexus of that cross would be a merging of responsibility and liberty difficult to reach, a battle among women who are understood as least able to win it. Wrapped around the arms of that cross were wires of other kinds of battles-- the veteran, the orphans, the husband, the laborers, confined to a village... And the only triumph was that of the imagination" (xiii-xvi). At the center-point of Morrison's design is a difficult goal, the merging of responsibility and liberty: This point of merger is the ideal democratic secular society, the near-antithesis of Medallion's black community. As a morally righteous, racially segregated, economically deprived burg, Medallion's Bottom is emphatically not a liberatory zone. The fully deprived black women of the community are least able to attain the ideal way of being so prized in their fitfully democratic nation. Only their most heroic attempts will draw them closer to that nexus-ideal.

Just as distant from this idealized state of being are the other black folks in Medallion, the scared and judgmental church women and the disapproving men with no ground to stand on, the compassionate but trauma-shocked Shadrack, the unemployed laborers, the undifferentiated

orphans. Their confined existences "wrap around" and further confine the existences of Hannah, Nel, Eva and Sula. As Trudier Harris', in her chapter on *Sula* in *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, explains, Hannah, Eva and Sula Peace are "unacceptable except as reflections of a community that is dying. Sula carries no values that would sustain a society; Hannah would chip away at any established values; and Eva is too harsh...to create any but a very narrow world" (Harris 79). Contrary to Harris' alignment, it is the dying world of Medallion that is ultimately the root of the problem and not the Peace women. Just as blood will have blood, confinement creates confinement, cinches close confinement. The restrictions imposed on the black townfolk in general and black male townfolk in particular (primarily inter-generational unemployment enforced by the racist hiring practices of Medallion employers) function to deepen the restrictions placed upon the most restricted of persons, the black women of the community. The wires cinch closer and closer, tighter and tighter, turning round themselves, eating into that which they purport to protect. On the cross, the four women struggle against, or accept, their bonds. Closest to the nexus-ideal is Nel, who is free enough to love Sula deeper than she does anyone save her children, husband and her God. Nel loves women and men and her community. She willingly bears the responsibilities that come with loving people. She becomes a pillar of the community and a heroically devoted wife, mother and friend. Even after Sula has betrayed her by sleeping with Nel's husband, Nel seeks to re-unite with Sula at Sula's death bed and weeps and keens at Sula's grave. Nel is instinctively compassionate and responsible; and her passionate, devouring attachment to Sula indicates a certain freedom from the confines of Medallion that is unusual among the women and the men of the town. Contrasted with Nel, Sula Peace is the furthest from the nexus-ideal: She is an absolute individual, with no love or care for her community, a force disruptive of the male-female power dynamics and the religious and moral certitudes held dear in Medallion. Sula, "an active, destructive artist," to borrow Harris' formulation, ultimately refuses

the consolations of marriage and economic solvency and community approval (54). Her destiny is, thus, preordained. Living within social matrices of the community, she is subject to its governing logic and must, therefore, die impoverished, despised and alone, impaled at the sharpest, most distant point on the cross.

This is perhaps the most powerful theme of Morrison's first major work: The archetypal conflict between this insular and entrenched small-town community in collision with an individual unreconciled to its dictates. "Sula," Harris writes, "simply is... She is simply in the community; what it does or how it responds to her is of no consequence to her" (78). Sula's self-created and self-willed existence is, paradoxically, both the centrifugal force in the novel, around which all else rotates, and yet is strangely without gravitational pull because Sula has no care for her community. This paradoxical nothingness around which the whole novel orbits has drawn much critical attention. Barbara Hill Rigney points to the silence that attends Chicken Little's drowning, the "closed place in the water" where he goes down, as well as the "soundlessness" of Sula's orgasm, and the decisive departure, absence and nothingness that becomes of her romance with Ajax, the painful recognition of which quickly kills the force that is Sula (Hill Rigney, 23-24). This and other similar critical interventions have been validated both directly and indirectly by Morrison herself in her own critical work. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* is predicated upon the explication of the importance of those silences and omissions that obscure African-American presence in canonized American literature from Melville to Twain, Faulkner and Hemingway. In her 1988 lecture "The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" she tells us that "a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum... certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves" (Morrison 16).

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The first half of Morrison's novel calls attention to the insanity of a WWI veteran returned to Medallion's black village, the childhood of Sula and Nel, and the many sudden, violent tragedies that mark these years, including Sula and Nel's accidental drowning of Chicken Little. The randomness and inexplicable shocks of the novel's first movement become juxtaposed against the allegorical narrative of the second movement: Sula, ushered along by a plague of sparrows, returns from ten years away at college and traveling between America's great metropolises to The Bottom. Shadrack tips his cap to her and Dessie decides that this is a salutation shared between Satan's disciples. Almost immediately her behavior and eventually her very presence spark animus amongst the black folk. Sula puts on airs, wearing attention-catching clothes; she unabashedly sleeps with other women's men, takes Jude (Nel's husband) to bed, and is rumored to be so promiscuous that she even sleeps with white men, so that she fast comes to embody, for the black people of Medallion, the essence of the Devil's mischief.

The last of these offenses, her rumored relationships with white men, is an explicit challenge to black male authority over black women. Sula is transgressing the ideological line that would keep her under the control of black men. This transgression is soliloquized in one of the novel's more memorable passages: Upon meeting Nel's husband and hearing him complain about how he and black men in general are conscripted into menial service at the beck and call of powerful white men, Sula counters that black men are not oppressed but rather "the envy of the world" (Morrison 104). Everybody, she says, desires and loves black men. White women want them and white men want to be them; sisters love them and brothers love themselves well beyond the limits of healthy self-esteem. Sula's boldness leads Jude to comment that Sula is unmarried because while she can stimulate a man's mind, she is too intellectually assertive and domineering to stir his body.



Contrary to Jude's admonition, Sula's appeal proves stronger than Jude would admit when Jude cheats on his wife and sleeps with Sula, an act that at once reinforces Sula's thesis that black men are sexually desirable as well as the fact of her absolutely anarchic, transgressive character.

"As always," Morrison writes, with hard eloquence, "the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run" (113). They "said [Sula] was a bitch" and evil as well (112). Medallion's black community scorns Sula and only tolerates her presence in the patient yet thoroughly close-minded way that they abide all things they count as evil. Because God "was not the God of three faces they sang about," they are so compelled, for "[t]hey knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula." They lay broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkle salt on porch steps, to ward off the evil that they perceive. "There was no creature," Morrison writes, "so ungodly as to make them destroy it... The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over" (118). This complex relationship to perceived evil, and by extension to Sula, is interesting for its divergence from mainstream Christian religious responses to that which is taboo or considered evil. "She is," Hill Rigney writes, "...that last unexplained quadrant of the crossed circle symbolic of mandelic wholeness, the fourth face of the Holy Trinity, without which Father, Son and Holy Ghost are incomplete" (Hill Rigney, 55). Whereas mainstream Christian responses would include either the banishment or outright annihilation of the evil subject, the black folks tacitly tolerate that which they despise. In fact, as Hill Rigney argues, the first three faces of the Trinity cannot be understood without knowledge of a fourth, and that fourth face provides wholeness to a material life so powerfully impacted by despair and deprivation. God, as black Medallion perceives Him, is dually good and evil. I read God's fourth face not with Hill Rigney as some quadrant inexplicable without excursion into Buddhism (i.e., "the crossed circle symbolic of mandelic wholeness"), but rather as

the lost angel Lucifer, selectively silenced and erased in more tame forms of Christian religious practice but everywhere present in the black Medallion world. This fierce Christianity, like the concept of mandelic wholeness, can be objectified by a four-quadrant symbol, but in Morrison's own formulation, where "Hannah, Nel, Eva, Sula were points of a cross," this symbol is the cross re-purposed to a black folk culture design (Morrison xiii-xvi).

This black folk culture spiritual design accommodates the Devil, Sula, and a thousand natural shocks, inexplicable deaths and sudden tragedies. For the black people to banish evil from their presence and therefore *take control* of their environment by subduing it would be to fabricate an unnatural life-way wherein the work of God would be replaced by the fears of men and women. Such an escape, even if desired, is impossible due to the racial segregation and economic deprivation that the community faces on a daily basis. At its best, the black community confined to The Bottom, barred from good jobs, forced to live on the town's leftovers, exists beyond fear and beyond consolation, in a state of stony-eyed knowledge, endurance and courage.

When Sula meets Ajax, she falls in love. He appreciates her mind as well as her body and willingly holds conversations with her, which she values more than their physical relationship. Ajax sees in Sula a woman reminiscent of his mother, an "evil conjure woman" strange in appearance and incredible in her talents. Where before Sula Ajax "had never met an interesting woman in his life," save his mother, his curiosity is suddenly sparked (126). Sula's uncanny effect on men intensifies with her relationship with Ajax, and Ajax has an equal effect on her. For the first time, Sula begins to work her way toward the nexus of the cross where liberty and responsibility intersect. In the attempt, of course, she tangles ever more tightly in the wires that represent the community wrapping round the ambitions and emotions of women.

"Sula," Morrison confides, "began to discover what possession was" (131). Her need for Ajax is so surpassing, it astonishes and overwhelms and changes her. Where until his arrival, Sula had been a kind of inviolable individual impervious to the pettiness, possessiveness and neediness of town and city, after Ajax her sentiments become more mainstream. When Ajax leaves her, with seemingly typical masculine indifference, Sula is broken. As if in acknowledgement that she has succumbed to love and heartbreak and is no longer the uniquely impervious self of all her previous days, Sula soon after falls ill and dies.

In her deathbed argument with Nel, Sula reasserts her radical female authority: "I know what every colored woman in this country is doing... Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world." When Nel asks what Sula has "to show" for all her living, Sula responds "Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind" (143). This assertion, reminiscent of Ellison's *Invisible Man* happily sequestered in a forgotten basement by novel's end, is also in keeping with Morrison's rhetoric in the 2004 Foreword: "... [T]he only triumph was that of the imagination" (xiii-xvi). Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* was perhaps the first critical work to identify and extensively document the centrality of anti-social male characters in the canon of American literature, noting, among other observations, the American rejection of the European novel of manners, its dramas of family and community relations, its reliance on custom, ritual and acceptable behavior, in favor of an anti-heroic narrative mode that fetishizes individual freedom of mind and body above all else. Sula's elevation of individual intellect and desire above the wants, needs and customs of the community is in keeping with male heroes from Huckleberry Finn and Ishmael to Victor LaValle's mentally ill ecstatic, Percival Everett's Thelonius "Monk" Ellison and Junot Diaz'

wondrous Oscar Wao. Precisely what draws Nel and Ajax and the reader to Sula is that she is, if not the only interesting woman in Medallion, at least an exceptional female figure indifferent to patriarchal authority and community customs, a woman willing to assert her own individuality and freedom.

Sula's presence is anarchic and her actions far from unproblematic. A "despicable user," Harris avers (Harris 54). In her behavior, Sula not only exposes the town's bigotry, but also plays games with the genuine companionship and loyalty that is offered her. The most dubious of her acts is sleeping with Jude, Nel's husband. "But what about me?" Nel wonders during the deathbed scene. "Why didn't you think about me? Didn't I count? I never hurt you" (144). This plea, moving, heartfelt and morally unambiguous, rings true. Sula has hurt Nel without cause or thought to the consequences of her actions. Nel is right to look askance at her old friend, even on her deathbed. The conflict between the individual and the community, between liberty and responsibility, is a thick, fraught one. Neither Sula nor her community is necessarily right or good, nor is either necessarily wrong or bad. Their conflict is an inevitable moment in the progress of a society, a tipping point at which old values are challenged, dubiously upheld and ultimately found wanting. When Sula is buried and the black people of Medallion shun her funeral, leaving it to the white people, this is less a comment on Sula's character than on the character of the townsfolk and their governing ideologies. Where even the white people of Medallion are willing to acknowledge the universal moment and tragedy of death and cross racial lines to send Sula on, the black folks are conspicuous for their mean-spirited refusal to do so. The old values of Medallion's community, at least those that relate to the female role within the community, having been challenged and dubiously upheld, are finally found wanting.

That Sula is labeled as bad and even evil due to the misogynistic ideology informing the townfolks' judgments is wrong. If Sula were a man, her betrayal of Nel would have been forgiven in time and, more important, would have been seen as a natural aspect of her male character. To brand a man as evil or rail endlessly against his promiscuity is understood as a waste of time and a denial of nature, but women are afforded no such forgiveness. *Sula* speaks powerfully to the untruth of such ideology. As in Matthew 10:34, Sula has not come to make peace. Rather, she has returned to Medallion as the embodiment of difference and change. She has asserted her individuality and freedom by taking control of her sexual life and by disregarding the male-dominant ideologies of both the men and women among whom she lives. In "The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" lecture Morrison calls her "new world black and new world woman... Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed..." (Morrison 33). *Sula* is a major complication and progression in American literature's approach to women's lives. Roderick Ferguson posits that the novel "offered black lesbian feminists a opportunity to formulate a politics that could negate the gender, racial and sexual regulations of nationalist formulations" (Ferguson 111). Certainly the novel acknowledges an expanding range of available female roles, in part by dramatizing just how limited and irrational are the gender, racial and sexual boundaries that Sula transgresses. *Sula* at once presages the many commercially and artistically successful novels by and about black women over the past three decades and marks a high point in the radical representation of black women, upsetting unexamined notions, challenging the literature itself to deeper examinations and explorations.

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Read in relation to *Sula*, Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* signals both progression and regression. Published twenty-six years after Morrison's radical novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever* is today one of the most popular books among young black readers, male and especially female.

Simone Gibson notes, in “Critical Readings: African American Girls and Urban Fiction”, that it is “the novel accredited with the reinvigoration of the genre from its original popularity in the 1960s and 1970s” (Gibson 565). So it makes sense that I’ve known many young people, especially young black women to insist that the novel is the best thing they’ve ever read, their most favorite novel, even that they have read it three and four and five times.

The main character is Winter Santiago. Winter covets her mother's many marital possessions and shows no compassion for her mother when she loses the man and the looks that garnered those goods. Winter betrays her girlfriends, fucking their men and double-crossing them in business. She steals donation money from HIV-infected patients, beats and robs an old woman with a sock full of rocks, spends money with staggering frivolity, ignores the advice of legitimate mentors, is absolutely uneducable, and seems to find value only in a life inundated with predatory, rapacious thugs. The novel, however, is bigger and more complicated than Winter and its vision of black womanhood is important and multi-faceted.

Winter is the daughter of Ricky Santiago, one of Brooklyn's most notorious and successful drug dealers. As the novel opens, the Santiagas find themselves at the tail end of a long reign as a drug kingpin family in the ghettos of Brooklyn. Sensing that they are no longer safe within the city, Mr. Santiago moves his family to Long Island. But when his impatient, greedy wife grows bored with her new suburban home, things go wrong. Mr. Santiago takes her with him on a trip back to Brooklyn and she is shot in the face, destroying her appearance and sense of self-worth. Santiago, enraged, re-takes a hands-on approach to his business, mandating a war on the streets of Brooklyn. In the ensuing madness, law enforcement gets involved and Santiago's entire crew of drug pushers and assorted thugs are apprehended, jailed, charged and eventually convicted of

conspiracy and drug trafficking. "...[I]t was apparent it was a total wipeout. One by one," Winter recalls, "women's voices filled with fear, rage, and hysteria called demanding Santiago rescue their husbands, brothers, sons" (Souljah 93). Santiago meets the same fate as well. His family scatters. His house and all his assets are seized and re-distributed, his wife falls into crack addiction, his youngest twin daughters are placed in the care of Midnight, the only man in Santiago's crew not to be imprisoned, his eldest daughter Winter is remanded to foster care until she turns eighteen.

Winter articulates a rational argument against the policing of drug trafficking: "People don't understand Santiago's world. It's business. Nobody kept a drug dealer's business in check but the dealer himself and the team he set up. There has to be punishment for those within the team who test too much and step out of line. There has to be punishment for outsiders who attack the business. Violations have to be responded to..." Winter is not wrong. Drugs should be legalized and regulated throughout the country, thereby eliminating the need for those who sell drugs to protect their product and locations of sale. Law enforcement, Winter argues, "shouldn't be able to barge into our business and force their rules on us" (117-118). In a true free market system, unencumbered by misplaced morality and selective competition, law enforcement would only interrupt business that directly endangers the public health and welfare. Drug abuse, not drug use would be policed. Where Winter and her father have it wrong is in their unwillingness to bend to settled law: Until the laws change, they risk their freedom by dealing drugs, or even by living in the same house as a drug dealer. By idolizing her father and rationalizing his stubborn, destructive behavior Winter sets a life-path for herself that is similarly doomed.

Winter's only male attachments are to men who remind her of her father. She seeks out strong-willed young men involved in drug dealing. This explains her crush on Santiago's employee, Midnight. Midnight's assertion of discipline, poise, confidence and control impresses her. She describes his voice as having "that masculine authority that made me hot" (41). Note how Winter's romantic and sexual impulses depart from Sula's: While both are promiscuous, Sula and Winter are attracted by different characteristics in men. Where Sula is drawn to Ajax for his masculinity, his self-confidence and self-control, she has no desire to see Ajax dominate other people, least of all herself. Winter states that her man "would need to own the world to win [her]" (10). Where she takes pride in imagining Midnight beating down other men just to impress her and sees proof of manhood in Santiago's murder of two fellow inmates (she figures they are weak men who deserve to be done away with), Sula doesn't care to see her man dominate everything in his path. Where Winter wants her man to own the world, Sula is not possessive or ego-driven and is not attracted to men who are highly acquisitive or egotistical. Where Sula is "new world black and new world woman," Winter is cut from an old and confining cloth that limits the possible life-ways for both women and men (Morrison, 33).

Winter wants to dominate and humiliate other women; hence her constant talk about being the baddest bitch, the finest-looking, best-dressed chick in Brooklyn. Where Sula and the Peace women locate themselves within a small but complex "woman-centered consciousness" that "defies syllogistic equations," as well as traditional logic, morality and spirituality, Winter lives in a vast but tightly tied and simply drawn world (Harris 75, 71). Hers is a world without the dark unknowable beauties of spirituality, cut off from supernatural fantasy and power. It is a world of material, man-made hierarchies, with everyone's worth determined by whether they are more or less attractive, wealthy, etc. than their peers. Because her thinking is so oriented around a



simplistic ethics of dominance and submission, she cannot understand why the men whom she wants to be dominated by should be humble before women or before the world. Sister Souljah points out in her excellent explanatory notes for the novel, "If a man cannot be humble, it is likely that he cannot be still. To be still is to be silent, without motion. Every man needs to have or develop the ability to be still at some point in each day. It is the time when he can consider or reconsider his past actions. It is the time when he can think or pray. It is the time when he can allow his conscience to do its job..." Obviously, these truisms apply as aptly to women and girls as they do to men and boys. Winter, in particular, shares these faults with her male counterparts. "There are many grown men today," Souljah writes, "who never even consider going to a library or bookstore, or opening a book to read... Their lack of humility convinces them that there is no need to read. Their arrogance reminds them that they already know everything. As a result, they can never grow or change." She points out that, in contrast to Winter, Midnight is contemplative, bookish, loyal and humble, willing to take direction and able to learn from his mistakes. "Midnight," she writes, "was able to be still" (Souljah 497-498). Winter and Midnight would have been incompatible at every level. Where Midnight, despite his profession, fulfills many of the ideals of masculinity (and gives up drug dealing, moves to Maryland, raises Santiago's youngest daughters and opens a barbershop after Santiago goes to prison) by ceding authority and dominance, Winter's desires remain too base to allow her to recognize the deeper strength that comes from humility, silence and study.

One might, however, look at Winter in a different light. *Salon's* Sean Elder categorizes Winter as a "dead-pan narrator in the Huck Finn mode" (Elder). Elder takes gleeful pleasure in Winter's fast-tongued mockery of everything and everyone around her—from overweight activists to AIDS patients in need of "fashion rescue" (Souljah 272). Seeing Winter as a ribald, Huck Finn-

type character groups her not only with Twain's famous child, but with an array of canonized anti-heroic American youth figures portrayed in literature, including J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield (*Catcher in the Rye*) and Hemingway's Nick Adams (the Nick Adams stories), as well as more recent anti-heroic central figures such as Cormac McCarthy's kid (*Blood Meridian*) and, in fact, Sula Peace herself. Such an analysis exposes a surprisingly strong connection between Morrison's seminal novel and Souljah's famous street lit story. As anti-heroic and anti-social female outlaws, Sula and Winter are reminiscent each of the other. While very different in the ways they approach their womanhood and their given societies, Winter does share with Sula a visceral lack of regard for propriety and nicety. Winter is the narrator of her picaresque so she usually expresses this anti-heroic streak in misanthropic interior monologues, whereas Sula is "off stage" for large portions of *Sula* and therefore expresses her anti-heroic style through a compilation of sexual exploits, rumored doings and singularly memorable encounters<sup>25</sup>. Despite even this formal difference in how their cavalier attitudes are presented to the reader, it is probably the case that Sula and Winter stand as the two most well-known black female versions of a classic American literary type, the solitary, journeying, experiencing anti-hero.

"... [P]recocious, babacious and as tough as a hollow-point bullet," Winter predictably bucks at the curfew and other restrictions placed on her at the all-girls foster home (the House of Success) which she is required to enter after her father is incarcerated (Elder). She sets up a scheme by which a girlfriend on the outside steals clothes from department stores, supplies them to Winter, who then sells them to the girls at the house. Along with doing hair and nails for the girls, this

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<sup>25</sup> The scene in which Sula cuts off the tip of her finger to scare the white boys who have harassed she and Nel on the way home from school comes to mind, as does the famous scene in the kitchen with Nel and Jude. (Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York, NY: Vintage. 1973. Foreword 2004.)

scheme nets Winter some decent money with which to indulge herself. Perpetually on the search for eligible young drug dealers and rappers, Winter attends a party with some of her old friends. When she flirts with her girlfriend Natalie's boyfriend, there's a falling out that ends with Winter unable to return to the House of Success without being attacked. On the run, she ends up living with radio personality and purveyor of black uplift rhetoric Sister Souljah and Souljah's friend, a young black female doctor who owns the house in which Souljah lives and from which she ministers to various disadvantaged groups. Winter hates Sister Souljah on general principle ("She the type of female I'd like to cut in the face with my razor" [Souljah 1]) and dismisses the doctor as an over-educated, unmarried failure. Completely dismissive of the material aid and advice both young black women try to give, she lies about her identity, her past, her family situation and attempts to use Souljah to gain access to the popular rappers with whom Souljah organizes benefit concerts and charity events. When Winter learns that Souljah has a vague relationship with Midnight, she works as doorwoman at an event for HIV+ New Yorkers at which Souljah is speaking, steals the event's donated monies, steals Souljah's letters (including her correspondence with Midnight) and leaves for Maryland, where she has learned Midnight lives. The strict moral logic that over-governs the plot and intent of the novel makes for a severe dichotomy here, between Winter, mean, dishonest, hapless and uneducable, and Souljah and the doctor, who are both generous, fair-dealing, professionally successful and well-educated. Winter's rejection of these women and the bond that they offer presages her ultimate downfall.

Before she can make it to Maryland, Winter meets an old sex-mate, Bullet. Bullet has become a successful drug dealer since last Winter knew him. He satisfies Winter's ego, telling her she's beautiful, taking her on vacation to Key West. Winter figures she's finally returned to the life she was always meant to lead, now supported by a man as able and calculating as her father. It

quickly becomes apparent that Bullet is practicing psychological control over Winter, sequestering her in an apartment, marking her movements, punishing her whenever she disobeys him. In one chilling episode, he lets three pit bull dogs loose in the apartment, effectively confining Winter to her bedroom for days without food or water. Bullet keeps his drugs in the apartment, leased under Winter's name. He transports the drugs in a car, rented under her name. And when law enforcement busts the criminal operation, Bullet is not even charged while Winter is given a fifteen-year prison sentence. After her first year incarcerated, her old girlfriend Natalie is imprisoned in the same unit on similar charges. The novel ends with brutal determinism: At the funeral for Winter's mother, Midnight, the symbol of right masculinity, arrives with Winter's two younger sisters; Santiago and Winter, the symbols of America's imprisonment age, attend as well. "... [My father] wanted to hug me," Winter recalls, "but his hands were chained, and so were mine" (426). At book's end, father and daughter are state property no different than if they were slaves.

In her 2010 essay "Reading Street Literature, Reading America's Prison System", Kristina Graaff observes that "A particular important facet of the genre is how it is inextricably linked to the US penal system on multiple levels... Imprisonment is also a central theme in most storylines" (Graaff 1). *The Coldest Winter Ever* closes within the prison system, in this powerful final scene. But the specter of incarceration haunts the entire novel. In a sense, the book begins with incarceration when Santiago is convicted on drug charges. Shortly thereafter, Winter enters a form of juvenile confinement, if not incarceration, at the House of Success. The possibility of jail and prison time stalks every movement of the criminal enterprises that pervade the narrative. Graaff speaks to the shadowing omnipresence of prison, which is not only a feature of Souljah's novel but of the vast majority of street lit novels:

In a rather pessimistic, though one might say also more realistic stance, prison is integrated into numerous Street Lit narratives as an inevitable and recurring part of the characters' life. In what might be termed *stagnation narratives*—referring to the African American migration narratives that usually depict the *move* from the South to the Northern cities—characters permanently oscillate between streets and prison, without ever managing to escape the vicious circle between the two worlds. (Graaff 2)

In this startling formulation Graaff not only describes the role of prison in much of street lit but is able to link it, in ironic contrast, to the Great Migration that is an essential component of African-American history and that has deeply impacted American life ever since WWI. Isabel Wilkerson explains that the Migration's "imprint is everywhere in urban life. The configuration of the cities as we know them, the social geography of black and white neighborhoods, the spread of the housing projects as well as the rise of a well-scrubbed black middle class," all were the product of the Migration. Perhaps even more importantly, the Migration created "people who might not have existed, or become who they did... James Baldwin and Michelle Obama, Miles Davis and Toni Morrison, Spike Lee and Denzel Washington" (Wilkerson 10). Perhaps Winter Santiago would not exist in the way she does without the Migration having happened, but she is less the product of the Migration itself than of inner-city social patterns that post-date it.

By contrast to the epic agential movement across American space in quest for freedom, safety, better paying work and the fulfillment of human potential that Wilkerson narrates in *The Warmth of Other Suns*<sup>xiv</sup>, the stagnation narrative that Graaff identifies within street literature presents us with documents that are almost exactly opposite in their content. The stories are tightly bound

within their urban confines. The story subjects are never fully free, for they "permanently oscillate between streets and prison"; they lack the basic bodily safety that comes with the knowledge that one is highly unlikely to be incarcerated, as well as the more general safety that a life outside illegal and penal spaces obviously affords; those who are put to any sort of work provide labor with scant remuneration, probably compensated at a rate lower than the inflation-adjusted real wages received by plantation sharecroppers after Reconstruction. The stagnation narrative also recalls Ruth Gilmore's observation that the principle effect of modern mass incarceration is not spectacular violence or even covert punishment but "*incapacitation*" (Gilmore 14). Gilmore avers that theorizing mass incarceration of black and brown Americans cannot properly be termed a "new slavery," nor linked to Patterson's social death concept that is more correctly seen as the effect of slavery, not incarceration, because "very few prisoners work for anybody while they're locked up" (21). Rather, Gilmore writes, from the perspective of the prison system and from the perspective of the society that has brought it into being, modern American prisons are nothing more than a "simple-minded... geographical solution that purports to solve social problems by extensively and repeatedly removing people from disorder, de-industrialized milieus and depositing them somewhere else" (14). From the perspective of the incarcerated and the potentially incarcerated who populate street lit texts (not to mention the fact that many authors of street lit novels can claim personal experience of incarceration), the absurdity of a penal system that simply seeks to periodically relocate people into immobile situations is obvious because, by its very nature, such a system negates personal development, moral and social evolution, and reinforces a cyclical lifestyle that turns between dubious freedom and stagnating confinement. There is no rehabilitation here, let alone progress beyond recurrent criminality and imprisonment. Street lit's stagnation narratives reflect criminologists' findings that mass incarceration as a system of crime regulation is a self-perpetuating practice: "Prison time doesn't

exactly prevent crime and it doesn't exactly cause crime. Its public safety benefit," Paul Butler writes, "depends on our ability to calibrate how much to use it... Most scholars believe that the increase in incarceration in the 1990s lowered the crime rate by around 20 percent"; however, "After that, most criminologists agree, the crime reduction benefit of incarceration levels off" due to the combined effect of prison and jail overcrowding, social disorder, family disruption, the routinization of the prison experience and there being too many unemployable young men (Butler 32-33). Central to the objective value of street lit, Graaff argues, is precisely that it makes such an issue of mass incarceration in America. Mass incarceration and the prison system that is its operating mechanism is a kind of socially silent yet omnipresent, hugely powerful institution in America. "[Street lit] embodies and illustrates the omnipresence, magnitude and repercussions of the prison apparatus like no other literary genre or artistic expression...." (Graaff 3).

Graaff terms *The Coldest Winter Ever* "a cautionary tale," chiefly because Souljah has structured her story so as to "illustrate the destructive outcome awaiting those involved in the crack trade, but also to represent prison as a just punishment for those partaking in criminal activities" (Graaff 2). This moral structure is, additionally, ethnicized and racialized: Winter's last name, Santiago, suggests her Latino heritage. Winter's mother is African-American and her father is Latino or Black-Latino. Mr. Santiago's mistress, Dulce Triminestre, is Puerto Rican. If Winter is the product of these crime-corrupted unions, the message seems to be that inner-city black and brown youth have been tragically corrupted by the processes of the drug game and the felonizing of possession and conspiracy charges. In particular, her story demonstrates the impact of the drug culture on poor communities and the dubious way in which law enforcement builds cases against socially marginal people, exploiting the weakest members of a criminal enterprise, punishing them for not colluding against their friends, family and close associates.

Distinguishing her novel from the glorifications of street life inundating hip-hop and Hollywood, Sister Souljah, in her notes to the novel, asks, "But who was going to tell the story that focused on the fall of a drug kingpin, and of how he descends into poverty and slavery? How the state places him back in chains naked and pinned in, chained to another slave just like him?... How the world pimps his unprotected daughters and dwarfs then devours his sons?" (437). *The Coldest Winter Ever*, she implies, is the answer to these questions. If the novel is understood as a statement, or a series of exposés, it is the predictable answer to these questions.

Conceived as an utterly determinist and naturalist fiction wherein each character, save Midnight, fulfills a destiny determined by his or her socio-economic position, the novel is less a piece of art than a social and political statement, and, as such, is completely effective. However, when placed against Morrison's *Sula*, *The Coldest Winter Ever* appears a sad, limited expression. I am not making an artistic judgment; rather, because Souljah's novel eschews traditional literary aesthetic concerns around lyricism and narrative experiment as consciously and determinedly as do Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, I am noting the social openness, hope and beauty of women like Sula, and the comparative closedness and pettiness that characterizes Winter's life. Winter is much more kin to abused and abusing characters like Crane's Maggie, Dreiser's Carrie and Ann Petry's Lutie Johnson. Like Carrie, Winter's avarice is its own prison, and like Maggie and Lutie, Winter is forsaken by the world, condemned by its logic of power. In fact, one can find parallels between the way Carrie is seduced first by Charlie, then by Hurstwood, only to part disastrously with both men<sup>xv</sup>, and the way Winter binds herself to the degenerate rapper GS, then allows herself to be seduced and betrayed by Bullet. Comparing the narrative with Crane's naturalistic novel of New York renders similar parallels: Winter is



marginalized by the state after her father is arrested and the family's assets frozen; poverty and inter generational alcohol abuse force Maggie out of doors and into street prostitution. Maggie's marginalization and eventual squalid demise resembles Winter's imprisonment and consequent erasure from free society. Like Lutie Johnson in *The Street*, whom after killing Boots realizes that she has misdirected her rage and despair at an average black man instead of at the landlord, club owner and police who have variously targeted she and her son, at book's end Winter finds in her imprisoned father the symbol of personal, familial and racial defeat.

*The Coldest Winter Ever* can be located within this sphere of urban naturalism and determinism and shares with other novels of this type a certain moralizing as well. The logic of *The Coldest Winter Ever* is a strictly dichotomous world of right and wrong (The doctor is good, Santiaga is bad. Midnight is good, Bullet is bad. Souljah is good, Winter is bad. Etc.). Whereas *Sula* challenges traditional moral and artistic strictures, *The Coldest Winter Ever* reinforces a deeply conventional moral system and falls back on a cumbersome literary style. Perhaps because the consequences of transgressing moral codes in the world of contemporary street literature are no longer a bad reputation and a case of the clap but death from AIDS, imprisonment on drug possession charges, or execution in the streets, there is little room left for the political and poetic risks characteristic to the world of Morrison's women.

Sula, for one, lives her life with a sense of its human potential: She lives to the utmost and, against their conscious will, enlivens all those around her, friends as well as enemies, lovers and haters. Because she has stepped out of her "proper" place and imagined herself differently, those around her react to her uniqueness and discover new capacities within themselves for fear and love and imagination. Sula's willingness to transgress the boundaries of her social world stands in

stark and depressing contrast to the determinism that rules Winter's society, actions and ultimate fate. Where Sula is free, Winter is figuratively and literally a slave to her father's world, her ghetto upbringing and to the state itself.

We might speculate that one reason for this regression is the unsustainability in modern America of the black folk culture that Sula at once revels in and so flamboyantly disrupts. Sula's story itself is the sign of a dying community; black Medallionites are unable to get jobs or make money, and cannot protect their land from annexation into a golf course by the hostile dominant society. Medallion is precariously preserved in its pre-WWII state by a mish-mash of Christianity and folk spirituality, by endurance and insularity. It is a doomed world just as Sula, though the free artist of herself, is yet a doomed woman in her dying world. Perhaps Winter Santiago is the inevitable progeny of the death of black and Latin folk cultures in modern America.

*Sula* ends in sorrow but it is told in love. By contrast, *The Coldest Winter Ever* records a bleak regress into intellectual, spiritual and physical confinement. However, it must be recognized that if the novel is read not against its predecessors in black women's literature but by itself, it is valuable. Taken for what it is, the scathing record of an American crime involving equally drug addicts and dealers and a misguided corrupt judicial system, the novel serves purpose. It is a tour de force. And if it is in some sense time-bound to our specific environment and our passing way of things, readers will come to it years from now knowing themselves lucky and read with awful wonderment about this world.

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So after reading all that, I'll make the boy's argument for him: The previous two essays do have more than passing relationship one to the next, though their order doesn't, in my

opinion, help the reader to see it. I asked him to switch the two essays around, but he wouldn't. Said it made more sense the way he has it. I could try to replicate his argument, but I think that will make him look bad because I'm pretty sure it doesn't make any sense. I told him that reversing the order would make more explicit the chronological movement, from Morrison and the black feminist literature of the 1970s and 80s to Sister Souljah and the street of the 90s and 2000s. If the essay on Tyree's novel came next, then the literary chronology could move from popular black romance writing (Shareef Crawford at the beginning of the novel) to the problematic state of street lit circa-now (Shareef at novel's end). But he wouldn't reverse the order, nor even give my idea its due. He's stubborn like that; like his mother. I'm at a point in my life now where I don't need to argue over something so silly as whether his chapters make sense. This is our project together, but it's his name that's on it which makes it his ship to steer, ultimately. Whether this book makes sense or it doesn't, either way I'll be taking my insulin at 7 and 11 and kissing my wife goodnight when the clock strikes 12.

Putting the Ph.D. hat back on, I do see that viewed in tandem these two essays initiate an analysis around gender in street lit. Moreover, both essays look at the available masculinities and femininities within their respective street lit texts comparatively, in the case of Tyree's novel in relation to Shareef Crawford's forsaken identity as a romance writer, in the case of Souljah's novel in relation to Toni Morrison's *Sula*. This allows us to see that far from being constant, or even typical gender norms within black communities, the available gender roles

represented in the two novels are heavily influenced by their literary moment within contemporary street lit, as well as the social moment within black culture within which both novels arise. Each essay elaborates an argument for why the street lit text under discussion can serve as a significant signpost in the development of urban literature and street lit, thus helping to form a historiography of both literary categories, as well as an understanding of the formal significance of the latter sub-genre (street lit). Finally, both essays emphasize the social and political commentary that is a key feature both of Omar Tyree's novel and Sister Souljah's novel. This reminds us not only that street lit is a vividly contemporary and relevant narrative form, but that its particular concerns (hyper-masculinity, the oppression of women, the drug trade and mass incarceration) are pressing concerns within any critical discussion on race, gender and state control.

Up next is the boy's essay on Riis and Canada. Again, where he won't make a case for his own work these weary bones, tired eyes, coarsened throat and slackened mind will haul that water for him. The connection between what might be termed two pop-sociological polemics and the novels already highlighted is largely implicit. There is a two-fold linkage: 1) Moralizing "crisis" rhetoric; 2) a will toward progressive reformism. In *The Last Street Novel* Tyree intermittently employs Shareef as the mouthpiece for his crisis-charged rhetoric around the degradation of black literature. The novel at last ends on a cautionary note, the writer hoisted on his own petard, forced to author trash text after trash text essentially as punishment for his avarice and masculinism. *The Coldest Winter Ever* is a narrative bound in repetitive crisis,

culminating in the cautionary example of Winter and her father incarcerated, meeting at her mother's funeral, their hands chained. Similarly, both Riis and Canada focus their muckraking on New York City's most squalid streets and employ a vocabulary that flashes with adjectives and imperatives asking for our sympathy and demanding our attention and action to solve the urban ills they detail. More subtly, both Riis and Canada structure the programs for social reform that they propose around specific sites of an American social status quo. Riis is determined that all urban reforms take place within the bulwark of *laisses-faire* capitalism. Canada pays deference to the American government and United Nations when formulating his plan for action in the Harlem slums. This is of a piece with the shaming of Shareef Crawford for his many sins against the high craft of literature and the unimpeachable bonds of marriage. When Jurell sentences Shareef to an indefinite literary servitude, the reader may not be happy about it but the logic of the text compels the conclusion that Shareef is paying the predictable price for his numerous transgressions. Likewise, in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Winter is finally forced by both fate and the state to acknowledge how destructive her actions have been in that final moment poised before her mother's casket. Both novels fall back on a rigid moral system of right and wrong and punitive conclusion. Personal and collective improvement, it is implied, will only come of a certain recourse to the sort of age-old values that much reformist logic (including the logic operative in the ideology of both Riis and Canada) is premised upon. While not without its truth, this way of seeing and doing things unfortunately leaves all reformist literature, from the muckraking of Jacob Riis to the novels of Sister Souljah, vulnerable to the worst aspect of

conservatism: That it is fundamentally opposed to systemic change and therefore far more protective of powerful systems than of the individuals within them.

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### Comparing the Rhetoric and Social Mission of Jacob Riis and Geoffrey Canada

While helping Helen Levitt and Janice Loeb film impoverished urbanity as it lived, festered and struggled in 1948 New York, James Agee mused that “The streets of the poorer corners of great cities are above all a theater and a battleground. There, unaware and unnoticed, every human being is a poet, a masker, a warrior, and in his innocent artistry projects against the turmoil of the street an image of existence” (*In the Street*). Jacob Riis and Geoffrey Canada at once manifest and disregard Agee’s poetics. Both Riis, an immigrant who came impoverished to the city of cities from Denmark to make his living and his name, and Canada, a son of the South Bronx and a man in Harlem, are great actors upon the stage of the New York slums. Both are social warriors dedicated to the exposure and re-design of blighted urban space; neither is interested in crafting a narrative poetics that expresses that space, luxuriant in its wastes, forging existential crystals that are beyond good or evil. Both would rather raze and re-constitute. They are activists, and while, ultimately, their activism falls more in line with politically centrist reformers such as Clinton and Bloomberg and Bratton than with the most radical muckrakers, their major literary works are nevertheless complicated by a performance of the urban shape-shifting that Agee marks. Chief among these shape shifts is the phenomenon of their similarity: A polemic against poverty out of the nineteenth century penned by a Dutch immigrant, a manual and manifesto on violence written by a black man raised in post-WWII inner-city America. Two texts that merge now and again along the edges of their concerns and blindnesses.

Riis' seminal progressive work *How the Other Half Lives* and Canada's *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* resemble each other in setting, social intent, rhetorical strategies and the social aftermath that each text exists in now long after publication. Both books represent the explicitly sociological, ostensibly non-fiction wing of urban literature. Riis' work, published initially through Scribner & Sons in 1890, details Manhattan's super-extensive immigrant slums, the vice, low education and bleak life outcomes for the Irish, Italian, Jewish and Chinese immigrants that populated them. As prescription for the manifold social ills documented in its pages *How the Other Half Lives* makes what amounts to an impassioned policy statement, calling for the demolition of tenement housing throughout Manhattan, the building of park spaces that will function as wholesome areas of surveilled recreation for the poor, expanded educational opportunities, and the promotion of a value-set based around industriousness, sobriety, and normative morality. Similarly, Canada's book, though divided somewhat differently between memoir and polemic, is similarly awash in poverty, violence and despair in its first half and offers a series of possible prescriptions for the vice and violence plaguing early 1990s New York City in the latter part of the book. Both texts bear the marks of progressive practice and ideology, with the major difference being that Riis' work helps to initiate the progressive tradition whereas Canada's dissertation on youth violence follows dynamically yet largely uncritically in Riis' footsteps.

We have already discussed Riis' photography in some detail. The prose which constitutes the other element of *How the Other Half Lives*, like the photographs, seeks to both portray the squalor of tenement life in raw realist terms and to appeal to readers for their sympathy and active support in ameliorating slum conditions. What sets Riis' prose apart from his photography is that the prose, though not nearly as renowned as the photographs, proposes at least partial, if

ideologically limited, solutions to the crisis that his photography exposes. Therefore, in his writings Riis shifts back and forth between a melodramatic rhetoric of crisis and a fairly straightforward accounting of the factual problems that beset Manhattan's tenement dwellers. This dual rhetoric lends power to the argument that Riis makes.

The book begins with the chapter entitled "Genesis of the Tenement" wherein Riis relates the evils of slum squalor to "the mark of Cain", which he asserts the first New York tenement bore. He goes on to differentiate the rear house, "infamous ever after in our city's history", from its predecessor, the tenant-house. The tenant-houses "were the decorous homes of the old Knickerbockers", an aristocratic class in early Manhattan, whereas the same structures repurposed as the housing for the poor in response to massive migration into the city came to be known as tenements. Note the use of pathos in this opening passage of the book: Tenement life is related to biblical catastrophe; the tenements themselves are to be infinitely infamous. It is not that either of these statements is true or untrue that I want to note, but rather the dramatic urgency that Riis' rhetoric immediately claims (Riis 1).

The rest of the chapter represents a rhetorical shift as Riis transitions from the expression of crisis and painstakingly historicizes and describes Manhattan's tenements. He informs the reader in great detail of the socioeconomic conditions that dictated the transition from tenant-house to tenement that thousands of the city's structures underwent. Among these pressures were the simple increase in population within the city limits and the consequent imperative to house the burgeoning population, and the recognition among tenant-house owners that building additions (however structurally faulty and potentially inhumane) onto the homes and renting them to the



maximum number of tenants possible would achieve maximum profits. In describing tenement conditions, a floor plan (the first of several throughout the text) of “Tenement of 1863” is rendered for the reader’s perusal. “[T]hree very recent instances of tenement-house life” are detailed: The burning of a Mott Street tenement that left ten families homeless; the apparent suicides by self-poisoning by an entire family living in a Crosby Street tenement; a black family mashed into a tiny single room on West Third (5-6). This is one of the patterns Riis’ prose takes throughout the book.

When we analyze the chapter sequence of *How the Other Half Lives* we note that after the introductory chapter that for the most part historicizes the tenements, the following chapter (“The Awakening”) contemporizes the tenement environment that harbored not half but “three-fourths” of the city’s population (12). Riis explains how the city’s post-Civil War cholera epidemic drew attention from city officials to the general conditions prevailing in the slums. “The determined effort to head [the epidemic] off by laying a strong hand upon the tenement builders that has been the chief business of the Health Board of recent years, dates from this period” Riis writes (10). The limited effectiveness of the sanitation laws that were subsequently enacted spurs Riis toward his basic contention, that it is not enough to negotiate with the tenement builders but rather that the slums must be cleared, the old, below-code tenements torn down (Riis is less definite about the fate of newer tenement structures that are in compliance with sanitation laws). Riis now reverses his earlier rhetorical tack: Having presented the historical and current causation of slum conditions, as well as abundant intimately observed detail and further floor plans, Riis concludes the chapter with an appeal to fear. Noting the “bullet-proof shutters”, “stacks of hand grenades” and “Gatling guns” utilized to secure the Sub-Treasury, Riis wonders, with this the weaponry already necessary to guard the city’s possessions, what arms will be required when the city’s

impoverished population surges to even greater numbers (12). This passage is forerunner to a million admonitions about the potential danger of the festering slums in one city or another. Canada's work constantly echoes this appeal to fear, frequently citing the "war" that is youth gang and drug violence in the ghettos of contemporary America.

The following chapters delve with anthropological thoroughness into the daily reality of the slums. Chapters on the ethnic mixture of New York, the culture of downtown back alleys, Mulberry Bend, a raid on a stale-beer dive bar, and on the circumstances found in cheap lodging-houses follow. After the impersonal journalism of these chapters, Riis allows the book to become more humanist in approach, as he surveys the different ethnic communities that compose the slums: Individual chapters are devoted to the Chinese, Jews, blacks, bohemians, and the "common herd," by which Riis references the most common ethnic immigrant groups, the Germans and Irish. As readers of *How the Other Half Lives* know, these chapters are suffused with Riis' casually stated prejudices so it is only in relation to the sections of the book that simply detail different rooming conditions, the policing of saloons, etc. that I deem these sections humanist in approach. My point is to note the pattern by which Riis makes his Progressive argument and the balance in which he holds, on the one, the explication of factual details, and, on the other, the expression of crisis-charged rhetoric. In the two chapters following the ethnically-oriented section of the book, Riis focuses on the waifs and street Arabs, or homeless, rootless and often delinquent street children that roamed Manhattan by the thousands in Riis' day. The natural sympathy for the plight of the most vulnerable that such observations arouse allows Riis the rhetorical leverage to complete the movement from impersonal journalism to unsentimental yet intimate group by group description to all-out pleading on behalf of children (in the "Waifs of the City's Slums" chapter and the "Street Arab" chapter), young women ("The Working Girls of

New York”), the extreme poor (“Pauperism in the Tenements”), and the deranged (“The Man With the Knife”).

Canada’s *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* functions much the same way, beginning with Canada’s story of personal transformation from a scared and hunted child in Brooklyn and the South Bronx to a skilled, crafty street-fighter to a college student at an exclusive private school secluded far from urban environs to a passionate social reformer back in New York City. Canada uses his personal narrative as template for the process of his argument: First he explains in encyclopedic detail the way youths in violent urban situations are conditioned to be violent. Then Canada explains the strategies that he’s devised for the reduction of youth violence during his years as a college student, educator and community builder. Finally, he narrates how he worked to establish and expand the Harlem Children’s Zone, his life’s work, which began as a standard inner-city after-school program not different from a thousand other programs across the country and developed it into a holistic center for education and wellness. Canada explains outreach and collaborative efforts that he’s undertaken with a variety of noted political figures, most curious among these being the alliance Canada formed with Desmond Tutu and the United Nations Peacekeepers. Bluntly, the U.N. has encountered severe difficulty in places as disparate as the Middle East, Rwanda and Haiti. It would not be the first body I would consult for conflict-resolution strategies. It is evidence of Canada’s ideological comfort with and reliance upon an old guard of institutions to solve the problems that youths encounter in radically transforming urban situations. I am not sure what the U.N. knows about gentrification in America’s urban cores or the transplantation of inner-city violence into ex-urban spaces or mass incarceration in America. It would seem to me that local social work entities, local law enforcement, and researchers that focus specifically on the problems that Canada’s Harlem youth encounter would be more beneficial consultants than

Desmond Tutu or Christopher Dodd. Alliances like this (which Canada promotes at length in the latter chapters of *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun*) seem good funding sources and generators of publicity for yet more funding, but poor reservoirs of actual knowledge about American youth violence, its causes and cures.

There is a similar difficulty to be found in Riis. I want to focus on an outlier section in *How the Other Half Lives*, the “Italian in New York” chapter that is omitted from the section on New York ethnics and is instead placed in the prior series of chapters that contain Riis’ “hard” journalism on dive bar raids, clear-lodging houses and the like, mostly devoid of the editorializing and appellate flourishes that characterize the later sections of Riis’ text. It is Riis’ “Italian in New York” chapter that foreshadows how housed the activist’s prescriptions for the betterment of the poor will be within the ideologies, prejudices and presumptions of his time. In this section, Riis contrasts, without actual explanation of either predisposition, “Mediterranean exuberance” with “matter-of-fact American community” (Riis 37). The reader is to understand that the difference in culture between Southern Europeans and Americans has to do with the industriousness of Americans, the predilection to useless celebration among the Southern Europeans, and the differences in work rate and material achievement that result there-from. Inadvertently, Riis’ text exposes how popularly consumed sources of information and opinion were leveraged as a principle means of othering ethnic immigrant groups that are today considered “white.” In language that has been applied to every immigrant group and to black migrants into American cities, Riis scolds Italian immigrants for entering the American system “at the bottom” and generally staying there “if allowed to follow [their] natural bent” (37). In this rhetorical move, Riis naturalizes the Italian-American under-class, figuring their lack of economic and social status as the inevitable by-product of their nature left to its self. Further on, Riis notes that Italians

are content to “live in a pig-sty”, and within the same sentence characterizes the Irish as “contentious” and Germans as overly “order-loving” (37). And later he comes back to the subject of the chapter, “the Italian,” who “is a born gambler” (41). Such casual judgments suggest Riis’ generic prejudices against ethnic communities, the product less of unique observation than of uncritical investment in the beliefs of his era.

Despite his preconceptions, Riis goes far beyond the governing ideologies of the prevailing social order in analyzing the real conditions of life among the downtrodden and he exposes the class relations that abet massive deprivation within immigrant communities. “Recent Congressional inquiries” are alluded to in order to corroborate Riis’ claims about the maltreatment and overt exploitation of recently immigrated Italians (38). In place of the promises that various unscrupulous persons-- chief among them petty bankers and contractors-- make to them, Italian Americans upon arrival in America are left with “hardships and a dollar a day.” As is the case now in economically vulnerable ethnic communities that are gentrified by entrepreneurs or dramatized in literature, movie and song for great profit, Riis makes the point that a “discovery was made by early explorers that there is money in New York’s ash barrel...” (39). The nadir of this discovery mission is the treatment of hapless Italian Americans freshly upon American shores. In utilizing a language associated with conquest and colonization (“discovery,” “early explorers”) Riis, probably unintentionally, figures the immigrant slums as a nation within a nation, occupied and exploited by the American power structure. This rhetoric would be taken up and extended with greater affect by Civil Rights and Black Power spokespeople.

An immigrant himself, Riis clearly occupies a shifting space between the marginalized poor and the socially privileged, his rhetoric at once a vast critique of American greed and a tool for ethnocentric shaming of immigrant “others.” His work for *the New York Times* and his platform as a journalist of note give him an agency far greater than his economically vulnerable and destitute subjects. Perhaps even a certain skin-privilege is at work here: Riis being Danish with Anglo features is not associated in the popular imagination of his time with the “natural bent” of Southern Europeans which, according to Riis, has a lot to do with avoiding work like plague. Yet Riis’ lived experience of immigration to America, his own survival on the desperate economic margins of New York City, and his struggle to achieve his status as a self-determining citizen no longer subject to the squalor of the slums obviously enhances his empathy and understanding of how the impoverished seventy-five percent of New Yorkers live. Riis’ work adopts, unconsciously, this same shape-shifting character, here advocating on behalf of the subaltern, there dispensing an array of pejoratives more fit for the Ron Paul Survival Report than a principled social reformer.

Riis’ ethnic prejudices are relatively inconsequential in *How the Other Half Lives*. They do not have great impact on his suggestions for the improvement of the slums, save for his fascistic argument for the control of Chinese men, who are characterized as inveterate opium dealers, pimps and predators upon white women (“The severest official scrutiny, the harshest repressive measures are justifiable in Chinatown” [Riis 85]). However, the totality of these prejudices suggests the fixed ideology that deeply informs Riis’ influential conclusions. Riis, Dail Murray writes in her Introduction to the 2004 edition of *How the Other Half Lives*, “did not believe in dismantling the apparatus of capitalism or agitating for a more equitable division of wealth... he was opposed to direct charity for the poor, believing it would merely encourage a perpetuation of

the ingrained habits which the poor had acquired from their degrading environment” (Murray xiii). Instead of reformation of a federal tax system that at the time levied no corporate or income taxes, Riis believed in personal charity, Christian ministry to the poor to instill religious morality, and cooperative negotiation with entrenched capitalist interests to eliminate “the brutalizing forces that . . . misshaped the human character” (xiv). Murray notes that Riis’ complex of prescriptive notions was in line with other urban social reformers of the progressive movement. A product equally of the prevailing ethnocentrism and progressivism of his times, as well as the Christian teachings that formed the base of his education, Riis’ philosophy and his specific solutions to inner-city poverty are ultimately housed within a set of simultaneously mobilizing and confining ideologies.

The Christianity that Riis adopts has affinity with the values of the Social Gospel that not only animated Progressives in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century America, but that are evident in Tolstoy’s *Confessions*, the Civil Rights Movement, particularly the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and at the edges of the current progressive movement, including Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone education initiative. Just as impacting, however, is Riis’ investment in capitalism as an unqualified social good to be variously ameliorated, appeased, assimilated to and negotiated with. That Riis did not support direct income taxation is indicative of his ideologically bound thinking. Economists long before Riis’ time had supported not only income taxation but progressive income taxation. One example of this is Adam Smith, whose *Wealth of Nations* recommends progressive taxation as a logical aspect of the capitalist process that it foundationally articulates. “The subjects of every state,” Smith writes, “ought to contribute towards the support of the government, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their

respective abilities; that is, in proportion to the revenue which they respectively enjoy under the protection of the state" (Smith Chapter V, Book II).

Not only Smith, but thinkers that were contemporary with Riis exhibited far less conservatism in their economic leanings. No less than the uncle to billionaire Howard Hughes, the scholar Rupert Hughes writes "Literature is the greatest of all democratizing forces. The liberation of man from despotries and serfdom has found its most tireless and skillful architect in literature... The freedom of man is not yet consummate. Nor will it be till the boundary-lines between the castes of to-day, social if not electoral, are blended into indistinguishable gradation of congeniality and luck in accumulating money" (Hughes 329)<sup>26</sup>. Here Hughes constructs the enterprise of literature as an inherently "democratizing" force that has as its final goal the liberation of man from political and economic domination. Moreover, Hughes sees this liberation as co-extensive with the drawing down of social divisions and economic inequality.

In Riis' own lifetime the income tax was implemented in the United States, via the ratification of the sixteenth amendment in 1913. And since then progressive tax systems have been employed in America and in every other First World nation. Today, the majority of American economists support differential taxation based on income (Klein and Stern 331-342). The result of taxation, especially progressive taxes, is a redistribution of wealth back to the state and federal government and our public sector. It is difficult to imagine Jacob Riis Park in New York City, "envisioned... as a Jones Beach for poor immigrants, a destination accessible by public transportation" having

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<sup>26</sup> Hughes, Rupert. "The Justification of Slum Stories" (1895). *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (A Story of New York)*. Ed. Kevin J. Hayes. Boston and New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's. 1999. Print.



been built, let alone accessed without public monies partly derived from progressive taxation (National Parks of New York Harbor Conservancy).

More largely, whole aspects of America as we know it are dependent on wealth redistribution and the maintenance of a welfare state, one of the chief factors in which is progressive taxation.

“Historically, the national welfare state that emerged after World War II included social insurance programs (which included the precursor to AFDC), but also the massive federal housing program; labor law and its attendant collective bargaining apparatus; highway construction; urban renewal programs; the War on Poverty and other antipoverty efforts; and a variety of additional programs aimed at urban labor, housing and property markets... It would be hard to imagine postwar metropolitanization proceeding as it did without the national welfare state” (Self 329).

Riis’ dismissal of wealth redistribution is clearly not an indication that he was a man of his times because many people both of his time and before his time advocated progressive taxing, wealth redistribution and class equality. Rather, it is an issue of ideology and a feature familiar to the capitalist elements that have long constituted a substantial part of the base of the progressive movement. Riis himself writes toward the end of *How the Other Half Lives* that “The business of housing the poor, if it is to amount to anything, must be business... Call it poetic justice, or divine justice, or anything else, it is a hard fact not to be gotten over” (Riis 235), an acknowledgment not without some truth yet problematic in unfettered practice because it accepts that the profit-motive, that by its very nature is exclusive of those who cannot directly render profits to the businessperson, must govern the poorest sectors of every city.

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Geoffrey Canada's *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.*, published over a century after Riis' seminal work, is an example not only of modern polemic against urban ills but of the tenacity of capitalism and status quo politics within the progressive bulwark. Canada's rhetorical method, I think, repeats Riis in some interesting ways. Similar to Riis, Canada adopts a crisis-charged vocabulary to assert the necessity of humanitarian aid in New York's slums. "There is a war raging in our inner cities across this country, and our children are the main combatants," the educator, activist and mentor writes (143). Canada regularly refers to the problem of youth violence as a "war" and asserts that inner-city black and brown youths, like child soldiers enlisted into a rebel militia, exhibit a series of learned violent behaviors much as men at war will. Moreover, Canada establishes youth violence as inter-generational in impoverished ghettos, marking the phenomenon back to his childhood, which is described as one incident of bodily harm or threat after another. "Some may think that this violence is new," he writes, "but it's not. Violence has always been around, usually concentrated amongst the poor." The difference in the New York of the 1990s, Canada explains, is not so much ghetto mentality but that "we never had so many guns in our inner cities. The nature of the violent act has changed from the fist, stick, and knife to the gun" (Canada 8).

Just as Riis presents specific instances of New York's horrors, Canada references a long list of first-hand violent experiences to vivify the extent of the crisis of youth violence. "A crucial part of the problem," he writes, "is that there are so few natural checks on killing today... for those of you who think killing is somehow impossible to imagine, just look around the world. Wars abound—intentional starvation, the killing of civilians, women, and children—and these atrocities are sometimes committed by farmers, laborers and other ordinary people. Even in this

country the military can take an eighteen-year-old boy and turn him into a killer in a matter of months” (40).

In *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* there is the scene where his teenage friend Michael pulls a knife on a grown man who has stolen his basketball and the minor theft almost escalates into a deadly battle. There is the time a big fat man comes onto his South Bronx block and threatens one of the boys, who commences to beat the fat man half dead. Later the man comes back with a gun and is only dissuaded from using it when the boys advance on him as one, looking down the barrel of his gun and daring him to shoot. There are the many stories of youths in his charge who are killed by gunfire, almost always over drug turf, after Canada has returned to the streets of New York as a mentor and educator. All these scenes re-enforce the crisis-charged reality that Canada at first seeks to expose, then to solve. Leah Hager Cohen in a *New York Times* article on *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* observes that the book “feels less strictly literary than any [memoir, scholarly report, or persuasive argument]; at times Mr. Canada's book seems less like a book than a bell, or a beacon” (Hager Cohen 1). Clearly taken with the narrative and rhetoric that Canada employs, Hager Cohen describes the effect of the text as a calling, presumably to the duty to address the ills of which Canada writes. The financial and media backing that Canada's initiatives have received during the past decade and a half since the book's publication speaks to the fact that Hager Cohen is not alone, a lot of people have been similarly compelled<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, Canada's book is doubly effective both at drawing concern over the human carnage it cites and inciting action to solve the problem of youth violence.

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<sup>27</sup> The most comprehensive source for information on the work of Canada and his colleagues can be found in Paul Tough's *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*

It is Canada's solutions that most mimic Riis' ideology. Like Riis, Canada is a reformer, not a revolutionary. The Harlem Children's Zone aims to change the Harlem slums into a bastion of middle and upper-class American values in education, health and wellness, which is necessarily not a revolution but a reform. One counter-intuitive example of this reformism is the instruction in martial arts that Canada personally provides the youths at the Harlem Children's Zone: This seems at first glance so radically alternative to the regular curriculum a child would receive in K-12 public school as to be revolutionary. However, teaching martial arts to children as a means to instill focus, patience, anatomical awareness and health in fact enfolds itself within the larger cultural norm that has taken root in America's major urban environments: The mainstream adoption of practices such as yoga and mixed martial arts are especially evident here in California. The Harlem Children's Zone, meanwhile, has become remarkably effective, as has Canada's other major project, the Beacon Schools, first established under Mayor Dinkins in 1991.

Both the Children's Zone and Beacon Schools function on the same basic logic: That they are extra-academic sites that acknowledge that "comprehensive services for massive numbers of children *and* their families" are needed. "We have realized," Canada writes, "that... you cannot save families without rebuilding communities" (132). In fact, one might think of the Children's Zone in Harlem as a Beacon School site in microcosm, the most concentrated and therefore most measurable example of Canada's vision for the nurture and education of distressed children.

While perhaps revolutionary within the public school framework that Canada's kids come from, nothing that Canada's Children's Zone or Beacon Schools is doing would be unusual in the rearing of a child in the Berkeley, California hills or in a well-heeled suburb in Connecticut. It is simply the application of 'round-the-clock care and focused, efficient, creative health and

education plans in New York's poorest slums that is unique. Perhaps the clearest symbol of the difference between revolution and reform is simply that the Beacon School sites are, in the main, established on public school sites after school hours, thus literally re-purposing public school space that New York taxpayers have already paid for and thus made public land.

Canada is a Bowdoin College-trained community activist and reveres if not the traditional educational system a variation upon it that applies the more rarefied elements of that system to the under-privileged. The project of the Harlem Children's Zone is to help mold productive citizens within the society that exists, not to directly change the society. In this way, Canada is a reformer in the same vein as Riis, who sought to replace the tenements and tenement culture with the residential plan and value-set of the American middle and upper-classes. Riis' advocacy for park-building and beautification across New York City neatly foreshadows Canada's Beacon Schools as both are sites "designed to handle the large numbers of people that must be involved in order to rebuild communities" (132).

Canada recognizes the Beacon Schools as "good first steps" but goes on to state that "I felt that we needed to go further" because "[e]ven more violent codes of conduct still ruled the streets in our neighborhood, and young people were still at a very high risk of being killed for little or no reason" (143). A colleague is a coordinator for the national Black Community Crusade for Children and wishes to one day go to the United Nations "as an ambassador for children" (143). This is the basic connective logic that spurs Canada and his colleague Rasuli to decide that "that's exactly what young people need to know, how the experts make peace" (143).

Yet, to quote Canada himself, “[J]ust look around the world. Wars abound—intentional starvation, the killing of civilians, women, and children...” (40). Where international diplomacy has actually ended violence in recent decades, in parts of Eastern Europe and in Northern Ireland, it is the decided exception to the rule. The leading diplomatic minds that are forever brokering peace between warring nations have achieved only intermittent conflict-resolution in the Middle East, in West and East and Central Africa, and in Central Asia.

It is impossible, at this moment in history, to fully perceive whether Canada’s ideology is as fitful in its progressivism as was Riis’. One observation that can be made is that just as Riis’ campaign to tear down the tenements stirred upper-class sympathy for the plight of the immigrant poor in New York City, thus helping to create the sociopolitical environment in which income taxation could be enacted, public works such as park building could go forward, and progressivism in general was allowed to ameliorate the conditions of the slum without actually eliminating the slums themselves, the inner-city America that Canada’s first work inveighs against has already changed tremendously. While areas of poverty are, in fact, more numerous now—in 2012-- and extensive than they were in the 1990s (when *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* was published), violent behavior among all groups of people is dramatically lower. This is especially true in New York City. Numbers of murders in New York City peaked in the early 1990s, precisely the time period in which Canada finds himself composing *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.*: 2,605 murders in 1990, 2,571 in 1991, 2,397 in 1992 and 2,420 in 1993. By 1998 that number had dropped below 1,000 murders and by 2010 the annual number had stabilized over a five-year period (2006-2010) between 781 in 2009 and 921 in 2006. Numbers of violent crimes peaked at the beginning of the 90s as well, reaching a high of 212,458 in 1990, and then began their precipitous fall during Mayor Dinkins’ term in office. In 2009 the violent crime number was almost two-thirds lower

than what it had been in 1990, at 75,110 infractions reported<sup>28</sup>. The reasons for this are numerous and have been analyzed in much greater detail in other spaces. I would only observe that, contrary to Police Chief's Bratton's assertion that controlling behavior<sup>29</sup> via the implementation of James Q. Wilson's "broken-windows" theory of policing is the sole, or at least prime-dominant reason for crime decrease, the fact that violent crime rates began their steep decline prior to Bratton and Mayor Giuliani's terms in office and prior to the expansion of Bratton's policing methods from the subways to the city as a whole suggests that other factors, too, played a major role in New York City's increasing safety<sup>30</sup>. Some of these reasons, widely speculated upon, include the natural reduction and stabilization of the crack-cocaine market, more racially integrated police forces, gentrifying the poor out of New York City and its boroughs, and the aging of the city's population. Perhaps, then, education reforms such as those implemented by Canada within Harlem and in other urban areas around America should receive some of the properly dispersed credit as well.

The other matter, which goes unacknowledged by Bratton and others who promote the policing methods used to quantitatively control and reduce crime in New York and Los Angeles, is that it is obvious enough that behavior control in the absence of improved education, job opportunities, living conditions and the like can reduce crime and publicly aberrant behavior to virtually absolute zero. Just think about North Korea, or the nation formerly known as Burma. The poor can be controlled by any government willing to use enough force. The challenge is to maintain both a safe society and an open society, and an open society can only be maintained, or, in the

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<sup>28</sup> New York Crime Rates 1960-2010. New York Law Enforcement Agency Uniform Crime Reports 1980 to 2005. <http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/nycrime.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Bratton, William. Interviewed by Neil Conan. "Falling Crime Rates Challenge Long-Held Beliefs". National Public Radio. Washington, D.C. Jan. 3 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Bratton had been NYC Transit Chief but became NYPD Commissioner in 1994, a year after Giuliani's election.

case of America's worst ghettos, fostered where there is a healthy and learned population. Within the logic of progressive reformism, which has as its goal the maintenance and extension of American prosperity, Canada's Harlem Children's Zone and Beacon Schools are more necessary than innovative policing methods. The work of Jacob Riis and other reformers of that era were so effective because they focused primarily on the improvement of free society, not the expansion of the punitive realm. This helps to explain the advancements made by the descendants of impoverished European immigrants, those populations now fully incorporated into America's privileged strata, even after the rejection of policing methods that would suppress alcoholism and promiscuity.

Canada and Riis are, without question, successful social reformers. Both have helped to improve the living conditions of the most deprived New Yorkers. That their reforms are limited by time-bound ideologies is evident as well. To return to the formative metaphor of this piece, both have authored shape-shifting texts that at once highlight every aspect of their social mission and also resemble one another in telling ways. Considering the two texts in tandem indicates just how formally elastic is that category of Urban Literature, its potential for social benefit and ability to transcend racial constructs. Though the contrasts between texts such as *How the Other Half Lives* and *Fist. Stick. Knife. Gun.* and the street lit novels referenced in prior sections of this analysis are obvious, the fact that these texts share a certain subject matter and some similar concerns when it comes to the exposure of poverty and city blight is significant. Every genre is in a process of maturation, expansion or contraction and this process is not solely the creation of writers writing different kinds of books. Critics, too, aid in this process by widening the lines of sight and the field of consideration. To class Riis and Canada within Urban Literature is not only analytically accurate but important in that it suggests how widely influential and how diverse in form popular



literature about urban spaces is. Furthermore, the reforms undertaken under varying ideological banners by numerous zealous reformers, realpolitik practitioners and profit-minded businesspeople, particularly the rapid gentrification of our major urban cores, have changed the fundamental subject of all urban literature and street lit: The inner-city is a different and in some ways more complex place than ever before. It is certainly different than the archetypal inner-city of 1950, when the cities absorbed millions of black migrants, or 1970, by which time the full impact of red-lining, white flight, de-industrialization and urban renewal bore down on impoverished urban lives, or 1990, when Harlem and many other black ghettos reached their violent nadir. The material changes in America's major cities suggest a response in the literature about cities. Both the fictive and polemical literature about these places will be compelled to new approaches, new forms and novel conclusions.

## Black History

In the break, he passes. When I'm not expecting it. Doesn't matter he's been ill for years, diabetes blasting out walls and tearing out floors in his body. I wanted him with me so I stopped thinking about all his illnesses and about the inevitability of his leaving and home-going. But nothing but the mind yields to want. We found him on his bed in his home lain in what was obviously the sleep from which he'd not waked. He was smiling. There were no signs of distress. The windows were all closed and the late summer September heat enveloped the house, hellishly hot. He lay on the bed without sign of distress, only a smile fixed upon his lips like he was somehow still sleeping. He was wearing his green, blue and yellow AFL-CIO shirt and a pair of gray shorts. The shirt was not creased or tousled; it was feather-soft, especially where his stomach rounded and rose, as if its fabric were somehow self-resigned to his perpetual use. A notebook full of his drafts and brainstorming for upcoming essays sat on the tilting nightstand leveling the lamp that he must have turned off right before he fell asleep. The painting that he had loved so much, a simple portrait of a man carrying his child over his shoulder like a delicate burden, the boy's hand sheathed by a baseball glove, the dark skin of son and father all the more apparent for the white shirts that each wore, perched above the bed, perched above his still body.

He and I had talked about a critical work launched from an analysis of Percival Everett's *A History of the African-American People [Proposed]* by Strom Thurmond. There was critical potential not only in the satirical elements of this Akashic Urban Surreal series work, but in its commentary on the writer-editor-publisher nexus out of which books essentially spring. Our pattern had become that I would write something, have him read it after I'd submitted it for publication or presentation at a conference. In this case, I'd been contacted by Professor Derek

Maus at SUNY Potsdam: Professor Maus is doing an anthology on black satire and was mistakenly directed toward me as someone knowledgeable in black black humor<sup>31</sup>. I don't know much about actual satire, but I had a pretty good grasp of what *A History* was really about.

#### Simon, Schuster, Satire:

Ostensibly the tale of how the late South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond attempts to join the company of esteemed dignitaries Kim, Khloe and Courtney Kardashian (*Dollhouse*), Mike “The Situation” Sorrentino (*Here's the Situation: A Guide to Creeping on Chicks, Avoiding Grenades...*) and Sarah Palin (*Going Rogue: An American Life*), *A History of the African American People [Proposed]* by Strom Thurmond by University of Southern California Professors Percival Everett and James Kincaid is too intelligent a text to primarily target so easy a site of ridicule as the segregationist senatorial celebrity. As objects of satire go, an aged, half-witted Thurmond is not only too easy a target but also too unrewarding. Everett and Kincaid can remind readers that the real Thurmond was a race-baiting opportunist and probably a real-live racist as well. They can muse at the possibility that their fictive Thurmond has, in his old age, forgotten how to read, write and keep his lechery confined to the slave quarters. Instead, Everett and Kincaid's satire actually focuses itself upon the mainstream publishing industry, in particular a fictional Simon & Schuster, its lust for trash profits, writers' relationship to this publishing industry hegemon and the mediation of this relationship by the authors' race...

“Where's Potsdam?” my dad asked me; less interested, apparently, in my opening paragraph than in geography.

“I don't know,” I told him. “I didn't think about that. I guess it's a SUNY.”

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<sup>31</sup> “black black humor” simply refers to African-American satire and gallows humor. It also suggests the double-meaning of the chapter title, “Black History.”

“It’s probably cold as hell there, up around Canada or something. Maybe you should create a college on the edge of America and call it by some old world name. What’d you tell this Maus guy?”

"I asked him when the deadline was. Not the deadline he quoted everyone else at, *the real* deadline."

"You know, it's funny," he said. "I should've done this PHD thing after all. People ask you to send them work even though they don't know you from Adam. And you don't even have your PHD yet."

In the mornings I wondered about it, too: Maybe we were all publishing in a fantasy land released from the profit necessity that apparently ruled the world. Or maybe it was more complicated than that. By nightfall, typically, I was done analyzing the system. I just wanted our voices speaking in the world. I wanted his voice in the world. If the best way to make that happen was inside a niche within a university outside the market, so be it.

I never got to share with him the entirety of this essay. I've been working on it in my obsessive way, forgetting to eat and sleep, driving myself closer to the grave. Now that it's complete, I don't even know that he'd be impressed by it. Probably not. My ideas never convinced him much. He'd probably ask why the reversal from writing about street lit to writing about a novel categorized by its publisher as part of an "Urban Surreal" series. I would point to the larger mission of my dissertation, which is not simply an analysis of street lit but of the relationship between Black American writers and the publishing industry. Street lit is simply a commercially

dominant force in the current market. That reality combined with the lack of critical attention paid the sub-genre is the occasion for my extended analysis of some of its representative texts. In fact, I believe the current literary moment demands more than the passing note on this phenomenon that most scholarship on contemporary African-American literature has afforded it. Beyond this crucial intervention, the larger project that my dissertation undertakes is this relationship central to the production of African-American literature. My dad has talked about the traditionally appellate position of the black writer, beginning with Wheatley and extending all the way into the present day, with only a few special exceptions.<sup>32</sup> My focus on contemporary texts largely follows from this original diagnosis, for what interests me is both the effects on literary content and the market life of these subordinated and marginalized works, and the ways in which black writers have sought to escape this structural artistic and economic problem. My essay, in looking to Everett and Kincaid's satire on writers, agents, editors and publishers, seeks to detail this marginalization through reference to this embellished example. Moreover, the essay moves beyond Everett and Kincaid and explores other figures in the publishing apparatus, primarily booksellers, to figure out what might be a "way out" of the appellate pose for those writers who possess neither an elite position or the sponsorship of the privileged. My focus shifts from the writer to those who market their books because I am seeking a holistic analysis of, first, why books by and about black people occupy such a marginal position within the market, and, second, what strategies have overcome that marginality. Much of that knowledge and work lies outside the writer's experience and is better located at the points of distribution and sale. In addition, the

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<sup>32</sup> John K. Young notes that James Wheldon Johnson negotiated with the Knopfs "on the same plane as white writers" (Young 8). In a similar vein, Toni Morrison's experience as an editor with Random House prior to her career as a noted author afforded her a greater knowledge of the industry and more leverage within it than any acclaimed black writer of the post-WWII period whom I am aware of.

careers of writers like Omar Tyree, E. Lynn Harris and others who have combined the functions of publisher and writer through the work of successful self-publishing also provide valuable points of reference in this critical endeavor. Putting it like *that*, I think my line of reasoning might actually have persuaded him about the future of this current chapter.

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### Power and Marginality in Everett and Kincaid's Satire

Sven Birkerts, writing in the *New York Times*, holds that “*A History of the African-American People [Proposed] by Strom Thurmond*, written by Everett and James Kincaid, is billed as a novel, but a moment's inspection is all you need to see that it is really a full-out spoof. But of what?” Birkerts ultimately decides that there is no there, there<sup>33</sup>; rather, that the book is all “pokes, gibes... and strange sparking whimsy but with no living body to go with it” (Birkerts 1). He is wrong. As is the case with many of the texts that I have undertaken to analyze, Everett and Kincaid's satire has been judged on criteria alien to its intent and thus misjudged as insignificant work and unworthy of critical attention. Where Birkerts and other reviewers of *A History* are frustrated in their search for some familiar satire on American race relations, they totally miss the core concern of the text—the publishing industry and its relationship to the writers within it.

In *A History* Everett and Kincaid are drawn from their tenured teaching positions at the University of Southern California by the enormous sum of \$700 a-piece to ghostwrite a Black American history book for Senator Thurmond and/or the psychotic surrogate Barton Wilkes on the stated basis that “the history of the African American People has been, to a great extent,

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<sup>33</sup> This is a reference to the “THERE” sign in Oakland, California, which mocks Gertrude Stein's infamous statement about the city (Stein's hometown)—“There's no there, there.”

coextensive with the Senator's own" (Everett and Kincaid 18). The negotiation process between Wilkes and Simon & Schuster (S&S) officials by which the writers are commissioned to do the job is a brutal set-piece. For starters, neither Everett nor Kincaid is allowed to negotiate on their own behalf. Rather, the powerless writers are negotiated for by the advisor/ assistant Wilkes and by Martin Snell, the Senior Editor at S&S, as if they were antique jewelry, impounded cars, or people on an auction block.

The negotiation drives home the marginality and the pliability of the writer within the publishing industry nexus. The "Grant of Rights" that Wilkes and Snell agree to on behalf of the authors states, in part, "Author, on behalf of himself and his heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns, exclusively grants, assigns and otherwise transfers to the Publisher and its licensees, successors and assigns, all right, title and interest in and to the Work, throughout the world, in perpetuity..." (30). The irony that the contractual exploitation of the authors begins with a completely fraudulent gesture to their autonomy ("Author, on behalf of himself...") is hard to miss.

The "Copyright" agreement similarly cements the authors' inferiority to the political and corporate representatives (Wilkes and Snell, respectively) that commit legal theft upon their work and resultant profits: "Nothing contained in this Section shall be construed as limiting, modifying or otherwise affecting any of the rights granted to Publisher under this agreement" (31). In other words, if some creative, scheming author or lawyer might find a loophole within this contract by which the Publisher's control over the work of the author might be limited or modified, the contract's addendums and footnotes will see to it that such loopholes are negated in the corporate womb.

The "Permissions, Index and Other Materials" section of the contract dictates that the Publisher can at any time demand, set an ultimatum for and will promptly receive from the author "art, illustrations, photographs, charts, maps, drawings... index, bibliography, table of contents, foreword, introduction, preface... 'Frontmatter' and 'Backmatter' "at the author's "sole expense" (31-32). Indentured servitude is not too strong a term for the disempowered writer-position that this contract sets out. The section of the contract entitled "Revision and Correction" states that "If Publisher, in its sole discretion, deems the Manuscript... or any other materials delivered by Author to be unacceptable in form and substance [the author must]... revise and correct materials to the satisfaction of Publisher" (32). Note that the Publisher is referred to by the neutral, impersonal descriptor "its", thus immunizing both Snell and Wilkes, as well as any other single individual from personal responsibility for this travesty of fair trade. If the author fails to deliver not only the original manuscript but subsequent revisions and supplementary materials punctually, according to the Publisher's ultimatum, the "Termination for Non-Delivery" section of the contract dictates that "Author shall... immediately repay Publisher any sums previously paid to Author..." (33). Thus, the entire financial risk of the publishing process is borne by the author, whereas the profits will be the possession of the Publisher. In this same vein, the "Author's Indemnity of Publisher" is written so as to "defend and hold harmless Publisher, its subsidiaries and affiliates, and their respective shareholders, officers, directors, employees, partners, associates, affiliates, joint ventures, agents, representatives, friends, family members and acquaintances from any and all claims, debts, demands..." (33). Thus, the entirety of the corporate enterprise is brought to bear essentially *against* the author and abetted in its attack upon the author by the author's consent-- "Publisher, its subsidiaries and affiliates, and their respective shareholders, officers, directors, employees, partners, associates, affiliates, joint ventures, agents,



representatives...", all institutions and persons aligning themselves with a rapacious corporate mission will be released from the risks of competitive capitalism and held safe in an environment of corporate oligopoly and monopoly and corporate immunity from concessions to the rights of independently contracted labor. The "Right to Withdraw" section of the contract seals the publishing company off from any and all risk by simply concluding that "Publisher shall have the right to withdraw its offer of Agreement at any time prior to or after the delivery of the Manuscript" (34). In other words, there is no point at which the author can withdraw him or herself, his or her efforts, or expenses from the enterprise, whereas the publishing company will at all times be afforded all those rights.

It is no accident that the fictive S&S achieves this absurd apotheosis of exploitation in negotiation with a base political functionary, thus speaking to the collusion of political and corporate entities. That the "Author's Indemnity of Publisher" includes "friends, family members and acquaintances" adds nepotism and cronyism to the laundry-list of absurdities and injustices instantiated by the contractual complex arrived at by the literary elite and a crude political gopher. Andre Schiffrin, who for thirty years served as Managing Director at Pantheon, until leaving in controversy when multibillionaire media buyer S.I. Newhouse and his functionary, the "illiterate businessman" Arthur Vitale, deemed Pantheon insufficiently profitable and set about dismantling it, pinpoints this collusion in the real world of publishing and media: "We cannot speak of open competition or a free market in American publishing today. We are faced with a classic situation of oligopoly, approaching monopoly. The conglomerates' links, through common ownership, to other media give them incredible advantages in press, television, and newspaper coverage... conglomerates' control of key media is so powerful that governments have been afraid to invoke the provisions of antitrust legislation" (Schiffrin, 88; 147). Random House, Pantheon's parent company, as well as

all the other major publishers, have each colluded (the polite economic term would be "merger," of course) with vast multi-media conglomerates that simply over-dominate the publication and distribution of literature, totally subordinating the traditional sites of influence in the publishing process.

Jerome McGann argues in the *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* that "'final authority' for literary works rests neither with the author nor with his affiliated institution; it resides in the actual structure of the agreements which these two cooperating authorities reach in specific cases" (McGann 54). Since the publication of McGann's groundbreaking theoretical approach, increased media monopolization has rendered editorial theory's central tenet (that final authority over literary works "resides in the actual structure of the agreements...") obvious. Schiffrin's exposure of the effect of media monopolization on publishing in *The Business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took Over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read* is perhaps the most straightforward treatise on the issue. If we return to Everett and Kincaid's work for a moment, in the case of the fictional contract authored for the authors by S&S and Wilkes, the "actual structure of the agreements" is altogether imbalanced, oppressive and punitive. The same holds true within the actual publishing industry, where the multi-media conglomerates sit on the low end of the seesaw, tipping authors, their agents and small press imprints in the direction of maximum profit, ejecting them when they deem them insufficiently lucrative. No theory is needed to understand what we can see happening before us; however, editorial theory can be complicated in new and demanding ways to catch and explain many of the industry's fractal phenomena.

John K. Young is involved in precisely this work. In *Black Writers, White Publishers*, Young explains the particularly dire implications of all this for the final authority over the literary texts written by African-American authors: Riffing off McGann's formulation, Young reminds us that "these textual authorities [conglomerates, large publishers, small press imprints, editors, agents and authors] are often not 'cooperating' " (Young 25). Even long before the conglomerate buy-ups and takeovers, African-American authors often had their social marginality leveraged against them and their work. One need only recall David Walker's life and death battle to publish and distribute his work, Richard Wright's eventual shelving of half his life's story, and Chester Himes' initial inability to publish many of his novels in America, or even in Europe without being completely exploited and coerced out of his profits<sup>34</sup>, for evidence of this non-cooperation. Perhaps, as is the case in *A History*, the issue of textual authority would play out the same for Everett, who is black, and Kincaid, who is white, in the present day. Now, both are simply subject to conglomerate domination. However, extrapolated to any prior era in American letters, race, as much or more than corporate domination, would likely be the dictating force. Everett would likely cede more authority over his creation and the profits related to its sale than would Kincaid. Race, as deeply as economics, has mediated authorial control over the editing and marketing of American literature for two centuries.

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Obviously, *A History of the African-American People by Strom Thurmond* lampoons actual author-publisher contracts. It makes into figures of fun everyone involved in the press. Told without comedy, it would be truly depressing. When I interviewed him as part of this study, founder and editor of *Connotation Press: An On-Line Artifact* Ken Robidoux used the word

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<sup>34</sup> Himes, Chester and John A. Williams. *Dear Chester, Dear John: Letters Between Chester Himes and John A. Williams*. Editors John A. and Lori Williams. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press. 2008. Print. (See page 28).

"powerless" to describe the writers' position and condition. "We're powerless," he said with seeming nonchalance. We were sitting outside a bowling alley in some part of Riverside, California that I never knew existed until Ken set the interview there. Listening back over the tape now, I can distinctly hear balls striking pins and others guttering out, banging densely into the metal tunnels. The setting was nothing if not nonchalant. It was also getting cold, the desert temperature felled like a shot bird by the encroaching nightfall. But I drove at the point anyway, questioning Ken more closely on his word choice. Are we writers really powerless? I wanted to know. Certainly, Everett and Kincaid's satire suggests so. Ken went on to clarify his assertion, stating that "We do have power. We can start a democratic revolution in a former Soviet bloc country. Writers do all kinds of amazing things... But when a writer writes a script in Hollywood and sells it, the director can do whatever he wants with it, change it however he wants. That's the reality"<sup>35</sup>.

Indeed, in Hollywood the writer is especially disempowered due to the peculiar nature of the movie-making process and business. Ken is in that world. I am not. Hollywood is not my topic. Despite our differences, however, our conversation was almost wholly predicated upon the general understanding that the writer is completely marginalized in the mainstream publishing industry. This, Ken remarked, was the basic reason why he established *Connotation* in the first place: "Because writers are producing amazing work and they're unknown. Even when you know the work, you don't know the writer. *Connotation* was established to fill that gap."

As noted already, if this generic "writer" is completely marginal, the generic "black writer" is even more so. Young points out that McGann, in founding editorial theory, focuses on writers

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<sup>35</sup> Robidoux, Ken. Personal interview. Riverside, CA. Jan. 2012.

like Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats and D.G. Rossetti, "authors who maintained an extraordinary degree of control over their works' production, thus leaving little conceptual space for writers like Wright, Larsen, Reed, and, indeed, almost every racially marginalized author whose relationship to textual production is characterized by a lack of control, both at the material and broader social levels" (Young 29). Indeed, an editorial theory founded around the experiences of writers racially marginal in the American context, Percival Everett among them, would take the absurd commitments outlined in the author's contract in *A History* as more than a one-note joke, and would rather understand it as hyper-realized representation of the real conditions of authorship in an environment that continually disputes the author's agency over his or her work.

McGann and the editorial theorists that have followed him caution against unexamined notions of authorial agency and ownership. N. Katherine Hayles, for instance, argues that "A more accurate perception" of literature production "would focus on the editorial process of choice, which is always contextual and driven by 'certain interests,' although these reside not exclusively in the text but in the conjunction of the text, editorial process, and cultural context... There is no Platonic reality of texts" (Hayles 97). For Hayles and for editorial theory in general, it is precisely this process by which the text is lifted from its originary state (which we still generally imagine as its "real" state, a kind of idealized, Platonic form, the product of a sole authorial consciousness) and revised severally by 'certain interests' that must be understood in order to confront the text at its multiple "real" levels. This is, to my mind, a valid critical approach that helps to shed particular light on African-American literature's history and current condition because these texts tend to be so deeply mediated by their engagement with the publishing industry's various editorial levels. The problem, as Young notes, with editorial theory as it relates to texts written by people of color is the theory's lack of engagement with race as a mediating factor. Editorial theory, in the

absence of this consideration, tends to understand the editorial process as more similar in its effects upon individual authors than it is, for writers such as Yeats, Pound, etc. have exercised far more agency over their texts than their black counterparts have. If anything, black authors and the critics who engage them must be *more sensitive* to the lack of authorial agency and the deeply complex process of textual management and revision than are their white counterparts. Though perhaps lacking an academic vocabulary for these issues, Phillis Wheatley, David Walker, Nella Larsen and Chester Himes could not help but be highly conscious of the contextual "process of editorial choice" that Hayles cites and would know from experience of intervention by the law (Wheatley taken to court to verify her status as author), by political and vigilante forces (Walker's text banned, bounties placed upon his head), and by variously intentioned editors that these texts were hardly theirs alone. Their authorship and textual control existed within a matrix of diffused ownership, wherein they were, literally, no more than minority owners.

In the wake of conglomerate-takeover, where writers of all races and ethnic backgrounds are increasingly marginalized by expanding corporate power, it is crucial to understand how historically disempowered writers and book-sellers have dealt and continue to deal with the market.

Everett and Kincaid's story contemporizes and satirizes the reduction of black authorial agency (represented through Everett's marginality in the contract negotiation) and authorial agency in general (represented through Kincaid's marginality in the contract negotiation). Andre Schiffrin's *The Business of Books* exposes just how complex, monopolistic and authoritarian the mainstream book-selling business has become. In firmly delineating levels of power, Schiffrin's work shows that predatory capitalism is at work within the publishing and media apparatus and that it has cast

previously marginal figures (say, an entrepreneur who seeks to sell novels by writers of color or avant-garde titles, or the writers themselves) even further out.

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For me, agency over this dissertation consists of no more than saying what I can, writing what I can about the person closest to my heart. Probably, no one will ever read this. I don't mind that at all. In fact, there's a certain kind of counter-intuitive freedom in such invisibility and anonymity. The author may not have control over his or her text, but control is only one form that freedom takes. Real ownership entails responsibility, whereas the irresponsibility that exists when genuine ownership is denied results in a certain unaccountability and irresponsibility to the system within which one is functioning. The speech that is possible in this divested space is itself quite special.

My father is beyond the exertions of institutional power now, forever outside all machinations and every economic trend and condition. Inviolable outside it all after the pain and pressure of sixty-two years finally exploded in his head, occluded artery, constricting, constricted, bursting vessels, blood-brained, windows never opened, hot as a sun spot, cardio infarction, silent bed, motionless man, mourning mother, speechless son.

I have felt no press, no need or want to write about his passing. I was just getting around to the point where I could write about his initial illness some ten years ago and the careening crises of his health since then. I was not prepared for him to die. It was not expected. It was too sudden. And now I'm left with only this stumbling broken stuttering clumsy grief. I've left the country, and now returned to an American desert as cold and lifeless as the hollow of an urn. I've plunged myself into a love and, not paradoxically, a kind of monasticism around work and hard silent relentless thought tunnels that shoot up and down into the illimitable blackness that is my

freedom and fate. Death appears not like an undiscovered country but a familiar place that I can travel to and return from in the shadow of a moment. It is there, in that space, where I see him and talk to him and where he tells me if I am right or wrong. This space which, for lack of a better word, I still call death is not a vacuum but rather a stage in a continuum that wraps around from omega back into alpha and from ending back into re-beginning. I see our origins, his and mine, there.

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#### Toward a Theory of Black Enterprise

My friend Faron Roberts was the person I saw (the first friend, I mean, that I saw) upon exiting the plane the morning after my father died. I got the call the night before and survived into morning and caught a 5am flight out. Faron works at the airport. That's why I saw him when I got off the plane. I think he could tell that it was a different kind of visit this time.

I first met Faron at his *Phenix Bookstore* in downtown San Bernardino when I was seventeen years old. The bookstore, windows dimly lit but with a distinctive sign that read *Phenix* in large gold-lit, italicized letters, was next to a rowdy barbershop that I frequented for every haircut I had between the time that my next door neighbor and amateur barber was shot at point-blank range through the back of his head and his hands became too shaky to handle a razor across heads and throats and the day I moved away to go to college.

You could almost miss the bookshop if you weren't paying attention. But it was Faron's bookstore that brought Toni Morrison to read at the campus of Cal State San Bernardino. It was Faron who introduced me to Omar Tyree and who told me about the difficulty of working with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on book tour. It was Faron who hipped me to the local self-published street



lit titles that the people of San Bernardino would leave with him, hoping that he'd place their poorly edited, cheaply bound trife-life stories on his shelves. He always did, explaining to me that the literature, no matter how poorly written, how unprofessionally presented, or luridly narrated, represented people's dreams, the aspirational angels of their nature. Faron told me about himself, his childhood, what it meant in terms of physical and mental vulnerability to grow up in Philly with multiple gang territories between his home in the projects and the nearest public library. This, he said, was how grown adults born in the United States of America could be illiterate in the year 1998. In the year 1999. In the year 2000. 2001. 2002. 2003. This talismanic childhood memory combined with the present tense reality of illiteracy and letterlessness to inspire his entrepreneurship. As a business impetus, it recalls Giddeon Lewis-Kraus' observation that book business dealings take on a Platonic ideality, an "aesthetic-commercial catechism," or, for Faron, a moral-commercial catechism that is "the ideal junction of the remunerative and the good" (Lewis-Kraus). This moral-commercial catechism, destined to marginality in a predator capitalist system where immediate profit is often the sole self-justifying goal, nevertheless called Faron to open *Phenix* and to place it with all intentionality down on E. Street in the middle of one of California's most deprived economic zones.

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When I interviewed Faron in December, 2012 in a neighboring suburb of San Bernardino, he told me that a black woman with long experience in the book trade had warned him that "if you depend on black people to eat, you will starve." He could put his bookshop in a lot of other places, she advised. Suburbs were burgeoning all over the Inland Empire. Rancho Cucamonga. Redlands. Highland. Even Rialto was getting itself together. Faron chose not to heed her warning. He kept the store in San Bernardino. Something to do with those aspirational angels. Eventually, *Phenix* shuttered its doors, as did the *Borders* bookstore in the city's only functioning mall. There

is no longer, as I write this in Spring 2012, a single bookstore in San Bernardino, California. Not simply the effect of internet incursion and virtual book-selling, the institution of book-selling, especially to black people where I'm from, has been in its death throes for a decade. "She was prophetic," Faron admitted very matter-of-factly. "Because they didn't support the way they should have. The way I thought they should have."<sup>36</sup>

He would like to return to book-selling, he told me, on-line. "That's where everything's going," he figured, shrugging, smiling. He went on to tell me about exploring new avenues by which to create an on-line presence. I offered my connections to Ken, who founded *Connotation Press* on-line, and Rudolph Lewis, founder of *ChickenBones*, an on-line African-American literary journal. Faron's is just one story of the life-cycle of the black book-seller and independent entrepreneur, but it is illustrative and representative of larger-scale problems with entrepreneurial models in black communities and for book-sellers particularly.

John W. Handy notes in his study "A Theory on the Evolution of Black Business Development", that "black business's access to capital, managerial skills, business acumen and business-specific human capital has been endogenously determined by the historical evolution of purposeful withholding of effective market demand for African American goods and services... the lack of demand for black produced goods and services for over 100 years demonstrates why this factor constitutes a sufficient condition for the observable outcomes of capital shortage, inefficiency, paucity of entrepreneurial models, skewness toward small size firms with few or no employees, and lower business formation rates compared to other groups" (Handy 381). Posed in social as opposed to economic terms, this set of realities operates by a rather elementary logic: "...it has

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<sup>36</sup> Roberts, Faron. Personal interview. Redlands, CA. Jan. 2012.

been a truism," Phillip Brian Harper writes, "that most blacks are, perforce, at least 'passingly' familiar with the ways of white society, and so can negotiate it as necessary... [while] whites' *lack* of familiarity with black society is not only a function of their not *needing* such, but an indication of their rightful lack of desire for it, since the benefits it offers are few, if any" (Harper 119). The absence of white interest in black culture, including most of its goods and services, immediately places black enterprise in a marginal, minority space. *Phenix* exemplified many of the effects Handy's economic analysis identifies as the results of low demand: For starters, it was a small shop. Faron and his wife were the owners and only employees. *Phenix*, far from inspiring other black entrepreneurs, actually presaged the extinction of the book-market in the city. Unable to attract a white (or Latino, for the city is nearly majority Latino) buyership, and with an insufficient number of devoted black customers, the store went under.

Handy and other scholars focus on the fact that "black businesses have been, in effect, isolated by a system of tariffs on capital, retail sales, rents and consumer and business credit" that have been imposed by a white-majority population that refuses to buy black produced goods in relevant number and creates artificially high barriers to entry through high rents, red-lining, and credit and loan withholding (Handy 382). Politically conservative Hoover Fellow economist Niall Ferguson corroborates this argument, explaining in *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* how, historically, the arbitrary withholding of credit and loans has excluded black communities from America's ostensible ownership society (Ferguson 250-252). Sociologist Dalton Conley's *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth and Social Policy in America* was the first longitudinal study to put in concrete terms the power of the ownership society as it relates to racial inequality, over and above income and employment factors. The study delineates the marginal position of those without valuable inter-generational property holdings. Past policies of

credit and loan withholding, as well as a host of other economic phenomena that favor white over black, reverberate across the decades and reinforce racial caste based on property and wealth accumulation.

In contrast to Handy, Ferguson, Conley and numerous scholars of racial inequality, Faron's prescient adviser points the finger not at a race-stratified economic order but rather suggests that black consumers do not support black entrepreneurs and thus hasten their demise. In my experience, I've found both sides of this coin to be generally true. As my father liked to observe, most white people don't know where the predominantly black area is in their own city, let alone the places of business there. Few black people are so ignorant, but many mistrust black produced goods and services and would rather patronize corporations, trusting their quality control and preferring the lower prices that large outfits can generally afford to charge. In any case, white ignorance and/or discrimination and consequent disinterest in black goods and services, combined with black thrift, mistrust and consequent disinterest are simply racialized sides of the same coin: Whether focused on the ways that white financial power, expressed through the banking system's prohibitive barriers to entry or the social segregation that physically separates the majority of white consumers from areas where black produced goods and services are trafficked or on a similarly disinterested black buying public, the analysis will reach the same conclusion. To further the earlier maxim, If the small-scale black literary entrepreneur depends on anyone, black, white or otherwise, to eat, he or she will starve.

This is a bleak way to look at things, as it seems to require that an entrepreneur possess wealth (or at least income) independent of his or her book-selling business. Admittedly bleak, it is nevertheless often the prevailing situation. Try teaching an African-American Literature class, or

a class that requires the acquisition of African-American authored texts in bulk, and see how negligible and insufficient is the supply of in-print titles for all but the most famous black novelists, story-writers and poets. It is a catastrophe in black letters, the genesis of which is not the black writer but the inability of book sellers marketing books by and about black people to gain traction within the market. Supply can only rise to meet demand, and becomes extraneous to the market in the absence of demand. This is basically the case for most black book sellers and, as a direct consequence, for most black writers.

"...[A]ll individuals," Handy writes, "who are more risk averse than the marginal entrepreneur will choose to work for others" (396). "...[T]he more risk averse African American will choose to work for majority firms that have not been confined by similar long-term market and resource constraints" (399). The way this applies to *Phenix* is that upon seeing the result of Faron's risk as a marginal entrepreneur (his business became insolvent, he lost money and closed the shop before his losses endangered his home and his family's well-being), I become more risk averse in my relation to the market than Faron was. I choose not to engage the book market as a marginal entrepreneur who controls sale and distribution of literature but merely as a writer laboring to create literature, employed catch-as-catch-can by those institutions that depend on literary product in one way or another, college and university English departments, magazines, literary journals and publishing houses. As "labor is inherently weak relative to capital," myself and writers like myself "must sell [our] labor power in order to continue to exist as human beings" and remain in an inferior economic and social position in perpetuity (Mason 362). This brings us full circle and explains the positionality of Everett and Kincaid as their scholarship is exploited by the political and corporate elites that fuse their force in an attempt to publish an absurd history of the African-American people as envisioned by a hypocritical, illiterate and senile racist United States senator.

The only ways out of such a model of labor inferiority, according to Patrick L. Mason's "Inequality in the Market for Labor Power", are "access to domestic resources, informal market resources, or state resources" (Mason 362). In our situation domestic and state resources can be signified by unionized wage labor at colleges, universities and foundations protected by tenure and seniority. This employment is open to persons with multiple advanced degrees and significant social capital. Because of my more middle-class upbringing, the educational level of my parents, and my matriculation through research one universities, I am much better-positioned for this kind of escape from the market forces that restrict aspirations than is Faron, or than are most black people, people of color and people of modest means. What are, then, open to the majority are "domestic resources" and "informal market resources", and these reservoirs of power explain not only the second life of street lit but the second life of *Marcus Books* as well. An example of successful black entrepreneurship in the media and literary spheres, *Marcus'* story illustrates a counter-reality that has always stood alongside the bleak vision set out thus far: Black entrepreneurship persists, as do many of the businesses it spawns. Tech entrepreneur, Salesforce project manager and the organizer of the PitchMixer entrepreneur forums that present tech-oriented entrepreneurship opportunities to Oakland-area innovators and technologists, Ayori Selassie affirms "Yes, we are hidden in plain sight! Somebody owns the business where you get your hair cut. Somebody owns the soul food place... People need to know these stories"<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, from Anthony Johnson's Angola farm to Tulsa's Black Wall Street, Chicago's Bronzeville, even Magic Johnson's current investment portfolio and thousands of lesser known examples, the stories are out there.

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<sup>37</sup> Selassie, Ayori. Personal interview. Oakland, CA. March 2012.

Almost hidden in plain sight in its Fillmore location in San Francisco (as well as on Martin Luther King Boulevard in West Oakland) is the oldest surviving black bookstore in the Western United States, *Marcus Books*. Its recent history is as illustrative as Faron's experience of the challenges that commercial-literary outfits face, but *Marcus* also shows how activism and direct action in a community can preserve intellectual space despite the realities of a predator capitalist regime. With its dual locations on opposite sides of the Bay, the bookstore occupies a special place in the intellectual life of Northern California. “*Marcus Books* has been at the center of Bay Area black intellectual, political and civic life for more than half a century, the site of Black Panthers meetings as well as the Bay Area's first Kwanzaa celebration. The San Francisco store and a second outlet that opened in Oakland in 1976 have hosted prominent authors and activists — Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Muhammad Ali among them. Most of all, the business and its determined overseers have offered sanctuary to generations of African Americans, broadening their view of the world and of themselves” (Romney, 1). Although I had trouble getting an interview with Oakland store manager Blanche Richardson, or with store staff (Blanche's daughter) for this project, I can attest personally to the value of *Marcus*. It was Blanche and *Marcus Books* that brought Tavis Smiley to Allan Temple Baptist Church in East Oakland. It was Blanche and *Marcus Books* that brought Michael Eric Dyson to speak at the East Bay Church of Religious Science on Telegraph. It was Blanche who introduced me to the late Reggie Lockett, a West Oakland poet and professor who became my mentor before his untimely passing.

Established by San Francisco State Black Studies professor Raye Richardson and her husband Julian in San Francisco's Fillmore in 1960, removed (to a separate site within the city) with urban renewal soon after, and reclaiming its original location in 1980, *Marcus* has known tough times.

Like most small black businesses, it has the wolf that is capitalism by the ears, neither able safely to keep it, nor to let it go. But in recent years the Oakland store has faced insolvency, almost shuttering its doors. Three or four years ago, my email inbox was regularly visited by urgent emails stating that *Marcus* in Oakland was about to go out of business, fomenting anti-eviction activism on its behalf. Likewise, the original site in San Francisco has seen its customer base dwindle as well. Multiple pressures impinge upon *Marcus*, including but not limited to the accessibility of literature through amazon.com and other on-line book sellers, the financial crisis, and the black population shift out of the Fillmore and Western Addition in San Francisco and away from West Oakland, to the remote inland suburbs. *Marcus* can do nothing about the financial crisis or the combined effects of gentrification and black suburbanization. However, in response to amazon.com's price-check phone app, Jasmine Johnson (daughter to Karen Johnson, who runs the San Francisco store) authored and posted an anti-amazon petition to change.org, stating, in part, that "In most places, Amazon doesn't pay any taxes and they don't contribute to local economies in nearly the same way that small businesses do... All around the country I see independent bookstores and other retailers fighting for survival in this tough economy. Amazon's Price Checker app goes beyond simple competition in a free marketplace. It represents an ugly race to the bottom that might provide short-term benefit for bargain hunters, but will lead to long-term pain for communities in the form of lost jobs and tax revenues" (Johnson 1). The petition, as of this writing, has garnered 12,860 signatures, attracted a *Los Angeles Times* article and coverage in the *Wall Street Journal* and has renewed local interest in the store's product and its ethos. Moreover, Jasmine, a doctoral candidate at Cal and formerly visiting scholar at Princeton, has worked to "increase the store's online presence through a Facebook page" (Romney 2). Through street and virtual activism, as well as taking up the tools of on-line social media, *Marcus* is managing to survive in one of the most competitive markets in the world, the San Francisco Bay



Area, despite amazon.com's predatory strategies and population shifts that are the result of economic shifts that are re-locating their consumer base further from their physical sites of business. *Marcus'* story provides a ray of light in what is, generally, a rather raw and bleak forecast. It to some extent refutes the theory that depending on black people to eat is a sure way to starve and shows that under specific conditions small-scale entrepreneurship, even in the literary sphere, can be feasible for those seeking to market black literature.

*Marcus'* survival, however, is a tenuous one largely occasioned by special access to domestic and informal market resources that few black businesses possess. *Marcus* has been doing business in the Bay Area for more than a half century and all the social capital to go along with it. The family ownership collective has cultivated a devoted patronage experienced in street activism, people who are willing to chain themselves to a storefront to halt its eviction. *Marcus* has three generations of well-educated and specifically trained family ownership at its disposal and benefits from all the experience, know-how, calm perspective, and understanding of on-line networking that multiple generations of workers invested in a single goal can bring to bear in that effort. In its initial phase, its owners were a married couple who had between them a teacher's regular salary, a Ph.D., and a history of successful entrepreneurship (Julian opened a print shop in 1948, twelve years before founding the bookstore, and it also remains in business [Romney 2]). In its current incarnation, *Marcus* is buoyed by a network of young, middle-aged and elder family members, and in particular a junior employee who is completing her Ph.D. at elite academic institutions. This latter advantage has allowed *Marcus* to tap what Ravi Sundaram has termed the "bleeding culture" or "information bleeding" that is "constantly marking and spreading in urban life," combining the concerns of a small black bookstore with the concerns of activists locally and globally on behalf of small business the world over (Sundaram, 13). The Bay Area bookstore is,

therefore, a uniquely positioned entity even within a difficult market and its survival, while beautiful, is not necessarily duplicable by an entrepreneur in Faron's situation, or by the typical marginal entrepreneur.

In the absence of elite education, sufficient stable external revenues, inter-generational ownership and prior market traction, the domestic resources that *Marcus* has leveraged in their fight to survive are not available. This was essentially the situation Faron found himself in as a beginning entrepreneur in an unreceptive environment. For him, depending on black people (or white people or Latinos) to buy black books eventually meant store closure. The "informal market resources" in Mason's equation represent the other hope for entrepreneurship and eventual agency within a world of letters over-governed by predator capitalism. The question that Faron's situation presents is obvious: What agency might exist for black and other marginal writers and entrepreneurs outside of extremely specialized circumstances? The street lit narrativists provide the most obvious answer: Their success is predicated on providing stories that cater to the entertainment desires of a specific group of readers; they implement informal as well as formal publishing and distribution strategies. Street lit narrativists' success is a real-time example of disorganized capitalism, as much heir to Sundaram's "bleeding culture" concept as is Ms. Johnson and as are the economically marginal Delhi citizens that are the subjects of Sundaram's study.

Methods of street lit production and distribution vary widely. Recall those local San Bernardino writers that would convince Faron to put their books on his shelves. These people were self-publishing their work on a small and relatively unambitious scale, working through the auspices of a faltering bookstore to popularize their work. More ambitious in nature are the examples provided by E. Lynn Harris' and Omar Tyree's careers. While not properly categorized as a street

lit author, per se, Harris' intervention in the publishing market is an example of what I'll call *over-ground* self-publishing. This terminology is meant to signify that Harris leveraged mainstream institutions (principally, his corporate employers, but also a vanity press) to abet his self-publishing process, essentially turning the power of other corporate entities to the work of intervening in the mainstream publishing industry.

Harris worked as a computer salesman at IBM, AT&T and Hewlett-Packard for more than a decade. Using his earnings in business as capital, Harris printed and self-published his first novel, *Invisible Life*, through a vanity publisher. Harris began hawking copies out of the trunk of his car at Atlanta beauty parlors. "In what has since become the stuff of legend, his book found its way into the hands of Martha Levin at Doubleday, which [thereafter became] Harris' publisher" (Pesce 1). For more than a decade thereafter, until his sudden death in 2009, Harris' subsequent novels consistently garnered bestseller status, their audience chiefly middle class black readers.

Tyree's self-publishing process was similar to Harris', although Tyree's independent income may have been more marginal, as he began self-publishing his work shortly after graduating from Howard University, using what was likely the less reliable income earned as a journalist for black-owned weekly newspapers. According to his testimony during the Q & A portion of the reading he gave at the Carousel Mall back in 2001, Tyree sold his self-published novels "out-the-trunk" at salons, malls and churches and kept his own sales ledgers. After recording sales of 10,000 books, he was able to attract contract offers from major publishers. Several of his subsequent novels became bestsellers. Like Harris, Tyree leveraged his familiarity with mainstream business practices, using his college training as a journalist to craft entertaining stories and organizing his own sales records to legitimate his success with corporate buyers.

Moreover, in his talk at the Carousel Mall, Tyree professed to be inspired by the success of Terry McMillan. He also said that he wanted to surpass her as the top-selling African-American novelist. That McMillan leveraged an initial book deal and her publisher's inability to properly market her work as an opportunity to re-fashion the entire bookselling enterprise for African-American romance and pulp fiction literature is perhaps the ultimate example of the *over-ground* method. Her use of beauty salons, churches and other popular sites in black communities that typically elude mainstream publishers is a strategy that has pollinated both the approaches of *over-ground* and *underground* self-publishers.

Where in 1895 Rupert Hughes had referred to street lit storyteller Stephen Crane's self-published novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* as a lone orphan, the "unclaimed foundling" disregarded by all potential publishers, a century later Harris, Tyree, Zane and other initially marginal black writers embraced the orphan-hood of their works, employed innovative marketing strategies for their foundlings and thereby totally re-defined the self-publishing enterprise (Hughes 332)<sup>38</sup>. Showing how lucrative self-publishing could be, these writers anticipated the decentralization of the publishing industry in the 2000s<sup>39</sup>. Their work has helped to de-emphasize the role of "middle men" agents and to de-stabilize the old guard publishers that Hughes personifies as selective adoptive parents predisposed to inaccurate prejudice. Marginalized black writers have constituted the canary in the publishing industry's rapidly evolving coal mine. Their work as self-

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<sup>38</sup> When unable to find a publisher for *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* Crane self-published the novel's first edition in 1893, using brown paper covers (Rood 18). A subsequent 1896 edition, much revised, was published by D. Appleton & Co.

<sup>39</sup> While I have no data to support the assertion that the publishing industry is being radically re-defined, decentralized and diffused, I can say that as a working writer in a community of working writers our conversations, not to mention our professional dealings as writers, are dominated by the consciousness of the deep changes in the industry wrought by electronic media.

publishers serves as an inspiration and specific example for other writers located outside the dominant media conglomerates and the university publishing system.

Street lit narrativists are typically located outside the dominant media structures and outside of academia as well. These writers oftentimes lack elite university placement and corporate employment, yet they nevertheless are inspired by the successes of McMillan, Harris and Tyree and take up many of the same strategies pioneered by those authors. However, they do so in the absence of many of the skill sets, expectations and demands prevalent in a mainstream business context. Working the *underground*, their method is closer to Sundaram's concept of "piracy" as an ulterior disruption to capitalist control operative within an accepted regime of private property (Sundaram 13). As Sundaram would have it, "networks of pirate culture... usually target the urban populations outside this world [of "familiar modes of incorporation, credit cards and credit rating agencies, frequent flyers, vacations, niche marketing, ATM cards and monthly billing cycles, corporate consumer campaigns and brand environments"], but who are nevertheless drawn increasingly to the commodified forms of urban experience" (13). How this functions in a street lit context would be, for instance, the unlicensed solicitation of self-published novels on Chicago's el, or in New York's subway trains, or in the unpoliced depths of the Berkeley Flea Market. Mark Reynolds describes a generic street lit vendor marketing book titles "on sidewalk tables, alongside other tables hawking knockoff jewelry and bootleg DVDs" to emphasize the paradoxically common and outsider nature of street vending literature (Reynolds 1). Such solicitation accepts the dominance of the capitalist regime and the omnipresence of the market as "a way of life in which market values seep into every aspect of human endeavor... where social relations are made over in the image of the market" (Sandel 66). Yet it also disrupts capitalist control by leaving unheeded its strictures around license and accepted zones of product

solicitation. It further disrupts capitalist control by successfully marketing off-brand books bereft of the corporate brand of a Random House or Simon & Schuster to black people who have historically chosen to buy corporate products before black produced goods and services. Disrupting this history of corporate dominance, the market intervention of underground street lit self-publishers may somewhat put the lie to the widely held belief among risk averse black bourgeoisie that to depend on black people to eat is to ensure starvation. As Handy states, "entrepreneurship as a career choice for African Americans was severely abridged" because "the opportunity cost of self-employment even for the best prepared individuals was still too high" when compared with the "nonstochastic, riskless wage level in the labor market. Until recently, this was especially true for a black middle class by public-sector employment, unionized manufacturing jobs and teaching" (Handy 399). Already located outside of black middle class society, street entrepreneurs tap the well of black commerce by locating their business outside of academia, as well as corporate and government-sanctioned institutions. By simply doing their own underground capitalist thing street lit entrepreneurs have established a market niche.

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As the entrepreneur's role is, fundamentally, to be an innovator, to organize and coordinate factors of production in combination with previously unutilized or under-utilized inventions, and entrepreneurship has historically remained outside the reach of Black Americans, especially those without access to higher education, a family history of entrepreneurship and/or corporate connections, the potential of *underground* self-publication to intervene in public sphere dialogue cannot be ignored.

If we look solely at the ability of successfully promoted street literature to penetrate the consciousness of those populations generally untouched by literature and black and brown models

of success, the dual impact of offering a literature that is at once entertaining and that by its very existence and market life affirms the ability of minority authors to compete and thrive in a hyper-competitive marketplace is considerable. In "Reading Street Literature, Reading America's Prison System" Graaff describes "numerous strategies that are specifically geared towards imprisoned readerships." Relentless Aaron, for example, would take the prison busses from New York City up North to the correctional facilities. Riding alongside inmates' friends, spouses and family members, he would promote and sell his books. This tactic "afforded him inside knowledge of a prison-related infrastructure unknown to commercial publishers and distribution firms." She also tells of Sidibe Ibrahima, who has "registered with various correctional facilities as a book supplier, and now regularly ships prepaid titles to the avid readers." Ibrahima claims ever-increasing demand for the titles he distributes behind prison walls. "[T]here are even," Graaff offers, "inmates building publishing infrastructures from inside prison" (Graaff 3). Seth Ferranti, co-founder with his wife Diane, of Gorilla Convict Publishing, is one example. Ferranti made successful legal defense of his right to operate the publishing business while still incarcerated. These novel approaches to the distribution of literature are examples of the capitalist ethic put to mutually sustaining use: Relentless Aaron, Sidibe Ibrahima and the Ferrantis are profiting from establishing a market in a severely underserved zone and are providing their consumer base with pieces of a literature that will at once entertain them and allow them to imaginatively escape their confines, while also depicting in more detail the socioeconomic conditions producing and maintaining their confinement than any other representational medium. Moreover, the most introspective street lit narratives, like Shareef Crawford's journey into Harlem's underworld and back out, narrate a series of "educative transition phase[s]" that constitute what Graaff calls the "*Street Lit bildungsroman*" (Graaff 2), offering convicts a space of reflection and redemption. Carried out on a greater scale, not by corporate incursion but by more and more small business

enterprise within prison and other underserved spaces where literature and entrepreneurship are both badly lacking, street lit, as well as the far larger and more refined categories of Urban Literature and African-American Literature might resurrect broken lives in what are generally regarded as American dead zones of marginality, poverty and incarceration.

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“Did I get it?”

“Not quite,” he tells me.

“Why not?”

“You failed to make explicit all the connections you see in the subject matter. It’s still too implicit. It’s still incomplete.”

“I can’t help that. I know it’s incomplete. It will always be incomplete.”

“That’s OK. Everything’s incomplete. You never can say everything you want to say, and we just go on like this.”

“And then one day it’s over.”

“I know,” he says, “I know. Don’t cry. There’s a certain fiction in the closed covers of a book— or a life.”



“I know,” I said, realizing now what I'd been too afraid to admit before: That this was all my fabrication, my words standing in for things he'd never said, ideas he'd never expressed.

Realizing, now that my father had been too brutalized by the life that the ghetto and racism and blacks who hated each other and textbooks with the pages torn out and flies the size of rats and evil sadist cops and colleges that only wanted him to run and jump, to ever tell these stories. He had escaped and had no desire to record it all. It always falls to a generation removed from brutality to raise the memorial and count the cost. This is why street lit, in all its history-haunted squalor, is only a late expression of despair and yet a fresh portent of a better world.

“You’ve got the dog in you,” he tells me. “Got that from your mother. You know how to work. I was always too much of a dreamer, ya know. I gave you dreams, but that dog is all from her and without it, dreams are dead on arrival.”

Maybe this is resurrection; where death is transformed and the break is mended.

## How Underground Publishing Methods (case in point: David Walker) Re-Purpose

### Dominant Ideologies

I remember my dad mentioned *Walker's Appeal* to me when I was maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. I recall reading it over the course of a couple nights. At the time, I didn't fully know what to think of it. The bland and obvious platitudes about Walker's courage and his importance to the black freedom struggle occurred to me, but little else. It has only been in the process of conceptualizing this project that I've returned to Walker's text, drawn to it by the discussion of alternative publishing methods that my dissertation undertakes (particularly in the previous chapter). It is ironic that I would look to the author of a text entitled *The Appeal...* for an historical example of the black writer unbounded by the appellate position. Of course, for structural reasons largely delineated in the previous chapter all writers find themselves to a greater or lesser extent marginalized within the industry in which we sell our work, so I am not arguing that Walker somehow broke completely free of the conventions that immobilized so many other black writers supplicant at the base of the publishing system. Indeed, in the Introduction we measure out the extent of Walker's appellate versus assertive and aggressive rhetorical positioning and come to the conclusion that while the appellate stance probably takes up more pages of the work than do the other rhetorical strategies, it is not Walker's appeal to his white readership but his thoroughgoing critique of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* and his exhortation of free and enslaved blacks that form the powerful center of the *Appeal*.

This final chapter in my dissertation will leave off analysis of the contents of Walker's manifesto and instead focus on the methods by which it was originally smuggled as an outlaw text into

lands where it was banned under penalty of imprisonment and state-mandated death. Walker's self-publishing endeavor is a powerful early example not only of black people entering the American public sphere as independent agents working for their own emancipation, it is also an example of entrepreneurship and an avowal full citizenship along an economic line as well. Far from simply accepting American citizenship in the restricted forms that the powers-that-were sought to impose it upon him, Walker actually re-imagined and undertook a manifestly alternative capitalism. This revolutionary endeavor did not simply replicate the status quo American economic system, but briefly re-fashioned it in ways that could work for America's most marginalized citizens.

Throughout this chapter, I will also explain how Walker's methods can be read in relation to the underground distribution methods of current-day street lit writers and publishers. Both instances of entrepreneurship hold in common not only their initial marginal position but a wonderful creative self-sufficient instinct as well. That said, there are also significant differences along ideological lines that differentiate Walker's methods and purposes from those of modern underground book sellers.

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Saidiya Hartman asserts that "The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves... To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?" (Hartman 170). The *Appeal*, where it is still summoned forth, cannot simply be called up as a philippic against antebellum atrocities or as proof of a right to reparations, but must provide some future light for the citizens of this world. Walker's work,

which ended his life, was on the forefront of black self definition. Ironically, in ceding power over his life ("I count my life not dear unto me, but I am ready to be offered at any moment" [Walker 81]), Walker gives life to the notion of a global black collective ("We are a people, notwithstanding many of you doubt it" [48-49]) and attempts to roil that rhetorical collective to rebellion ("Let no man of us budge one step, and let slave-holders come to beat us from our country" [73]).

The struggle to publish was, in that time, the struggle to speak. Black Americans, shunted from the American public sphere and thus made bereft of public voice, found forum for expression, recognition and collective action in the abolitionist newspapers and published volumes that sought to end slavery and achieve the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. In antebellum America, Gene Jarrett points out "Fomenting social movements determined the political tractability of African American literature" (Jarrett 57). Literary progress and political progress were in this way wedded. As Judith Stein has noted, the basis of black politics was Radical ideology, founded in abolitionist ferment and allied to capital "to produce material progress and enlightenment" (Stein 24). For Walker, this meant, first, re-purposing his earnings from his used clothes store on Brattle Street to help fund *Freedom's Journal*. This was a multiple re-purposing of goods. Walker took advantage of his shop's prime location near Boston's wharf, which attracted disembarking seamen with a simple policy of exchange and mutual profit. These men would sell their used gear to Walker, who would then re-sell it to seamen on outgoing voyages. In addition, it seems that Walker also sold conventional clothing, new as well as old. After re-purposing used seamen's gear and old clothing by re-sell to customers looking for consignment store prices, Walker promptly re-purposed the profits from sale, processing these into the engines of abolition (Davis 4). This multiple re-purposing is a running theme of underground economic

structures and is inherent to Sundaram's concept of "bleeding culture." It is the act of taking an item and envisioning a different use for it, then acting upon that vision to actively re-purpose it that allows not only items but ideas to pour out across race, class and cultural strata. Walker's sustained acts of re-purposing foreshadow the way that the street vendors that Sundaram writes of re-purposed "First World" electronics sold in Delhi (an instance of physical items re-purposed) and how self-published street lit narrativists have re-purposed the tactics of hip-hop self-promotion and the ambitions of capitalist entrepreneurship to sell their stories (an instance of ideas re-purposed).

By the late 1820s, Walker was contributing his own abolitionist writings to *The Liberator*. He became active in the street festival celebrations of Haitian independence and the end of the North Atlantic slave trade. He came to live in a home very near to Boston's African Meeting House, "a refuge for those in need", and to establish a reputation as a successful businessman who lived with startling frugality and seemed bent on giving nearly all he earned in charity to the less fortunate (Richardson 5). Walker joined the African-American Masonic Lodge #459, which would "facilitate his entrance into higher black Bostonian society, [and] also gave him access to a network of black compatriots who operated in stealth and were probably complicitous in many emancipation schemes" (Davis 4; Scriven 15). By December of 1828 he had risen high enough in local regard to address the Massachusetts General Colored Association. He called out passionately for unity among the coloured people of Massachusetts in order to protect, aid and assist one another despite the horrors of American prejudice (McHenry 45-47). As the anti-slavery movement passed out of what Hasan Crockett has termed its initial "school" of pre-1830s reformers, "mostly men of means like John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, who viewed slaveholders as brethren in a sordid business," and into the militant second school, Walker

emerged at the forefront of the movement. "The publication of Walker's *Appeal* ushers in the second, militant, abolitionist movement" (Crockett 1).

Though a major force in the movement's militant turn; in fact he helmed the foremost abolitionist publication in the nation-- William Lloyd Garrison found the excerpts that Walker submitted from his *Appeal* too radical even for *The Liberator*. Where Walker advocated violent rebellion, Garrison preferred only non-violent struggle. As Turner explains, this "fission portrays a historical problem Blacks were to have with liberals as allies, over who should set the direction and objectives of their liberation struggle" (Turner 14). Garrison declined to publish the *Appeal*. However, Walker effectively set the direction and objectives of the black liberation struggle by pursuing self-publication and guerilla distribution of his work.

David Walker could not be silenced anymore from within the abolition movement than from without. If Walker, Turner notes, had a dictum, "it would have been that freedom must be actualized by oppressed people themselves, which requires them to assume an independent methodology to analyze their world in order to change it" (14). One crucial aspect of this methodology, which has largely and unfortunately gone ignored by Black Americans, is Walker's independent entrepreneurship, which is the practical and ideological root of the *Appeal's* self-sovereign publication. Instead of depending on the publishing apparatus, he utilized his private monies earned in business and took his own private time to print, bind and self-publish the *Appeal*. The manifesto made the Boston abolition circuit, as would be expected. But when shipments of the book were confiscated as far off as Savannah, Georgia, Wilmington, North Carolina and Charleston, South Carolina, it was clear that something more significant was in the

wind: Walker's methods of distribution were not only, to use this chapter's terminology, *over-ground*, but intricately and extensively *underground* as well.

Walker's method began at his shop, near Boston's waterfront. Many black men worked on ships at the time and Walker's best friend, the husband to abolitionist and author Maria Stewart, James W. Stewart happened to be a successful independent ship outfitter of whaling and fishing vessels. Thus presented itself a ready network for the covert movement of the *Appeal*: Utterly material in its workings, Walker inaugurated the dispersal of his work by sewing the pamphlets into the thick lining of the seamen's coats before they set sail (Davis 5). Each pamphlet passed into the hands of a Negro dock-worker down south or any ready soul that the sailors might meet in their time on land became a conduit and helped to set in motion the pamphlet's penetration of the slave society.

As 1829 passed into 1830 slaveholders and political forces throughout the South awakened to the fact of a black entrepreneur (not to mention revolutionary writer) so skilled at the dispersal of his work as to disseminate it across the whole of the nation without license or corporate sponsorship or a formal system of transportation. As Sundaram notes, "Piracy's strength was its ability to innovate and proliferate and to disperse when attacked by new enforcement regimes..." (Sundaram 13). Likewise, Walker's distribution strategies were innovative and succeeded largely by shock, bewildering a slave society that had dismissed blacks as hewers of wood and drawers of water and had scarcely imagined blacks to be capable of any complex activity outside of white direction. "His explicit display," McHenry explains in *Forgotten Readers*, "of the ability of a black man to read widely, reason lucidly, and write authoritatively defied claims of black intellectual inferiority and delivered a crippling blow to the prime justification for black

enslavement and oppression" (McHenry 40). That Walker so deftly and covertly outsmarted Southern authorities put the lie to racism itself.

Moreover, the local improvisations by which the *Appeal* circulated, independent of Walker himself, or any other central coordinating figure, a few boxes packed in with other boxes in a shopkeeper's den, a freedman taking the long way to work, a church service that lasts ten minutes more, or lets out earlier than usual, a field slave communicating Walker's intent in code as she sang Gullah-inflected spirituals over cotton rows, proliferated the manifesto's presence throughout all reaches of the South.

McHenry speaks to the vast impact of the *Appeal* among both literate and illiterate blacks: "As a document that united the black population in their belief that they were deserving of freedom and emancipation, the impact of the *Appeal* upon the black population in the United States was irrefutable, regardless of whether it was read privately by a literate individual or heard by one without the ability to read for him or herself" (43). By imagining indirect as well as direct ways by which black people could learn of his manifesto and take in its words, Walker radically expanded the reach of his *Appeal*. In particular, his understanding of reading and literacy as a collective endeavor taken on not simply by lone individuals but by a community and a society subverted the aims of slaveholders to shield southern slaves from Walker's work while enacting a method of literary dispersal that brought blacks into united collective action, mutual aid and support. Whereas the "pirate modernity" that Sundaram chronicles accepts the ideological and material limitations of the "property regime", Walker was able to look beyond the individualism that property acquisition and capitalism typically promote and imagine a system of information-sharing wherein individuals did not simply acquire knowledge for personal use and private gain



but within a group setting that naturally distributed information equally among many persons. In this way, Walker's distribution strategies do not simply presage the "out-the-trunk" entrepreneurship of street lit narrativists and the "pirate modernity" of Delhi street vendors. Walker is not simply a creative entrepreneur disrupting capitalist control mechanisms while accepting the property regime that determines the form that capitalism has taken. Instead, he has enacted a form of entrepreneurial capitalism that does not merely reject the slave system but that attacks avarice itself, finding this sinful urge at the root of all predatory capitalist ideology, undergirding all systems of slavery and serfdom and oppression. "...[T]hose who are actuated by sordid avarice only, overlook the evils, which will as sure as the Lord lives, follow after the good. In fact, they are so happy to keep in ignorance and degradation, and to receive the homage and the labour of the slaves, they forget that God rules in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth... [and] will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed" (Walker 5). Walker defines the slaveholder as one who is "actuated," at the level of existential consciousness and their marketplace life, by "avarice" alone. Slavery cannot exist in the market or in human consciousness outside a foundation of pure greed. Morality is completely denied, kept from the commercial process and the psychological existence that founds all commerce. Walker, believing in the power of a just God, sees this self-actualization over an ocean of avarice as a fundamental denial of the all-encompassing moral structure, including divine punishment, wherein the marketplace and the individuals within it yet exist.

Instead of accepting avarice (or even enlightened self-interest) as the sole rule of humanity, Walker re-imagines capitalism outside of individualism and simply weds entrepreneurship to an intellectual socialism: He socializes his intellectual property, freely redistributing his pamphlet to

those without the capital to acquire it, encouraging a system by which those without the money or literacy to read it themselves might still engage the work through a collective process.

The socialized text could not be contained. By late autumn of 1829 the dangerous pamphlet was found circulating among blacks in Savannah, Georgia. As many as fifty copies, it is said, were confiscated (Eaton 323-334). Later, a tavern keeper in North Carolina named Jacob Cowan was found in possession of it and arrested (Davis 2). Governor Owen of North Carolina himself entered the fray, informed of the incendiary document by a magistrate who described its contents as "treating in most inflammatory terms of the condition of the slaves in the Southern states, exaggerating their sufferings, magnifying their physical strength and underrating the power of the whites..." (McRae 218-219)<sup>xvi</sup>. The Governor in Virginia, James Floyd, intercepted an anonymous letter that asked a shopkeeper, Thomas Lewis, to distribute thirty copies and to await more still. Governor George Gilbert of Georgia received a letter indicating sixty copies were seized by the preacher Henry Cunningham, doing God's work great and small. The white steward of the brig *Columbo*, Edward Smith, was arrested, charged and convicted in Charleston for distributing Walker's dangerous design (Davis 1-2). Despite all efforts to stop its spread in the early months of 1830, the *Appeal* was uncontrollably circulated and in black and white hands across the South by summertime.

Labeled a seditious document, harsh penalties were threatened, up to and including death for persons found possessing or distributing the pamphlet. Savannah banned all black seamen from disembarking in the city. Georgia and Louisiana lawmakers banned distribution of all anti-slavery literature and enacted laws against black literacy. By fall, North Carolina, Walker's home state, where he had been educated and where the great Negro scholar John Chavis, likely the most

learned black man of the early nineteenth century, had taught white and black alike, would follow suit outlawing literacy. Georgia put a \$10,000 bounty on Walker captured alive, a \$1,000 bounty on his head (that is, if murdered). Back in Boston, Walker's associates urged him to flee to Canada, but Walker had anticipated and answered not only their pleas but the panicked and punitive backlash against his manifesto in its very pages: "I write without the fear of man. I am writing for my God, and fear none but himself; they may put me to death if they choose" (Walker 60). Just as Walker had argued in the *Appeal* that America was Black Americans' country and they need not relinquish it to escape to Africa, Walker himself stood his ground in Boston. "Those who are ignorant enough to go to Africa, the coloured people ought to be glad to have them go... This country is more ours than it is the whites-- we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*. The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears:-- and will they drive us from our property and homes, which we have earned with our blood?" (73).

On June 28th, 1830 David Walker died suddenly, almost upon the doorstep of his Brattle Street shop. Swiftly thereafter, legislation in one Southern state then the next came down to ban in law what, slaveholders now in retrospect felt, was surely supposed to have been banned in custom all along: While it remained a mystery how a Negro such as Walker, born in the South, son to a slave, had gained such an education as to be conversant in the scriptures, world history and the nation's founding documents, the latter which he had exercised critical faculties upon with the express purpose to declare them insufficient, this Negro Walker who had somehow become a Brattle Street business owner and the author of an insurrectionist text, this anomaly of a Negro who had even orchestrated clandestine dispersal of his screed down the Atlantic seaboard and then throughout the whole of the slaveholding United States, whatever had made him, none other like him would ever exist again. Negroes forever and anon would be banned from the book. They

would not be taught to read or to write. Those found teaching Negroes these skills would be punished under the law.

Meanwhile, back in the high society of black Boston, Maria Stewart's dungeon shook. I see her falling to her knees, or lying motionless on her mattress, her body as rigid and hot as a corpse under the summer sun. David Walker is dead. Her husband, too, has died. Perhaps she remembers Phillis Wheatley who, too, expired abandoned and impoverished in Boston and wonders what hell books bring black people to. Crushed to earth, bereft of all that she had been, there amidst death in so many forms, she is reborn in revelation; for a more passionate and total activism for her people, black people and women alike.

The next year, William Lloyd Garrison, despite abjuring the violent rebellion that Walker advocated, publishes serially Walker's *Appeal* in *The Liberator*. The most shocking and perhaps most impressive episode of self-publishing in American history has come to its crescendoing close: Walker, now no longer able to publish himself, lives in reprisal and demand through the *Appeal's* open publication.

The ideal of black self-determination on American soil is, in part, born, or at least finds its first voice carried further than a drum, song or sermon shouted ever could, in the process of self-publication and guerilla book distribution. With our networks of electronic exchange and information connecting people of every Nation, language and tongue, perhaps now is a good time to look to Walker's furious final years as still relevant to our own time and situation. We should, in my opinion, be thinking very hard about how we can re-purpose both capitalist and socialist ideology so as to educate, enfranchise and empower those without agency and bereft of public

sphere power, I see this as the truly critical, necessary intervention that we can make, given our work, our time and place.

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<sup>i</sup> Gibson may have hit as many as 960 home runs but because Negro League record-keeping was spotty and, additionally, many of these home runs may have been hit outside the Negro Leagues, on barnstorming tours against white major league teams, or against minor league teams, it is hard to figure out exactly how many of Gibson's home runs were achieved against professional competition.

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<sup>ii</sup> Though reminiscent of, if not actually inspired by, renowned black separatists such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, David Fleetwood Walker and Marcus Garvey, the Ras character in *Invisible Man* is never more than a marginal political protestor, without elite connections, professional title or money. Ras inhabits a severely deprived and oppressed political, social and racial space that makes the unilateral direct action he temperamentally favors virtually impossible. There are probably more practical means by which to alleviate his suffering and the suffering of his followers, as witnessed, for example, in the labor organizing efforts of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters, a real-life organization contemporaneous to the time of the novel. By contrast, it is impractical to confront, as Ras does, armed with shield and spear upon a steed, New York City Police officers who fight with guns. In fact, this well-known scene is only the final symbolic coup-de-grace for a character that is consistently irrational, quick to anger and violence, unable even to consider compromise despite his marginal position in the novel (Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York, NY: Random House. 1952. Print.).

Strident yet vague gestures toward revolution and state overhaul read now as unconvincing when we consider that the United States was at the time of Ellison's quarrels with Black Arts figures during the 1960s at the very height of its economic and military power. In retrospect, it is also difficult to take seriously the Black Panthers' call (point nine in the Ten Point Plan) for all incarcerated black men to be released from federal prisons and jails because they have not been given a fair trial by a jury of their peers and thus have status as political prisoners (see <http://www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm>). This is but one example symptomatic of the improbable and logically unsustainable nature of much rhetoric produced out of the Black Power Movement.

<sup>iii</sup> In the California Newsreel production *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey* Amiri Baraka claims that Ellison threw a party at his NYC apartment. Baraka says that he called ahead of time, explaining that he would attend but that Ellison "put a dog to the door" nevertheless. Ellison, Baraka concludes, was a "snob."

<sup>iv</sup> This is purely personal observation, but it seems to me that *The Fire Next Time* was the most famous of Baldwin's works during his lifetime and certainly during the 60s. Since his death in 1987, for a variety of reasons, *Giovanni's Room* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain* may have become more popular.

<sup>v</sup> I use the term "invisibilized" in this instance to refer to the fact that many of the significant novels produced during the Black Arts era currently struggle to stay in print, and are frequently out of print and thus inaccessible. Examples that come to mind include John O. Killens' *The Cotillion*, which Coffee House Press brought back into print a few years ago as part of its Black Arts Movement Series. The same effort brought back into print William Melvin Kelley's *dem*, John A. Williams' *Captain Blackman* and Rosa Guy's *Bird at My Window*. While certainly appreciated Coffee House's efforts nevertheless point up the extent to which these titles have fallen from public attention in the decades after Black Power and Black Arts' vogue.

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<sup>vi</sup> For discussion of Morrison's marketing strategies allying print and television resources, let me direct the reader to John K. Young's chapter "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey and Postmodern Popular Audiences" in *Black Writers, White Publishers*, as well as Michael Perry's "Resisting Paradise: Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey and the Middlebrow Audience" and Kimberly Chabot Davis' "Oprah's Book Club and the Politics of Cross-Racial Empathy" in *The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah's Book Club*.

<sup>vii</sup> Getting exact or even approximate sales figures from publishing houses, agents, etc. is virtually impossible. Of course now BookScan allows one to look up such data (for a fee). However, works that were published prior to the advent of BookScan (such as the novels by McMillan and Zane that I refer to in this passage) are not so easily calculated. The sales numbers publicly advertised by publishers are famously unreliable. See Kim Rose's 2002 *Writer's Weekly* essay "300,000 Copies Sold!" on Zane's bookselling success. See Paulette Richardson's *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion* and McHenry's *Forgotten Readers* for further information on McMillan's publishing industry success

<sup>viii</sup> For a fuller explanation of street lit's specific genesis and history (as opposed to its emergence contextualized by the broad sweep of African-American literary history, which is what this study provides) see *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature* by Vanessa Irvin Morris

<sup>ix</sup> McMillan essentially went on the writer's equivalent of the chitlin' circuit. Nothing new there.

<sup>x</sup> This reality, obvious to most Black Americans, is largely uncommented on in popular and political discourse that still tends to group all blacks under the monolith "Black community." William Julius Wilson noted the two-tiered nature of black society as far back as 1987, with *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Popularly, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s PBS Frontline documentary *Two Nations of Black America* noted the phenomenon in 1999.

<sup>xi</sup> That context being patterns of corporate disinvestment in urban cores, the in-migration of blacks to and the departure of whites from cities, the advent of extensive American suburbs, blockbusting and red-lining schemes, the manifold effects of the Civil Rights Act and the Fair Employment and Housing Act, 1970s and 80s de-industrialization, and continuing urban renewal/gentrification.

<sup>xii</sup> See Dave Zirin's *A People's History of Sports in the United States*: As the story goes, in the wake of Tommie Smith and John Carlos's "black glove salute" on the medal podium at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, Jesse Owens was sent by IOC chairman Avery Brundidge to talk to the black athletes at the Olympic Village. Owens told Smith, Carlos and the rest that the raised-fist protest, which the athletes had stated was a black power gesture, was meaningless. The black fist, Owens told them, is meaningless unless it has dollars in it. What Owens thought of the athletes' use of human rights medals to protest the slaughter of student demonstrators in Mexico City earlier in the summer of '68 and what he made of the athletes appearing barefoot, to signify the poverty of the world, is unknown. Lee Evans, 400-meter Olympic champion, said that he found Owens to be "confused."



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<sup>xiii</sup> This phenomenon can be seen in the slow corporate reaction to the tectonic shifts in music industry sales due to Pandora, itunes and other avenues of internet music downloading and the newspaper business's fast-approaching obsolescence in the face of a changed market.

<sup>xiv</sup> Wilkerson's study narrates the journeys of three Great Migration migrants: Ida Mae Gladney, who pulls up stakes in Mississippi and moves up to Chicago, George Starling, who goes from Florida to Harlem, NYC, and Dr. Pershing, who travels from Monroe, Louisiana to Oakland and then Los Angeles, California.

<sup>xv</sup> I refer to Carrie's parting from both her lovers as disastrous despite the fact that Carrie herself ends up a famous woman in the entertainment world. This is not only because both men gutter-out when their relationships with her fall apart, but also because at the book's conclusion Carrie is materially successful but lacks the close relational bonds that are so crucial to health and psychic wellness.

<sup>xvi</sup> McRae, James F. to Governor John Owen. *Letter Book of the Governors of North Carolina, 1829-1830*. 7 Aug. 1830. The letter is referenced in Clement Eaton's "Dangerous Pamphlet" essay. See: Eaton, Clement. "A Dangerous Pamphlet in the Old South." *Journal of Southern History, II*. Franklin Press. (1936): 324-334. Print.