Stories Written On Concrete: Understanding and (Re)Imagining Street Lit and Culture, 1990-2007

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STORIES WRITTEN ON CONCRETE: UNDERSTANDING AND (RE)IMAGINING STREET LIT AND CULTURE, 1990-2007

A Dissertation Presented

by

JACINTA R. SAFFOLD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2017

W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro American Studies
STORIES WRITTEN ON CONCRETE: UNDERSTANDING AND (RE)IMAGINING STREET LIT AND CULTURE, 1990-2007

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DEDICATION

Jessie May and Mary Helen
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ABSTRACT
STORIES WRITTEN ON CONCRETE: UNDERSTANDING AND (RE)IMAGINING STREET LIT AND CULTURE, 1990-2007

MAY 2017

JACINTA R. SAFFOLD, B.A., EMORY UNIVERSITY
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Directed by: Professor James E. Smethurst

“Stories Written on Concrete: Understanding and Re-imagining Street Lit and Culture, 1990-2007,” coalesces around stories of urbanity and coming of age at the turn of the twenty-first century. As the Hip Hop generation reflected on the social, economic, and cultural shifts of the 1980s and 1990s, they took up paper and pen to immortalize the conflicting duality of the gritty and glamorous experience of growing up on a concrete cityscape in America. I interrogate how street lit disrupts normative literary representations of black life in print. Specifically, I consider how urban fiction writes against the African American literary canon in style, subject, and publication. In the process, my work has become a cultural site of hetero-normative resistance, as it calls for the widening of acceptable black narratives. Street lit novelists, some of whom were previously drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes, gangsters, and incarcerated persons infuse their personal experiences with poverty, crime, and violence into their fantastical depictions of a shifting urban terrain. This project illuminates the other side of African American literature, provides another access point to Hip Hop cultural production, and helps to validate the kind of popular fiction that is often left out of academic discourses. The genre has existed and thrived on the margins of popular literature and the academy for thirty years. But now, street lit receives its due.
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INTRODUCTION: THE STREETS NEVER CHANGE: AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN FICTION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

We live in a society where a black hoodie can turn a kid with a bag of Skittles into a menace worthy of being pursued and shot to death, then the murderer is legally venerated for “standing his ground.” We live in a society where raised hands do not signify don’t shoot, or surrender, especially if the hands are heavily pigmented. We live in a society where a man exclaiming he cannot breathe is not considered a cry for help, or mercy, but a threat that must be leveled without impunity. We live in a society where a black boy cannot walk around a store with a toy gun that is sold at the same store for fear of being labeled a miscreant, social deviant, and then annihilated for appearing to be dangerous.

We live in a society where blackness is a pervasive and imminent threat. A threat so fierce that black mothers and black fathers must teach their sons and daughters to shrink and cower within their black skin to fit the description society has created for them. Within our society, stories about the beautiful, ugly, and triumphs of black lives are not prioritized. Because contemporary stories about black lives are not taught in classrooms, discussed in coffee shops, or even acknowledged as literature worthy of academic inquiry, images of black youth are only understood as threats, expendable, problematic.

We live in a society that desperately needs to celebrate storytellers who are willing to weave unapologetically realistic stories about coming of age in urban America in a time and space where blackness is under attack. Contemporary African American urban fiction, or street lit, helps fill the void. Even with evidence of the genre’s necessity, it has often been dismissed, ignored, or marginalized within academia and secondary education. Therefore,
we need serious scholarly inquiry surrounding the creation, reader response, and wider culture of street lit. Urban youth of color clung to street lit at the turn of the twenty-first century because street lit stories could easily be a page from their life’s story (Morris 1). Further, street lit novels prompted students to engage in serious conversations about text subjects, which often translated into real social issues. The merits of truly engaging street lit as a literary genre and site of cultural production lay far beyond what was written on the page.

Street lit was a contemporary African American urban fiction genre that began in the early 1990s with Omar Tyree’s most popular novel, *Flyy Girl* and grew to encompass urban erotica, Gangsta Lit, sista lit and authors such as Zane, Kwan, and Eric Jerome Dickey before the literary digital turn of 2007.1 Street lit, like black crime and detective fiction before it, was widely popular among African American readers, but was undervalued and vastly overlooked in academia. However, the genre had a deep and rich cultural history surrounding the creation, publication, publicity, and reader reception of the texts. Street lit, a literary genre and site of cultural memory, was a vivacious space where urban African American stories were understood and (re)imagined.

“Stories Written on Concrete” considers popular urban fiction from 1990-2007, although the first street lit novel (*Flyy Girl*) was published in 1992 and the genre has persisted well after 2007. Tyree began writing *Flyy Girl* at the opening of

1 Amazon released the Kindle, an electronic book reader, in 2007. According to Forbes, Kindle is the most popular device for ebooks. Therefore, I use the release of the Kindle as the marker of the digital literary turn, especially as it pertains to popular literature.
the 1990s and the years preceding Tyree’s foundational novel were critical to understanding why street lit novels were published by large imprints in the 1990s and were made available to a wide and avid readership. Terry McMillian’s second novel, *Disappearing Acts*, marked the beginning of an important moment in popular black fiction mass-market publishing. *Disappearing Acts* published in 1989, along with McMillan’s two subsequent novels (*Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*) sold millions of copies, topped sellers’ lists like New York Best Sellers and Ebony’s Best Sellers, and indicated to the books’ publisher (Atria Publishing a division of Simon & Schuster in particular) that such kinds of books has an enthusiastic audience. Not only were fans willing and eager to purchase these novels, they endorsed an emerging culture around the novels by participating in book clubs, making the adapted films box office successes, and demanding that the novels be available in libraries and bookstores across the United States. The entire last decade of the twentieth century was essential to the emergence of street lit and its surrounding culture.

In the early 2000s, innovations in technology fomented with street lit culture and provided wider access to any person who had access to a computer or laptop and wanted to write. Fiction written by fans about celebrities, especially fantasy stories about popular Hip Hop and R&B artists written on support forums of artists’ official webpages was one way the world wide web changed the terrain of print publishing. The digital age all but eliminated the need for major clearinghouses. A new era in publishing generally and street lit specifically was ushered in when the online retail titan, Amazon, released Kindle, their first electronic book reader in
E-books prompted many street lit authors to release their novels digitally. Unfortunately, this move often severely cut author profit margin. The appeal of e-books was their portability and cost, which meant that street lit titles were popular for shorter periods of time and generated considerably less profit per purchase. Ultimately, authors had to produce more content for a fraction of the profits they received before the digital turn. Omar Tyree, in an effort to remain culturally relevant and retain his usual book profits digitally serialized his novels and demanded that fans pay for each installment separately (Personal Interview). This endeavor was not very fruitful. In light of the post-turn changes to American publishing, “Stories Written on Concrete” does not move beyond 2007. It is important to note however, that street lit did not end with the digital turn.

Academic scholarship on street lit mainly pertains to library studies and the possible educational benefits of reading street lit texts. *Urban Grit* by Megan Honig in 2010 and *The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature* by Vanessa Irvin Morris in 2012 were created specifically to help librarians cater to the interests of street lit readers. Honig provided an annotated list of over 400 street lit texts, with suggestions for creating core collections and serving specific readerships like pre-teens and young adults. The *Advisory Guide* provided a clear and concise definition of street lit, which texts were classics within the genre and what fiction and non-fiction works were forerunners to the genre. Morris created guidelines and tangible standards for determining if a work can be deemed street lit. She also did an impeccable job of highlighting other subgenres that fall under urban fiction and street lit like urban erotica, chick lit, and thug love. The slim volume is not an
exhaustive text and does not deal with the textual and culture studies aspects of street lit. Further, the Guide focused mainly on texts written in the 2000s rather than the 1990s when the genre first took shape. Urban Grit and the Advisory Guide together provided librarians and instructors with insight into street lit; specifically which texts were appropriate for various age ranges and what texts were most popular, and a basic knowledge of specific novel themes, symbols and plotlines. These two texts provided a provisionary scope for street lit and highlighted how readership demanded drove what texts were produced, published, and circulated.

In 2014, Keenan Norris edited the first book length academic text on street lit, Street Lit: Representing the Urban Landscape. The mere existence of Street Lit: Representing the Urban Landscape points to the intellectual promise of street lit as an academic subject and the dearth of scholarship on the subject. The articles and interviews provided within were critical preliminary scholarship on street lit’s location in the larger field of African American literature, insightful narratives on how and why authors wrote street lit novels, and where the genre is potentially headed. Nevertheless, there is no full-length study on the literary and cultural implications of the genre.

Arguably, street lit was situated within two larger African American literary traditions; twentieth century African American urban literature (with novels such as The Street by Ann Petry, Native Son by Richard Wright, Maud Martha by Gwendolyn Brooks, and The Sport of the Gods by Paul Laurence Dunbar), and the popular Blaxploitation fiction from the 1960s and 1970s (with writers such as Iceburg Slim, Donald Goines, Herbert Simmons, and George Cain). The academic silence around street lit (like its popular fiction predecessors) alludes to larger rifts between academicians who study African American
literature and culture and the masses of people who consumed popular African American literature and culture.

**Preaching Promises: Migratory and Early African American Urban Literature**

Almost a century before street lit, African American literature and urban experience welded together to create a literary tradition that deals overwhelmingly with issues effecting African American city dwellers. As African Americans flocked to the urban North in droves for employment and a promise of a better life than that of the Jim Crow South, fictional stories began to emerge about the journey North, the transitional period of adjusting to city life, and the fraught, ever continuing battle against urban decay. The lineage of African American urban literature can be traced from some of the earliest written works by black people in north American cities and towns, including several slave narratives, the poetry by Phillis Wheatley and writings by Jupiter Hammon² through present day popular young adult fiction categorized as street lit, Hip Hop lit, or urban fiction³. African American literature pertaining to the urban experience has become one of the most widely created, published, and read black literary genres. Admittedly, many urban literature works belong to other genres and at times are not necessarily attributed to the urban literature tradition, especially in aesthetic quality. Most of the works within the twentieth century African American urban literary tradition are considered to be hightbrow

² The line between non-fiction narratives and literature dealing with urban North America is often blurred. Here I am citing non-fiction narratives as precursors to the urban literary genre because slave narratives and the like are often classified as literature in addition to being history.

³ Though precursors of street literature can be traced back to as early as the eighteenth century, the street literature, I posit, begins in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century and the emerging of African American post-emancipation migratory stories.
black fiction by today’s standards. These works are usually considered to be canonical African American and separate from the mass-market popular fiction published in the last quarter century. Nevertheless, the line between highbrow and popular fiction is permeable when considering themes and subjects more so than literary technique, composition, and style.

Though literature about urban experiences existed for centuries, urban literature was recognized as a genre in the second half of the twentieth century. Most libraries and bookstores attributed urban literature to other genres that coalesced around specific literary eras or modes of creation rather than a theme or landscape; New Negro, Naturalism, Modernism, and Post-Modernism for examples. In the broadest sense, works that dealt with social issues that specifically plagued black and brown people in metropolitan environments are categorized as African American urban literature.

Although the requirements to be considered African American urban literature are wide, the tradition has been one of the most innovative ways African American authors have employed to track and understand the ever-changing physical and metaphysical urban terrain. There have been three distinct periods within the African American urban literary tradition. First, was the urban literature origination period (roughly from 1900 to the 1930s), which mainly borrows literature from American realism, modernism, and the New Negro Movement. Literature published in this period overwhelmingly detailed the migratory narratives of African Americans who journeyed from South to North and confronted issues of disillusionment and frustration. Second was the middle urban literature period (from about 1940 to the end of the 1970s), which dealt with the lasting
effects of segregation and the beginnings of severe drug and sex abuse in black urban communities. The middle period was also when the urban literature genre splits between traditional literature on black urban experience and Blaxploitation fiction that centered the black urban underclass by telling the stories of pimps, drug users, and vagrants. 4 Third was popular African American fiction, which were mainly post-modern responses to urban living and what scholars such as Keenan Norris, Vanessa Irvin Morris and myself term as post-1980s’ street lit. While there were distinctive literary periods within the urban literature tradition, all urban works were connected through the captivating endeavor to understand, (re)articulate, and (re)imagine what happened in urban America for black and brown people.

Early in the twentieth century African Americans began a mass exodus from the rural South to the urban North strapped with meager clothes and means, motivated by whispers of good jobs, better housing, and the best hope for a decent future (Grossman 106). Often what came to these dreamers was disappointment, which found its way onto the pages of authors who sought to capture the sentiments of the times in which they wrote. In The Sport of the Gods, Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote a quasi-biographical story about an African American family that is forced away from their southern cottage because false allegations of thievery were lodged against the father, Berry Hamilton. After Berry’s sentencing, the rest of the Hamilton family moves to New York City, which before they departed, “had an alluring sound”

4 This bifurcation was also between highbrow and lowbrow black literature of the time.
(Dunbar 43). New York City, for the Hamiltons, was a new and scarily exciting place where they could begin their lives anew. The narrator attempts to articulate the dichotomous attraction and apprehension by telling the reader, “to the provincial coming to New York for the first time, ignorant and unknown, the city presents a notable mingling of the qualities of cheeriness and gloom” (Dunbar 45). The narrator, in reference to the newly arrived southerner, states, “the lights in the busy streets will bewilder and entice him. He will feel shy and helpless amid the hurrying crowds. A new emotion will take his heart as the people haste by him—a feeling of loneliness, almost grief...” (Dunbar 45). Dunbar weaves a narrative of devastation and disappointment for the entire Hamilton family with Joe (Berry’s son) becoming ensnared by the illicit New York City nightlife, Kit’s (Berry’s daughter) moral reputation becomes tarnished due to her interactions with some of the most vile men the city shelters, and Mrs. Hamilton forsakes her imprisoned husband by marrying another man to remain financially solvent. Life in the “big” city forces the Hamiltons to become immoral characters.

Similar in migratory progression and biographical overtones, Richard Wright’s Black Boy: American Hunger is a modernist coming-of-age story about a young African American intellectually and physically “hungry” boy named Richard (even the protagonist’s name evokes a sense of autobiography). After spending the majority of his formative years in the South, Richard relocates to Chicago. When

5 Hunger becomes symbolic of the protagonist’s quest for more and the direness of his urban situation.
Richard arrives he sees that, “unemployed men loitered in doorways with blank looks in their eyes, sat dejectedly on front steps in shabby clothing, congregated in sullen groups on street corners, and filled all the empty benches in the parks of Chicago's South Side” (Wright 288). It is important to note that the protagonist, before moving to Chicago, has spent a fair amount of time in various metropolitan southern cities and towns including Jackson, Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee. The protagonist’s description of those southern urban spaces is quite different from how he details his time in Chicago. For example, in chapter twelve, Richard wanders “aimlessly about the streets of Memphis, gaping at the tall buildings and the crowds...” without noticing, or at the very least not caring to tell his reader, how the people look who constitute the crowds at which he gazes (Wright 223). Wright’s lack of rich description of people on the streets in urban southern spaces can metaphorically be attributed to the racial and social differences in the South and the North in early twentieth century literature.

Leisurely standing around in the South was potentially extremely dangerous, even fatal, for a black man at the turn of the twentieth century (which is not to say that the same could not be said for the North) and that often times translated into character actions in literature. Simply, it was more common and more socially acceptable for African American urban literature characters to congregate on sidewalks in the North. Further, Southern spaces, whether rural or urban, are often literally assumed to be dangerous and depressing for African American characters in ways that the North was not. Both Dunbar and Wright helped lay the foundation for the geographical specificity (meaning the industrial urban North) and locational
variation (the actual cities and towns tended to vary) that was symptomatic of the urban literature tradition.

Richard Wright published another quasi-biographical novel, with similar naturalist themes, *Native Son* four years before *Black Boy*. According to Michelle Wallace, “Richard Wright’s *Native Son* was the starting point of the black writer’s love affair with Black Macho” (*Black Macho* 55). Wallace defined The Black Macho as black men who, “advocate(d) violence, the death of all whites, the moral and physical superiority of the black man.” She cited Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver as exemplars of the Black Macho based on their radical prose. She expanded her definition by stating that, “Black Macho was the stuff of which stirring, gut-spilling prose was made” (*Black Macho* 63). Justin Gifford’s conceptualization of urban containment within black literature in the first half of the twentieth century expanded Wallace’s definition of The Black Macho. Gifford states, “The emerging black neighborhood operates in detective literature as a symbolic proving ground for the constitution of white masculine identity” (*Pimping Fictions* 20). The emergence of the Black Macho preceded the dope boy image found in street lit in the urban literary imaginary as intimidating and domineering men who were able to move urban blacks into action, whether for Black Power or forming illegal drug enterprises.

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6 Gifford defined detective fiction as pulp stories from the 1920s-1950s that were the domain of white men and often featured a white detective who investigated criminal cases in urban spaces with mainly black suspects (*Pimping Fictions* 19).
In addition to African Americans relocation stories, the urban literature origination period provided modernist tales of dreams deferred and failed hopes. Ann Petry’s *The Street* is about a black woman’s desperate desire to rise above the socio-economic ills that plagued her daily reality in Harlem. The novel begins with the narrator personifying the cold winter weather that pervaded New York City. The narrator intimates that, “it [the cold] did everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street” (Petry 2). Petry uses cold weather to symbolically reinforce the harsh and isolating urban reality her characters face. Lutie Johnson, the protagonist, is an overworked, underpaid, single mother who is trying to clothe, nourish, and shelter herself and her young child Bub. Throughout the novel Lutie endures sexual harassment from her apartment building super, a nightclub proprietor, and a musician. Her marriage fails because her unemployed husband resents that she is the sole breadwinner for their family. These among other damaging social mishaps turns Lutie cold like the wind that discourages the people walking along the street she lives on. Lutie desperately hopes that she and Bub can evade the cold streets and preserve their wholeness and humanity. To this point the narrator tells the reader that, “none of those things would happen to her, Lutie decided, because she would fight back and never stop fighting back” (Petry 57). She fails. Lutie becomes so cold by the end of the novel that she murders the third man, Boots (the musician), who attempts to take advantage of her sexually. Further, Lutie

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7 This is a specific reference the poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes that begins with “What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?” which was basis of Lorraine Hansberry’s play “A Raisin in the Sun.” Both pieces arguably dealt with similar societal issues as Petry’s *The Street.*
fails her son by not protecting him from the devious lifestyle some people who loiter the Harlem streets live. Lutie fears that, “this street will keep him [Bub] from finishing high school; that it may do worse than that and get him into some kind of trouble that will land him in reform school because you [Lutie] can't be home to look out for him because you have to work” (Petry 67). After Lutie murders Boots she flees to Chicago to avoid arrest, leaving Bub behind to succumb to all things she feared most for her son. *The Street* illuminated the social issues that distinctly affected African American women in urban spaces and foreshadowed prevalent literary themes in street lit.

Early African American urban literature considered how ill effects, like poor housing conditions, directly impacted the lives of characters. *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is primarily an African American religious novel. Nevertheless, the story about a young spiritually confused boy has an urban setting, which directly impacted how the story was told. The novel begins with the protagonist staring a yellow stained ceiling, which conveys that the house is in ill repute from the outset. The house also has flimsy walls denoted by John, the protagonist’s, ability to hear all the other inhabitants’ every movement and even being able to hear radios playing in neighboring houses (Baldwin 12). All of the background minutiae alludes to the Grimes family home being poorly constructed, improperly maintained, and incapable of providing proficient privacy from the outside world. John Grimes’ home is enough to label *Go Tell it on the Mountain* an urban novel.

John also has several intimate interactions with the street. Ever since John could remember, the Grimes family “had taken to the streets... on their way to
church” (Baldwin 4). The precious moments John is in between his house and the Temple of the Fire Baptized Church are spent on the street, where another world exists. The street becomes a symbolic wasteland between two pillars of moral uplift; family and religion. The street and the church arguably engage in a war for John’s allegiance. The stakes of the battle are raised when the narrator states that John “would live in this shining city which his ancestors had seen with longing from far away. For it was his; the inhabitants of the city had told him it was his; he had but to run down, crying, and they would take him to their hearts and show him wonders his eyes had never seen” (Baldwin 31). His ancestors who longed for the city uncritically considered all that could be gained by migrating to urban spaces but not—according to this quote—what could be lost. When Baldwin writes that the inhabitants of the city told John the city was his, Baldwin intentionally leaves the who ambiguous. Baldwin does not distinguish between the prostitutes and the church mothers or the gamblers and the deacons. This impartial declaration given by John’s elders allows him the space to choose between the secular and the sacred. John is placed in the crosshairs of a moral and dilemma where he must choose between the pleasures of the world and the expectations of the black church.

Baldwin’s use of personal agency highlights another important feature of the African American urban literature tradition. Many urban literature characters are called to make personal and conscientious decisions about the kind of urban experience they will have. Often the choices are a life of fast-paced, extremely dangerous deviance or a mundane, honest, difficult, and unyielding one.
*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker chronologically belongs to the middle period of the urban literature tradition but the novel is more in line with the origination period thematically.\(^8\) This fictive depiction of a rural black sharecropper and his family in Georgia engages issues of the highest immorality, including child neglect, infidelity, and murder. Grange Copeland, the main character, has three distinct lives; two in Georgia and one in the urban North. While in New York City, Grange is able to regain some of the self-pride that his previous life as a sharecropper has taken away. He walks away from an altercation that leaves a white woman dead with feelings of triumph and sweet vengeance. Grange’s racially charged rage prevents him from saving a pregnant racist white woman’s life. Initially Grange “had come North expecting those streets paved with that gold...” (Walker 144). But he eventually “found that wherever he went whites were in control; they ruled New York as they did Georgia; Harlem as they did Pointing Street” (Walker 140). The weight of this racial realization weighs so heavily on Grange’s conscious that he elects to not help a drowning pregnant woman, because she is white. Walker arguably intends for this incident to be morally blurry. While Grange did not technically cause the woman’s death, he also did not save her from death. In addition to being an interlocutor for the origination and middle periods, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* also models how racial tensions sometimes manifest themselves in African American urban literature. Unlike Berry Hamilton in *The Sport of the Gods*, Grange Copeland has some form of agency in this racially

\(^8\) *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* was published in 1970 but was set in the 1930s and 1940s and is an African American migration story.
charged urban situation by being able to decide if he will help the pregnant white woman. Urban literature from all three periods present a myriad of interracial situations but what was significantly different between origination and middle urban literature was how much power and authority the African American characters had in those situations.

The origination period of African American urban literature established the how and why some of the fraught relationships existed between black bodies and urban concrete spaces. Migration stories captured and creatively expressed the hopes of many African Americans who left the horrid conditions of the South. These stories also attempt to articulate a sense disappointment in the lack of social mobility in the North, specifically in terms of housing, employment, education, and socio-economic growth.

**Professing Problems: Middle African American Urban Literature**

Next, the middle period shifted from stories about how African Americans went to the urban North en masse to how the successive literary generations weaved stories about African Americans who attempted to survive in urban environments and how those same people aspired to rise above or move away from cities. This period ushered in a bifurcation of highbrow and lowbrow within the urban literature tradition. In addition to the delineation between “good” and “bad” African American urban fiction, the middle period was responsible for the emergence of autobiographies, deviant culture stories, and fantasy novels within the tradition.
Non-fiction literature like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X's as Told to Alex Haley*, *Pimp: The story of my Life* by Iceberg Slim, and Donald Goines’ semi-autobiographical novel *Dopefiend* were significant to the evolution of urban literature in similar ways that slave narratives were important precursors to the origination era (Morris 11). These texts introduced a hyper-authenticity to the tradition by providing verified authors who actually lived the hardened and morally bankrupt lives described in their work. Their narratives about being gangsters, pimps, and drug abusers were “all access passes” into an alternate, underworld universe for many readers. According to Bonnie Andreyev, “Black pulp fiction or street literature has often been marketed to attend to (and critique) the white desire to voyeuristically inhabit the racialized ghetto” (Andreyev 22). The idea of being allowed in on a well-kept secret lifestyle coupled with the dark deviance described in the pages captivated generations of readers.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley*, was published in 1964. X details his formative years in a manner that is in line with the migratory stories attributed to the early period of urban literature; though notably his journey was from the rural Northwest to the urban Northeast. X claims that, “the streets had erased everything [he had] ever learned in school” (X 157). When X travels to Harlem he, “like hundreds of thousands of country-bred Negroes who had come to the Northern black ghetto before me, and have come since, I’d also acquired all the other fashionable ghetto adornments—the zoot suits and conk...liquor, cigarettes, then reefers—all to erase my embarrassing background” (X 59). He is able to speak to the physical realness of this lifestyle through experience. Malcolm X knew how
the texture of a zoot suit felt, he could recall the pungent odor of lye in his actual hair, and he could re-articulate how cigarettes and reefer felt in his lungs. He was able to give his readers what urban literature novelists often could only hint at; real experience. Therefore, when X says that he, “combed not only the bright-light areas, but Harlem’s residential areas from bad to worst, from Sugar Hill up near the Polo Grounds, where many famous celebrities lived, down to the slum blocks of old rat-trap apartment houses, just crawling with everything you could mention that was illegal and immoral,” his audience could treat his words as a testimony (X 79).

In the middle urban literature period African American authors began experiencing mass-market success with Blaxploitation fiction or the black crime fiction genre. Gifford defines what I term Blaxploitation era fiction as, Black Crime Fiction, which is “An umbrella term that encompasses the paperback novels written by African American criminals and prisoners in the years after World War II” (Pimping Fictions 2). I use Blaxploitation era fiction as an encompassing term that captures the intricacies that co-created literature and culture. Gifford similarly states, “The representations of black masculinity promoted in these books have influenced everything from Blaxploitation films to gangsta rap to contemporary African American literature” (Pimping Fictions 8).

Robert Beck, under the pseudonym Iceberg Slim, rose to literary fame by writing his “pimpography” Pimp: The Story of My Life and created a literary mold for autobiographies and fiction about illegal urban trades like pimping, drug dealing, and numbers running. Slim writes in the preface that he endeavors to take the

\[9\] See Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners by LaShawn Harris for more about metropolitan informal economies.
reader with him “into the secret inner world of the pimp” (XII). As an ex-pimp clawing at redemption, Slim offered his autobiography with the hope that, “if one intelligent, valuable young man or woman can be saved from the destructive slime; then the displeasure I have given will have been outweighed by that individual’s use of his potential in a socially constructive manner” (Slim XII). He then delivered a candidly vivid depiction of his introduction to pimping culture, how he built a “stable” of whores, why his drug addiction influenced his pimp name, and when he ultimately decided to walk away from pimping and “square up.” During his pimping reign, Slim would say things like, “you needed your ass kicked” to his whores (Slim 69). He would think about how he desperately wanted, “to control the whole whore [emphasis mine]” (Slim 87). Slim’s unfiltered, perverted musings had the power to entice and allure readers. Iceberg Slim, Malcolm X, Donald Goines and a handful of others who offered their most embarrassing and shameful moments as cautionary tales, were able to resonate with readers from the vantage of experience. Justin Gifford states, “orchestrated by white publicists from Hollywood, the publication of Beck’s Pimp: The Story of My Life represents at once the beginning of a literary renaissance of black popular literature and a further marginalization of black literary talent” (Pimping Fictions 47).

The narrator in Pimp represents a transitional character, which bridges the violence and dominance of the middle period Black Macho and the street lit Dope Boy or Gangsta character types. Slim did so by couching his very detailed and unapologetically grimy quasi-autobiography with a moral assessment of his previous life. His story became legendary and arguably a rite of passage narrative.
The narrative was alluring to an urban, mostly African American male audience, because there was substantive evidence to corroborate his stories of grandeur. Given that he left pimping behind, he was able to provide a kind of second sight on his life. He towed the line of captivating his audience with seemingly fantastical tales of control over women, personal circumstance, environmental effects while laying his faults and shortcomings bare for anyone to read. Robert Beck intricately understood that his past life as a pimp provided a platform for him to reach an urban audience and as he wanted a platform to advise younger urban dwellers on how to think more critically and moralistically about pimping. *Pimp* was an important forbearer of street lit through its subject matter and its moralistic rootedness. Further, *Pimp* can be understood as a non-traditional coming-of-age narrative in that the main character’s evolution happens through a coming-of-maturity.

Middle urban literature novels tended to also concentrate on detailing the grimiest and most perverse aspects of the urban underworld. For example in Herbert Simmons’ *Corner Boy*, the narrator describes an alleyway in the black belt of Chicago as a

“Long tunnel of darkness, angry curses... winos, gambling with each other, each trying to win enough money to buy another bottle of muscatel which all would wind up drinking. The flicker of a match in the blacked-out car—the rubber band, the heating of the spoon, the suck of the syringe, the plunge of the needle” (Simmons 55).

Simmons used stream of consciousness to identify the subconscious linkages between gambling, alcohol, drugs, and the anger and symbolic darkness felt by the characters in *Corner Boy*. Author George Cain used similar language in *Blueschild*
Baby. Georgie, the protagonist, says that, “there was something exotic about this dislocated piece of Harlem, the teeming crowd that trundles ceaselessly about the towers... The men posed before the bar, hands in pockets, or leaning on a fence, watching the young girls and women cart kids and groceries past” (Cain 30). Middle urban literature used bodies, dilapidated buildings, unkempt parks, and economically depressed communities to cast dreary images of black life in urban spaces.

Corner Boy, like many middle period urban literature novels, contrasted grey and depressing descriptions of urban environments with relatable and endearing main characters. In particular, Scar—one of Jake’s closest friends—is a drug abuser but his tragic story humanizes him and his addiction. Simmons writes, “Scar...wanted to play football in college more than anything in his life...He had to go to work and take care of his invalid mother, because his father, who crippled his mother one night in a drunken rage, got killed...His old man tore up the car and Scar’s dream” (Simmons 55-56). Scar uses drugs to numb the pain of his dream shattering before it was realized. Middle urban literature attempted to illuminate the progression of social descent through riveting individual stories of tough luck and even harder heartbreaks.

Additionally, these urban literature texts acted as moral compasses to guide readers through the urban geographies of the underworld, which had a different set of rules for conduct and code of ethics. In Sam Greenlee’s urban fantasy novel, The Spook Who Sat by the Door, Dan Freeman infiltrates the CIA and subsequently causes law enforcement to be dislodged from the south side of Chicago. The novel included
all the usual urban literature suspects, including prostitutes, racist white antagonists, drug users, and gang members. In the final chapter Dan Freeman elects to kill Dawson, a black police sergeant, for the sake of the Freedom Fighter Movement. Freeman believes that violence is the only way for black people to attain liberation in the United States. Freeman believes his actions are justified because of how hostilely and brutally police officers tend to treat the black inhabitants on the south side. He sees the mission to reclaim black neighborhoods as more important than adhering to the law.

Chester Himes’ *A Rage in Harlem* also served as a social commentary on the corrupt nature of law enforcement in metropolitan cities. In the novel’s opening, a con artist impersonating a U.S. Marshal says to the protagonist, “being as you’re a colored man like myself, I’m going to let you off this time. You give me the two hundred bucks, and you’re a free man” (Himes 11). This scene described three issues with civilian and law enforcement interaction that *A Rage in Harlem* considers. First, con artists feel comfortable enough to impersonate a law enforcement official, which can be considered, at best, a terrible attempt at flattery and at worse a blatant disregard for authority and rule of law. Second, Jackson begs for the con artist to take a bribe. By overtly asking for an illegal bargain, Jackson also exhibits disrespect toward the law. Third, beginning the novel with such a scene and the subsequent hyperbolic buffoonery on the part of actual law enforcement characters indicates particularly negative and low expectations for persons in authority. These anti-law sentiments extended to urban minority communities throughout the twentieth century. Urban literature as a literary tradition
overwhelmingly dealt with issues of police brutality and abuse of authority in the forms of fraud and corruption.

Often, politically charged literature written by authors like Greenlee and Himes, have been differentiated from African American urban fiction about social degenerative characters such as pimps, prostitutes, and drug dealers. However, detective and crime fiction from the 1960s and 1970s was co-created on a continuum of urban black fictive expressivity, which highlighted the fractured and often competing understandings of the black urban experience in the United States. Similarly, Gifford "invites us to rethink Himes as a more intermediary literary figure, bridging the hard-boiled detective literature of the early twentieth century to the popular African American crime literature that has emerged in the past four decades" (*Pimping Fictions* 17).

From the 1940s through the end of the 1970s, the United States experienced a second world war, a cold war, a Vietnam War, legal and social civil rights struggle, the Black Arts Movement, a war on drugs, and a war on crimes. Novels such as *Corner Boy, Blueschild Baby, The Spook Who Sat by the Door,* and *A Rage in Harlem* and personal narratives like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley,* *Pimp: The Story of my Life,* and *Dopefiend* were all creative literary responses to the societal pressures of this period of great change and destruction. The middle period of urban literature endeavored to use beautiful, brutally honest language to voice collective frustration, anger, moral confusion, and desperation for a people in several states of transition due to war and major legal decisions.
The available African American fiction concerning North American urban
documented in the 1960s and 1970s can be understood within two distinct but co-
created fields; the Black Arts Movement and Holloway House influenced print
during the 1960s and 1970s the Black Arts Movement emerged as a
“spiritual sister” to the Black Power concept. According to Amiri Baraka, Black Arts
works had an obligation to be about black people and to be politically charged.
James Smethurst refers to the movement as a “form of political and artistic
nationalism from the 1960s and 1970s” (2). Natalie Collins and Margo Crawford
defined the movement as a cultural push to redefine how blacks are perceived or
how black beauty is defined.¹⁰ Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the door* has been
categorized as a Black Arts novel due to the main character, that embodied how
black people could beat ‘The Man’ or the United States Federal Government at its
own game by infiltrating the CIA and mastering the tools and the agency's tactics
utilizes then ultimately using the government’s tools against it. Further, the novel
takes place in Chicago, Illinois, one of the major sites of the Black Arts Movement
(Smethurst). Alternatively, Holloway House, a small publishing imprint, grew in
popularity during the 1970s when they published Donald Goines’ early quasi-
autobiographical urban fiction. Holloway House branded itself on an urban grime
moniker and proclaimed itself to be “the world’s largest publisher of black
experience paperbacks.” Despite their differences, both the Black Arts Movement

¹⁰ Collins and Crawford 7
and Holloway House endeavored to provide new kinds of literature focused on the black urban experience.

Baraka, the Black Arts Movement most central author, called for black poems that *kill* in his poem “Black Art.” Within Baraka’s Black Arts prose, including his play “Dutchman,” he addressed the contentious racial division between white and black in the United States with biting honesty. He unapologetically called for black people to use their words as weapons against whiteness and institutional racism that was built on the division of color within the United States. Similarly, Holloway House authors like Goines, Beck and Joseph Nazel wrote novels that were loosely based on their experiences (and other people they knew) as black men in America. The honesty used by both Black Arts and Holloway House writers was complicated because their works never could achieve complete honesty due to the nature of fiction writing. They were writing “true fiction,” which blurred the line between fiction and non-fiction and left the reader wondering what was real (and honest) and what was make believe.

**Proselytizing a New Present: Contemporary African American Urban Fiction**

The middle period of African American urban literature was also a preparation period for what scholars such as Keenan Norris and Vanessa Irvin Morris, and myself term, street lit. According to Keenan Norris street lit “is a body of American literature produced by post-1980s 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” (Norris XXII). Similarly Vanessa Irvin Morris defined street lit as, “a genre that
provides an interpretive lens through which readers witness the daily survival
struggles and dramas of city residents living certain lifestyles. These lifestyles are
varied, from the pimp and prostitute to the working single mom and stories about
detective and the news anchor” (Morris 1). Justin Gifford asserted that street lit
novels, “Feature stories of black criminals who attempt to escape the confined
spaces of modern America—prisons, housing projects, and ghetto streets. Against
the backdrop of these white-constructed spaces of containment and surveillance,
the criminal characters of this genre become outlaws as a radical stance against
systemic white racism” (Pimping Fictions 3). I define the genre as a contemporary
African American popular fiction genre that can be traced from the early 1990s
(with precursors dating back to the early twentieth century) and to the
establishment of black pulp publishers like Cash Money Content and movies based
on African American urban novels like Precious (Push) and Addicted. Street lit,
similar to its predecessors was often categorized as low-brow fiction. According to
Justin Gifford, “while street literature has garnered a loyal constituency of readers,
there has been a growing controversy concerning the genre’s popularity, its quality,
and its social message” (Pimping Fictions 152). Nevertheless, it evolved to include
sub-genres such as gangsta lit, urban erotica and sista lit, and writers such as Sister
Souljah, Zane, K’wan Foye, Sapphire, and others. Street lit was often denounced for
it’s misogynistic, hyper-masculine romantic character relationships. Many street lit
novels balanced a precarious line of telling cautionary tales and glamorizing street
culture, which is full of prostitutes, pimps, gangster, drug dealers, and abusers.
Further, street lit was a distinct literary era in the urban literature tradition because
of its production and publication innovativeness. However, it was also connected to the previous urban literature periods through the continued use of geographical specificity and locational variation. Street lit, like the urban literature tradition, details the pungent smells of human struggle, the texture of urban decay, and the bated breath of hope that emanates from city living. Street lit is urban literature’s evolutionary response to Hip Hop culture, claims of a post-racial America, the advent of social media, and the election of the first black president of the United States.

My dissertation illuminates how street lit was aligned with the larger historiographical trajectory of African American literature. It also makes a case for how street lit disrupted canonical subjectivities by focusing on characters that operate outside the bounds of polite and civil society. In chapter one, “Literature That Grew on Concrete: Understanding Street Lit,” I delimit the scope and depth of the overall project by considering how street lit emerged in the 1990s as a response to robust black readership culture and sustained itself in spite of a waning public readership in the twenty-first century. Specifically, chapter one highlights street lit’s marginalized position in contemporary African American literature, while espousing how this alternate position is central to the genre’s wide spread success in the popular African American imagination.

Next, chapter two, “If Skills Sold: Street Lit’s Commodification” focuses on how street lit was hyper-visible in book retail spaces but was relatively invisible or muted in scholarship and the classroom. This chapter coalesces around the economic and cultural value of contemporary black creative expression by considering how street lit and Hip Hop music navigated competing pressures of mainstream popularity and moral uplift obligations primarily using Essence and New York Times bestsellers data and Billboard Music charts. The
third chapter, “Fly Girls and Bad Bitches: Gender and Sexuality in Street Lit,” considers how street lit texts used gender expectations to construct conflicted characters through the use of a Hip Hop feminist praxis. Street Lit novels often contested and reified normative gender and sexuality frameworks for people of color. By interrogating the intersection of race and gender in street lit texts, I am able to link the genre to a broader Hip Hop culture while using these fictive alternate realities as a pedagogical tool to imagine better lives for people who live in urban spaces. The final chapter—“Doorknocker Earrings and Dangerous Liaisons: The Cultural Memories of Street Lit”—considers how the genre innovatively used material culture and collective memories to tell stories about blackness and urbanity. I use Maurice Halbwachs’ theoretical approach to collective memory, Stephen Henderson’s concept of mascons (massive concentrations of experiential energy), and Hip Hop culture’s obsession with materiality and consumption to position street lit as a Hip Hop culture producer, a site of material memory, and a way for the newest generation to collectively remember coming-of-age. Through these chapters, I offer four theoretical approaches to understanding street lit and (re)imagining the discourse around the intersectional experiences of brown and black people in the contemporary moment.

Overall, my dissertation aims to define street lit as an African American literary genre; textually analyze a number of genre-specific novels; and (re)define street lit as an important site of cultural production at the turn of the twenty-first century. Through my dissertation, I hope to shift the position of street lit from the margins to the center of African American literary and cultural discourses. This shift will help academicians, community activists, librarians, and teachers understand how and why street lit was able to resonate

11 Hip Hop feminism allows for the acknowledgement of both the misogyny, patriarchy, and sexism that pervades Hip Hop culture and its usefulness and import to younger generations of popular culture consumers.
well with young people of color in ways that other literature was unsuccessful. Further, my
dissertation seeks to serve as a roadmap for integrating street lit into academic spaces,
specifically in American Literature Studies, and Popular Culture Studies. By no means will
the following chapters capture every street lit novel ever written or discuss every author.12

The purpose of my dissertation is to bring attention to the genre, begin to identify its scope
and connections to other academic disciplines, and consider some of the genre’s intellectual
and cultural benefits. I hope to add meaningful scholarship to the emerging field of African
American urban fiction scholarship.

Urban literature was the fiction (and non-fiction narratives) about black inner-city
experiences. Street lit was comprised of stories that were set on concrete terrain and were
about the effects of human closeness that begot metropolitan life. The street has become a
real, yet imaginary surface for writers to explore the rich textures, vivacious contours, and
fleshiness of human experience. The inner city streets provided a common path for readers
and the characters they love to interact in intimate ways. Urban literature had the ability to
resonate with the real lives of readers while transporting them to alternate and parallel
universes. Street lit and African American urban fiction more generally have become a part
of a powerful lexicon which shapes how we define of the African American experience.

12 For such work refer to Urban Grit by Megan Honig.
CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE THAT GREW ON CONCRETE: UNDERSTANDING STREET LIT

“The inner-city streets were hard and represented hard times.”

-True to the Game by Teri Woods

The year was 1993. The United States was getting acclimated to president Bill Clinton’s administration. Home computers were becoming available to the average person. The World Wide Web was captivating a global audience. Oprah Winfrey was a common household name and her monthly book club has altered the bestsellers’ list landscape. Any book Ms. Winfrey added to her reading list instantly received a massive boost in sales. Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize in literature for The Bluest Eye. Terry McMillian has released her novels, Disappearing Acts and Waiting to Exhale, to shocking and overwhelming success (both novels were turned into major motion films shortly thereafter due to this success). Hip Hop music and culture was spreading out of Brooklyn to all regions of the United States and beyond; though most popular mainstream television, radio, and print outlets viewed it as a fad that would undoubtedly pass with enough time (Rose). Mario Van Peeples’ film, New Jack City, had begun to immortalize the seductively gritty 1980s’ crack cocaine era.

Within this climate, Omar Tyree published what is now considered to be the first street lit novel, Flyy Girl. Tyree dedicated the novel, “to all sisters and brothers in memory of the glamorous and exciting ‘80s.” This coming-of-age story graced numerous best sellers’ lists, was highly circulated in most North American metropolitan public libraries, and captivated black urban audiences for over twenty years (Norris VII-XI). Tyree was one of the progenitors of street lit. He was the first (self-proclaimed) urban author to have tremendous success as an independent writer in the contemporary African American urban
literary tradition while addressing issues stemming from the crack-cocaine era. Over the years, *Flyy Girl*, gained the coveted status of a must-read for urban fiction lovers, it was only second in popularity to *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah. After twenty-two years in print, the novel was still culturally relevant enough that its fans, old and new, pushed for it to be adapted into a feature length film, which is slated to appear in theaters in 2017.

Tyree, as a novelist, also embodied the spirit of street lit culture through the marketing mediums he employed to sell his early work. After unsuccessfully pitching *Flyy Girl* to a number of major publishing houses. Tyree did what many early Hip Hop artists were forced to do as a result of lacking enthusiasm from major recording labels, he published, marketed, and sold his work under his own imprint MARS Productions (Tyree Interview). Tyree, and other early street lit novelists employed Hip Hop techniques to get their work into the hands of their readers. 

In 1989, Terry McMillan’s second novel, *Disappearing Acts*, ushered in a new era of African American popular fiction within mainstream publishing houses like Random House, HarperCollins, Penguin Books, and Simon & Schuster. In addition to *Disappearing Acts* and *Waiting to Exhale*, McMillan subsequently published *How Stella got her Groove Back* with Viking Books, a division of Penguin Books. All three novels were adapted to feature length films and were lauded as brilliant, unexpected successes in both print and film. McMillan’s novels proved to conventional, large-scale presses several imperatives. First, her works proved that an active, contemporary African American readership exists. Second, African American readers were willing to purchase books and invest in African American authors and their branded materials, i.e. films and memorabilia. Third, African American lay readers

13 Teri Woods also self-published in the early 1990s.
were invested in contemporary issues that overwhelmingly affected black people, especially in inner city spaces, and enjoyed fiction that grappled with such subjects. Finally, McMillan provided a marketing and managing blueprint for large publishing houses to sell black urban books. McMillan’s success opened the once-firmly shut doors of major publishing houses to African American popular fiction authors.

Terry McMillan’s *Disappearing Acts* was a metaphorical bridge that integrated Street lit into the larger field of popular African American fiction. *Disappearing Acts*, set in 1980’s Brooklyn, details the hopes, wishes, doubts, and fears of urban working class African American characters with the romance of Franklin Swift and Zora Banks. This novel, like *Flyy Girl*, takes place in the 1980s but instead of glamorizing the rise of Hip Hop and crack cocaine in Philadelphia, it weaves the concurrent middle class aspirational narratives of a black man and a black woman. The novel’s inspired film starred Wesley Snipes as Franklin and Sanaa Lathan as Zora. This was the second of McMillan’s novels to successfully cross over into the silver screen. McMillan’s early works encouraged major publishing houses like Simon & Schuster to invest in popular African American fiction; in turn giving rise its large-scale commodification.

Although, McMillan attempted to separate her work and her image from the urban literature tradition (Street lit in particular her mainstream success nevertheless was a precursor to the Street lit genre. To her credit, McMillan’s novels were thematically

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14 Omar Tyree credited McMillan’s work with making contemporary black books marketable and him getting his first major publishing contract in a personal interview on 10/10/2016.
different than Street lit. Traditionally, McMillan’s characters were middle or working class black urban dwellers who confronted life and all of its hurdles as legitimately employed people with mostly functional familial structures. Her characters and their interactions were distinctly different from those of the drug dealers, hustlers, playboys, flyy girls, and prostitutes that pervaded Street lit novels. Further, McMillan believed that her works had higher political stakes for African American readers and on the whole were more in line with canonical African American novels. Still, McMillan’s wide popularity helped Street lit gain a national platform.

Street lit was identified by several competing names when critics, authors, and readers were attempting to understand what the genre was including Hip Hop Lit, Ghetto Romance or Urban Lit. The term street lit is the most commonly used name for contemporary African American urban fiction among readers. The “street” in street lit was a meta-symbol for urbanity, blackness, and the social underclass. The street was a purposely generic, broad, and was meant to embody the spirit of densely populated urban cities with large communities of black and brown people. Yet, it was a symbol that invoked specific meaning for each region of the United States, every ’hood, and each block (Murray; Rose). For example, in urban neighborhoods a popular way of identifying someone engaged in socially deviant behavior was to proclaim that they were “in those streets.” In this context, “those” streets were code for someone performing illegal activities that frequently transpired outside of homes, schools, or churches—all symbolic spaces of safety, moral

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15 I use canonical here to denote the stark contrast between African American novels that are celebrated in academic spaces from street lit novels, not as an indication or justification of an African American literary canon.
rootedness, and spiritual love, respectively. Merriam-Webster provides five definitions of “street,” the last most aptly attests to street lit’s understanding of the word:

1.  
   a : a thoroughfare especially in a city, town, or village that is wider than an alley or lane and that usually includes sidewalks  
   b : the part of a street reserved for vehicles  
   c : a thoroughfare with abutting property  <lives on a fashionable street>

2.  : the people occupying property on a street  <the whole street knew about the accident>

3.  : a promising line of development or a channeling of effort  <a crafty politician working both sides of the street>  <success through compromise is a two-way street>

4.  capitalized  
   a : a district (as Wall Street or Fleet Street) identified with a particular profession  
   b : the people who work in such a district  <doing better than the Street expected>

5.  : an environment (as in a depressed neighborhood or section of a city) of poverty, dereliction, or crime  <grew up on the mean streets>

Mirriam-Webster also provides relevant examples for “on the street” and “in the street” describing them as, “idle, homeless, or out of a job” and “out of prison; at liberty,” respectively. According to Vanessa Irvin Morris,

“The street, in and of itself, can be considered a motif for street literature texts because the street itself is often characterized as an awakened, ominous presence... The street is a silent antagonist. It never speaks in language or voice. It speaks through the gaps in silence—the exhale, the gasp before the breath—the street speaks. It demands response to the blood it sheds, as if a sacrificial altar upon which souls are summoned to purgatory. The street positions itself as a necessary rite of passage... The street is an unnatural hell...” (Morris 20).

Overall, the street has become a symbol and motif within contemporary black literature and culture.
The symbolic “street” used across street lit texts was a contradictory space of freedom and surveillance. Street lit characters were able to exercise their urban expertise through a litany of illegal, underground rackets. Some street lit characters specialized in sex work as pimps and hoes, or gold diggers. For example, Mercedes in *Flyy Girl*, Gena in *True to the Game*, and Winter Santiago in *The Coldest Winter Ever* are all considered to be gold diggers. All three characters are not prostitutes because they do not have a pimp, nor do they negotiate a specific monetary price for sexual interactions, rather they use sex and their sexual attractiveness to maintain an economically secure lifestyle. Mercedes instructs Tracy to follow in her footsteps by exchanging sexual favors for material goods and personal profit. Mercedes tells Tracy,

“I told you, don’t give them nothin’ unless they got something to give you. Now I know Victor is a suave young-boy and all, but you won’t get nothin’ out of it, ‘cause I had his older brother, and I know. They some stingy motherfuckers. Half the time, girls end up buying them shit* (*Flyy Girl* 212).

Mercedes encourages Tracy to test the bounds of black female sexual freedom, but can only do so because she has been observing Tracy’s interaction with young boys in their neighborhood.

*True to the Game* by Teri Woods opens with Gena, the main character, traveling from Philadelphia to New York City (from one “street” to another, however the cultural rules and social hierarchies remain constant, which points to the broadness of “the street”), in search of men of great financial means. All the while,

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16 A gold digger, commonly defined, was a beautiful woman who exchanged sexual favors for material possessions and other financial benefits from men. For further information hear Kanye West’s song, “Gold Digger.”
she elects to remain romantically tethered to Jamal, who verbally and physically abuses her in exchange for lavish gifts and financial stability (*True to the Game* 17). Even Gena’s love for her leading opposite, Quadir, is deeply entangled with the life he can provide her, due to his seemingly endless supply of money. Gena is free to explore the bounds of her own love with multiple partners. But love for her is deeply entangled with the financial ability of her suitors who use their money as a form of control.

It should be noted that by conventional standards *True to the Game* is not a “good” novel. The plot line is at times nonexistent and the underdeveloped characters appear and disappear without warning. In fact, the entire novel reads more like Woods pieced several different stories together without care for continuity. Nevertheless, this novel is a cornerstone of street lit and should be celebrated for its innovation in publishing and distribution. Woods self-edited and published *True to the Game*, which, “was hand bound with [a] gold gun on the front” (Woods I). Woods was able to sell over a million copies from the trunk of her car, at independently owned African American bookstores, and on street corners. This novel, with all of its flaws, characterized what connected the newest wave of African American urban literature to previous iterations like the prose of Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck) and Donald Goines. Additionally, *True to the Game* exemplified how street lit novelists were able to mass-produce and distribute their work before publishing houses were willing to print urban novels. Street lit enthusiasts who read *True to the Game* were probably more willing to forgive Woods for misspelled words and poorly constructed sentences, because they knew that the words on the page
can be “trusted.” Readers understood that some editor did not amend Wood’s words “to appeal to a broader audience” or demanded she augment sections of the novel to fit the vision of the publisher. In addition, only being able to buy the novel from Woods made the experience of owning a copy exclusive and special.

Similar to Gena using men in True to the Game, Winter Santiago, in The Coldest Winter Ever, uses men like Sterling and GS to remain a Ghetto Princess. GS believes that Winter is the key to establishing his image as a major drug player because she inherited status by being Ricky Santiago’s (the former kingpin of New York City) daughter. These characters and countless others represented one of the primary motivations for the men on “the street” to risk their lives, gang banging, and trapping. Sister Souljah’s The Coldest Winter Ever was a definitive example of street lit. The novel is a bildungsroman that weaves a cautionary tale about the urban trappings of material vanity, sexual possession, and the ill effects of drug abuse and gang violence. Vanessa Irvin Morris hailed The Coldest Winter Ever as a seminal novel because of its literary form, content, and publishing impact. Sister Souljah was a community activist and rapper who was known for being publicly criticized by President Bill Clinton. Her unique fame socially positioned the novel and author in several concurrent Hip Hop, political, and popular culture conversations.

Opposite street lit female characters, the genre’s male characters strove to be the best, highest grossing drug dealer, pimp, or hustler in their particular neighborhood, borough, or city. These roles were limited to male characters because women usually were

\[\text{17} \text{ Meaning a well groomed, appropriately behaved, inaccessible trophy of a woman for urban America, i.e. black men characters that succeeded in illegal.}\]

\[\text{18} \text{ Selling drugs in a system that was a known and identified as a “trap,” because doing so surely led to incarceration, loss of loved ones, and/or death.}\]
not kingpins in street lit or on the street. Though it is important to note that women were often instrumental in the success of men. Gifford argues that street lit reversed “the usual gender dynamics of pimp literature,” which generally had a men protagonist who used women’s sex value for profit by constructing strong women protagonists (Pimping Fictions 152). However, street lit only superficially centered female characters. Despite being in the foreground, female characters maintained the same marginal and low-agency positions for women characters as Blaxploitation era fiction.

Women were either romantic partners or some type of mother figure within the story. Acquiring the most beautiful, best dressed, and curvaceously proportioned young\(^{19}\) woman available completed the iconic drug dealer image for most street lit male characters. Within street lit romances, female characters were usually relatively younger than their male partners in terms of age and maturity. Age and beauty for these characters were symbiotic, in ways that blurred the line of predatory sexual relationships.

When more street lit novels emerged in the 1990s, by authors such as Teri Woods, Shannon Holmes, K’wan Foye, Sister Souljah, Zane and others, a gender divide was drawn between novels and among street lit authors. Within street lit texts, rigidly defined character roles for men and women were established. Street lit men were expected to be brutish, emotionless, promiscuous leaders, and women had to beautiful, seductive, subservient, cunning mothers. The inflexibility of these roles provided fertile soil for street lit authors to contest, reify, and redefine African American woman and manhood. Authors were able to use these defined roles as a barometer for their individual characters.

\(^{19}\) Women’s physical beauty in street lit was inextricably linked to youthfulness. The beautiful women in stories are usually under the age of eighteen but had bodily features of mature women.
Both men and women were expected to inhabit certain roles that were rigidly bound by gender expectations and had unwritten standards that were devoid of unconditional love although romance was central in most street lit stories. Romance, on the metaphorical street, did not adhere to the standard definitions of love and devotion, which ideally were freely given and unencumbered by money, social status, or material gain. The pressures of the street distorted notions of reality including affection, loyalty, and emotional connections. Surrounding social intrusions like poverty, socio-economic immobility, and generational education stagnation obfuscated basic emotions and altered the meaning and telling of black urban romance. Often the subject of romantic affection shifted from person-to-person love typically detailed in romance novels to person-to-idealism, or person-to-era, or person-to-lifestyle. In *The Coldest Winter Ever*, GS and Winter are more invested in the urban social status the other can provide rather than a relationship built on love, trust, and respect. Souljah explicitly stated in interviews that these character choices were intentionally devoid of moralistic grounding as an authorial attempt to force the reader to consider his/her personal motivations for romantic relationships. This lack of intentionality on the part of the characters became so commonplace within the continuum of street lit novels that it was merely part of the landscape, a norm, or expected standard of the genre.

Even within these intimate relationships—that were played out on front porches, street corners, and under the seedy luminosity of street lamps—there was constant surveillance. All the different racketeers were constantly under the scrutiny of legal enforcement, social welfare program gatekeepers, and other characters that were supposed to act as moral compasses within the story. Characters like Sister Souljah in *The Coldest

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20 For more detail on form and style in the Romance genre see Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. 
Winter Ever and Gah Git in True to the Game are forces of good and high moral integrity, meant to act as the moral consciousness within their respective novels. Street rules often distorted, inverted, and even obliterated socially accepted definitions of decency, good work ethic, and fairness. It was often difficult to discern right from wrong within street lit and on the street.

Word on the Street: Locating "The Street" in Literature

Polarizing academic expectations for popular African American fiction further complicated how street lit was defined, categorized, and catalogues. Street lit, like many other popular fiction genres, was labeled as lowbrow literature in academic spaces and defined as pulp fiction in the marketplace. Pulp fiction, defined as “fiction dealing with lurid or sensational subjects, often printed on rough, low-quality paper manufactured from wood pulp,” has historically been labeled as inadequate and dismissed by academic scholars.21 It is important to note that scholars like Lawrence W. Levine argue that fiction often begins as a popular phenomenon and only eventually becomes classified as highbrow literature with time and sustained praise. Levine also delineates between highbrow literature’s inaccessibility and lowbrow literature’s commonness by suggesting that literature has traditionally been evaluated within a hierarchy that prefers elitism. However, the line between popular and high literature is often arbitrarily drawn and Levine suggests what is “more troubling [is] the tendency to equate the notion of culture with that of hierarchy of culture so that to examine closely the manner in which the hierarchy of culture [is] erected, or to challenge the reasoning behind the hierarchy’s parameters, [is] translated almost

inevitably into an attack on the idea of culture itself” (Levine 7). Most important to understanding street lit’s cultural significance and its place in African American literature, Levine argues, that literature—more specifically, mass consumption and cultural absorption of popular fiction—is vital to the process of critically understanding and preserving historically significant culture and/or literature.

Within Levine’s definitions of high and lowbrow literature, street lit is easily characterized as lowbrow literature. First, book sales were a major determinant for street lit success. Often, reprints of street lit books plastered the number of copies sold on the front cover front and/or boast of high bestsellers rankings. Second, street lit, as a genre, was lauded for its accessibility to ordinary readers. These novels were easily read and understood by people with varying literacy skills. Third, most street lit novels have grammatical and stylistic errors due to little or no editorial resources. Many publishers did not require or provide copy editors for these novels because the books were meant for quick consumption and were able to sell without the extra effort. Some avid street lit readers were able to finish a novel a

Figure 1: Reprints of The Coldest Winter Ever state that more than a million copies of the text have been printed and the novel’s sequel, Midnight, is a New York Times bestseller.
day. Therefore, publishers often preferred high quantities rather than quality street lit books.²² Fourth, street lit novels were intentionally historically and culturally specific. The characters use slang that is specific to a particular region and time era, which dated the material and grounded street lit in a cultural moment. Street lit, like Shakespeare’s plays and symphonies (Levine uses both to track the process of moving from popular, or lowbrow, to highbrow culture), was created as a cultural commentary to be consumed and critically considered by the masses, not an elite specialty group.²³

Street lit’s lowbrow status was both helpful and hindering. Foremost, the status indicated that street lit’s overall intention of being for the common person was being achieved. Street lit readers were the people authors like Sister Souljah and Omar Tyree most endeavored to reach.²⁴ Street lit not only reached its target audience, it was also a lucrative genre. A number of street lit novelists were able to make a comfortable living through book sales and venturing into other modes of cultural production, like film adaptations of their novels and television series based on their characters.²⁵ However, street lit was often dismissed in academic settings and deemed inappropriate literature for young readers. The genre’s commonness was a major reason behind the silences around the genre. The silences created a glass ceiling that prevented the genre from being elevated

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²² For a fuller discussion on street lit publishing, see chapter two.

²³ This is not a comparison street lit, Shakespeare, and symphonies, rather it is an attempt to highlight the reasons why street lit was often labeled as lowbrow literature.

²⁴ Both authors told me that they wrote for minority women navigating urban spaces.

²⁵ Zane has had the most success with film and television adaptations of her work with the movie “Addicted” and the “Sex Chronicles” show. Also, Omar Tyree recently contracted Lionsgate to film a version of Flyy Girl.
from the street (meaning the everyday urban reader) to a higher plane of consumption. The
genre was pigeonholed as marginal literature for minorities.

In addition to hierarchical delineations, cataloguing street lit texts in library
collections and bookstores helped restrict the scope of the genre. Street lit novels were
usually categorized in library collections as Young Adult Fiction. The Library of Congress’
cataloguing system defines Young Adult Fiction as books with subjects and reading
comprehension levels that challenges youth readers. Generally, Young Adult Fiction is for
middle and high school aged readers. More specifically, “For Library of Congress purposes
juvenile or children’s literature is defined as material for an audience of up to and including
ninth grade or age fifteen. Young Adult Literature is generally defined as ages twelve
through high school” (LOC.gov). This categorization in regards to street lit was a constant
site of contention among librarians, classroom teachers, parents, and readers. Many figures
of authority (over young adult readers) took issue with the mature subject matter of street
lit prose and the genre’s disregard for grammatical and stylistic conventions that typically
governed fiction writing. Scholars like Vanessa Irvin Morris and Meagan Honig (both
librarians) grappled with the appropriateness of street lit books in their respective texts on
the subject and both came to similar conclusions: street lit stories were often extrapolated
from reality and/or reflected a distorted version of its reader’s true stories. This magical
realism26 was a definitive point of departure for street lit within contemporary popular
literature, especially when comparing street lit to other contemporary popular Young Adult
Fiction like The Golden Compass by Philip Pullman (1995), Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s
Stone by J. K. Rowling (1997), Holes by Louis Sacher (1998), and The Sisterhood of the

26 Mirriam-Webster defines magical realism as, “painting in a meticulously realistic style of
imaginary or fantastic scenes or images.”
Traveling Pants by Ann Brashares (2001). Nevertheless, many street lit novels were coming-of-age stories meant to encourage readers to create a personal moral constitution of good virtues. Street lit stories were aimed at helping urban youth navigate through the maturation process. Thus, it was immeasurably important that street lit stories dealt with pertinent issues that plagued urban young adults like drug trafficking, gang violence, sexual violence, and reproductive rights despite trepidation from librarians, teachers, and parents.

Additionally, some street lit novels were categorized as romance or general fiction rather than Young Adult Fiction. Street lit novels that have a plethora of graphic sex and depraved violence scenes and that use an overwhelming amount of vulgar language were often excluded from the Young Adult Fiction category, even if the characters were high school aged or the story was about coming-of-age. Street lit’s reflective realism complicated where the line of appropriate young adult literature stood. Often inner city young adults needed a safe platform and the language to discuss traumatic experiences that were a byproduct of their environment and street lit was that springboard. Street lit also risked exposing young minds to mature subjects before it was developmentally appropriate to do so. It was often difficult for librarians, teachers, and parents to know when it was appropriate and, perhaps, helpful to introduce street lit to young readers.

In addition to categorization woes, there was an ongoing debate as to whether street lit’s relegation to a specific and narrow audience was advantageous or potentially detrimental to the longevity of the genre. Sister Souljah, wrote about black (African Diasporic) families and intentionally targeted her work towards minority readers. Omar Tyree created strong black women protagonists because that was what he had seen around

27 All examples are pulled from Goodreads.com’s Popular Young Adult Fiction Books List.
him growing up. These authors had the ability to explicitly write for a black audience without the need to make their works more accessible to a wider audience or to ensure their novels would sell to non-minority audiences. There was freedom in being able to focus solely on black urban subjectivities. And to a certain extent, that freedom was also restrictive. Tyree has often complained about the narrowness of street lit expectations. He symbolically retired from urban literature once before and wrote a novel titled *The Last Street Novel* in attempts to break from the street lit mold and introduce new kinds of subjects for his black characters like international travel and cyberspace relationships. Street lit was a powerful literary space for urban black readers with vortex-like powers that pinned authors into a specific kind of writing.

Within the African American literary tradition appropriate subjectivities for black authors has been hotly contested. Langston Hughes wrote “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” as a response to constraining literary expectations from the older intellectual gatekeepers of the New Negro Renaissance (Lewis). Other younger writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay chose to depict the lives of urban criminals and deviants despite backlash from older New Negro intellectuals such as Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, and Carter G. Woodson. During the 1940s and 1950s Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Gwendolyn Brooks’ employed modernism and magical realism to write *Black Boy*, *The Street*, and *Maud Martha*, respectively. These novels and many others about African American urban life in the post World War II era were met with initial silence and market stagnation. In the late twentieth century *Black Boy* has been integrated in high school literature curricula. *The Street* and *Maud Martha* have gained popularity among academicians, due in part to African American women in academia who spearheaded efforts to reclaim lost or overlooked black women’s writing in the 1980s. These texts were not instant African American literary classics partly because they unflinchingly laid bare all of
the embarrassing aspects of post World War II era urban life. Similarly, Black Arts Aesthetic Movements fiction is still placed at the margins of African American literature. In particular, Black Arts novels received very little academic attention in comparison to Black Arts poetry and plays. The same was true for African American detective and crime fiction, especially authors such as Chester Himes and Walter Mosley (Gifford). The rejection of popular African American urban literature has been widening the divide between the academy and the urban masses for more than a century.

Historically, African American urban literature was relegated to the margins of American literature for a number of reasons. First, the subject matter was often deemed inappropriate for polite conversation and for young adult readers. Second, urban literature was generally categorized as pulp fiction, which has been commonly taboo in the academy. Third, urban literature has usually been historically, geographically, and culturally specific rather than timeless with broad subjectivities. Nevertheless, urban literature’s place at the margins of American literature was used as a unique advantage.

Throughout the twentieth century, urban literature had an “outsider within” position within the academy. According to Patricia Hill Collins, “outsider within” was the socio-cultural position African American women often held in the academy, by being simultaneously welcomed and othered. 28 This space captured the competing positions of being a fully recognized scholar and relegated to additive spaces or the margins in the academy. The same was attributed to African American prose within American literature. Often, African American literature was only taught in elective courses, during black history month, or as the minority text to ensure “diversity.” Further, when urbanity was the subject

28 “Learning from the Outsider Within” Patricia Hill Collins
of academic inquiry the discourse did not travel beyond the small group of scholars who are deeply invested in the topic. The public popularity of urban literature, especially street lit, was incongruent with the amount of attention such literature received in the academy.

Nevertheless, the margins provided urban literature access to urban authenticity that defined the genre. Many urban literary classics such as The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as Told to Alex Haley, Pimp: The Story of My Life Robert “Iceberg Slim” Beck, and Whoreson by Donald Goines were iconized and achieved enduring popularity because their heroic tales about hustling, pimping, and drug activity were verifiable. These narratives and African American popular fiction written in the same vein represented the antithesis of what was traditionally deemed appropriate (i.e. worthy) for academic African American literature. This literature was often ignored, swept under the rug, or shoved into the closet, and has become the dirty little family secret everyone knows exists but refuses to acknowledge. Yet, this academic embarrassment only served to fortify the illicit, dangerous, and edgy persona of these texts, which was one of the key elements of their sustained mass-market success. There was power in being willing to stand against the expectations of the gatekeepers of knowledge. There was power in the margins of academia.

As the genre evolved, street lit authors and their core readership established an assumed understanding about character expectations that allowed readers to identify when a character did not meet street lit expectations. This undocumented contract between text and reader existed due to the similarity between the real streets urban readers trudged along daily and the ones street lit characters used as center stage for their elaborate and

29 The metaphor of closeting street lit can be best understood by examining how the closet is employed in same sex desire. For the best example see “Trapped in the Epistemological Closet” in C. Riley Snorton’s Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low.
glorified street tales. The street lit contract was an extension of the “street code” that governed real life for urban readers. In order to make sense of the concrete jungles across America, certain codes of ethics, especially pertaining to organized crime and illegal activities, have been established. The “street code” in street lit novels was an innately understood social order that governed the lawless urban enclaves across the United States. Some examples of the street code include: snitches get stitches, never get high on your own supply, and loyalty over royalty.

Usually, the author’s moral and/or political message for the text was fully illuminated when the reader considered why the character missed his or her mark. Often, the moral within street lit texts was that life as a drug king pin, flyy girl, hustler, or dime piece was not sustainable, or aspirational. Authors like Omar Tyree and Sister Souljah intentionally used their characters as sacrificial learning tools for their readers. In Omar Tyree’s Flyy Girl, Tracy Ellison was able to rise above the deleterious effects of urban living and go to college. This ascendency only follows after Tracy endures an abusive relationship and seeing her flyy girl remodel, Mercedes, addicted to drugs. Similarly, Victor—Tracy’s first sexual partner and the neighborhood playboy—is redeemed only after being imprisoned. Tyree used his characters to didactically express to readers that criminal and deviant actions had consequences but there was always room to transform into a morally upright, law-abiding person.

Alternatively, in The Coldest Winter Ever Winter Santiaga is never redeemed. She pays for all of her urban transgressions by being imprisoned for a crime she does not commit and enduring the remainder of her life with a mutilated face. Even when Winter is

30 For more examples see The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man and “Slapstick” on Season 3, episode 9 of the HBO series The Wire.”
physically freed from prison she does not have access to the “freedom” that accompanies being a pretty girl in the “hood” because she has sustained a major face laceration. Early in the novel, all of Winter’s ties to her previous life are severed, which in turn forces Winter to rely on more than her physical attributes and her ghetto princess status. Alongside Winter, Souljah introduces Midnight, one of Ricky Santiaga’s underlings who is involved with the illegal drug trade because he does not have any other available options for survival. Midnight acts as moral compass in *The Coldest Winter Ever* by taking responsibility for the Santiaga girls when Ricky is imprisoned and by rebuffing all of Winter’s sexual advances, which signifies his refusal to buy into the proscribed hustler role. Midnight is rewarded for his righteousness by being able to get out of the drug game with a large sum of money and a bright future. Souljah very clearly distinguishes between good and bad characters for the sake of her readers and the political message she pushed as a writer and activist. In both *Flyy Girl* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the text and reader understood the merits of being a flyy girl or a ghetto princess. Both Tyree and Souljah took this mutual understanding of the street code a step further by exemplifying why flyy-ness was unsustainable and exposing the true ugliness that such a glamorous lifestyle brought.
Though street lit stories were typically morally driven, the evaluative standards for the genre were not the same as those used to measure other literary genres, nor could they have been. The aims and goals of street lit authors were often incongruous with traditional literary standards. Further, most street lit authors intentionally worked outside the bounds of English literary conventions. Similar to Amiri Baraka’s call for a new black aesthetic during the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement, street lit and culture demanded a different set of literary standards.

The Black Power Movement conceived a uniquely black aesthetic (Gayle XXII). During the latter half of the 1960s African Americans were not only frustrated with the stagnation in non-violent Civil Rights initiatives and continued police brutality, they grew weary from attempting unsuccessfully to assimilate into the American mainstream. From these frustrations grew the black power struggle, which consciously decided to cease attempting to gain white approval (Joseph). This action endeavored to encourage race pride and self-assurance through various mediums of black art. According to Black Arts theorist Addison Gayle, “A critical methodology has no relevance to the Black community unless it aids men in becoming better than they are (XXII),” meaning the black aesthetic and by extension the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement had insure that black cultural and creative expression was evaluated and celebrated using standards that fit the purpose of the art. These standards were necessarily divergent from American aesthetic standards. The Black Arts Aesthetic Movement attempted to undo centuries of degradation with words, images, and music that uplifted black culture. However, while attempting to establish unique black cultural standards, those who ascribed to the Black Aesthetic and Black Arts Movement identity standards isolated themselves within their native country. Aspects that made African American art and culture different from other modes of American creative
expression and a deep sense of pride for these differences was often times misidentified as black separatism.

**Contending Forces: What Separates the Street and the Academy**

For street lit the scope of appropriate subject material and moral messages were often called into question. Terry McMillan unwaveringly repudiated the genre. Though McMillan has been attributed with helping usher in the street lit era, she made her disdain for the genre abundantly clear. According to her, the issue with street lit was “that millions of young black readers will not grow out of these titles” (Alexander). She did not see street lit as a gateway into more academically accepted literature, but rather a dead end that left street lit readers in a place little better than not reading.

Nick Chiles, an author and critic, shared McMillan’s rejection of street lit. In a very controversial article, “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut,” Chiles wrote about his experience going into a bookstore and encountering an entire book section for African American literature that was stocked mainly with street lit novels. To this realization Chiles wrote,

"but the placard above this section of Borders in Lithonia didn't say 'street lit,' it said 'African-American Literature.' We were all represented under that placard, the whole community of black authors - from me to Terry McMillan and Toni Morrison, from Yolanda Joe and Benilde Little to Edward P. Jones and Kuwana Haulsey - surrounded and swallowed whole on the shelves by an overwhelming wave of titles and jackets that I wouldn't want my 13-year-old son to see..."
street lit books, according to Chiles were good starting point if they are used as a
gateway into more “respected” black literature. Chiles used phrases like “works
inspired by the best that’s in us” and “driving out serious writers” to denounce the
genre and liken street lit to tasteless pornography. In a later interview Chiles said,
“street literature is too often about the glorification and exploitation of sex, violence,
greed—the worst aspects of our nature, the things that we all must fight to tame,
rather than to celebrate” (Nix). Ultimately, for critics like Chiles and McMillan, street
lit was unable to inspire readers to aspire for “better” life outcomes for themselves
or expand the scope of their literary interests.31

The field of street lit was a contentious space, fraught with disagreements
and heated debates. What defined street lit? What was the genre to be called? Who
were street lit writers? What was the purpose of street lit novels? Were street lit
artists writing for profit or solely for the love the craft? Was it possible to write for
both? Could street lit be considered African American literature? Could street lit
offer its readers any educational value? Did street lit die in the new millennium?
Street lit writers, critics, and readers considered these questions, and others. But
what was uncontested was that many of these debates took place via email,

31 Several street lit enthusiasts have countered these attacks on street lit. Most notably,
Kemeshia Randle explored the implications of the allusion in Nick Chiles’ article title. “Their
Eyes Were Reading Smut” is similar in title to Zora Neal Hurston’s novel, Their Eyes Were
Watching God, for which Hurston received overwhelmingly negative criticism due to the
overtly sexual and graphic nature of her prose initially. The text, however, was caused as
important African American literature in the 1980s.
magazine editorials, and blog sites rather than in classrooms, journals, and books because there was resounding silence about street lit in academia.

Regardless of the academic potential of the genre, street lit authors typically did not go on to have careers in academia. Several street lit novelists have lived similarly to their characters and as a result have had more experiences with the United States penal system than higher education. For example, Shannon Holmes released his first best selling novel, *B-More Careful* while incarcerated for various drug convictions. He also signed his first literary contract from prison, which speaks to the innovative and unconventional production aspects of street lit. *B-More Careful* has sold over a half a million copies and was the first novel to be published under Teri Woods’ small publishing imprint, Meow Meow Productions. Kwame Teague allegedly authored the *Dutch* trilogy while serving two consecutive life sentences.32 Sister Souljah, though having attended college, has stated that academic concepts, especially black feminist thinking, do more to limit rather than liberate and enhance her works (Souljah Interview). Further, critics like Felicia Pride posit that “it’s almost as if the craft of sentence writing associated with ‘literary fiction’ is at odds with the quest to ’keep it real,’” which was integral to street lit. The oppositions between the goals of street lit and academic literary expectations may help explain why such a successful genre went virtually unnoticed and/or unacknowledged by academicians.

32 There has been some debate about who authored the first two novels in the *Dutch* series. The novels were copyrighted under Teri Woods’ name but Teague claims this was done for better publicity due to his incarceration. However, he was the actual author.
Street lit authors typically regarded their work as everyday acts of moral uplift, as evidenced by the strong moral messaging threaded throughout the works of authors like Omar Tyree and Sister Souljah. Nevertheless, Souljah did not identify as a street lit author and Tyree compromised by referring to his novels as “urban classics” and himself as an urban griot. Souljah says that urban fiction and related genre names “are too small and inaccurate” for her work (Email Correspondence). Alternatively, Tyree was a self-proclaimed urban griot. Though he initially embraced the genre, he did so with high moral expectations for his characters and for the works of his contemporaries. In fact, Tyree claimed that he lost some of his readership when he was unwilling to write a “street fantasy” sequel to *Flyy Girl* (Tyree XIII). Further, Tyree made his frustrations about urban fiction stagnation known. Tyree writes, “But now, after sixteen years and sixteen novels in the African-American adult urban fiction game, I feel like the man who created the monster Frankenstein” (Tyree Retirement). Street lit has surpassed modest expectations in mass-market sales and projected longevity of the genre. The issue many critics take with this surprising success, was a lack of positive innovation in form and content. According to Tyree, street lit writers and their characters did not evolve. Writers and readers were content to write about the same kinds of negative characters without ever endeavoring to add fullness or variety to their stories (Tyree Interview).

33 Tyree preferred the term urban rather than street because he claims to be a keeper of urban traditions rather than a writer attempting to glorify what happens in the streets.
Arguably, there were viable ways to reconcile the tensions between street and academic strivings. According to Kemeshia Randle in her essay, “Gang Wars: The Academy versus the Streets,” “Street/popular fiction works...are valuable to both culture and the academy: they are indicative of the notion that there is no essential blackness, and they provide an intergenerational dynamic by which to bridge the gap between generations of scholarship...” (10). Street lit endured in a social climate when television and video games were preferred over library cards and reading circles. These novels were able to resonate with its readers on a deep and intimate level. Vanessa Irvin Morris, posits that street lit “is about documenting history... collective memory” (Barnard). Justin Gifford in *Pimping Fiction*, argues that, “Critics have assumed incorrectly—simply by their neglect of the genre in toto—that these books are formulaic and that their individual differences are insignificant in the face of their negative ideological effect.” He continues, “We can no longer afford to ignore this genre of literature, if for no other reason than its complex history and modes of representation; race, class, and gender identity; and the connections between high and low culture” (*Pimping Fictions* 7). Street lit's collective memory was an amalgamation of personal experiences, urban legends, and morality in alternate universes that abided by codes written for underworld characters like pimps, hustlers, drug dealers, flyy girls, and prostitutes.

K’wan Foye, author of best selling street lit novel, *Street Dreams*, argued that the genre was important because it reflected a real lifestyle that otherwise would have gone largely unacknowledged. The line between reality and fiction was often intentionally blurred in street lit novels, which arguably attributed to the
genre’s commercial success and it’s academic denouncement. Fiction that bordered so closely on reality did not leave substantial room for commonly accepted literary creativity, nor did it necessitate that readers stretch their imaginations very far, according to critics like Chiles and McMillian.

Street lit was able to resonate with specific demographics because readers had similar experiences as the characters on the page; which was no different than what other popular fiction had done for other demographics for centuries. A blog by The Harvard Press writes, “it seems fair to say that the street-lit phenomenon constitutes a from-the-ground-up cultural movement, proof that literature is inextricably located in a particular place and time, and an indication that the reading culture we might expect is not always the one we’re going to get.” It was extremely important for development and sustenance of urban young adult readers to be able to find texts that reflected their social and cultural positions. In fact, Becca Sorget posited that “when Urban Fiction is not included in [library] collections, it is an attempt to silence and control the transformation of readers who experience a further understanding of their situation in relation to others’ situations,” in her article “The Transformative Power of Urban Literature.” Sorget continues, “the significance of the cyclical culture of Urban Fiction is that it breaks the culture of silence and creates power, resistance, and a means of survival through expression.” For many street lit readers, negative criticisms of the genre extend to harsh and sometimes unfair judgments of their lived experiences. Street lit’s literary significance was so deeply entangled with its larger cultural impact, that it was
difficult to objectively denounce the literature without denigrating the real experiences of its readers.

Further, Nakia Chaney argued that the inclusion of street lit in educational settings helped reinforce inclusivity of English dialects. Chaney explained that urban students often code switched between two kinds of English in their everyday lives; they spoke and wrote in standard English in school and other professional settings and expressed themselves in African American vernacular at home and in other communal spaces. Her article, “In Their Own Words: street lit, Code Meshing, and Linguistic Diversity,” urged a code meshing model in education where “educators and writers celebrate the multiplicity of the English language without prescribing merit for one dialect over the other” (115). Ultimately, “urban literature can also be very important in composition pedagogies because the types of linguistic diversity that urban literature offers are authentic” to the dialects spoken by urban students (18).

Equally important, it is imperative to understand the difference between presenting gritty and candid tales of urban living and glorifying the lifestyles of criminals and morally bankrupt characters. Street lit novels often presented their characters as cautionary tales and had overt moral messages at the denouement of each story. A fair majority of street lit novels ended with the demise of deviant characters. According to Sherrod Tunstall, “many of the authors who write in the Urban Literature genre say they’re not trying to glorify it’ they write because they don’t want to see readers in the street, and want readers to see that it’s not good to
be a drug dealer or a prostitute” (Baker and Tunstall). The pimps, prostitutes, and petty criminals had to pay for their poor decisions.

Street lit contributed to the continuation of the African American literary tradition by introducing a new generation to stories about black life en masse. The mere existence of the genre means that African Americans have continued to write and read about themselves. Respected scholar and Black Arts poet, Sonia Sanchez endorsed street lit. Sanchez said, “I’m delighted that young people are writing. I’m delighted even about street literature. I believe we should write everything” (Moore). With encouragement from important literary producers and critics like Sanchez, Cornel West, and Michael Eric Dyson, street lit has an opportunity to enter into academic conversations.

Street lit arose from the same cultural spaces as Hip Hop. The subject matter in street lit prose and rap lyrics was similar. Street lit characters often reference real Hip Hop artists and some Hip Hop artists have written street lit books (most notably Sister Souljah). Scholars like Khalid Akil White and Stephanie Dunn street lit considered a close cousin to Hip Hop. White writes, “in the same way that storytelling in rap music comes from the self-expression of urban and inner-city African Americans, street lit arises as the artistic ‘cousin’ to rap music” (White 124). Therefore, conversations about Hip Hop culture have been integral to understanding the cultural context of street lit and it’s social purpose and impact.

Tricia Rose’s book, Black Noise, was a study on rap music and Hip Hop culture, which helped to contextualize the social landscape on which most street lit texts were written. It was written around the same time that the first street lit texts,
like *Flyy Girl* and *True to the Game*, appeared. Street lit was emerging as a popular genre while scholarly conversations about Hip Hop music and culture began in academic spaces. Specifically, Roses’ conversations about rap music production, publishing, and distribution, narrative forms in rap lyrics, and black women rappers were salient to conversations about street lit’s commodification, literary style, and gender difference in authorship and novel characters.

Roses’ text ushered in related Hip Hop studies conversations, which led to the concept of Hip Hop Feminism. Hip Hop feminism, like black feminist thought and womanism, arguably came out of the third wave of feminism. According to Brittany C. Cooper, Aisha Durham, and Susana M. Morris, Hip Hop feminism was “an umbrella term to encompass creative, intellectual work regarding girls and women in Hip Hop culture and/or as part of the Hip Hop generation.” Placing Hip Hop culture at the center of black feminist discourse created a particular sub-cultural space where the code of ethics for works shifted dramatically. Hip Hop feminism allowed for the gritty, candid and often politically incorrect styling of rap music, street lit and urban independent films.34

**Literary Spread: Street Lit Sub-Genres**

When street lit grew in popularity and increased in volume, several sub and related genres emerged, including urban erotica, gangsta lit, and sista lit.

34 See chapter 3 for a fuller discussion on Hip Hop Feminism and street lit.
Certain street lit elements remained constant across the subgenres, like the push for books to be commercially successful, the lack of editorial review, and the focus on people of color in urban spaces. However, urban erotica, gangsta lit, and sista lit also widened the scope of street lit by emphasizing underutilized character types, moral messages, and presentations of criminal activity. These differences broadened the parameters of street lit and encouraged more inclusivity. While street lit, as a whole, was easily characterized as an African American literary genre with hetero-normative gender conceptions, its subgenres arguably pushed the boundaries, in urban erotica especially. Traditionally, hustlers and gangsters in street lit were one-dimensional villainous characters. Gangsta lit provided more nuanced articulations visions of these hardened and violent criminals through their ability to love family, friends, and romantic partners. Street lit also tended to singularly focus on the protagonist’s growth, but sista lit used friendship to bind the emotional evolution of multiple lead characters together.

Dissenters, like Nick Chiles and Terry McMillan, viewed these genres as collective “smut” and monolithically placed all contemporary urban fiction at the bottom of the African American literary hierarchy. In light of the critiques, finding nuance within the street lit genre was imperative to reframing these texts in academic discourse and preserving authorial intentions. To that end, authors like Zane, Wahdia Clark, and Eric Jerome Dickey wrote novels for an arguably more mature audience, mainly due to how explicitly sex is depicted and the age range of their characters. This is especially true when comparing these authors to other
authors who focused on coming-of-age stories. It is important to note that these subgenre distinctions are fluid. For example, Sister Souljah’s inclusion of graphic sex scenes escalated with each new book. Souljah also incorporated relevant themes like interracial relationships and black immigrants in the sequel to *The Coldest Winter Ever, Midnight*. Midnight focuses more on Midnight and his family’s immigration from western Africa in America, integration in America, and his struggle to be a good and caring romantic partner. This story is in stark contrast to Midnight’s role in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, where his character’s arc rested on his ability to be a good drug trafficking lieutenant for Ricky Santiaga and a seemingly ideal status match for Winter Santiaga. Though Souljah elected to incorporate more commonly acceptable subjectivities, she also included dramatically more explicit sex scenes. In a similar manner, Omar Tyree wrote a few risqué novels after the success of *Flyy Girl*. These works focus more on sexual pleasure and uncomplicated glamorous depictions of criminal behavior in urban settings, including *Diary of a Groupie, The Last Street Novel,* and *What They Want.*

Vanessa Irvin Morris categorizes urban erotica and what she terms as thug love (which is referred to as gangsta lit here) as intertwined but separate genres. She writes,

It is important to note that Tyree has repeatedly expressed his frustration with the narrow novel expectations set by his readers and the incessant push to keep his literary subjects within the parameters of black sex and violence. In fact, *The Last Street Novel* and *What They Want* titles are meant to be the author’s satirical expression of disdain with the stagnation of street lit subjectivities.
“It is also fair to state that thug-love fiction is a bridge between street lit (in addition to authors already mentioned, think K’wan, Nikki Turner, Vickie Stringer) and urban erotica (think authors such as Zane, Noire, Allison Hobbs). The two genres are often conflated with each other; however, it is important to understand that they are distinct literary traditions that oftentimes attract the same readers. Urban erotica is not location specific—it’s stories take place in settings from various geographies and socio-economic loci. Thug-love fiction can almost be considered a blend of street lit and urban erotica, as it carries elements of both genres” (Morris 30-31).

Expanding on Morris’ understanding of urban erotica and gangsta lit, I position sista lit as another co-created subgenre that fits within the larger umbrella of street lit. Urban erotica emerged from several concurrent literary and cultural spaces. First, the evolution of the World Wide Web created a digital space for writers to share their work with virtually complete anonymity. Writers like Zane, who is the daughter of a divinity professor, a mother, and a wife, had a blind platform to share erotic fiction without personal judgment from publishers, readers, or family. Second, the contemporary success of urban fiction also helped create space for urban erotica to thrive through having similar settings and character types. Third, urban erotica was been able to line the shelves of black owned business stores, populate corner book sellers’ tables, and eventually appear in large bookstore chains like Barnes & Noble and Borders Books due in part to the proliferation of small black owned publishing presses and increased presence of urban divisions within larger imprints. Fourth, Hip Hop culture, in the late 1990s and early 2000s began to move to a sex and sensuality model, with rap videos featuring scantily dressed women gyrating on camera, rap lyrics about promiscuity and sexual prowess, and the
creation of urban fashion companies that were specifically geared toward curvaceous women and tailored to accentuate women’s lower halves, i.e. Apple Bottom Jeans and Baby Phat (Chang).

In 1997 Kristina L. “Zane” Roberts began sharing her fiction with people she met in online chat rooms. She was surprised at how quickly her work spread and by how overwhelmingly positive her readers responded. Zane wrote out of boredom. Two years later, she published her first full-length novel *Addicted* through her own imprint, Strebor Books, Int. Strebor is Zane’s last name spelled backwards (Brown). Zane was able to take advantage of the already established contemporary African American fiction market place, which was being saturated with novels similar to Terry McMillan’s women empowerment novels. Also, Zane leveraged her digital presence to promote and disseminate her work. Her contemporary, Omar Tyree, fondly recalled how Zane used to collect email addresses from book events to add to her email listservs and to send out more information for her online websites (Tyree Interview).

From the outset, Zane’s fiction was racy and raunchy. Her first novel is about Zoe Reynard, a woman who has three concurrent extramarital affairs to fulfill her sexual desires because her husband refuses to experiment sexually. While maintaining the popular indicators of street lit—the story is located in an urban environment and is based on the gritty aspects of contemporary society—*Addicted* is also noteworthy for focusing on one particular social issue; sexual possession (which can lead to sex addiction). Zane was one of the most popular street lit urban erotica writers, with over thirty novels, two Cinemax television series (entitled

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Zane’s Sex Chronicles and Zane’s The Jump Off, and a recent major motion picture based on the novel Addicted.

Zane’s novels grew more explicit in content when she became more established as an erotic writer. And while Zane was unquestionably the “queen” of urban erotica, she soon found herself in good company. Writers like Eric Jerome Dickey and Omar Tyree also had success in writing about groups of women friends who are seeking love and sexual satisfaction. It should be noted that Dickey and Tyree began incorporating more detailed sex scenes and blatant use of sensuality in the early 2000s, which coincided with the explosive popularity of Zane’s erotica.

Urban erotica on the whole has been identified by sex, sensuality, and urbanity. For these works the focus within romantic relationships was centered more on sexual satisfaction rather than love and commitment. Specifically, women’s sexual satisfaction took an unprecedented leading role. Focusing on black women’s sexual pleasure was arguably a revolutionary concept; especially, because black women’s sexuality has been policed from multiple and competing sources (Lorde, Stallings, Miller-Young). In slavery, black women had very little power to decide whom they would have sexual interactions with and even less say over who sired their children (Genovese, Hartman). After slavery and up until the late twentieth century black women generally were sex objects for their husband’s pleasure. Urban erotica, while overwhelmingly dealing with African American heterosexual relationships, also depicted same sex couples and grappled with LGBT issues in the black community. Interestingly, these relationships were often ancillary to the lead character’s main romantic endeavors and/or the main character’s sexuality. Same
sex loving was largely an understated aspect of urban erotica; meaning, most characters who “dabbled” in same sex relations did not come to more personal sexual awareness.

Urban erotica was a site of colonial resistance and sexual liberation. The genre presented unconventional narratives of people of color that focused on their sex lives. Urban erotica gave black characters access to myriad kinds of sex, whereas previous African American literature generally used sex as a site of collective and remembered trauma. L. H. Stallings’ discussions of terms like sex work and sexual labor are beneficial to understanding the political stakes surrounding the censorship of urban erotica. Arguably, the curtailment of urban erotica, “perpetuate(s) the imperatives for sexuality set by colonial or imperialist projects, but men and women’s decisions to use sexuality outside the moral mandates of these projects should also be read as a challenge to the subordination of sexuality in most modern religions, as well as a means of improving the material realities of everyday living” (Stallings 150).

Zane, Eric Jerome Dickey, Noire and other twenty-first century authors like them were continued to answer Langston Hughes’ call to write stories about all facets of black life, “without fear or shame” (Hughes “The Negro Artists and the Racial Mountain”). Also similar to Hughes, these authors had proverbial gatekeepers who disapproved of urban erotica’s boldness, who denied the subgenre’s place within African American literature, and discouraged the creation, publication, and dissemination of urban erotica texts. Despite the naysayers, urban erotica did consistently well in the pulp publishing business. Urban erotica “kept the lights on"
for major publishers like Random House and Simon & Schuster, meaning urban erotica was a reliably popular and lucrative genre.

*Addicted* was the symbolic origin of the urban erotica genre. Zane elected to have *Addicted*'s protagonist, Zoe, use brazen language that deviated significantly from the norm of African American women's fiction. For example, Zoe tells us, “I was taking things to the extreme, having fucked Quinton on my desk earlier that day and now getting ready to fuck someone else before driving home to my husband” (*Addicted* Zane 183). In continuation, Zoe says, “He made me prop my leg up on the edge of the tub so could eat my pussy, and then I sucked his dick before he held me up against the wall with my legs straddled around his waist and fucked me rough just like I wanted” (*Addicted* Zane 184). In subsequent novels, the sex scenes escalated.

In addition to explicit heterosexual sex scenes that bordered on the pornographic, *Addicted*’s protagonist has one same sex love encounter. Zoe’s homoerotic encounter does not foment into some sexual revelation, like her other extra marital affairs. Rather it is used more as a marker of the seriousness of her sex addiction, which can be understood as passive homophobia or at least discomfort with homoerotic subjects for the author and perhaps early urban erotica more generally. Further, Zoe’s sexual interaction with a woman are left uncomplicated and are presumably a by-product of her illness rather than repressed or unexplored

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36 For a fuller discussion on black women in pornography and Hip Hop cultural production, see Mirielle Miller-Young's *A Taste of Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*. 
same-sex desire and was completely omitted from the film adaption of the novel. *Addicted* indicates that black women's sexuality can be explored within fiction but also limits what kinds of sexuality can be explored.

Seven years after Zane published *Addicted* and six years after Sister Souljah published *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Noire published *G-Spot*, which according to Janise L. Dames, author of *Momma's Baby, Daddy's Maybe* the novel is “*The Coldest Winter Ever* meets *Addicted!*” (*G-Spot* book cover). In *G-Spot* a nineteen-year-old girl named Juicy becomes trapped as the trophy girlfriend of Harlem old school gangster Granite “G” McKay, a man twenty-seven years her senior. The novel is a coming-of-age story that focuses on Juicy’s sexual maturation. In a pivotal conversation between Juicy and an older woman who works for G and who used to be a prostitute with Juicy's mother, Dicey tells Juicy,

“They ain’t invented nothing that can take the place of a hard hot dick drilling up in you, but you should be able to find something that'll come in second place. But why settle for all them tools when you got a real live nigger in your bed every night? Either take charge and make G fuck you right, or go find you some dick you can live with” (*G-Spot*, Noire 65).

Dicey’s words are fierce and direct. She understands Juicy’s need for sexual satisfaction, validates Juicy’s right to erotic pleasure, and encourages Juicy to fight for sexual liberation. Dicey's advice was contrary to the pervading expectations of real women like Dicey and Juicy who came from impoverished communities and were somehow connected with underground rackets. Early in the novel Juicy emphatically tells her reader, “the dollars had my nose open at first too, but not anymore” (Noire 7). Unlike Winter Santiaga in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the material status drug dealers and gangsters can provide does not impress Juicy. However, she
is unable to escape the trappings of the urban underworld because she is entirely financially dependent on G. He uses money, sexual violence, and Juicy's younger brother (who is the only family Juicy has left) to control her. When Juicy does something that displeases G, he sodomizes her. G uses her younger brother's eagerness to join the criminal underworld to keep Juicy mentally trapped. While the novel is superficially about the protagonist's journey to find her "g-spot" it also considers the repercussions of sexual repression and how sex was portrayed in street lit.

Eric Jerome Dickey's *Between Lovers* navigates a love triangle among two women and one man. Against street lit convention, the main character is a man—an unnamed protagonist who is a Los Angeles based contemporary writer. In the novel the protagonist vies for the affections of his ex-fiancé, Nicole, who is in a committed same sex relationship with Ayanna. Nicole decides to not choose between the protagonist and Ayanna by presenting a third option; the three enter a triangular romantic relationship. In an effort to get the protagonist and Ayanna to agree to share in love and sex they go to a club downtown San Francisco. While there they witness a scene,

"Inside the tiny coed bathroom, alcohol, urine, and perfume permeate the air. Men and women are crowded inside one stall, either tiptoeing or standing on the edge of the toilet, cheering as they look over the metal wall into the other stall. We push our way into the powder room, move into the cheers, ease a few of the stumbling drunks aside, and look over into the other stall. Two girls are in the booth. Away from the rest of the world, living in their own little box. Face-to-face. Pretty much bottomless. One straddling. Kissing. Hips rolling against each other. Making love for the crowd that they are too intoxicated to care about. Too
deep inside their sin to notice a hundred eyes hovering over their heads. One gets too excited. Moves too fast. Their vibrator drops. Rolls to my feet. I kick it back. The one on top grabs it. Without looking up, they say well-mannered thank you and keep on loving. On our tiptoes, we blend with the crowd and keep on watching” (Between Lovers Dickey, 148).

Viewing two liberated lovers who allow their mutual infatuation with each other to overpower any trepidation about an audience foreshadows the unconventional romance of the leading female characters Nicole and Ayanna are negotiating. Similar to Zane and Noir, Eric Jerome Dickey used direct language to describe sex in Between Lovers (and majority of his other novels) and the novel presented alternative modes of romantic and sexual relationships. Dickey’s language and character interactions positioned same sex relationships in the realm of normalcy, rather than a major indication of sexual illness (like in Addicted) or a peripheral, unexplored alternative to sexual prison (like in G-Spot).

Although urban erotica was tremendously popular and was often categorized as its own genre, it still very clearly was an outgrowth of street lit. Foremost, majority of urban erotica novels are set in major American cities, not to mention that the subgenre has been identified as “urban.” Next, although these novels focused less on criminal rackets, they still contended with topics that were considered to be socially impolite and generated some of their appeal from the notion of traversing “off limit” subjectivities. The idea of being “let in on a secret” remained consistent throughout urban erotica and street lit. Urban erotica was also quickly produced and was often hurriedly consumed and then passed along by readers.
Compared to urban erotica, gangsta lit was hard love making. More specifically, gangsta lit as a subgenre of street lit centered romantic love amidst a cruel and unforgiving underworld. The genre harkened back to 1960s and 1970s Blaxploitation novels by the usage of gritty main men characters like drug dealers and hustlers. But gangsta lit endeavored to display the “softer” side of these hardened criminals as well. Gangsta lit deviated from Blaxploitation literature by centering requited love between thugs and the women in their lives, including romantic companions, sisters, and grandmothers. The genre was also a direct outgrowth of the street lit tradition and tended to employ similar geographical settings, character tropes, and plot arcs. The genre was also affectionately called thug love to highlight the paradoxical nature of the genre. According to Vanessa Irvin Morris, “although the traditional definition of thug is ‘criminal’ or ‘gangster’ within the context of street lit, there is a cultural (in terms of the streets) definition that is more about surviving street life than about being a criminal” (29). Adding to Morris’ understanding of the “thug” in street lit and gangsta lit generally, the cultural definition of thug also incorporated the capacity for thugs to love and have a moral consciousness about the social and physical violence they committed. These stories used hetero-normative black love to overcome the issues that came along with an urban lifestyle.

Gangsta Lit allowed hardened male characters to be vulnerable—especially with women they cared for—which deviated from the traditional character construction of gangsters and drug dealers in street lit. It also inverted the street lit gender binary by centering the experiences of men rather than women. Gangsta lit stories featured far more
scenes with only men characters, provided more soliloquys and confessions about the moral dilemmas criminals faced (these intimate moments usually happened in complete isolation or at the very least outside the presence of women), and added more contour to the difficult decisions gangsters made. Isolated confessions allowed gangsta characters to retain their hardened and cold exterior to deal with the harsh realities of the street but also gave the reader important interior moments of reflection and vulnerability. This vulnerability increased these characters’ ability to access humanity in what Helen Page termed the “white public space.” Page writes, “the racialized and gendered information inscribed in contemporary black male imagery is racially filtered through the whiteness of our national seeing I/eye” (106). She also claims that images of black men, both negative and positive, were constructed as un-embraceable in the media. Gangsta lit complicated the negative images of black men and complicates their un-embrace-ability by providing fuller and more complex depictions of black archetypal characters like gangsters, pimps, and hustlers. In gangsta lit stories men were able to be good and bad, loving and cold, tender and violent. They are multifaceted beings, which were capable of being more than one-dimensional villains.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins writes,

“in the context of the new racism in which miseducation and unemployment have marginalized and impoverished increasing numbers of young Black men, aggression and claiming the prizes of urban warfare gain in importance. Being tough and having street smarts is an important component of Black masculinity.”

She continues, “mass media’s tendency to blur the lines between fact and fiction has important consequences for perceptions of Black culture and Black people” (151). The accepted images of black masculinity in the media and the blurred lines between fact and fiction at the turn of the twenty-first century were indicative of the necessity of gangsta lit,
as a site of political resistance. The "brutish" black male who seemed to "always fit the
description" as the perpetrator of alleged crimes received facial features, a personality, ties
to family and community in gangsta lit stories. Ironically, literature about gangstas being
gangsta humanized urban black men. In the media, black men's actions were constantly
portrayed as unprovoked and un-excusable. This relentless attack on the image of the black
man elevated individual black men's interactions with society to a monolithic image of an
aggressive, unthinking black menace that became little more than myth. Gangsta lit
provided a counter image by endowing black male characters with ambitions beyond drug
trafficking and gang violence, by depicting them as members of society, and by highlighting
their ability to love, which can be understood as the polar opposite of black male
aggression.

In Street Dreams, K'wan Foye's Essence Magazine bestselling novel, Rio is a gangster
and drug dealer by circumstance rather than desire. In trying to explain his disdain for his
trade Rio tells his partner,

"Yeah, but it's different. Wit me the end justifies the means. I'm hustling till I get on my feet,
girl. You think I like being out here like that? Hell nah. Prince is always coming to me about
going down full-time, but I ain't gonna do it. I mean the would be all that, but it ain't worth
it. I can't bring myself to be the kinda nigga it takes to grind full-time. I'm sure more niggaz
would jump at the chance to be the man next to the man, but not the kid. I'm my own man"
(24).

Rio has the skills and street smarts to be a successful drug dealer according to
Prince, the resident King Pin. Throughout the entire novel Rio continually stands
firm in his moral decision not to sell more drugs than necessary for him to have the
bare necessities in life, even as his peers encourage him to delve deeper into the
drug game and claim a seat at the head drug dealers’ table. Rio steps further outside of the traditional character trope of a black thug by remaining in a committed relationship with Trinity. When she questions his loyalty, Rio tells Trinity, “T, I’m a grown-ass man. Fuck I gotta lie for? You should already know how I’m rocking. You my boo. Ain’t nobody else, man” (24). *Street Dreams* presents a re-visioning, a *dream* of sorts, of black men who engage in street activity. Within this re-visioning, the male characters are not exonerated from the transgressions, nor are they presented as agentless. They are, however, complicated and conflicted characters who are able to be both loved and hated.

In the same year that K’wan Foye published *Street Dreams* (2004), Wahida Clark published her first gangsta lit novel, *Thugs and the Women Who Love Them* (which she wrote while imprisoned) and started her assent to gansta lit royalty. Clark became the premier gangsta lit (or what she terms Thug Love) author and even created her own imprint to allow other urban literature writers access to publishing. She also fared well in the e-book market by releasing digital versions of her collection and works published under her imprint, Wahida Clark Publishing. The book, *Thugs and the Women Who Love Them* presents three vignettes about three young friends who love different types of thugs (pimp, drug dealer, and liquor store owner) while having career ambitions to be doctors and lawyers. The first friend falls in love with a pimp despite being a “respectable” law student at Rutgers University. The narrator explains Snake’s attraction Angel as, “She was someone who could balance him out. Someone to settle down with. After all the whores he’d dealt with, Snake respected a woman who wouldn’t let him beat her down
physically or mentally” (Kindle Locations 462-463). Despite being violent and abusive to his stable of whores, Snake admires a strong woman, who does not cower to his “mack” game. Snake also has a lineage of pimps in his family. His personal investment in strong black women and his circumstance of being in the “family business” helps to nuance his choices in life. With this information questions of nature versus nurture arise. Did Snake choose pimping or did pimping choose him?

Teri Woods’ *True to the Game* is easily one of the original gangsta lit classics. Woods characterizes Quadir as a master drug dealer who strives to get out of “the game” before he is imprisoned or killed. In a moment of reflection the narrator shares,

"Quadir sat back and looked at all the stacks of money surrounding him. The years of hustling had paid off. People spend their entire lives working to retire and still don’t have shit. Quadir, on the other hand, had hustled for five years, and could retire at the age of twenty-five a millionaire, never working an honest day in his life... For the time, he saw what he really was: a drug dealer. He knew it was wrong. All he did for the hustle was a constant reminder of his own greed. Things were getting real complicated in the streets... everybody had guns. Everybody. Even little kids had guns. Your life meant nothing. It was all about money, who had it and who didn’t. Not only had Quadir beat the odds, but also lived to tell about it, not owing any debts and not owing any favors. That in itself was a task, as most of Quadir’s friends were dead or in jail" (Woods 155).

Quadir, unlike Rio in *Street Dreams*, fully immerses himself in the drug business and revels in the riches and spoils of the trade. However, Quadir reaches an enlightened understanding of his odds if he remains in the drug game. As his untimely murder approaches, Quadir makes provisions to leave drug dealing behind in order to live a life of love and happiness with Gena.
In stark contrast to the grittiness of gangsta lit, sista lit novels generally focused on a close-knit group of friends (who are women and black) that were searching for love, happiness, and companionship. Sista lit was connected to chick lit, a popular fiction genre that emerged in the mid 1990s and proliferates in the early 2000s with works like *The Bridget Jones Diary* by Helen Fielding and *Sex and the City* by Candace Bushnell. Chick lit explored contemporary depictions of women (mostly white) in popular culture and was often times stigmatized as “completely superficial” according to Felicia Salinas-Moniz (Ferriss and Young). On the whole, sista lit characters were significantly older than traditional street lit characters, with majority being in their late twenties or early thirties. These women usually had obtained high school and college diplomas and were financially stable through legitimate means. The focus for sista lit novels shifted from “the game” found in street lit stories to finding a suitable life partner on an ever-changing urban terrain. These novels attempted to address rhetorical questions about black romantic relationships like: “where are the real men? Or “Are there any good brothers left?”

The “sista” in the sista lit term purposefully ignored traditional grammatical convention for several reasons. First, the designation between sister and sista represented the difference between all who were connected by a shared experience of womanhood and those who were both woman and black (specifically in the United States based context). Both iterations of the word share the same root, which was symbolic of the structure of black womanhood in relation to womanhood.

37 Similarly, there were racial and cultural distinctions in the gangsta in gangsta lit.
among all women; both were experiential standpoints. Experiential standpoint theory suggests that every individual formulates their understanding of the world through various experiences. Further, shared or similar experiences are able to converge into a shared experience or standpoint. Standpoints are a way for people to connect through their shared past or bond over a common understanding. The “sista” concept was a standpoint for black women, especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, as it denoted a commonly understood kind of lifestyle that was female, black, urban, and yearning for happiness, love, and stability. Second, the use of sista was indicative of the genre’s tendency to ignore conventional grammar and style. Though this tendency was more frequent in traditional street lit stories. Third, sista helped fortify the close friendship and/or kinship bonds the women characters tended to share in these novels.

The genre was molded around Terry McMillan’s successful early novels about black women’s experiences in friendship and love, especially *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. *Waiting to Exhale* which both chronicle black women in their thirties and forties who are searching for fulfilling romantic relationships and personal happiness. Carolyn See from the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* proclaimed that *Waiting to Exhale* “is part of another genre entirely, so new it doesn’t really have a name yet. This genre has to do with women, triumph, revenge, comradeship...” (*Waiting to Exhale* III). *Waiting to Exhale* ushered in a new era in character configuration in black women centered novels. In the wake of McMillan’s success, other authors like Eric Jerome Dickey and Carl Weber also
offered novels with a similar format, friend groups who are looking for romantic relationships.

Kirkus Reviews declared that, “Dickey is a witty, observant cousin to such writers as Terry McMillan and Connie Briscoe” (Sister, Sister 1). Additionally, Dickey mentioned Waiting to Exhale several times throughout Sister, Sister and depicted a scene that is eerily similar to the most iconic scene of the film adaptation of Waiting to Exhale. In McMillan’s novel Bernadine, a married woman and mother of two young children, learns that her husband has been cheating with a woman who is white. The narrator details Bernadine’s sentiments, “Not only was he leaving her. Not only was he leaving her for another woman. He was leaving her for a white woman. Bernadine hadn’t expected this kind

Figure 2: This image comes from ”Waiting to Exhale,” after Bernadine burns all of her unfaithful husband’s belongings. This image has become symbolic of scorned black woman rage.
of betrayal, this kind of insult” (*Waiting* 26). The mistress’ whiteness heightens the husband’s offense because it presumably indicates that Savannah could never be the kind of woman to make her husband happy, as she cannot control the color of her skin. In response to her husband’s infidelity, Bernadine decides to burn all of his material possessions that she helped him acquire by being the secretary for his company rather than going back to school and pursuing a career of her own.

*Sister, Sister* by Eric Jerome Dickey was published in 1996, in the wake of major success of Terry McMillan. The back cover reads, “Valerie, Inda and Chiquita are three women looking for love in today’s L.A.- in this bold and sassy novel by an author who crosses the gender line to meet *Waiting to Exhale* head-on.” *Sister, Sister* uses graphic language and introduces more mature Hip Hop and R&B musical overtones by making cultural references to the film *Poetic Justice’s* soundtrack and specific musicians like Anita Baker and George Clinton. The novel is also similar to McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* in form; both novels offer concurrent stories from a group of urban black women who are friends and struggling to find and maintain romantic relationships with men. In similar fashion as Bernadine in *Waiting to Exhale*, Valerie, one of the main characters in *Sister, Sister*, realizes that her husband has been unfaithful and elects to seek revenge with fire. Dickey writes,

“She brought the lights up. He cut short his scream and sobered when he saw Valerie standing close to him, dressed in black running shoes, black jeans, black leather gloves, black sweatshirt, and a black baseball cap turned backwards on her head. He looked down and saw

38 *Waiting to Exhale* is by Terry McMillan (1992).
the fire-engine-red metal gas container at her feet, matches in hand. More important, he saw
the look in her eyes. He inhaled the fumes and gagged as panic quickly surfaced on his face.

‘What, what, hey, what the are you doing?’

‘You don’t like me so it don’t matter. This dumb-ass uneducated bitch is about to fuck you up
for life. You burned me.’ Valerie struck a match. ‘Now I’m going to burn your ass” (Weber
209).

Employment of violence and revenge exemplifies how sista lit fits within the street
lit genre.39

Lookin’ For Luv by Carl Weber was a refreshingly new take on the highly
saturated genre of African American popular fiction. Weber, unlike the majority of
his contemporaries, elected to present the male perspective on dating and black
love with an urban backdrop. The novel was predicated on men who were
attempting to establish themselves in middle class occupations and had little time to
date. Each of the main characters meets a series of women through a telephone
dating service. Weber provides interesting changes to the street lit formula while
remaining squarely in the genre (and the sista lit niche) by using cutting edge
technology for the era and changing the protagonists from the typical woman
perspective to a man orientation on dating. Lookin’ For Love is similar to Waiting to
Exhale by Terry McMillan and Sister, Sister by Eric Jerome Dickey, in that a group of

39 Sister, Sister is an example of the fluidity in street lit subgenres. The novel fits in both sista
lit and urban erotica genres.
men who are friends endeavor to understand the complexities of love and relationships.40

(Re)Imagining Place and Space: The Difference and Same-ness of Street Lit

Urban settings were a pre-requisite for street lit. All street lit novels may not have been relegated to the same cities and towns, but there was an expectation of the genre that the novels have geographical specificity throughout the text. Often times the narrators and characters named real streets, buildings, and neighborhoods. Grounding the literature in real urban spaces added a layer of authenticity to the story being told. Street lit readers often praised this geographical specificity by claiming that they could envision themselves walking down the same streets as their favorite street lit characters (Morris 4).

Street lit novels tended to straddle a precarious line between unrelenting, “authentic” candor and embellished notions of grandeur. Often, street lit characters talked in regional specific urban slang that was unfiltered, biting, and honest. Though how characters use language generally reflected actual linguistic patterns of urban culture, the stories these characters tell are half truths, and grossly distorted visions of reality. The dichotomy between wanting to remain “true” to “the streets”

40 Weber created an independent publishing house in 2005, following the footsteps of other independent authors like Teri Woods, Omar Tyree, and Daaimah S. Poole.
(and the accompanying culture) and desiring something different and better is usually what drove the plot in street lit novels.41

At their core, street lit novels were generally love stories. Most commonly, they focused on love and romance between men and women characters. However, some stories focused on a character’s love for criminal activity (the street), a historical or cultural era (Hip Hop), or a specific kind of culture (urban America). And some novels presented a double entendre love story that focused on romantic love among characters and love for the immaterial. Flyy Girl for example, focuses on the romantic escapades of Tracy Ellison but the entire novel is “dedicated to the glamorous and exciting ‘80s” (Flyy Girl).

Centering romance in street lit highlighted the power of black love and arguably created a collective social commentary on the importance and necessity of black love and passion in literature. Black romance novels were a recent development within the African American literary tradition according to Belinda Edmondson and Gwendolyn E. Osborne. Authors such as Terry McMillan and E. Lynn Harris are considered to be the first commercially successful popular African American romance novelists with street lit novels trailing closely behind.

The 2007 digital turn ushered in new opportunities and challenges for street lit to continue evolving without losing the defining characteristics of the genre. Established authors like Omar Tyree have elected to try digital serial novels. Many bestselling street lit works have been converted to electronic books, which are

41 For a fuller discussion on black authenticity, see Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity.
available through digital retailers like Amazon.com and Nook by Barnes and Noble. Almost every published street lit author (like most contemporary writers generally) has a personal website to promote their catalogue, provide fans with biographical information, and a readymade platform to blog about their professional activity and opinions on current events in literature, Hip Hop culture, and other relevant social arenas. Authors have used audio and visual graphics to help promote their newest works. Finally, there has been far more access for new writers to enter the field; a computer and a willingness to write is sufficient to launch a new novel and possibly a career. But, with this erosion of publication came complications of a saturated market, which ultimately to decreased individual book sales (more product availability begot a buyers’ market, which led to decreases in product sales).

The street became a real, yet imaginary, surface for writers to explore the rich textures, vivacious contours, and fleshiness of human experience. The inner city streets provided a common path for readers and the characters they love to interact in intimate ways. Street lit still has the ability to resonate with the real lives of readers while transporting them to alternate parallel universes. In these terms, Street lit was a broad, racially, gender, and socio-economically inclusive literary genre.
CHAPTER 2

IF SKILLS SOLD: THE COMMODITIZATION OF STREET LIT AND HIP HOP CULTURAL PRODUCTION

“If skills sold/ truth told/I'd probably be/lyrically/Talib Kweli/Truthfully/I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/(But I did five mil)/I ain't been rhyming like Common since.”

-Jay-Z

In the fall of 2015, Omar Tyree went on a multi-city book tour to promote his latest novel, All Access: The Price of Fame. At his Howard University Bookstore talk in Washington, D.C., his audience was scant. Though this was a homecoming of sorts for Tyree, a Howard alumnus, and important enough for the university to dispatch a Hilltop journalist, his visit was eclipsed by the monumental groundswell that was the twentieth anniversary of The Million Man March on Washington, hosted by the Nation of Islam and featured The Honorable Lewis Farrakhan. Not to be deterred, Tyree spoke at length about his career, starting with his days as a Howard student in the School of Communication. He also broached topics like the current climate of the publishing industry, frustrations with narrow genre expectations for authors like himself, and how he endeavors to push African American urban literature’s

42 The Hilltop is Howard University’s student newspaper.
boundaries by presenting characters who deal with social media drama and viral sensationalism rather than dated subjects like drug dealing, gangbanging, and pimping. This shift in topic, according to Tyree, reflected the ever-shifting terrain of urban America. In the face of street lit stagnation, he vowed to make a comeback. He vowed to have overwhelming crowds at his future events upon the release of a film adaptation of *Flyy Girl* by Lionsgate Productions. Tyree was hopeful that his new novel and the promise of a *Flyy Girl* movie would reinvigorate his authorial career and propel street lit into the future.

Fast forward a year later and Tyree confessed that he was “still out here” (pushing *All Access* and trying to capture some of the black limelight always available at places like Howard University). Tyree had returned to Washington, D.C. and to Howard University for the 2016 homecoming festivities where he was hoping to sell some books. Before journeying to Howard, Tyree had devised a market plan for *All Access* based on his intended demographic. He assumed that a large college educated middle class reading public would attend Howard’s

Figure 3: Image taken from Omar Tyree’s public *Instagram* page. His photograph comment says, “It looks like I’m getting more #TennesseeStateUniversity #love than #HowardUniversity and I didn’t even go to #TSU Come on #HU #family where the love at?

23 likes
4w

onlyfomarttyree It looks like I’m getting more #TennesseeStateUniversity #love than #HowardUniversity and I didn’t even go to #TSU Come on #HU #family where the love at?
checkmycredentials We all read and reread your books!!
jtsugeiden 😊
theonlytennisee Lovely!
Homecoming and that he would be able to capitalize on the recent alumni who had knowledge of African American urban fiction and possibly some familiarity with his past novels. Tyree also figured he would be able to interest younger black students present with the subject matters in *All Access*. He set up his portable book display outside of a town hall meeting concerning “the coalition for blind justice” in celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Afro American Newspaper. Among noted guests for the event were CNN host Ras Baraka, Mayor of Newark, New Jersey, Gelani Cobb, author, educator, and news anchor Roland Martin, and Hip Hop radio personality Charlamagne Tha God (Afro Staff). Tyree, wrongfully assumed that the personal interaction of an author selling his books directly to consumers would implore assembled middle class, educated black people to buy his books in staggering quantities like he had done in the 1990s and early 2000s. He did not take into account how the hyper-connectivity of social media and digital technology has dramatically altered the literary marketplace. Tyree was still living in a turn of the twenty-first century street lit world, where a charismatic author and a new novel with a good story line equated to millions of books sold.

During the peek period of street lit, 1990-2007, many genre authors were able to demonstrate that there was a robust African American reading public that was willing invest in stories about contemporary black life. These authors were also able to carve out space that was uniquely black in the mainstream publishing industry. They insisted on using non-traditional sales approaches that were cultivated in African American communities while working under contract with the largest publishing houses in the United States. By contemporary African American
authors succeeding in the margins of the publishing industry they were able to make their own rules, demand more autonomy within lucrative book contracts, and engage meaningfully with their niche readership. Within this African American literary success, a fissure along class lines developed which resulted in two distinctive, yet overlapping and competing, African American popular fiction genres, middle class African American fiction and street lit. The turn of the twenty-first century was also a point of departure for Hip Hop cultural production with its increasing presence in mainstream media outlets. The mainstreaming of Hip Hop forced the culture into a moralistic dilemma of staying underground (and therefore true to the original, youth expressive purpose of Hip Hop)\textsuperscript{43} and being financially successful through Hip Hop commercial production. The financial profits that came along with successfully telling black youth stories further complicated the contemporary urban terrain, especially for Hip Hop music and street lit. With competing non-traditional and traditional sales techniques, class based distinctions, and a booming Hip Hop industry; street lit became ironically hyper-visible and invisible in the contemporary American popular marketplace.

Street lit, like other modes of Hip Hop cultural production, was supposed to be a passing trend. Instead, the genre became the literature of urban America at the turn of the twenty-first century and immortalized the spirit of Hip Hop with ink and paper. Street lit

\textsuperscript{43} For more on the purpose and creation of Hip Hop see by The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture by Bakari Kitwana, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation by Jeff Chang, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America by Tricia Rose, and Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap by Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar.
matured and crossed over into mainstream American production outlets alongside the Hip Hop music industry. The widening of street lit made the genre hyper-visible (by a sustained mass public) in the books trade. Success also induced a symbolic and deafening silence by critics, other popular black authors, librarians, and the like. Street lit often had to compete with other types of urban storytelling like middle class African American popular fiction, Hip Hop inspired films and music. Street lit became one of the most repudiated, yet lucrative, popular fiction genres to date. The largest publishing houses, such as Simon & Shuster, RandomHouse, and Penguin, had subsidiary urban fiction divisions and/or quasi-independent imprints that specialized in urban literatures. For more than thirty years, street lit remained viable in a saturated urban storytelling market because of its ability to capitalize on innovations in technology and popular urban culture. Street lit was a subversive literary space, which employed unconventional mediums of production and publication.

“Shorty, Say What’s Your Price:”44 The Impact of Pricing and Binding on Street Lit

Sales

Walk into any major book retailer, small second hand bookstore, or public library in the early 2000s and you were assured to find Hip Hop influenced books. These books spanned fiction and non-fiction and covered everything from biographies of notable celebrities, to the histories of the movement, to memoirs from people in the industry, to novels inspired by the culture. Bookstores provided a visual representation of how

44 “Shorty, say what’s your price,” is the first line of the hook to Nas’ song “You Owe Me,” which features Ginuwine and was released on Nas’ 1999 album, Nastradamus.
expansive Hip Hop’s sprawl was since it went mainstream in the early 1990s. Hip Hop inspired fiction, or street lit, in particular most often dominated the African American literature section in book retail stores. Street lit was synonymous with African American popular fiction.

Though street lit was pervasive in commercial outlets and was endorsed in Hip Hop spaces, no unbiased quantitative data exists to substantiate the financial success of the genre. Nielson, the same company that provided album sales data to Billboard Music, also collected sales data for books using ISBN barcodes. However, the unconventional sales methods street lit authors often employed fell outside of what Nielson Bookscan captured. Street lit books were often independently produced and/or sold initially. After a title gained underground success, major presses would reproduce the novel to distribute to a wider market. Sales data for the initial novels often came from the author who self-published and kept their own financial records. The transition from self-publishing to a major press release left much room for data manipulation or misrepresentation, making most sales figures unreliable at best. Further, some of the more successful genre authors would peddle their work in alternative spaces even when they were under contract with a large press, rather than depending solely on the marketing efforts of their publishing house. For example, Vickie Stringer and Wahida Clark were able to use connections forged from their previous times of incarceration to gain notoriety and sell their novels to incarcerated populations. The ad hoc manner in which street lit books were usually sold pushed the genre further away from traditional African American literature and allowed the genre to chart its own terrain. Street lit sales and the inability to track them illuminates the genre’s place in the margins and shadows of the publishing industry. Street lit ironically legitimated itself through its sales records and borrowing history, which was only substantiated through the genre’s pervasiveness in the marketplace.
The unconventional nature of street lit sales called for authors to traverse arbitrary marketing boundaries in ways that other contemporary African American authors did not. For example, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison would not be expected to sell *Song of Solomon* or *Beloved* from her car trunk or on a busy street in Harlem after the success of *The Bluest Eye*. Alternately, street lit authors were expected be in tune with their niche audience, know how to get novels in their hands, and predict what they wanted to read next. Because street lit was a self-made industry, many large imprints did not invest heavily into branding, marketing, or promoting most works. The onus of getting fans excited about a new work was on the author. This sort of apathy towards the genre permeated many public libraries, high school classrooms and academic spaces. However, the marketing void in street lit also provided authors with more authority to determine how their works were promoted and where they were sold.

The personal nature of selling novels directly to consumers dismantled the conventional divide between author and reader. Also, online technological advances like the digital community BlackPlanet45 provided readers with more access to their favorite authors and allowed the genre to employ the longstanding African American tradition of call and response.46 Online communities and author websites created a false close relationship, whereby authors could control their public image and gain feedback on their work from readers. This false closeness between authors and audience added to the intimacy of the genre. Point of sale exchanges allowed authors and readers to discuss what the reader

45 BlackPlanet is an online social media platform targeted specifically to people of color. The platform was especially popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

46 For examples of the call and response African American literary tradition, see *Call and Response: the Riverside anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* edited by Patricia Liggins Hill, et, al.
enjoyed most about a previous title, what should happen to an alluring character, or what themes the author should tackle next. In this way, the reader was made to believe they had influence on the authors' writing agenda. The exchange also added another dimension of constructed reality that allowed the reader to “verify” the authenticity of the author, the novel characters, and in a way themselves as readers.

The unconventional sales techniques of street lit writers re-entrenched the genre's paradoxical space of invisibility and hyper-visibility in four ways. First, the call and response exchange between author and reader centered the reader by anticipating and valuing their opinions. Second, the shift in marketing and sales took books off of stuffy, dusty bookshelves and put them in the hands of potential readers. In this way, street lit books moved from the limelight in large retail stores to the shady places on busy side walks, quiet corners in barbershops, and serene church vestibules after Sunday worship. Third, selling books in intra-cultural spaces made the author hyper-visible not only to the people present in that space, but it also sent reverberating praise for the author and text throughout the larger community. It meant a great deal when a street lit reader was able to speak with a favorite writer, buy their book, and have it autographed in the same exchange. The result was that the author and the text became hyper-visible and part of everyday discourses in urban neighborhoods or in other centers of communal exchange (i.e. social media, national conventions for black Greek letter organizations, and prisons) while becoming muted in mainstream print media. Fourth, working outside the boundaries of

religious spaces and street lit subjectivities have often been misaligned, making their pairing inconsistent and requiring constant renegotiation. Nevertheless, many genre authors held speaking and sales engagements in black churches.
book whole selling pushed these works out of traditional reporting spaces and was an identifier of the difference between more canonically accepted African American literary works and urban fiction. For example, very few street lit texts have appeared on the New York Times bestsellers lists and have been far less likely to be considered for renowned book award. This invisibility in spaces of praise and accolades added to the shade cast over the genre more generally.

In addition to Nielson Bookscan, some wholesalers like Barnes & Nobles, Amazon.com, and Borders Books also quantified the units they sold individually but most of these records were not preserved properly or were incomplete due to various editions of the same title. Street lit’s niche market success was best evidenced by genre titles appearing in abundance on the Essence bestseller’s list and not on the New York Times’ bestsellers list. Essence’s bestsellers list, the most comprehensive sales data for street lit at the turn of the century, used a sample size of independent black bookstores to extrapolate popularity estimations that were based on how much one novel sold compared to others rather than the amount of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Novel Title</th>
<th>Essence Bestsellers’ List</th>
<th>New York Times Bestsellers’ List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Flyy Girl</em> by Omar Tyree</td>
<td>Listed 4 times in hardcover (Simon &amp; Schuster $23), 6 times in paperback (Scribner $12);</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Coldest Winter Ever</em> by Sister Souljah</td>
<td>Listed 29 times in paperback (Pocket Books $6.99); most charted novel from 1994-2008</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Push</em> by Sapphire</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
<td>Listed 2 times (Knopf $20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>G-Spot</em> by Noire</td>
<td>Listed 8 times in paperback (Strivers Row $13.95)</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>B-More Careful</em> by Shannon Holmes</td>
<td>Listed 12 times in paperback (Meow Meow Productions $14.95)</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>True to the Game</em> by Teri Woods</td>
<td>Listed 12 times in paperback (Meow Meow Productions $14.95)</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: A list of the most known street lit titles and how frequently they appeared on the NY Times Bestsellers’ List and the Essence Bestsellers’ List.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>NY Times</th>
<th>Essence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thug Love by Wahida Clark</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addicted by Zane</td>
<td>Listed 3 times in hardcover (Penguin $23.95)</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Lovers By Eric Jerome Dickey</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
<td>Listed 2 times (Dutton $23.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Dreams by K'wan</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
<td>Does not appear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

books sold in total. In contrast, the New York Times’ list pulled data from a larger pool of book wholesalers and independent stores that did not aggregate by race or other socially constructed categorical differences. The Essence bestsellers lists helped confirm that inner city black girls and women were the primary consumers of street lit.48 This is not to say that the Essence bestsellers list was without fault. The bookstores that reported sales data were not always known for warding off external influences or reporting the figures honestly. Some had antiquated record keeping methods that simply could not support the information being requested and supplied guess-timations instead. Adding to the difficulty of tracking sales, many authors purchased their own work in bulk to sale independently (like Tyree selling All Access at Howard’s homecoming) and did not always sell all they purchased. Furthermore, street lit thrived on word of mouth promotion, which meant that texts had a higher pass along rate than the typical novel. This was evidenced by the prominence of street lit titles in used bookstores, second hand stores like The Goodwill and The Salvation Army, and public libraries in most metropolitan cities. The initial purchase of these texts were down payments on ideas and principles that were

48 Urban African American girls and women were also Essence Magazine’s target demographic.
subsequently passed along and repurchased. The value of the texts was much higher than the $7 to $20 the initial owner paid.

Street lit’s commercial success was in the shadows of the widely popular monthly book club segment on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and contemporary fiction geared towards educated, middle class African American women. The *Oprah Show* and the wider availability of middle class African American fiction\(^49\) had women of color joining monthly book clubs in their local neighborhoods and online communities across the nation. Many of these clubs began by reading the Winfrey recommendations but would grow to fit the specific interests of participants. For black women in particular, book clubs became a space of rich intersectional dialogue and a massive concentration of black women’s intellectual and economic energy. These book clubs required literacy skills and a willingness to think critically in concert with other clubwomen.\(^50\) Arguably, the rise and popularization of black women’s book clubs altered the kinds of novels authors were encouraged (and at times outright expected to write). Novels were called to be more overtly provocative and

\(^{49}\) Middle class African American fiction from the turn of the twenty-first century primarily was adult fiction concerning romance, same-sex friendships, and familial obligations. The genre coalesces around African American women and men characters, usually in their thirties and forties that were financially stable and college educated.

\(^{50}\) Clubwomen traditionally defined members of social organizations for women that focus on improving civic conditions through volunteerism and advocacy. See Deborah Gray White’s *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*, Farrah Jasmine Griffin’s *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African American Migration Narrative*, and Anne Meis Knupfer’s *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women’s Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* for more on African American clubwomen. The term has been appropriated here to identify black women who belonged to contemporary book clubs at the turn of the twenty-first century. Though these book clubs did not focus on civic engagement and volunteerism, they did provide black women an interior space to collaboratively work through social issues that plagued their communities concerning family, romantic relationships, financial freedom, and educational obtainment.
controversial in ways that would bait readers into forming staunch opinions that would in turn enliven book club meetings with spirited conversation. These “hot topic” novels deviated from the usual markers of canonically accepted African American literature by the simplistic style of storytelling, the plain language employed to tell the stories,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Book Type</th>
<th>Top Rank</th>
<th>Times on List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terry McMillan</td>
<td>A Day Late and a Dollar Short</td>
<td>HC $22.95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disappearing Acts</td>
<td>PB $8.95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Stella Got Her Groove Back</td>
<td>HC $23.95, PB $6.95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 in HC, 3 in PB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mama</td>
<td>PB $9.00</td>
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<td>Casting the First Stone</td>
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<td>Not a Day Goes By</td>
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Table 2: Novels by African American popular fiction authors that appear on the *Essence* bestsellers list at the turn of the Twenty First Century.
and the limited subjectivities of the stories told. Furthermore, most clubs met once a month and typically read recently published novels, which by sheer quantity negated the reductive and elitist nature of literary canons.51

Many middle class black women’s book clubs, outside of Winfrey’s suggestions, chose to read the novels by the likes of Terry McMillan, Kimberla Lawson Roby, Eric Jerome Dickey, and E. Lynn Harris. By the early 2000s, these novelists and their contemporaries (save McMillan, who was still reveling in her early 1990s success in literature and film) were publishing one or two books per year to keep up with their exponentially growing fan base.

Book clubs helped boost book sales and elevate the notoriety of established authors. Black clubwomen bought assigned novels unquestioningly. Book clubs were designed for members to read the same text together and discuss its merits and limitations together. Books for clubs were not dependent on the author personally selling the novel or the power of word of mouth recommendation like in street lit. Though book clubs helped insure initial commercial success for middle class African American novels, it also intuitively decreased the pass along rate of these novels, which ironically drove an increase in selling price. Book club novels often went on the bookshelves of working and middle class black families, displayed on living room coffee tables, and became statement pieces for when company came. The propensity to display these novels necessitated a higher production quality and the extra cost was passed on to the consumer.

________________________

51 Literary canons are purposefully reductive and are meant to be the best literature and not necessarily the most popular.
Working and middle class black women were willing to spend between twenty and thirty dollars on a title, in part, because the book doubled as a decorative home fixture. A nicely bound, hardcover novel with a demure dust jacket symbolically signified wealth and prosperity in three ways. First, these novels were for casual readers and had no immediate value in the workplace. In order for black women to remain abreast of the most recent books, they had to have a certain amount of leisure time, which meant that their public and private labor obligations were not overwhelming and these women could spare an hour or more a day to read. They had less taxing work obligations, did not have public sector occupations at all, or were able to hire help for their private sector duties. In any case these women were classified as middle class or better. Second, literacy in the black community, since the time of enslavement—when reading was forbidden—has always signified prosperity and intelligence. Not only were books evidence of reading, they were also a barometer for consistency in leisure reading. Most avid black clubwomen wanted to avoid the dreaded conversation of their coffee table books being outdated or outmoded by the author publishing the next major installment of a series or there being a more popular novel floating around. Having the “right” novel on display when entertaining guests was an important marker of middle class black women’s social and cultural capital. Third, hardcover novels codified a level of unnecessary extravagance. Most of these middle class African American novels were eventually released in cheaper paperback versions. However, by the time titles reached paperback reprints, they were passé and not display worthy material. In the race to signify black middle class wealth and success, leisure reading became a time sensitive endeavor. Being beholden to rapidly changing cultural trends and trying to remain popular amidst the constant barrage of new titles meant that these novels were antithetical to the African American literary cannon that overwhelmingly sought works that were not bound by the feeble constraints of time, popularity, or overabundance.
Given that street lit appealed to a younger and more Hip Hop centric demographic than middle class African American fiction, book pricing fluctuated more. Many street lit texts underwent several editions within their first five years of availability. Most publishers insisted on starting with a hardcover edition, which usually was the most expensive version and yielded the author (and publisher) the highest profit margin. However, hardcover books were extremely hard to sell to the street lit demographic given that most readers did not expect to keep these books for long nor were they willing to spend upwards of $20 of their limited disposable income on a one-time read. Also, hardcover editions were fairly large and bulky, which made them inconvenient for the mobile or casual street lit reader. Next, the title was released in a mass-market edition, which was still made with fairly quality paper and cost on average between $12 and $18 a copy. Though a slightly lower profit margin for the author, mass-market editions had a higher success rate among street lit readers. Last, most successful street lit titles were released in pocket-sized editions or as pulp books. These editions were usually the cheapest version of the book and cost on average between $5 and $12 for a copy. For cheap run editions, the quality of the material was lacking and began to fall apart at the seams and the covers tore after they were passed along a few times. Yet, pocket editions were overwhelmingly the highest selling version of street lit titles. Authors had better odds selling a substantial amount of pocket books at a lower profit margin than they did selling hardcover editions at high profit margins (Tyree Interview 2). The sheer amount of editions street lit titles underwent in its infancy further complicated sales tracking.

52 This data was derived from Essence bestsellers lists from 1994 (when the list began) to the end of 2007 (the end of this study).
Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* however did not undergo the conventional edition sequence. As a result, *The Coldest Winter Ever* was the most pervasive street lit novel on Essence’s fiction list. The novel appeared a total of thirty six times or the equivalent of three years and was consecutively listed for twenty-nine months. The novel only appeared on the *Essence* hardcover list twice at the price of twenty-three dollars a copy. When Pocketbook Publisher released *The Coldest Winter Ever* in paperback, they bypassed mid-range quality prints and went straight to bottom pricing with the novel costing $6.99. In 2000 the average paperback fiction novel on Essence’s list cost $10.82. The *Coldest Winter Ever* drastically undercut other well selling titles. Souljah’s novel was affordable for a younger black reading public compared to the steep prices of middle class African American novelists like Dickey, Harris, and Roby. Her cheap book coupled with her Hip Hop music career and public persona as a community activist motivated wide and sustained sales while authenticating her and her novel in neo-Hip Hop circles. Her novel flew off the shelves and was a common topic in black barbershops, beauty salons, and urban high school cafeterias across America.

*The Coldest Winter Ever* proved to the publishing industry that quantity in street lit matters far more than quality. Publishers stood to make substantially more money selling higher volumes of cheaper books. However, other street lit novelists, Omar Tyree in particular, had trouble getting their publishers to buy into this “fast cash” model. Tyree’s work arguably tows the line between street lit’s young adult fiction audience and middle class African American fiction, which made it difficult to pinpoint his audience and what they would reasonably pay for a book. In 1996 Simon & Schuster released an edition of

53 This figure was pulled from a sample size of all monthly lists from 2000.
Flyy Girl (which had previously only been sold independently by Tyree) in hardcover for twenty-three dollars a copy alongside A Do Right Man, which was also priced at twenty-three dollars a copy. A Do Right Man54 concerns an educated, single black man navigating dating in the 1990s. This novel starkly deviated from the young adult subjectivities of Flyy Girl. According to Tyree, he did not want to write A Do Right Man but received pressure from Simon & Schuster to write a novel in the likeness of McMillan’s high performing Waiting to Exhale and How Stella Got Her Groove Back. The deviation in subjectivity added another layer of difficulty to how and to whom Tyree’s works were marketed and sold. Bookstores did not know how to market Flyy Girl and A Do Right Man simultaneously to competing but overlapping audiences. Given that Tyree straddled the line of young adult street lit and middle class African American fiction he and his publishers at Simon & Schuster did not agree on pricing or binding quality for his novels.

Not only was the commercial success of middle class African American novels over-determined by black women book clubs, these clubs also helped set the subject and moral agenda for black women’s novels written in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Issues concerning romance like interracial relationships, black women’s sexual freedom and pleasure, women’s superior socioeconomic status in relation to the men they dated, and the explosion of sexually transmitted diseases—chiefly AIDs—were popular subjects within the genre because these were issues black women faced daily. Overall, many of these novels wrote against or outside of long established literary tropes of black women being asexual mammy figures, or welfare queens, or sex crazed jezebels.55 These stories sought to

54 The title was similar to Aretha Franklin’s popular song, “A Do Right Woman, A Do Right Man.”
55 For more on black woman archetypal figures see chapter 3.
humanize black women’s experiences and provide a platform to have meaningful
discussions about topics that were typically taboo in black communities, like homoerotic
desire and mental health.

Middle class African American book clubs were ushered into the media-scape by
two primetime television programs airing episodes concerning the intersection of race and
gender during book club meetings. On the United Paramount Network (UPN) situation
comedy, *Girlfriends*, the topic of book clubs was introduced in season three, episode sixteen,
“Sex, Lies, & Books.” The episode originally aired February 17, 2003 in the wake of
successful book club authors like Terry McMillan, Eric Jerome Dickey, and E. Lynn Harris. In
the episode the main character, Joan Clayton, is asked to host the monthly meeting of a book
club that features, “powerful women” according to another character, Sharon Upton Farley.
In an effort to please and impress Sharon, Joan agrees to read *The Emperor of Ocean Park* by
Stephen L. Carter. An actual book, *The Emperor of Ocean Park* was the debut novel of a Yale
cover, this text never appeared on the *Essence* bestsellers’ list or *The New York Times*
bestsellers list. The novel’s absence from *Essence’s* niche market list and *NYTimes* wider,
mainstream list calls into question this novel’s audience and whether this fictitious book
club chose the novel because of nepotism (as majority of the characters were in the law
profession) or for its popularity and ability to resonate with them as readers. It became
clear through the scene that the point of reading the novel was not to share thoughts or
engage in a meaningful discussion rather it was to prove that the women could digest dense
and overabundant prose on top of their many public and private labor responsibilities. In
addition reading the voluminous text, Joan also went to great lengths to provide an array of
food options that will be palatable to the book club members. In encouraging the members
to eat more crab salad and attempting to assuage a woman’s vegan dietary restrictions, Joan
is trying to impress upon her guests her ability to fit into their elite and bourgeois circle. Joan, in contrast to the other clubwomen, is the only character wearing her hair curly and pulled back. Given that most of the characters in the scene are women of color, they had to undergo some form of hair manipulation to achieve their hairstyles. Their choices to ascribe to more European straight, flowing hairstyles, coupled with all the women having lighter hues of brown skin implores us to question what it meant to be a powerful woman of color at the dawn of the twenty-first century (or at least in media representations).

In addition to being a first time book club attendee and the only curly haired woman in the room, Joan is made to feel insufficient and an imposter for not reading all 654 pages of the novel. Sharon makes a snide remark that paralleled Joan’s failed attempt to read the entire novel to how Joan underperforms as an attorney. Sharon encourages Joan to leave the club meeting because for these middle class African American women, not reading massive novels about upper crust African American families is unacceptable. This interaction between Joan and Sharon also points to how some club spaces unwittingly became hostile towards black women when the initial goal was to empower black women. When one of the clubwomen brags about having the author in speed dial a diverging aspect of middle class African American fiction from street lit is illuminated. Though personal interaction with authors helped street lit succeed, the immediate author access this woman brags about creates a different call and response dynamic, which positions authors more as servants to the whims of readers than autonomous artists who could choose to allow reader responses to influence their work. This scene was a hyperbolic attempt to highlight the inter-personal and intra-racial violence around literacy and belonging that manifested in spaces like book clubs when standards were impossible and the available subjects and novel interpretations were narrow.
A few months after the “Sex, Lies & Books” episode of *Girlfriends* aired, the African American mother-daughter centric comedy *The Parkers* dealt with middle class black women’s book clubs as well. In episode twenty of season four, Nikki Parker attends an elite black women’s book club meeting in an effort to network with wealthy black women who could potentially patronize her catering service. From the outset of the episode, there is a distinct class bifurcation between black women that pits Nikki against the middle class clubwomen. Nikki and her accompanying friend, Andell, represent the working or underclass with their fledgling business and high school education. They are attempting (and failing at the task) to enter into the realm of the black financial elite in Los Angeles, California. The interaction among Nikki, Andell, and the clubwomen is similar to how Joan of *Girlfriends* is marginalized when first attending a book club meeting. In addition to making Nikki and Andell feel inadequate for not finishing the massive novel, the women also shame Nikki for not being married or in a relationship with a wealthy man. When Nikki is given an opportunity to remark on the novel, she bravely points out the inaccessibility of the prose and an inability to connect with the story or its characters. In pointing out the novel’s (and by association the clubwomen’s) break from reality, Nikki illuminates the slippery slope of narrowing expectations in African American popular fiction in the early 2000s. Juxtaposing the inaccessibility of the text, the episode mocks the seeming over availability of African American popular fiction authors by having the novelist present to read from the book and guide the discussion. Nikki’s honest novel critique compels the clubwomen to eject her from their meeting. However, as Nikki is leaving the author stops her for an interior moment of solidarity. The author confesses to loathing pretentious book club meetings and writing incoherent, dense prose to suit the desires of the wealthy elite who will not only pay a premium for the novel but will also provide a speaking honorarium and arrange plush travel accommodations. By the end of the scene, it becomes clear that
there were questions of integrity and motivation surrounding middle class African American popular fiction authors.

The socio-economic class disconnect between Nikki Parker and the middle class African American club women also appeared within the pages of *Essence* magazine and on the national stage. In the wake of rapidly growing book clubs, African American literary authors and major publishers took advantage of this ready-made audience to do readings or book signings for large book club gatherings. Presses also put effort in getting these novels featured in highly circulated magazines for black women like *Essence, Ebony,* and *JET*. These kinds magazines had monthly columns or staple sections on books recommended by books editors. Sections like *Essence’s* “Bookmark” and later “The Mix Books” and *Ebony’s* “Book Shelf” helped authors promote their work and became validating sources for the novel selections of book clubs. Generally, book columns in magazines and book reviews in newspapers helped influence what the public was reading across the United States. Books editors and magazine staff at black periodicals like *Essence* were in control of which books would receive features and which ones would not. Their choices were not bound to reading trends or demographic data and did not always reflect the kinds of books audiences were interested in reading. Their choices, however, did heavily influence which texts book clubs selected. By connecting localized book clubs with nationally circulated magazines, black women were able to be in concentric communities tethered together through books. Book clubs helped black women connect with their sister/friend groups, local book clubs, and a national reading public while remaining comfortably in the niche middle class African American literature genre.

At the turn of the twenty-first century *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines chose to overwhelmingly feature novels from middle class African American authors although *Essence* magazine’s bestsellers lists indicated African American women were
overwhelmingly purchasing street lit titles instead. In trying to explain the arbitrary nature of choosing works to feature Celia McGee admitted that, “with so little marketing money to spread around, and so much of it going to a handful of high-profile titles, publishers depend on the attention of book reviews” (2006) Ultimately, these gatekeepers relied mainly on their personal opinions of various novels and what they assumed black women wanted to read when deciding which novels to review or feature in books columns. Though arbitrary for editors, the limited coverage of African American books in niche media outlets was deeply important because, “African-American titles receive[d] sparse coverage in the mainstream media” (2006). Regardless, of how niche magazines like *Ebony* and *Essence* decided on what books to feature, all African American authors were generally absent from broad outlets like the *New York Times* and *Publishers’ Weekly*. *Essence Magazine* books editor from the 2000s, Patrik Henry Bass said, “Mainstream reviews often suffer from ‘a complete absence of African-American titles’” (McGee 2006). This slippery slope of under-coverage in books had potentially deleterious consequences on African American authors, especially in street lit which depended on word of mouth promotion and niche market notoriety. Once again, street lit was forced to find creative avenues to promote and sell their works.
In addition to special recurring sections on books, *Essence*, *Ebony*, and *JET* would also have small sales inserts from discount distributors. Most often, these discounted books spanned a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction subjects from African America authors. Magazine book sales inserts were not limited to African American magazines or to the turn of the twenty-first century. However, the practice of making middle class African American fiction, classic black texts, and street lit available and affordable to black mass audiences helped dismantle the problematic economic divide that separated street lit from other genre’s in African American literature.

Many urban authors also used book conventions and fairs to sell and promote their works. These arenas ironically acted as a great equalizer among African American authors while conflating various genres to black books causing hyper competitiveness among authors. Unfortunately, fairs and conventions also conflated various genres to monolithic black books, which caused competitiveness among authors in unrelated fields. At both fairs and conventions, any one can reasonably obtain booth space. This open access was another way African American authors who had been turned away from traditional avenues were able to maneuver around exclusionary systems of power and influence.
Street lit, because of oppositional forces, had no dedicated, uncomplicated place within the popular American cultural imagination. Nevertheless, the genre was able to inhabit and succeed in marginal spaces. Street lit thrived in the shadows. The genre made just enough waves in the book business to be considered a steady and reliable business venture but arguably, not enough for academicians to pay attention, or more “respected” authors to associate themselves with the genre. According to the *Essence* Bestsellers’ List, for example, Bebe Campbell Moore’s *Singing in the Comeback Choir* out ranked and outsold Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* in the August 1998 issue. Further, *Paradise* appears on the Essence list five times over the span of five months in hardcover, whereas *Singing in the Comeback Choir* appears in both hardcover and paperback six times over the span of two years. *Paradise* garnered heavy promotion within black bookstores and book fairs because of the fame associated with Morrison’s name. Moore’s novel outselling and outlasting *Paradise* in bookstores points to the falsehood of larger assumptions about what kinds of fiction African Americans elected to purchase. The difference between urban novels like *Singing in the Comeback Choir* and the likes of Toni Morrison is that Morrison’s name carries Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes, unequivocal endorsements from Oprah Winfrey, and overwhelming critical scholarship. Morrison has a black cultural respectability capital that has elided urban literature,

56 Both novels were released within a year of the August 1998 Essence issue, making them contemporaries and marketable to the same black audiences. *Singing in the Comeback Choir* can be defined as a novel in between middle class African American fiction and street lit given its protagonist’s socio-economic status and the novels urban setting.
street lit and its novelists. Being coded as a street lit author was a marker of difference, a signifier of “other”.

In addition to marginal relegation in contemporary black fiction, street lit also contended with middle class African American fiction writers who vehemently delineated between their work and that of street lit novelists and who denigrated street lit on the whole. Nevertheless, authors like Omar Tyree and Teri Woods persevered and sold millions of books independently.

Table 3: Omar Tyree novels that appear on *Essence*’s bestsellers list.

Street lit authors, much to the chagrin of middle class African American authors, were able to broker lucrative book contracts with publishers that offered a great deal of autonomy to the authors and some were even able to start smaller subsidiary imprints under a larger parent company.

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<td>Simon &amp; Schuster</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>December 2006</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Omar Tyree novels that appear on *Essence*’s bestsellers list

Simon & Schuster for example invested heavily in African American popular fiction in the 1990s and early 2000s. One of Simon & Schuster’s imprints, Pocket Books, released
reprints of Terry McMillan’s early novels, *Mama, Disappearing Acts*, and *Waiting to Exhale*, which were all mainstays on the Essence bestsellers list in 1994 and 1995 (the time leading up to the box office debut of the film, *Waiting to Exhale*). Omar Tyree, after operating independently for his first novels, signed a lucrative contract with Simon & Schuster that included a Pocket Book edition of *Flyy Girl* for a larger, national audience that was copyrighted in 1996. The success of the *Flyy Girl* reprint led to Tyree brokering a six-figure, two-book contract with the publisher, which included the *Flyy Girl* sequel to, *For the Love of Money*, which was released in 2000. Tyree went on to have a long standing, though at times contentious, relationship with Simon & Schuster. Sister Souljah enlisted Simon & Schuster’s Pocket Books for her iconic and cheaply manufactured novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Zane also began her expansive novel career with Simon & Schuster with the release of *Addicted* through Pocket books in 2001. Simon & Schuster provided African American authors with unprecedented book contracts that could be likened to the lucrative deals Hip Hop artists brokered to with major music labels around the same period.

**Hustling Hip Hop: Marketing Street Lit and Rap Albums**

While working under contract with Simon & Schuster, Omar Tyree rolled out an elaborate Hip Hop music inspired marketing plan for promoting *For the Love of Money*. He asked for a definitive release, or “drop,” date from Simon & Schuster to encourage readers to purchase the novel as soon as it became available. At the time, this was not an industry practice, and Simon & Schuster could only provide Tyree with a time of month release window. With Simon & Schuster predicting *For the Love of Money* being on bookshelves across the United States in mid-august of 2000, Tyree settled on Tuesday, August 15, 2000 as his “official” drop date. He chose a Tuesday for its Hip Hop symbolism.
albums were released on Tuesdays and Nielsen Soundscan tracked weekly album sales beginning on Tuesdays. Tyree sought to benefit from the instantiated practice of Hip Hop fans purchasing their new music on Tuesdays or at least in the first week of availability. He also created t-shirts, key chains, and posters as promotional material. According to him, this marketing scheme was immensely successful, with *For the Love of Money* selling all fifty thousand first-print run copies in two weeks of the initial release. The novel made the *New York Times* bestsellers list, appeared on *Essence’s* bestsellers list for ten consecutive weeks, was nominated for an NAACP Image Award in its release year, and led to Tyree’s fourth consecutive contract with Simon & Schuster for an undisclosed seven figure amount (Tyree Interview). In the wake of the rapid sales of *For the Love of Money*, other publishers began having drop dates for new books. Namely, *Scholastic Press* began having midnight releases and associated launch celebrations for the *Harry Potter* series in the year following the release of *For the Love Money*, according to Tyree.

Author Zane, also took to innovative marketing angles. Given the erotic and explicit nature of her prose, Zane initially was an anonymous author and used email to circulate her early stories. In this way, she was able to protect her anonymity and add a layer of alluring mystique to her urban erotic prose. There was something terribly enticing about receiving anonymous semi-pornographic stories via email that left recipients wondering where the email came from and hopeful that there was more to come. Zane was able to curate a tailored audience using new technology. Her digital beginnings not only helped to establish her works’ viability, it also gave readers a platform to respond to her work. Zane sold more then 2.5 million copies of her first eight books in the short span of four years (Bellafante 2004). Digital technology allowed Zane to reach her audience faster than other authors, which translated into a rapid publishing trajectory where she was releasing a two or more
novels a year when her peers were publishing one novel every one or two years. The amount of work she published added tremendously to the volume of books she sold.

Many street lit readers were so enamored with these author’s initial works that fans and publishers pushed authors to write sequels, prequels, trilogies, and so forth. Despite some street lit authors wanting to explore other subjects concerning urban life for people of color, they were relegated to specific subjects and were confined by the limitations of their famous characters.

Street lit, despite being ascribed a wide cadre of names (including hood books, ghetto romance, urban lit, and smut stuff), gained a sense of cultural salience for a generation of young, literate, and urban Americans, who could vividly recall the first street lit title they read and how the book made them feel. Street lit, unlike middle class African American fiction, has been shamed, silenced, and censored in mainstream media. Similar to other modes Hip Hop cultural production—including, music, film, fashion, and television, street lit was repudiated and labeled a passing fad by pundits, critics, other African American novelists, librarians, and teachers. These anti-street lit forces did what they could to compartmentalize and diminish the impact of the genre in favor of helping middle class African American fiction succeed. Nevertheless, street lit novels enjoyed staggering books sales and cultural salience in black enclaves across urban America. Street lit stories, with their explicit and illicit subjectivities and Hip Hop inspired prose, gave voice to a generation of people who would have otherwise never found their likeness in print.
Yo! Rapping the City: Mainstreaming Urban Stories

Street lit, in addition to emerging from the shadows of *The Oprah Show* book club phenomenon, was borne of the Hip Hop golden age. According to Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, the late 1980s was a synergistic moment when Hip Hop cultural production was able to successfully straddle two opposing realms, the underground and the mainstream. Often street lit prose, like Hip Hop songs, were social commentaries on the residual ramifications of social policies enacted in the 1970s and 1980s, which included President Ronald Reagan’s trickle down economics that stripped the poor and middle class of social benefits in favor of steep tax breaks for the wealthy (Ogbar 144), the establishment of mandatory minimums for minor drug related offenses that disproportionately impacted poor people of color, and the sprawling prison industrial enterprise that has left more young black and brown persons incarcerated than in college (Michelle Alexander). In addition to similar subjectivities, street lit and Hip Hop music also shared similar production and dissemination practices due to being initially labeled as marginal and fleeting modes of youth expression with no real sustaining value. Street lit and Hip Hop music were forced to work independently and creatively outside of traditional structures, which demonstrated their viability in the marketplace. When mainstream outlets were willing to invest in urban creative storytelling, these art forms were commoditized.

57 It is important to note that Hip Hop cultural production is more than mere rap music, it includes other forms of black youth expression like R&B and Pop music, film, music videos, urban fashion, magazines, radio broadcasts, and literature.
and warped to fit Middle America's expectations, which were worlds apart from the urban metropolises that bred these stories.

Hip Hop music began in the South Bronx during the 1970s (Chang 67; Rose 2). The rap cyphers performed in parks, the graffiti canvassed onto buildings and train cars, and the house parties replete with a disc jockey (DJ) and his master of ceremony (MC) melded into a unique culture that infected the world (Rose 34-61). Hip Hop in the 1980s was underground and was passed along through DJ mixes on cassette tapes and verbal accolades. In the 1990s popular television shows like *Yo! MTV Raps, In Living Color* and *Rap City: Tha Basement* ushered in commercial success for Hip Hop artists (Rose 8). Additionally, Hip Hop was reformulated to be a poly-vocal and geographically inclusive endeavor, as artists from places outside of New York City gained popularity in the 1990s. Hip Hop artists like Tupac, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Ice Cube made music that was distinctively West Coast infused rap. West Coast Hip Hop artists have become mostly known as gangsta rappers, choosing to focus on the gang violence and police brutality that was rampant in places like Los Angeles and Oakland in their rhymes. Southern rappers like OutKast, Ludacris, T.I., and Eight Ball & MJG also brought their social and cultural location to Hip Hop's microphone in the early 2000s. Hip Hop created a platform for many otherwise marginalized voices to tell their unique stories in a manner that illuminated the continuities of experiences for those who created and related to Hip Hop culture (Rose 10-11). Tricia Rose, in her book *Black Noise*, uses Hip Hop videos as a prime example of how Hip Hop artists were able to create location specificity by filming rap videos in the neighborhoods of their youth while creating narratives that
resonated with wide audiences who were able to watch rap videos at home and look out of their windows and see similarities between the video and their own environment (Rose 123). In many ways Hip Hop music helped create an atmosphere that was ready to receive and pay for stories about minority experiences with poverty, violence, and perseverance in other mediums like print. Hip Hop and street lit were easily cultural and economic cousins (Khalid Akil White 124).

When Hip Hop was small tremors felt in the Bronx, it was easy to understand how breakdancing, graffiti, DJing, beat boxing, and MCs worked in tandem to create a unique milieu of youth expressive arts and an unfettered subculture. But as Hip Hop began to make seismic waves across the United States and around the world, Hip Hop could not continue to exist as an enclave of intra-cultural expressivity. In order to make Hip Hop palatable to mainstream and diverse audiences, it was stripped down to a simpler—more palatable—version, while maintaining some semblance of gritty unrelenting realness. The MC’s original role was to prime the crowd at local youth gatherings for the DJ and keep the party live all night long (Kitwana). As time progressed the MC began to eclipse the DJ, the b-boy, and the graffiti artist in notoriety, stage presence, and on vinyl. As Hip Hop entered the mainstream, the MC morphed into a rapper and was called upon to embody all the pillars of Hip Hop culture and deliver its message to the masses (Basu). And in doing so, rap became the equivalent of the crossover Motown sound for a new generation.

58 Specifically, this process was to make Hip Hop appealing to a white American audience.
From the base of rap music Hip Hop was rebuilt into a sales-driven entity, a lifestyle brand—a commoditized culture. The consumerist shift at the opening of the 1990s in Hip Hop de-centered the communal uplift purpose of the youth cultural form for a capitalist agenda. Many artists recognized the value in their unique talents and wanted to be amply compensated. Money meant that rappers invested more energy in selling records than in rocking a party until the break of dawn. Hip Hop in origin was the voice of the young, disenfranchised, urban, and voiceless youth. The mainstreaming of Hip Hop deeply complicated the culture’s representative capabilities, as artists began making music to please record label executives and wider consumer audiences.

The shift from MC to rapper in Hip Hop, coupled with the merging of Nielson Soundscan data tracking and Billboard’s music charting system in 1991 provided the mainstream media industry with fertile, uncharted musical ground to explore. Soundscan helped regulate Billboard’s music charts by tracking record sales weekly and autonomously, rather than relying on the reporting data from independent music stores and industry taste makers who were known for their propensity to be influenced by financial bribes. Soundscan was able to provide accurate and detailed geographic, time, and demographic information concerning individual album sales. When soundscan’s information was considered in relation to established information like racial composition of geographic locations and assumed daily work or education responsibilities the music industry was able to reasonably infer who was buying in the different genres of music. Soundscan helped illuminate how influential rap music was at the opening of the 1990s, despite the concerted efforts of music critics and radio station executives who refused to acknowledge Hip Hop’s popularity. With unequivocal data, Hip Hop music was able to take its place in mainstream American music with deafening finality (Wawzenek).
Soundscan’s data also uncovered that suburban white teens were the largest consumers of rap music. Data indicated that between 60 and 70 percent of all rap music purchased and consumed by suburban white youth (Basu). By 1998, rap was outselling country music by a margin of almost 10 million CDs, though country music had long sense been heralded as America’s music (Basu). This evidence came as a shock, though it was aligned with the historical consumption practices for black music in America; especially, when considering the Blues, Jazz and Rhythm & Blues traditions. Hip Hop was permeating white picket suburban fences through radio airwaves and television programming across the United States. This “darkening” of American culture was due in part to the initiatives taken by the Music Television (MTV) and the Black Entertainment Television (BET) networks a decade earlier. In August of 1988, MTV piloted a show exclusively dedicated to rap music, Yo! MTV Raps. The pilot was the most viewed television segment in the network’s history (“Yo! The Story of Yo! MTV Raps”). From the initial success, Yo! MTV Raps show became a two-hour long daily segment on all things Hip Hop. The show premiered new Hip Hop music videos, invited artists on set for interviews and live performances, and allowed musicians to broadcast from the streets of their neighborhoods for the entire world to see. According to Edward Kern “Ted” Demme, Yo! MTV Raps producer, artists would receive an average boost of 200,000 more record sales by appearing on the show (“Yo! The Story of Yo! MTV Raps”).

Less than a year later, BET introduced its own Hip Hop centered show, Rap City: Tha Basement.59 Both shows endeavored to introduce the latest in Hip Hop music and culture to

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59 According to Hip Hop scholar Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, Rap City premiered in 1988, months before Yo! MTV Raps aired in the same year (Hip Hop Revolution 107). His citation does not take into account when the show was initially piloted as a special, but rather when the show was premiered as a recurring daily segment. However, the common record uses the release
national audiences and provide emerging artists opportunities to gain notoriety. *Rap City*, like *Yo! MTV Raps*, capitalized on the gritty and humble beginnings of Hip Hop culture by having the show set in a drafty concrete basement, which was meant to imitate where Hip Hop music was conventionally created. MTV and BET allowed the shows to travel with Hip Hop artists, as a way to show fans where their favorite rappers came from and to authenticate bombastic home space rhymes. Both shows were also confronted with major censorship battles waged by network executives who found Hip Hop subjectivities too explicit for daytime television. This forced producers to constantly demand that more risqué and violent content to be included or risk not having the best artists on air. After all, Hip Hop was born as an anti-establishment movement aimed at giving voice to the concerns and interests of the youth. To censor its music was to re-inscribe the problematic strictures the movement worked against. *Yo! MTV Raps* and *Rap City* gave urban America a seat at the table of mainstream media. But that seat came at a high moral price for the culture.

With the popularity of *Yo! MTV Raps*, *Rap City*, *The Box*, and other music video outlets, the expectations for music videos began to shift in the late 1990s. Hip Hop videos from the outset were cinematic glimpses into the dangerous and mysterious worlds that were intentionally set far apart from the daily existence of Middle America. Music videos in addition to being voyeuristic entrées into how the “other” half lived, were geographic and cultural ownership claims over neighborhoods that were not owned, but rented, by black and brown people.\(^{60}\) In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hip Hop music videos were overwhelmingly preoccupied with moral messaging (i.e. “Night of Living Basehead” by

\(^{60}\) See Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* for more detail about music videos.

As Hip Hop artists gained notoriety, fame, and wealth from their work, many of them decidedly shifted from telling candid tales “from the bottom” to stringing together grandiose couplets concerning their newfound money and depicting their fast and loose lifestyle of luxury and richness. Often, Hip Hop artists turned to Herald “Hype” Williams to direct and/or produce shiny, flashy, and extravagant music videos in an effort to have video treatments to match the bravado of their lyrics. Hype, from Holis Queens, began his career as a graffiti artist and aspired to reach the same level of notoriety as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring in visual street art. However, Hype found more success working with digital media. Early in his production career Hype worked under “Uncle” Ralph McDaniels on early rap videos that were meant to capture the original gritty street mode like, “Night of the Living Baseheads.” Eventually Hype began producing his own music videos, which have come to trace the transition from underground to mainstream for many Hip Hop artists.

For example Nas' second album It Was Written caught the attention of mainstream audiences with the breakout hit, “If I Ruled the World” featuring Lauryn Hill and a video treatment by Hype Williams. In the video Hype employed jarring wide and bubble-eyed frames to starkly contrast the original approach of Hip Hop grit with Nas being captured hanging out with people in Queensbridge to the glitz and glamor of “new money” spaces like a casino and Times Square. These juxtaposing images were used to illuminate the grave differences but physical closeness between the two worlds artists like Nas were expected to
straddle. Specifically, when in Times Square Nas is on top of a moving vehicle with the skyscrapers and lighted billboards dramatically whizzing by in the background. In the shots of Nas in his old Queensbridge neighborhood, he is sitting and standing around dilapidated low-income high-rise buildings. And the casino scene features him in an extravagant suit, no tie, open shirt, lightly tinted sunglasses, a single gold chain, and a very large cigar. The casino can be understood as a bridge where talent and a handful of luck can determine one's fate rather than from where you originate or what you aspire to achieve.

The video also features melodramatic red and blue light gels, which refract on Nas and Lauryn Hill's skin magically. The gels buff out the hard edges of Nas' classic wheat colored Timberland boots, oversized clothes, and chipped front tooth (arguably all authenticating symbols of his urban belonging and markers of his underground Hip Hop status). The red and blue hues add complimentary glow and shimmer to the vast digital screens in Times Square. The bright lights help Nas, with all his markers of difference, fit into the downtown culture of wealth, extravagance, and larger than life dreams. The video and Nas’ lyrics begged questions of how artists could authentically belong within Hip Hop and meet crossover expectations.

Hype was able to bring the song's lyrics to vibrant life. The refrain states, "If I ruled the World, imagine that/I'd free all of my suns,61 (I love 'em baby)/Black diamonds and pearls/Could it be, If you could be mine we'd both shine/If I ruled the world/Still livin' for today, in these last days and times." Hype was able to capture Nas, Lauryn Hill, and the essence of the song by filming the video in shiny wide shots in the nexus of cultural

61 The entire song, hook in particular, is an ode to the Nation of Gods and Earths or the Five Percent Nation of Islam by invoking language of earths and suns and imagined alternative futures for black men and women.
difference; New York City. Using Times Square boldly demanded that Nas, The Fugees, their religious beliefs, and Hip Hop cultural production be written into the cultural landscape of New York City, America, and the world. Hype was able to ensnare and captivate a global audience by placing sharply contrasting images of Queensbridge with the easily identifiable and consumer driven Times Square. And by design, audiences had to reckon with the grave discrepancies between abject poverty in Queensbridge and wasteful opulence in Times Square, both of which represented the same metropolitan city. The video thereby, asks not only is it possible for a black urban youth to rule the world but if Hip Hop and mainstream America should be considered the same world.

*It Was Written*, with the help of Hype’s iconic music video, sold over 2.6 million copies since its release in 1996, which is nearly a %60 increase from *Illmatic*. The album has been iconized as a classic album by Hip Hop aficionados. *Illmatic* was successful in the mainstream marketplace, having sold less than 15,000 copies in the first week. And has gone on to sell over 1.5 million copies over the past two decades (Robertson). *It Was Written* was Nas’ most commercially successful album. Yet, the Hip Hop community precluded the work from discussions of classic and impactful rap albums, as was the case for *Illmatic*. Arguably, “If I Ruled the World” and its video treatment were the main reasons for this discrepancy. The video put Nas’ face in the homes of Middle America and prompted white young adults, with more disposable income than most urban young Hip Hop heads, to go purchase the album. For thirty years, the beginning riffs of the song with Lauryn Hill’s melodic humming have become a reliable way for any Hip Hop DJ to get crowds hype. The video has been used in countless documentaries trying to capture the “essence” of 1990s Hip Hop. It also solidified Nas as a voice of the voiceless and impoverished, which has
afforded him an outsider within position\textsuperscript{62} and has allowed him to exist in both urban America and the mainstream. “If I Ruled the World” demonstrated why record sales and lasting popularity in American culture were both important to the longevity and prosperity of Hip Hop artists.

“If I Ruled the World” spent twenty weeks in the Billboard Top 100 chart and peaked at the fifty-third position. His follow up single, “Street Dreams,” also from It Was Written spent seventeen weeks on the same chart but was able to reach the 22\textsuperscript{nd} position therein. “Street Dreams” capitalized on “If I Ruled the World’s” mainstream momentum and doubled down on the Hype Williams’ effect by again using oppositional shots of Nas’ black body against the blinding whiteness of casino lights and added Middle American famous Italian actors. The “Street Dreams Remix” went even further in crossover efforts by drafting R. Kelly (who also worked heavily with Hype for his videos) to sing the refrain.

Hype created the “If I Ruled the World” video at the height his 1990s Hip Hop reign. In the mid-1990s Hype was producing and/or executive directing an average of thirty music videos a year, some of which had unprecedented multi-million dollar production budgets.\textsuperscript{63} In 1999, Hype produced one of the most expensive Hip Hop music videos ever made; “What Is It Gonna Be?!” performed by Busta Rhymes and Janet Jackson. The video has been reported as costing upwards of 2.4 million dollars (Anthony). Hype Williams and his

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\bibitem{62} See chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of the outsider within concept in relation to Hip Hop and street lit.

\bibitem{63} It is unclear how many videos Hype has produced or executive directed because some of the videos do not include identifying information (which usually includes the names of the song, music artist, music director, and/or the music label in the bottom corner at the onset of the video) and many recording labels only listed themselves and the music artist in copyright documents. The obfuscation of Hype’s influence in video production points to larger issues of intellectual property ownership and fair pay in Hip Hop.

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treatments became a marker of a cultural shift in Hip Hop music production that ushered the genre into mainstream America’s musical tenor. This difference seeped into all crevices of popular American culture.

In videos produced or directed by Hype (and those created in an aesthetic likeness) were used to promote more than just music. Often times there was strategic product placement that directly led to brand endorsement contracts for Hip Hop artists. Champagne and fine liquors, for example, became a marker of fast-achieved success and symbolic excess for East Coast Hip Hop artists once they had been established as financially successful artists; like, The Notorious B. I. G., Jay-Z, and Puff Daddy. Jay-Z and Puff Daddy went on to broker multimillion-dollar endorsement deals with companies like Ace of Spades, create their own alcohol companies like Jay-Z’s Dussé and Puff Daddy’s Ciroc, and even manage their own nightlife clubs like Jay-Z’s chain of 40/40 clubs. In addition, many Hip Hop music videos were used to promote feature length films. At the turn of the twenty-first century, there was a proliferation of African American movies produced independently or in connection to Hip Hop artists and rap labels. This surge in black media production allowed for successful cross promotion and branding to occur. Many black or Hip Hop inspired films in the late 1990s and early 2000s had their original scores released as soundtrack albums alongside the films; including *Set If Off, Romeo Must Die, Belly* (directed by Hype Williams), and *State Property* (which featured the members of the Hip Hop group State Property, who were signed to Jay-Z’s Roca-Fella Records and was co-produced by Damon

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64 Over the span of his career, Sean Combs has been known by numerous stage names including Puff Daddy, Puffy, Puff, P. Diddy, and Diddy. He will be referred to as Puff Daddy henceforth in this text to reflect what he was commonly referred to as during the historical moment considered herein.
Dash, one the controlling owners of Roca-Fella Records). Often, the movie soundtrack songs had video treatments that incorporated clips from the film as a cross-promotional initiative.

While having the ability to promote works across mediums greatly increased the reach of artistic offerings, it also dramatically intensified the impact of failed ventures. If the soundtrack’s feature songs were unable to gain popularity on urban radio networks or generate enough music video rotations on major music television outlets, it was more likely that the movie also would not fair well in theatres or straight to DVD sales. However, the staggering rewards were well worth the risk, given that most of the ventures had an unprecedented amount institutional promotional support from major music and/or production companies. And major television outlets with Hip Hop segments created avenues for artists to simultaneously promote their music and film ventures by appearing for interviews and music performances and then having their video played on Yo! MTV Raps!, Rap City: Tha Basement, Total Request Live (TRL), and 106 & Park, among many others.

Most notably, the film adaptation of Terry McMillan’s Waiting to Exhale (by the same title) was able to capitalize on two seemingly mutually exclusive niche markets because of its ability to translate the original concept of the novel, black women’s solidarity and quest to find love, across various mediums. The novel, originally published in 1992, generated a loyal fan base through
staggering book sales, an endorsement from Oprah Winfrey, and a robust black woman book club network across the United States. The soundtrack album, released on November 14, 1995, was able to build from the established fan base by featuring soulful ballads from veteran songstresses like Aretha Franklin and Chaka Khan, who were popular among McMillan’s African American middle class and educated reading audience. The soundtrack also included some emerging vocalists who were best categorized as Hip Hop artists like Brandy “Brandy” Norwood, Mary J. Blige, TLC, and SWV and appealed to a younger urban audience. In the Hype Williams produced video for Brandy’s “Sittin’ Up In My Room” several short silent clips of Waiting to Exhale were inserted as a way to provide potential movie goers with content teasers. Though Brandy does not appear in the film, she was used as a promotional agent in exchange for the movie’s ability to introduce her music to a wider (and slightly older) black demographic. “Waiting to Exhale,” the film, and by extension Brandy and her song were promoted on day time television shows like The Oprah Winfrey Show. This promotional exchange of black art was also able to boost book sales for Terry McMillan’s special Pocket Book edition of the novel, which featured the same image from movie’s DVD cover and the soundtrack CD cover. Ultimately, in this case, cross promoting was beneficial to the music artists, film crew, Terry McMillan, and her publishing house.

Though there were other cross promotion ventures in black popular film and music in the 1990s and early 2000s, most were not able to achieve the same book, music, and film trifecta as the Waiting to Exhale venture. Waiting to Exhale’s commercial success proved that urban stories, across mediums, had a large and financially enthusiastic public, promotional efforts in black and brown communities were effective, and Hip Hop music and culture had the ability to move beyond youth demographics. Despite Waiting to Exhale’s unique cultural spread, street lit novels were able to retain ancillary connections to Hip Hop music and black films by inserting narrative allusions, invoking signified images on the
Street lit authors have appeared in the same radio segments as Hip Hop musical artists, their books have been sold on the same street corner tables as Hip Hop CDs and cassettes, and a number of writers have created their own Hip Hop music; most notably, Sister Souljah. In fact, Souljah first emerged as a rapper and community leader, almost a decade before the release of her cornerstone street lit novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

The fickle nature of the street lit marketplace and the relatively slow process of book publishing made collaborative promotional ventures among books, music, and film relatively difficult. Compared to the mere weeks it took to shoot a movie and the days to shoot a music video, the year or more it usually took for street lit authors to get a novel into the hands of readers was glacial and ill-timed for the music and film industry to align with the book industry for a staggered, cross promotional release. Nevertheless, street lit authors took advantage of the popularity of urban storytelling at the turn of the century.

In a similar manner as music videos with movie clips, street lit authors began printing teasers of subsequent novels in the back of the book. These small vignettes were used to keep fans invested in the author's work and incite excitement for the next novel. Employing book teasers helped authors signal to readers that their favorite characters lived on to have more adventures. The teaser had the difficult task of taking characters that readers loved through new and exciting challenges in ways that did not drastically alter their personalities or deviate from reader expectations. It also meant that authors needed to write consistently to ensure that subsequent novels would be released in a timely fashion. These pressures were almost impossible to withstand and often times the sequels to popular street lit novels failed. Authors like Omar Tyree and Sister Souljah had low performing sequels to *Flyy Girl* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, respectively. When speaking with Tyree about why *For the Love Money* was not commercially successful, he cited his
desire for Tracy Ellison to evolve into a mature college student competing with his audiences' expectation of Tracy to remain the same flyy girl that popularized the first novel. Similar to Hip Hop cultural cross promotion, novel series in street lit were high risk ventures that paid handsomely when they were successful but were crippling to authors if the concept did not resonate with readers.

As Hip Hop cultural production proved its viability in American media in the later 1990s and early 2000s, pioneering shows like Yo! MTV Raps and Rap City had served their purpose of introducing Hip Hop to the mainstream and were cancelled. In their wake, both MTV and BET had established popular music video shows with live studio audiences. MTV’s Total Request Live (TRL) and BET’s 106 & Park retained the established practices of playing music videos, interviewing artists, and recording live performances. But both networks ditched the dark and gritty basement sets that were synonymous with old school Hip Hop for more glamorous, brightly colored backdrops. TRL was broadcasted from a Times Square Studio with sweeping floor to ceiling glass windows, which allowed fans to congregate outside the studio and peer in from the street. Ironically, making music television accessible to fans from the street moved further away from Hip Hop’s urban, street roots and shut off the free following connections between rap artists and their home spaces. The glass windows, in many ways, came to represent the juxtaposing liberty and confinement of Hip Hop thriving in the mainstream. Many Hip Hop artists enjoyed unprecedented fame, riches, and socio-cultural power but they were also beholden to the interests of their music labels, short attention spans of fans, and the unpredictability of popular culture.
Once Hip Hop became a staple in American culture production, record companies like Sony, Arista, and Columbia, television media outlets including MTV and BET, and music stores like Sam Goodie, Circuit City, and FYE, employed the music as a dynamic marketing medium across business industries. Sales and promotions tactics for lifestyle brands moved beyond mere product placement in music videos to employing Hip Hop music in radio and television advertisements and employing artists as brand representatives. Conversely, Hip Hop artists’ lyrical endorsements of a product often resulted in staggering sales boosts for that company, especially in apparel. This led to many Hip Hop artists starting their own clothing lines including Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter’s Roca-Wear, Puff Daddy's Sean John, Cornell “Nelly” Haynes' Vokal and AppleBottom Jeans, and Percy “Master P’ Miller’s P. Miller, among many others. Hip Hop centered magazines like The Source, VIBE and XXL also used cover story interviews with high profile artists to justify charging more money for advertisement space. Hip Hop became the background music to American commerce. A heavy baseline and witty rhymes in an advertisement was able to sterilize the original gritty aura of Hip Hop. Advertisers found a way to commoditize the coolness of Hip Hop without the burdens that bore the art.

An entire culture of commodity was built to support images of Hip Hop grandeur and excess. This in turn solidified certain narrowing expectations of Hip Hop artists. Many music companies and subsequently lifestyle brands expected every Hip Hop artist to have a “rags to riches” narrative, a hard impenetrable exterior, and a desire to spend their new wealth on frivolity. These financially irresponsible and monolithic expectations were

65 Rapper “Jay-Z” alludes to this practice in his song “99 Problems” from The Black Album when he raps, “Rap mags try and use my black ass/So advertisers can give ’em more cash for ads.”
further concretized by MTV’s programming, which allowed viewers to “peek” into the lives of their favorite celebrities with shows like *MTV’s Cribs*, *Driven*, and *MTV Diary*. These shows often contrasted the lavish lifestyles and overabundance artists had achieved to the abject poverty from whence they came (McGrath).66

The commercialization Hip Hop cultural production in the mainstream was a defining element of street lit stories. The genre overwhelmingly responded to old school Hip Hop subjects but was created and influenced by the neo-Hip Hop generation,67 which was concerned with mainstream cultural production and hyper-consumption. Many genre novels included characters that came into an overabundance of money (usually through illegal means) and spent lavishly on materialistic signifiers of wealth. These books were at the nexus of where Hip Hop consumerism and urban realities met. These stories allowed readers more realistic68 access to the elitist lifestyles of Hip Hop artists by grounding these fantastical stories on familiar geographic landscapes, peppering the dialogue with accurate

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66 Whether they actually lived such lives of excess or these shows were simply for the enjoyment of a Hip Hop consumer public is debatable. The image of impossible wealth, however, was unequivocally the message commercial Hip Hop was pushing in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

67 Neo-Hip Hop refers to the second wave of Hip Hop artists and audiences that were producing and consuming black youth culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many of these artists were able to have longer lasting careers than first generation Hip Hoppers and had the advantage of established networks of producers, artist & representation representatives, and a consumer base.

68 Street lit stories created a false realness by presenting grossly improbable circumstances.
linguistic patterns, and adorning the characters with familiar clothes, hair, shoes, and jewelry.\textsuperscript{69}

The mainstreaming of Hip Hop came at a hefty price, which artists paid by sacrificing a localized, unique, and independent sound. Commodification negatively impacted Hip Hop in three distinct ways: in competing financial and artistic aspirations, available subjects, and the creation of a slippery slope of toughness. First, many artists lost their artistic autonomy and were beholden to large music companies that saw rappers as assets rather than artists. Hip Hop moguls like Puff Daddy and Jermaine Dupri attempted to act as intermediaries between artists and companies in matters of finance and creative direction. Even in trying to mitigate the tension between artists and music label executives, these intermediaries added another set of complications for artists to navigate and another entity demanding a percentage of the profits earned by artists. Although the mainstream provided Hip Hop acts with access to larger audiences and boosted album sales, this did not always translate to more money for the artists. In fact, artists like Jay-Z and Method Man have purported that music tours were the most lucrative venture available to Hip Hop artists. Nevertheless, high record sales helped fill stadiums and auditoriums for touring artists. Hip Hop's reliance on touring for profits made for grueling and taxing work; artists were often expected to perform multiple times in one night, in addition to radio and community interviews, and some artists would even record new music while on tour. Given the exhausting pace of touring and the emotional strife of being away from family, Hip Hop

\textsuperscript{69} Street lit thrived on it's ability to subvert traditional understandings of reality versus fiction by using aspects of reality like geographical locations, existing Hip Hop products, and even actual Hip Hop artists while telling fictional stories about hyperbolic characters.
artists likened being on the road to the labor intensive expectations of the drug trade and other illegal enterprises centralized in street lit.

Mainstreaming also stripped Hip Hop of its original moral center. Of course, there have been artists who were moderately successful peddling hard-hitting social commentaries and uplift messages like Common Sense, Talib Kweli, and Mos Def. However, most rappers felt they needed to choose between being successful and using their art as civil and social activism. In 2003, Jay-Z released what he purported as his final album as his way of reflecting critically and earnestly on his career.\(^7^0\) On the song “Moment of Clarity,” he raps,

“I dumb down for my audience/ and double my dollars/they criticize me for it/yet they all yell “Holla”\(^7^1\)/If skills sold/ truth told/I’d probably be/lyrically/Talib Kweli/Truthfully/I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/(But I did five mil)/I ain’t been rhyming like Common since/When your sense got that much in common/And you been hustling since/Your inception/Fuck perception/Go with what makes sense/Since/ I know what I’m up against/We as rappers must decide what’s most important/And I can’t help the poor if I’m one of them/So I got rich and gave back/To me that’s the win-win.”

Amidst Jay-Z’s crafty wordsmithery, he illuminates an important conflicting duality that plagued Hip Hop artists who aspired for their words to change the lives of people and make

\(^7^0\) Jay-Z has since released more music. He has also ventured into business roles by creating a marketing company, Translation Advertising; a string of nightclubs, 40/40; and a music streaming company, Tidal.

\(^7^1\) “Holla” was a popular song from Jay-Z’s album _The Dynasty: Roc La Familia_ released in 2000. Holla also was a popular ad liberation Jay-Z and other contemporary rappers used in the early 2000s. Jay-Z uses “Holla” here to represent the commercial buy-in of his fans who conflictingly wanted him to deliver hard hitting rhymes but overwhelmingly bought more of his commercial efforts.
money. In Decoded: Jay-Z, he writes, “Ultimately, every artist has to make a choice about what makes sense for them, and I’m not mad at whatever they decide. To honor the art of lyrical rhyming on one hand, and try to reach a wide audience on the other, is an art form in itself.” Either choice left audiences and artists fractured and reduced. The choice between money and artistic freedom has been a longstanding problem across musical genres. However, the expectation of having to “dumb down” or over simplify lyrics is yet another way that African Americans, specifically, have been forced mask parts of themselves to survive and thrive.72

Second, the forced choice between commercial success and politicized art led to a narrowing of available subjects. These strictures were rampant in urban literature as well. For example, Iceberg Slim was a highly celebrated figure in contemporary African American mythology and sold millions of books recalling his life as a Midwestern pimp in Pimp: Story of My Life. But his subsequent books, which concentrated on moral uplift, have failed to register with audiences. Similarly, Omar Tyree wrote a novel cleverly titled, The Last Street Novel and then “retired” from writing.73 In an interview Tyree admitted that the novel and his retirement were vain attempts to force publishers and fans to see how genre expectations have negatively narrowed the available subjectivities of urban prose. Having an enthusiastic consumerist public for both Hip Hop music and urban fiction can be lucrative, yet artistically suffocating.

Third, within the mainstream, Hip Hop became known as tough guy music. Most rappers in the 1990s and early 2000s had to display hardened, hyper-masculinity in their

72 Masking is an African American survival technique. See Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” for further detail.

73 Like Jay-z, Tyree has published novels since.
music, interviews, performances, and daily actions (Miles White). This bred a competitive
toughness that often led to baseless squabbles between rap labels, artists, and occasionally
geographic regions. Some of the most notable rap battles with hyper-masculine
performativity at the center of the skirmish included the East Coast vs. West Coast feud
stemming from misunderstandings between The Notorious “Biggie” Smalls and Tupac
Shakur, the decade long New York City based saga between Jay-Z and Nas, and intra-label
beef\textsuperscript{74} between Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson and Jayceon “The Game” Taylor. In each of these
rap beefs (and countless others) the opponents almost always questioned the others
manhood, sexual preferences, gender performativity, and pointed out the rare instances
that the other displayed vulnerability or was not the toughest, drug dealing, violent person
in the Hip Hop industry. These rap wars only further delimited acceptable gender
expression in Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop’s fascination with hyper-masculine performativity
put the culture on a fatal slippery slope that resulted in the deaths of Biggie and Tupac, the
bifurcation of New York City rap fans into Jay-Z and Nas camps, and the decline in the
musical success of 50 Cent’s \textit{G-Unit Records} after The Game left. Nevertheless, mainstream
Hip Hop created more avenues for more African American cultural expression.

\textsuperscript{74} Beef is a Hip Hop term for a disagreement or a battle to prove superiority, stemming from
beef usually being one of the toughest kind of meat.
Both Hip Hop music and street lit initially existed in the shadows of their respective industries. The art forms survived because musicians and writers were willing to peddle their work through unconventional networks in the urban market. And though quite a few artists were successful in doing so, to reach wider audiences these street artisans had to negotiate with industry leaders in music and books. However, Hip Hop moguls like Puff Daddy, Jermaine Dupri, and Master P. and writers like Wahida Clark and Terri Woods had the leverage of established sales records and fan bases. From this place of strength, these and other artists were able to demand contracts that provided access the resources of within large music labels and publishing imprints while retaining some artistic autonomy. Many artists started their own labels and publishing houses under umbrella companies. Puff Daddy with his A&R (artists and repertoire) experience at Uptown Records and underground fame from hosting unrivaled parties at Howard University and in New York City, started Bad Boy Records under Epic Records, a subsidiary of Sony Records in 1994 (Preezy). So So Def Recording was originally founded in 1993 as a joint venture among Jermaine Dupri, Sony Music, and Columbia Records (Radford et al). Master P. negotiated for Priority Records, Universal Music Group, and Koch Records to distribute albums released from his independent music group, No Limit Records (JAE). These and other labels capitalized on the experiential knowledge of their mogul figureheads to ensure that Hip Hop artists were receiving fair record contracts. The labels also created space for artists to record quality Hip Hop music in a time when the commoditization potential in Hip Hop tempted many in the industry to push meaningless but commercially successful projects.
Similarly, Wahida Clark Presents Publishing LLC was established after she gained notoriety from sharing “Wahida’s I Wanna Get Published Tip Sheet.” In 2004, her imprint was rebranded as W. Clark Publishing and became a subsidiary of Green and Company LLC (Official Wahida Clark Website). More than twenty publishers initially rejected Teri Wood’s *True to the Game*. However, Woods was able to negotiate a multi-million dollar contract with Hachette Book Group USA (one of the big six publishing companies) after self-publishing the same book and selling millions of copies to local black owned bookstores in Philadelphia and surrounding areas. Her contract with Hachette reprinted her earliest works and disseminated it to a wider audience. The deal also led to the establishment of Teri Woods Publishing, where Woods and new street lit authors were able to release their urban fiction to a national audience.

Major companies saw the monetary value in street tales and were willing give urban story tellers entitlements to names, royalties, and hollowed ownership in order to remain industry leaders. Though many artists prospered financially and were able to have more influence on popular culture through their arrangements with major companies, they usually did not receive their fair share of profits from their success. Large media companies ultimately had the final say on major decisions and more often than not handled the bulk of the financial decisions that were almost never in the favor of the artists. Independent companies were a new twist on an old scheme to exploit the labor of black artists. Many artists fell into the same traps that left entertainers from previous generations penniless by mistakenly assuming that creating a company meant complete ownership. In effect many

Hip Hop and street lit entrepreneurs became figure heads of companies that had an overabundance of cultural capital, especially among young adults and black women, but lacked true autonomy and financial independence. These hallowed positions of power forced Hip Hop artists to use non-traditional tactics to subvert mainstream expectations. For success in the mainstream, Hip Hop artists had to anticipate new trends in popular culture. Rather, they were responsible for creating the trends. This push to find the new and exciting “thing” stretched the bounds of creativity and kept artists on the edge of innovation. It also, called for artists to create across art mediums especially, in music, film, fashion, and literature.

The turn of the twenty-first century was a turning point for urban black storytelling in the American imagination. As Hip Hop cultural producers and street lit authors charted new territories in the mainstream marketplace, they were able to creatively capture the reverberations of social, political, and economic shifts on cityscapes across the United States. Though both Hip Hop music and street lit faced narrowing appropriate subjects upon integrating the mainstream, street lit was able to creatively resist constricting pressures by self-publishing, employing creative marketing techniques, and demanding imprint contracts with large parent publishers. In this way, the genre was able to subvert the disadvantages of marginality. Authors were able tenaciously rebuff naysayers and doubters with staggering sales profits. Street lit was the literature of the people; as such the genre concerned itself with creating intimacy between authors and readers and telling stories for people of color navigating urban experiences.

As African American urban fiction enters a new phase, replete with born digital publishing, robust social media, and declining casual readers, the genre has once again been called to find innovative avenues to not only to subsist in American popular culture but also to prosper. Street lit novelists have been looking to the future by brokering contracts to
translate their most popular works into film for the next generation of urban dwellers to use as a medium to interrogate and navigate life in urban America. Street lit, like Hip Hop, was not a quick fading trend. It will undoubtedly have to change to meet the needs of the newest generation of urban dwellers and to fit the accompanying circumstances. The genre may even be identified by a different name in the future. Nevertheless, street lit will remain a viable and relevant site of cultural production so long as people of color are faced with urban realities.
CHAPTER 3

FLY GIRLS AND BAD BITCHES: STREET LIT AND HIP HOP FEMINISM

“But Why I Gotta Give You Some Just To Be With You”

–Winter Santiaga, *The Coldest Winter Ever*

One night I attended an event to celebrate women of color. The evening was chocked full of hair supply giveaways, on site pampering services and intermittent full group discussions about the beauty and strength possessed by women of color. At one point a young woman dared to share her poetry. Despite being visibly nervous and a bit too boisterous, the young woman said something that resonated well with me. She said, “Concrete always cracks.” Aside from the statement coinciding with the symbolism of this dissertation’s title, “Stories Written on Concrete,” her words hold several concurrent meanings for that event and for this chapter, as it attempts to draw connections between street lit and feminism. She urged her fellow women of color to actively avoid creating emotional exteriors that are as hard as concrete. Women who are hard like concrete will inevitably break. For, women as hard as concrete break because of societal pressures; break because of self-imposed impossible standards; break because emotions are not meant to be hard, unyielding and impenetrable like—concrete. Also within her profound statement was an understanding of why the street lit genre resonated with young women of color primarily. Street lit stories were written on concrete cityscapes about young adults who erected concrete emotional walls to survive. Street lit stories detailed what happens when those walls crumble. And within the ruble were
fragments of readers with weary lost souls who found resplendence in the stories about urban life, who found meaning in the brokenness of street lit characters, and self-healing through the moral messages hidden in the pages of street lit novels.

Hetero-normative gender expectations and sexual relationships were at the core of the genre. Street lit gained notoriety for its misogynistic, hyper-masculine romantic relationships. Women characters in street lit were often ornamental commodities that were flaunted and consumed by men in romantic partnerships. Men characters were expected to display a high level of machismo, sexual aptitude, and barbarity at all times. Through the use of *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah, *Flyy Girl* by Omar Tyree, and *True to the Game* by Teri Woods, this chapter considers the ways women characters, especially young black women, are depicted in street lit novels in instances of sexual violence, parenting, and hetero-normative romantic relationships.

Street lit stories were typically written to encourage communal uplift and solidarity for African Americans, women in particular (Souljah “Email;” Tyree “Foreword;” Woods “Foreword”). These novels provided communal spaces—physical and literary—where iterations of black feminism and praxis met to reach a new Hip Hop generation of women of color. In order for such a union to occur, feminism had to be willing to reach young women of color in their locational reality, which was often similar to the settings of street lit novels (Morris 4). Feminism had

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76 The reader/text relationship is well documented by Vanessa Irvin Morris and Andrew Ratner. According to Morris readers frequently attest to the ability “to see their own reality reflected in street-lit stories...” (4).
to reach young women of color through the music they listened to, the culture they consumed, and the books they read. Street lit was a medium through which younger generations of women of color came to recognize the benefits of feminism (and vice versa). Street lit novels overwhelmingly focused on women characters that became emotional concrete against the harsh realities of North American urban living. Their stories were cautionary tales, detailing what could happen if young women of color aspired to “street” life.77 These are the heartbreaking tales of concrete cracking.

Pairing street lit and feminism may seem incongruent or even impossible because street lit does not fit neatly into the feminist agenda. Street lit, as a genre and site of cultural production, has often been charged with being misogynistic, patriarchal, crass, and embarrassing (Chiles). Nevertheless, street lit endeavored to tell dramatic fictive narratives of human experience. Many of these stories centered on the experiences of women characters dealing with issues of sexual violence, mothering, and hetero-normative romantic relationships. In order for the feminist benefits of street lit to be fully comprehended, the genre needed to be a black feminist framework strong enough to work through cultural incongruences. In short, street lit (like Joan Morgan argues that Hip Hop) needed “a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays” (Morgan *Chickenheads* 59). A kind of feminism that

77 I define “street” life as an urban North American existence for people of color who encounter social ills like drug dealing, drug abuse, alcoholism, gang violence, domestic violence, unemployment, high crime rates, high teen pregnancy rates, failing school systems, and the denigration of kinship structures. For a fuller discussion of the “street” see chapter one.
was brave enough to fuck with the grays, made allowances for the anti-feminist pitfalls of street lit while it appreciated the feminist

Feminism had to find new and creative methods to be relevant in the 1990s and early 2000s. In short, feminism had to get hip to Hip Hop. Arguably, feminism failed in this endeavor, as evidenced by the plethora of literature about millennials misidentifying with feminist labels (Aronson; Chesler). However, wo-manifestos like *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* and digital spaces like The Crunk Feminist Collective pointed towards efforts to merge the conventions of Hip Hop and feminism in a productive manner to appropriately and academically consider the cultural manifestations of the Hip Hop and Millennial generations.

Generally, the history and purposes of the mainstream United States based feminist movement have had a sordid and tangled relationship with civil rights strivings and the experiences of African Americans. Though the aims and goals of the feminist and civil rights movements were similar and often overlapped, both movements were unable to carve out a unique space to consider the intersection of race and gender and how these, at times, opposing social constructions put African American women in an uncomfortable predicament, where they were forced to prioritize one social oppression over another. The feminist movement, generally, was a white, middle class woman’s attempt to gain fuller access to the rights and

78 Millennials are individuals who reached young adulthood around the year 2000 (the height of the street lit era).

79 The Hip Hop generation, according to Bakari Kitwana, is the first generation to grow up in post-legal segregation America.
privileges often afforded to her husband and father. Further, the feminist movement sought to bring to light the horrors of patriarchy, the traumas of paternalism, and put an end to sexism. But silenced in these honorable aims were the black women’s voices who have been doubly objectified and denigrated; unspoken were the grave disparities in the starting places on the continuum of sexual equality between white women and women of color. Contrary to the multiple intersections of black womanhood is W. E. B. Du Bois’ idea about double consciousness, which only emphasizes two points of oppression. Double consciousness according to Du Bois is the perverse internal conflict within a person who, “ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (2). This unreconciled striving between blackness and Americaness, which was warring in one black body, does not leave room for a multi-frontier war. The conflicting trifurcation of black women, who are simultaneously black and American, necessitates the fighting of three concurrent wars—one against racism, one against Americanism which typically excludes visions of black women, and other against patriarchy. Additionally, during the beginning of the second half of first wave feminism the intellectual scholarship to address this further mutilation of black women’s American souls was not developed in the same ways that intersectional feminist thought is today. The lack of voice in feminism, writ large, has left some African American thinkers and writers with negative connotations of feminism and unwilling to seriously interrogate the merits of more inclusive iterations of feminism which have appeared mainly in the third wave of
feminism, with the rise of intersectional theory and the inclusion of non-hetero-normative conceptions about gender and sexuality.

In 1974, a group of black women began meeting to discuss and concretize a list of aims and goals that not only aligned themselves with the feminist agenda, but also gave credence to other contentions of marginalization like race and class. The Combahee River Collective, the name the group ultimately became known as, released a statement in April of 1977. The statement, in defining the purpose of the Combahee River Collective says,

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.

The Combahee River Collective Statement has come to embody a very important schism within both the feminist movement and the civil rights movement. The statement expertly explains why a separate space is necessary to address the very specific issues germane to women of color and emphatically declares that the destiny of black women is so closely intertwined with the success of feminism, that it is only when black women are freed from their multiple sites of oppression can there be a possibility of a fully successful feminism. The statement is quoted as saying, "if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." While there is value in reading the above statement as causal, implying that black women's uplift would result in universal liberation, has also caused issues within the ways black woman centered spaces have been discussed and categorized.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s a bifurcation in the naming and conceptualizing of
black women centered initiatives and thoughts arose. In 1979, Alice Walker published a short story as an introduction to a chapter in a book by Laura Lederer titled, “Coming Apart.” In this part introduction, part short story, Alice Walker introduces a term to describe her black woman protagonist; womanist. Walker, in describing the protagonist explains that, “a womanist is a feminist, only more common” (Walker 48). Though Walker does not provide very much detail about womanism in “Coming Apart” the term infers a type of racially conscious feminism. Also implied in the short story are some of the beliefs of the Combahee River Collective Statement, due mainly in part to womanism being ‘more common,’ or what the Combahee River Collective viewed as the bases to eradicating all systems of oppression. Four years later, Walker fleshed out her term by defining feminism in her 1983 collection, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose,*

1. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to women children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and women. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Within this definition of womanism, Walker is attempting to highlight several important factors in black women’s centered feminism. First, Walker is seeking to subvert the terms commonly associated with girls and women by taking a term derived from womanish, a slang term that means acting grown up or what Walker says in the first definition, the opposite of girlish, that typically is the antithesis of ‘true womanhood’ and places it at the heart of black womanliness. To this end, in “Coming Apart” Walker writes, “Black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are depicted at least as human bodies if not beings, black women are depicted as shit” (52). Second, Walker sets wide perimeters for womanism by associating the term with age, maturity, decorum, emotion and sexual preference. Third, men and community are integral to womanism in ways that are not to traditionally feminist. Finally, Walker asserts that womanism is a broader, more inclusive version of feminism by comparing womanism and feminism to purple and lavender. There is something to be noted about how Walker moves entirely away from using the word feminism in her construction of womanism and how that is actively combating the negative stereotypes of feminism, writ large. Womanist thought has not simply remained a theory used by Walker on feminism. Other gender critics like Clenora Hudson-Weems and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi have taken womanism to the global stage and have used the term in African diasporic frameworks. Alongside the rise of womanism came notions of black feminist thought, which similarly endeavors to fuse intersectional oppressions in productive ways for the multidimensional liberation of all people.

In the year 1990, around the same time as the emergence of the street lit genre,
Patricia Hill Collins published *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. In her book she says, "For African-American women, the knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women's critical social theory" (Collins, Kindle locations 424-426). Black feminist thought has created a space where issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality can be talked about freely and intersectionally.

Black feminist thought maintains that black women had a pointed agenda for the intersection of race and gender long before the beginnings of self-identified feminism. Or in other words, black feminist thought is able to claim the ideas and works of black women who would not have readily labeled themselves as black feminist thinkers. Patricia Hills Collins uses Maria Stewart, a nineteenth century black abolitionist and suffragist, as an entrée into black feminist thinking, because Stewart was one of the first black women to publicly speak about the unique site of oppression of being woman, black, and poor. Even though the case can be made that gender conscious abolitionism existed as early as the 1840s, black women of that time would have considered themselves abolitionists before they would have claimed feminism. Being able to use, or reclaim as it were, the ideas and works of black women provides champions of black feminist thought a wealth of intellectual material, that would otherwise go unused and obscured. Collins writes,

Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a multifaceted, African-American women's intellectual tradition. While clear discontinuities in this tradition exist—times when Black women's voices were strong, and others when assuming a more muted tone was essential— one striking dimension of the ideas of Maria W. Stewart and her successors is the thematic consistency of their work (Collins Kindle locations 294-295).
Also, the mere existence of black women’s centered scholarship indicates and legitimizes a move towards the establishment of black feminist thought. Further, an argument of two simultaneous women’s movements happening in the United States can be made, as black feminist thinkers have existed for as long as feminist thinkers, at least in a United States based context. Finally, black feminist thought is able to access a history of black woman thinkers and their ideas in ways that womanism cannot, as there is more flexibility in what can be claimed as black feminist thought than what is womanist. For example womanism would not necessarily include the Narrative Life of Harriet Jacobs as it does not account for communal uplift or includes an appreciation of music, dance, the moon, or The Spirit, but Linda Brent’s narrative offering is very squarely a black feminist thought piece.

In order for a literary work or scholarly concept to be considered black feminist thought, a black woman should create it or an ally to black women’s causes and it should intentionally address pertinent topics about black women. But, within black feminist thought, the concept is limiting and even oppositional to its end goal. As opposed to womanism, which requires love, communal solidarity, and courage, the perimeters of black feminist thought broader in that, any person that has discussed blackness and gender can potentially be claimed as a black feminist thinker. But on the other hand, the term is confining, as the producers of black feminist thought must be black.\textsuperscript{80} If blackness is a pre-requisite to be a black feminist thinker, black feminist thought simply shifts the actors of marginalization from white people to people of color. Also, this term places black feminism squarely in the realm of thought, which is typically considered less important and

\textsuperscript{80} It should be noted that Collins put a condition of blackness in her article, “Defining Black Feminist Thought.” The condition was subsequently absent from her book on the subject, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}.  

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academically savvy than theory. Though an argument can be made that black feminist thought is the basis to black feminist theory, the label of thought rather than theory denotes a stark difference and markedly inferior status of black feminism in relation to mainstream feminism. Black feminist thought also does not allow for subversions of Eurocentric academic practices in similar ways that African American Studies and scholar activism typically does. By using the term black feminist thought, black women are once again being marginalized, silenced and left out of critical conversations, and deemed inferior, if more is not done. To this, Collins answers by saying,

> Because U.S. Black women have access to the experiences that accrue to being both Black and women, an alternative epistemology used to rearticulate a Black women’s standpoint should reflect the convergence of both sets of experiences. Race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in Black women’s everyday lives, they work together. The search for the distinguishing features of an alternative epistemology used by African-American women reveals that some ideas that Africanist scholars identify as characteristically “Black” often bear remarkable resemblance to similar ideas claimed by feminist scholars as characteristically “women.” This similarity suggests that the actual contours of intersecting oppressions can vary dramatically and yet generate some uniformity in the epistemologies used by subordinate groups. (Kindle Locations 5938-5943).

She follows by saying, “Viewing Black feminist epistemology in this way challenges additive analyses of oppression claiming that Black women have a more accurate view of oppression than do other groups (Kindle Locations 5953-5954).” Collins has rejected the idea of black feminist thought being an additive, an after thought almost, to feminist thought. By doing so, Collins has centered the experiences of black women, while remaining connected to larger iterations of feminist thinking. The work of the Combahee River Collective, Alice Walker,
and Patricia Hill Collins have set the stage for newer, more intersectional feminist understandings of black womanhood, one of which has been Hip Hop feminism.

Though established in the same wave, Hip Hop feminism\textsuperscript{81} has been categorized as distinct from black feminist thought and womanism but also an outgrowth of the two, mainly due to Hip Hop centrality the other two lack. Placing Hip Hop culture at the center of black feminist discourse was able to create a particular sub-cultural space where the code of ethics for academic work, street lit analysis in particular, shifted dramatically. Hip Hop feminism allowed for the gritty, candid, and often politically incorrect styling of rap music, street lit and African American urban independent films from the 1990s and early 2000s to be critiqued for their educational and literary values, in addition to their misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy. Hip Hop feminism has been able to have real and relevant conversations about the problematic aspects of Hip Hop music and the culture around the music without denigrate the art, the people who created it, or the people who love it. As Gwendolyn Pough posits about rap, “the value resides in the critique” of the music, literature, and culture (Pough 92-93). Hip Hop feminism does not deal in absolutes, but instead pieces seemingly oppositional experiential standpoints together in a melodic manner. Hip Hop feminists have been able to achieve personal reconciliation between the sexism in Hip Hop and their quest for more just and gender inclusive society. According to Joan Morgan, Hip Hop feminism does not let the tensions between Hip Hop and feminism overpower the productivity of the pairing because, such a “feminism simply refuses to give sexism or racism that much power” (Morgan 60). Further, coupling street lit and Hip Hop feminism has the potential to

\textsuperscript{81} Critics like Joan Morgan and Crystal Brent Zooks have posited that Hip Hop Feminism fits within the Third Wave of feminism. Whitney Peoples sees Hip Hop Feminism as a disruptive continuation of second wave black feminism.
create a safe space to identify, explore and consider the ramifications of anti-feminist rhetoric. Spaces like book clubs, blogs and library groups can be fertile grounds to plant seeds of the feminist agenda through a Hip Hop culture lens.

Hip Hop feminism in the future, has the potential be a two-way bridge between the Hip Hop culture that produced street lit and academic spaces that have the tools necessary to unpack the theoretical and practical benefits of street lit texts. Fusing street lit and Hip Hop feminism is a way to ensure that future generations of women of color and new forms of African American urban literature will survive and thrive in the United States. According to Matthew Schneider-Mayerson "feminism, an activist movement whose academic representatives often maintain a strong connection to the ‘real’ world, has led to methodologies and epistemologies that favor the study of popular over elite texts” (26). In a similar manner, street lit was overwhelmingly committed to a “keeping it real” ethic that resonated well with African American lay readers (Patrick 31; Jackson). Street lit provided “real” opportunities for feminists to use academics to reach girls and women who fall outside of hetero-normative white definition of feminism.82 Using Hip Hop to meld discussions of street lit and feminism can marry the academy and “real” world in productive ways. In practical terms, such a union would involve integrating street lit texts into academic (mainly feminist) courses and academicians getting involved with local book clubs and library groups. Such arrangements would be important because “few people consume or produce popular culture with an active and critical knowledge of its ideological or gendered content”(Brenda Weber 129). But creating spaces where popular culture, in this case African American urban literature, is consumed and then immediately discussed

82 Street lit novels are fictional stories but they purposefully use real locations, allude to true historical events and are written in a cultural vernacular that reflects “real” life.
will potentially help its readers hone a critical eye that will be productive in their own lives. Further, such spaces will help African American urban literature generally, and street lit in particular, texts reach the ultimate goals of writers like Omar Tyree and Sister Souljah, who wanted readers to understand the dangers of illegal drug trade, sexual violence, and gang wars (Tyree “‘street lit’ Retirement;” Souljah “Email”).

Scholars like Brittany C. Cooper, Stephanie Dunn, Aisha Durham and Susana M. Morris have codified *The Coldest Winter Ever* as a Hip Hop feminist text. When defining *The Coldest Winter Ever*’s relationship to feminism Stephanie Dunn writes that the text, “reflects burgeoning ‘hip hop’ feminist discourses and Africana womanist thinking and takes its place within African American women’s literary fiction, intersecting with contemporary black cultural criticism” (85). Arguably, that *Flyy Girl* and *True to the Game*, written with the same gritty candor and against similar decaying cityscapes, are also Hip Hop feminist novels. All three novels have young women protagonists who are navigating spaces where their sexuality is central to their actions and interactions with other characters. Finally, all three texts make references to Hip Hop music, dress the characters in trendy urban Hip Hop clothes, and deal with the same issues of violence, illegal drug trade, and gang wars.

In order to have these cross-disciplinary educational discourses, we must first be willing to confront the limitations and drawbacks of pairing street lit and feminism. In the years since its publication, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, has ignited critical conversations about black communal solidarity, the character roles of black women in contemporary literature and the appropriation of feminist labels on contemporary African American urban fiction texts (Morris 55-88; Norris 100-107; Durham, Cooper and Morris). *The Coldest Winter Ever* is a novel about a young woman of color who
experiences harsh realities that closely resemble the plights of real black women in the United States. Despite there being substantial scholarship to support *The Coldest Winter Ever* being in line with Hip Hop feminism, Sister Souljah has rejected all feminist labels for her personal political views and the intended purposes of her literary works (Norris; Dunn; Durham, Cooper, and Morris). Instead Souljah proclaims to be a woman who, “want[s] to have a powerful mind and humble and modest way of sharing it, for the purpose of bringing families together, having a network of families which grows into a network of communities, ALL STRIVING and working to build businesses that heal and help and don’t destroy life, health and environment.” Souljah believes that feminism, writ large, is problematic. In short, she does not “love that word and the energy that it gives off” (Souljah 4.22.2014). The apparent friction between the author’s intentions and the audience’s interpretation, as it specifically pertains to the merits and restrictions of black feminist iterations within African American urban literature, produce productive discourses about how black feminism have been applicable to black literature. Sister Souljah’s visceral reaction to the feminist label can be associated with the deeply rooted, and arguably justified, hesitations towards all iterations of feminism by African American women thinkers and writers.

Nevertheless, “The Street” is a feminist literary experiential standpoint. According to Sandra Harding in “Borderlands Epistemologies,” “the concept of a standpoint arose from women’s political struggles to see their concerns represented in public policy and in the natural and social science disciplines that have shaped
such policy,” though the concept has been adapted to fit the disciplinary interests of other feminist thinkers (333). Standpoint theory according to Nancy Hartsock is an outgrowth of the Marxist standpoint epistemology that is founded on the basic principle of knowledge being socially constructed (Jaggar 303). Since knowledge is socially constructed, individual location greatly influences how and what individual knowers know. Feminist standpoint theory encourages the use of similar or the same experiential standpoints as a place of departure to make informed sociological understandings (or in the case of street lit, literary understandings) about groups of people (novel characters). Sandra Harding contends that it “is not only about how to get a more accurate understanding of marginal lives...” but rather standpoint theory seeks to, “produce systematic causal accounts of how the natural and social orders are organized such that everyday lives of women and men, Europeans and those they encounter, end up in the forms that they do” (Harding 337). In short, feminist standpoint theory has the ability to highlight macro structures without truncating individual experiences. Specifically, standpoint theory has been very helpful in humanities scholarship on African American women’s experiences.83 Standpoint theory in regards to street lit could help scholars illuminate the importance of shared fictive urban experiences.

While Harding is careful to point out that, “a standpoint is not the same as a viewpoint or perspective” (334). A standpoint can “start of from such locations in

83 Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Thought is a sociological historical text that carefully considers the unique standpoint of African American workingwomen to create a distinctive thought tradition.
order to explain the relationship between those lives and the rest of social relations, including human interactions with nature...” (Harding 337). The knowledge gained from understanding shared and/or similar experiences at that starting point is meaningful and potentially powerful. Joan Scott writes, “the visible is privileged” in regards to knowledge attainment. She continues with, “Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual visceral) experience” (“Experience” Scott 272). In this process what is visually obscured or oblique is often left out of the written record. Thus, certain sets of experiences are privileged and visually represented over others in ways that invalidate the experiences that are not reproduced. Street lit’s obscurity in conventional academic spaces has served to similarly invalidate the experiences of the genres characters as well as the everyday lives of street lit readers who share similar experiences with the novel characters.

Street lit, as a genre, emerged out of three important and competing African American cultural conventions; the widespread success of Hip Hop, the dramatic increase of popular black fiction published in the 1990s, and robust discourse about a pointedly African American feminist agenda. Though the genre was culturally Hip Hop, it deviated from rap subjectivities by primarily focusing on the lives of women and issues that disproportionally effected women of color in poor, urban settings. Women rappers did not enjoy the same commercial success as their male

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84 See chapter 2 for a more detailed explanation of Hip Hop’s commercial success and black popular fiction trends.
counterparts. And for those women (like Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, Missy Elliott, and Queen Latifah) who did make any traction in the industry, they were usually relevant for their ability to market sensuality and sex or were viewed as asexual and unattractive. Women were most seen in rap videos where they were often scantily dressed and danced provocatively for the enjoyment of men. Rap music at the turn of the twenty-first century preferred for women to be seen and not heard. Further, critics who pointed out the sexism and misogyny in rap were ostracized. But in street lit, the primary characters were almost always women. And though these women’s lives were problematically entangled with the male characters in ways that were parallel to the misogyny in rap, literature allowed for more critical reader response than rap music.

Street lit texts were best understood in a particular cultural context, which was urban, black, and hetero-normative. Street lit was an African American literary era that was mostly consumed by people of color who shared similar social and physical locational experiences as the fictional characters. Street lit came out of a similar social location as that of Hip Hop culture and thus had an accompanying set of particular practices; for example, the production and publicity avenues used by street lit authors to publish and promote their work often mirrored Hip Hop recording label practices.

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85 Hip Hop’s evolution from a small, geographically specific location (Bronx, NY, NY) to a global cultural phenomenon has been widely documented (Rose 1994, Chang 2005, Forman and Neal 2004) in ways that street lit has not and can therefore anchor some of the cultural elements that are co-constructed by artistic production in the areas of music (Hip Hop) and literature (Street Lit).
Street lit attempted to balance on a precarious line between identifiable and defining literary characteristics and not creatively confining itself to certain characters types, plot lines, and settings. In effect, street lit needed to be the impossible—both definable and unpredictable. Patricia Hill Collins considers such a contentious space in her sociological understanding of African American women. The outsider within concept is Collins’ attempt to reconcile the competing realities of marginalized people in institutions that privilege whiteness and maleness. While Collins uses the outsider within concept sociologically, the term is useful for understanding what kind of position street lit can potentially take within the academy in the future. Collins writes that, “this ‘outsider within’ status has provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society for Afro-American women” (“Outsider Within” 308). The same can be said of street lit’s possible standpoint in literature studies. Street lit in its creation and sustainment was strictly outside of academic domain. Many street lit authors were convicts, ex-convicts or were fundamentally opposed to and absent from institutions of higher education. Therefore, the genre has been clearly culturally located “outside” of the academic sphere. The academic efforts of scholars studying street lit, including Keenan Norris, Vanessa Irvin Morris, Shanita Jones, and Megan Honig, represent a collective effort to bring the genre “inside” the academy.

86 Shannon Holmes, Kwame Teague and Kwan were street lit authors who were convicts and ex-convicts. Sister Souljah (in a interview I performed) repudiated academic categories being placed on her as a political figure and her literature. Further, street lit novelists have been widely absent from faculty rosters in universities and colleges.
Hip Hop Feminism attempts to reconcile the tensions between race, gender and class for black women specifically of the Hip Hop generation (and arguably for the millennial generation). Whitney Peoples identifies “those who are crafting a political identity based on Hip Hop and feminism largely as younger, college-educated black American women who either grew up middle-class or who are now a part of the growing young black and upwardly mobile crew entering the American class hierarchy, who are often better off than their parents were” (Under Construction 26). Notably, this same demographic was the largest consumer market of street lit novels (Morris, Patrick 31). Most African American urban readers who enjoyed street lit tended to reject the novels selected for Oprah Winfrey's book club and opted for the top sellers in Essence magazine or being heavily promoted in Ebony, Jet, and Sister 2 Sister magazines. Many street lit enthusiasts wanted their literature like they wanted their Hip Hop, committed to “keeping it real” (Morgan 62).
“But Why I Gotta Give You Some Just To Be With You:” Sexual Violence in Street Lit

Literary critics and feminists have long analyzed rape within novels about African Americans. Scenes of sexual exploitation in novels such as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *The Street* by Ann Petry are examples of sexual violence performed against black women’s bodies and how these acts are not usually overtly identified as rape. These and other novels set in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries about African American characters consider the real social circumstances, which created a culture where African American women, were impossible to rape. Such novels use sexual violence against African American women characters and the subsequent ramifications of such violent acts to point to larger social issues. When analyses of sexually violent literary scenes are considered alongside sociological understandings of rape for African American women a culture of obscurity and silence emerges. According to sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins, the sexual exploitation of working class black women is not considered to be rape.” Collins posits, “The jezebel couldn’t be raped.” The jezebel has been an archetypal character in the American psyche that has been characterized as black and woman, with an insatiable sexual appetite and low or no moral standards. The jezebel caricature can be found in film, music, popular culture, and most relevant, in literature. The jezebel was created during slavery and has evolved over the course

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87 Taken from *Flyy Girl*, page 174.
of American history to maintain the denigration of African American women. The creation and sustained viability of the jezebel caricature has created a culture of silent suffering for African American women who have experienced sexual violence. The pervasive threat of being labeled a jezebel, or some modern day version of the same (i.e. ho, chickenhead, or THOT—That Hoe Over There), can be paralyzing and almost as traumatic as the sexual violence itself. African American women, who voiced the violations against their sexual beings, were then susceptible to public scrutiny. Black women’s pain has been excused with deafening questions like what did she do to provoke her attacker? Did she deserve to be attacked? Why did she not enjoy the act? Rather than answer such horrible questions and be branded jezebels, hos, chickenheads, etc. “African American women largely suffer[ed] in silence” (Sexual Politics 66).

Notably, many novels by black authors in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries about sexual violence and African American women rarely identified these acts as rape. In Toni Morrison’s Beloved, rape is intimately wrapped into supernatural elements and the hauntungs of slavery without ever being overtly addressed as such (Barnett). Pa in The Color Purple takes advantage of Celie, claiming that the young girl would do “what [her] mammy wouldn’t” (Walker Color Purple 3). Celie simply mourns the loss of the resulting children from her molestation without verbally taking notice of the damage the sexual act inflicted on

88 Refer to Black Sexual Politics by Patricia Hill Collins for a fuller explanation of the evolution of the jezebel caricature.
her. In *The Street*, Lutie Johnson’s sexual exploitation by her apartment super, 
William Jones and by a musician named Boots is described in such a casual manner 
that there is the propensity to believe such acts are normal and acceptable in Lutie’s 
world. In these novels, and others like them, sexual trauma has become a small but 
devastating piece of the African American woman’s fictional narrative. The de-
centering of sexual trauma in African American novels has served to highlight the 
silences around rape and complicates our understandings of what can be constituted 
as sexual exploitation when concerning black women’s bodies. Similar text 
discourses appeared in street lit novels. In the context of street lit, acts of sexual 
violence were often shrouded in hetero-normative relationships driven by material 
wealth. Both male and women characters often conflate sexual consent with 
expensive material purchases. Street lit women characters are expected to show 
gratitude for the nice things bought by the men in their lives by giving into male 
sexual proclivities, even if the women character’s moral instinct was to object. 

*Flyy Girl* by Omar Tyree begins with a birthday celebration for the six-year-old 
protagonist, Tracy Ellison. From the outset Tracy’s parents surround her with material 
goods. Her mother places great emphasis on Tracy’s attire and her father nicknames her 
pretty. The narrator spends an exorbitant amount of introductory space detailing Tracy and 
her parent’s physical attributes. From the beginning, the reader knows that Tracy is being 
groomed to become a flyy girl. Tracy is not a child of meager means, her family is very 
clearly middle/working class. Tracy’s father is a pharmacist and her mother is a dietitian at 
a nursing home (Tyree 13-14). However, her middle class status does not deter Tracy from
her ghetto ambition. Tracy does not hope and dream for a good post-secondary education that would lead to employment security and wealth building, which is typical in children of middle class working families. Instead Tracy wants the social status of being the prettiest, best-dressed, most physically attractive young woman in her neighborhood. Tracy wants to be a flyy girl.

Tracy has her first sexual relationship when she is thirteen with a boy three years her senior named Victor. She sees Victor, who is a popular bad boy in the neighborhood, as a means of increasing her own popularity in the streets of north Philadelphia. Possessing Victor would help Tracy reach flyy girl status. Therefore, Tracy uses her body as a commodity to be traded for social capital in North Philadelphia. Victor places Tracy in situations where it is unclear if he rapes her, she becomes complicit in illegal activities, and he causes her to derail her academic ambitions for the sake of being flyy. Though Tracy verbally consents to sex, Victor rapes Tracy, at least statutorily. Additionally, a case can be made that Tracy truly did not want to have a sexual encounter with Victor as she asks him, “But why I gotta give you some just to be with you” (Tyree 174)? The ‘some’ Tracy is referring to is sex. Her young age, coupled with her numerous hesitations insinuate a high level of discomfort with sex which, is at best, reluctant sex and at worst rape. Though issues of consent complicate Tracy’s first sexual encounter, the novel does not pause to address why such sexual exploitation is problematic and dangerous. The loss of Tracy’s virginity is arguably a traumatic experience that catapults her into spaces where she makes monumental life errors before even entering high school all for the sake of being flyy.

Similarly, Teri Woods presents a story of sexual possession that borders on rape in

89 I use ghetto here to mean black, urban poverty-stricken drug infested spaces.
her debut novel, *True to the Game*. Within the first chapter of the novel the protagonist, Gena’s personal agency is deprived and she is placated by expensive and shiny things in the same instance. At the outset the novel Gena is romantically involved with a local north Philadelphia young man named Jamal. Her first sexual encounter with Jamal can be easily categorized as rape, though Woods never explicitly names it so. The narrator begins the sexual encounter by explaining to the reader that Jamal had ”determined that he wouldn’t miss his chance before she was too far gone” from the marijuana he gave to her to help calm her and ease her hesitations. Even in light of the drugs, Gena still ”knew she should stop him.” And attempted to do so by asking, ”Don’t you think we should get to know each other? Don’t you think you should wear a condom?” But her protestations were in vain, ”he silenced her with a kiss” and... ”before she knew it, he was inside her” (Woods 15). During the act Gena thought, “you’re fucking a stranger, and you need to get him off of you” but ultimately decides to succumb to his desires for fear of inciting his anger and being stripped of the expensive clothes and jewelry he bought her.

In both novels, the women characters believe that they will gain something by sleeping with young men they barely know. Both Tracy and Gena see their vaginas as goods that can be bartered in exchange for loyalty and material possessions respectively. In both instances what they actually receive in exchange for sexual favors are possessive and abusive men who do not desire anything more than sex. Tracy believes that she can make Victor love her by giving into his sexual desires and Gena believes that Jamal will financially provide for her if she can keep him sexually satisfied. Both young women never pause to consider that their hesitations to have sex could be constituted as nonconsensual sex or, in other words, rape. Similar instances of questionably consensual sex pervaded the genre.

This pattern of blurred lines points to a larger issue within the street lit genre. Being able to identify, understand, and critique scenes of sexual inappropriateness within
literature is one way to put feminism in practice in discussion forums. By considering what street lit novels have presented, instances of fictitious nonconsensual or coerced sex can become important sites of feminist resistance.

"A Whole Generation sat back, and said, ‘Fuck it. I’m not Gonna Raise My Kids:’"\textsuperscript{90}

**Parenting in Street Lit**

Street lit novels were generally set in major metropolitan cities in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. The cityscapes street lit novelists created were replete with characters and spaces that reflected the post-Civil Rights historical era (Norris XXII). Specifically, the settings of street lit novels reflected three distinct North American urban manifestations. First was the rise of the crack-cocaine era, which gave rise to the black wealthy, violent crack kingpin archetype. Second, was the mainstreaming of Hip Hop music and culture, which was evident by the music characters listened to, the clothes they wore, and the slang they used. And third, the trickle down effects of the War on Drugs coupled and Reaganomics more largely\textsuperscript{91} that was responsible for helping construct the “welfare queen” image in the American psyche (Durham *Home 4*). The “welfare queen,” also known as the “welfare mother” was purportedly an unemployed African American woman who

\textsuperscript{90} Taken from *True to the Game*, page 9.

\textsuperscript{91} See Bakari Kitwana’s *Hip Hop Generation* for a fuller discussion on the impacts of Reaganomics on the Hip Hop generation.
intentionally had many children to increase the amount of welfare aid she received. The “welfare mother” myth claimed that these “queens” were able to live royally as dependents of government aid without having to work hard (Collins *Sexual Politcs* 132). This image linked black motherhood with laziness, fraud, and shame.

Overwhelmingly, parents (especially mothers) in street lit novels were depicted as neglectful, bad role models or non-existent. Street lit mother characters complicated cultural understandings of the welfare queen image. The role of motherhood varied widely in novels such as *Flyy Girl*, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, and *True to the Game*. These women characters presented the gamut of mothers from attentive, to drug addicted, to deceased (respectively). Mothers in these novels helped to shape the life expectations and circumstances of the protagonists. These women helped their daughters discern what should be valued in a world where the rules revolve around men and illegal drug trade. They told their daughters how to interact with men in romantic relationships. And they determined how the next generation of women would treat each other, especially when competing for men’s affection and money. But it is important to consider the role of the mother in street lit novels in tandem with the men characters. Often, the desires and subsequent teachings of mothers in these kinds of novels were deeply impacted by the men whom the mother loves. Men often played subversive roles in the lives of these mothers (and by extension the daughters) by using
their patriarchal and economic power to influence the decisions made by mothers.

In order to best understand the impact mother characters had on their daughters, it is important to shift the focus onto the male characters within the novels. This model is similar to what Saidiya V. Hartman does in *Scenes of Subjection*. Hartman utilizes a model that inverts the typical power lens to critically consider alternative perspectives on, “those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned” rather than scenes of overt trauma and barbarism (4). Hartman examines scenes that have typically been deemed spaces of agency, and privilege for African descended people. The most topically relevant example of this inversion is her discussion of slave narratives, especially *Incidents in the Life of Harriet Jacobs*. Jacobs is a precursor to Winter Santiaga, (the protagonist in *The Coldest Winter Ever*) in a few ways.92 Both Harriet Jacobs and Winter Santiaga are forced to make choices among the available options created by the male characters in their respective stories.93 Both live a life of feigned freedom by having the personal agency to choose sexual partners but not being able to choose not to have sex. And both must pay a high moral price to access their life of seeming freedom and enjoyment.

\[\text{92 Please note that *Incidents in the Life of Harriet Jacobs*, as a slave narrative can be read as a work of non-fiction, which creates a literary imbalance with *The Coldest Winter Ever*.}\]

\[\text{93 “Comparing the Available Women Roles and the Social Contexts of *Sula* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*” by Keenan Norris.}\]
To this end, Hartman writes, “The critique of freedom exemplified by the loophole of retreat—a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity—and the difficulties experienced in trying to assume the role of free and self-possessed individual prefigure the critique of emancipation advanced by former slaves in the post-bellum context” (9). Jacobs’ liberty is not true freedom because she spends the majority of her narrative trapped in an attic and/or on the run from her owner. Additionally, Jacobs becomes the subject of Dr. Flint’s desires and obsessions when he attempts to seduce, refuses to sell, and chases after her in the North. Similarly, Winter Santiaga’s liberty is contingent upon the men in her life. She is subjugated to their whims and desires, as well as being the subject of their affections and obsessions. Subjection, according to Hartman, lies in the relationship between witness and spectator or for the purposes of *The Coldest Winter Ever* between novel characters and audience. A discourse of subjugation is implicit Hartman’s text, which is also prevalent in *The Coldest Winter Ever*. The subjected women in *The Coldest Winter Ever* are also subjugated in subversive manners that are illuminated through understanding their subjectivity.

In the novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the narrator begins by intimating that she, “came busting out of my momma’s big coochie on January 28, 1977, during one of New York’s worst snowstorms. So my mother named me Winter. My father, Ricky Santiaga, was so proud of his baby girl that he had a limo waiting to pick my moms up from the hospital.” These opening details introduce the reader to a gender dynamic that is static throughout the novel. The reader first encounters two women characters before the first male character. Also, Winter's mother is seemingly in a
position of power regarding Winter’s birth. She selects her daughter’s name and is
doted upon by her husband who whisks her and Winter away from the hospital in a
limousine. Implicit in these introductory and abrasive sentences is an
unsubstantiated assumption that the roles of women are powerful. But ultimately
domineering men characters control the women characters. In this particular scene,
Ricky Santiaga controls his wife’s ability to reproduce, leave the hospital, and the
lifestyle Winter will experience as a child. The reader later learns that Winter’s
mother is never named in the same way as her father, Ricky Santiaga. By the author,
Sister Souljah, choosing to name Ricky Santiaga, especially since he and Winter’s
mother are introduced in the same scene, denotes the male domination that
pervades The Coldest Winter Ever.

According to Patricia Hills Collins, “the controlling image of the ‘bitch’ constitutes
one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy (Collins
Black Sexual Politics 123). Alternatively, “Black Bitches” are also characterized as “super-
tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated (Collins Black Sexual Politics 124).
Joan Morgan also discusses this celebrated archetypal figure in her book, When
Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down. Morgan’s use of
“STRONGBLACKWOMEN” is similar to Collin’s “Black Bitch.” According to Morgan, a
“STRONGBLACKWOMEN,” “by the sole virtues of [her] race and gender [she] was supposed
to be the consummate professional, handle any life crisis, be the dependable rock for every
soul who needed [her]…” (Morgan Chickenheads 87). Both Collins’ and Morgan’s
understanding of bad/black bitches are present in the character Mrs. Santiaga, who
embodies the binary of a bad/black bitch being loud, rude, and pushy and being able to
handle any crisis life throws. Collins states that, “Contemporary Black popular culture’s
willingness to embrace patriarchy has left the ‘Black bitch’ as a contested representation” (Collins *Black Sexual Politics* 125). Souljah presents that contested representation in *The Coldest Winter Ever* by positioning Mrs. Santiaga as a spoiled woman who is doted on by a loving and rich husband. But by the end of the novel the reader realizes that Mrs. Santiaga’s status as a bad bitch comes at a hefty price. When trying to deal with the weight of losing her husband to the federal penitentiary, her beauty, her house, and her children Mrs. Santiaga turns to drugs. She crumples under the pressure of being a bad/black bitch. Morgan posits that being a STRONGBLACKWOMAN is nothing to which to aspire and Mrs. Santiaga exemplifies why such a life is unsustainable.94

When the role of Ricky Santiaga is considered alongside what Mrs. Santiaga terms a bad bitch, the delicate power dynamic between men and woman comes into focus. In *The Coldest Winter Ever* Mrs. Santiaga defines a bad bitch as a black woman, “who handles her business without making it seem like business” (Souljah 4). Further, “a bad bitch controlled without the man ever knowing that he was being dominated. A bad bitch was so slick that she made him think he was calling the shots while she planted the seeds and was the owner of all his thoughts” (Souljah 44). Being a bad bitch is multidirectional. First, the connotation of the word bitch when associated with women has come to be considered repulsive, wrong, and backwards. Second, in this context bad really means good, which then can be understood as being good at ‘being a bitch’, which outside of the novel’s context is bad.

94 See Stephanie Dunn’s “Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films for more on the bad/black bitch concept (pages 26-30).
Simply, the act of being a bad bitch is something women like Winter Santiaga strive to be, despite it being negative. Nevertheless, the bad bitch dominant narrative is subverted in *The Coldest Winter Ever* by the term being associated with desired attributes by women characters. In the end, Souljah is attempting to make an important claim about why black women, real or characters, striving to be bad bitches is wrong. The bad bitch phenomenon can be found in rap lyrics, Hip Hop videos, and movies written about Hip Hop culture making “bad bitch” a woman’s issue with a Hip Hop focus.

But what is really important is why women characters are striving to be bad bitches to begin. Men characters like Ricky Santiaga, Bullet, and GS want women who are viewed as sexually desirable, who can be adorned with expensive material possessions to denote their wealth capacity, and who are able to withstand the negative ramifications of a life of crime. In other words, the male characters want bad bitches to parade around, which leaves little room for women characters to assert their own desires and aspirations. For example, within weeks of being shot in the face and days of her husband being taken into judicial custody, Mrs. Santiaga receives a message from her husband through Winter. Ricky Santiaga says, “Tell your mother I want to see her one week from today on Thursday. Tell her I said pull herself together and get down here on Thursday in her best shit so I can show her off” (103). In this demand, Ricky at least acknowledges the real trauma and pain Mrs. Santiaga must be experiencing, as she is attempting to recover from a near fatal injury, the loss of her husband and the lavish lifestyle she had with him.
However, he is insensitive to her inability to be the trophy he wants to display due to the physical damage of the gunshot wound to her face and her lethargic state caused by pain medication. Ricky Santiaga does not provide his wife any opportunity to be anything less than an extension of his wealth and power despite Mrs. Santiaga’s grave physical and emotional injuries. His outrageous requests are further compounded by Mrs. Santiaga’s injuries being caused by his business—opposing hustlers shot her in the face in a botched assassination attempt on Ricky, and his choice to deal drugs lands him in jail. Mrs. Santiaga’s inability to be ‘shown off’ by Santiaga take her out of the realm of being a bad bitch because she is no longer able to handle, “her business without making it seem like business.” In *The Coldest Winter Ever*, the fall from the height of bad bitch leaves women characters either imprisoned or dead. Winter is sentenced to fifteen years in prison. And her mother suffers an early death due to drug abuse.

But before Winter is carted off to prison she elects to go stay with one of her love interests named Sterling. In coming to this decision, Winter thinks, “I would use Sterling for as long as possible, at least until I got answers to the big questions about my mom, pop and sisters. I couldn’t see him minding. He seemed to enjoy being used... I just wanted the pockets, the apartment, and access to his little putt-putt to handle my business” (111). Winter being put in a place where she must depend on men for her livelihood puts this particular scene in a larger feminist frame that explores the dynamics of power between men and women, regardless of race. Before this scene happens, the narrator describes how helpless Winter’s mother becomes when Ricky Santiaga is taken off to prison. Mrs. Santiaga has no access to funds, she does not know what she rightfully owns, like the house she lives
in and the car she drives, and she refuses to make any critical decisions for the welfare of her children because Ricky has always made those choices for her. This role model of women helplessness elucidates why Winter's first solution to her homelessness and poverty is to ‘use’ Sterling. Winter sees her livelihood as inextricably linked to the economic resources of the men she can manipulate. With Winter being an allegorical character, we can understand this debilitating dependence on men as Souljah’s critique of women’s place in the power dynamic with men and a cautionary statement on the lessons mothers teach their daughters in words and in action.

Criminality is also linked to black women’s bodies in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, which fits into a larger social history of controlling black images that includes stereotypes of welfare queens, crack babies, and Souljah’s construction of a bad bitch. The reason Winter needs to latch on to Sterling, to begin, is because both of her parents are in the penal justice system and unable to provide a stable home for Winter. Criminality in *The Coldest Winter Ever* becomes coded blackness read onto a larger feminist issue, relational gender power. This construction of criminality as it pertains to black women is magnified when considering how Winter’s mother is arrested. Mrs. Santiaga, Winter’s mother, refuses to be a willful informant for the police. And when the arresting officer attempts to coerce her into testifying against her husband Mrs. Santiaga asks, “Am I under arrest?” The officer then replies, “If that’s what we need to have a civil conversation with you.” The narrator, Winter, explains that Mrs. Santiaga, “Unwilling to cooperate with the police, she stuck out her wrists as if to say ‘take me.’” The police read
Momma her rights, cuffed her, and put her in the car” (100). In this particular scene, the police know that Mrs. Santiaga has not engaged in her husband’s drug empire and yet they treat her hostilely and even go as far as arresting her for unfounded charges including resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer (Souljah 100). According to the Santiaga family lawyer, the, “charges were just a means for them to hold her for questioning about Santiaga and his operation.” Mrs. Santiaga is able to have the petty charges against her pleaded down to insignificant convictions and is released on her own recognizance. But upon entering the criminal justice system, Mrs. Santiaga is no longer able to fulfill her hetero-normative duties as wife and mother. Her house is seized because it was purchased with drug money, which causes all four of her daughters to be taken from her and placed in the care of the state. Depicting of Mrs. Santiaga as a criminal and social deviant illuminates pertinent issues for poor women of color. Though Mrs. Santiaga has the privilege of a private lawyer, she is still considered a poor woman because she never controls her own money and all the Santiaga family assets are seized due to Ricky Santiaga’s conviction. The criminal justice system in *The Coldest Winter Ever* disrupts the black family in devastating ways, especially for the four Santiaga daughters.

In the case of *Flyy Girl*, the Ellisons begin the novel as a working class family. The father, Dave Ellison, has a college education and earns a comfortable wage as a pharmacist. The mother, Patti, did not complete college but is still able to secure a decent job as a dietitian in an nursing home (Tyree 13-14). From the outset of the novel, Patti is described
as a flyy girl who was able to successfully matriculate into the middle class through marriage. The narrator explains that Patti is the prettiest of her three sisters and is able to ensnare the best man of the four non-collegiately trained siblings. Patty meets Dave at a college party and is able to sexually captivate him to the point of consenting to marriage (Tyree 14-17). The Ellison’s live in a comfortable northwest Philadelphia home where, “they had the luxury of private lawns, patios, driveways and lots of trees, which surrounded their three-bedroom twin-house, things not affordable to the many Philadelphians who lived in crowded row-house areas” (Tyree 14). In addition to middle class housing, the Ellison’s flaunt their socio-economic status by purchasing a plethora of expensive material possessions. Patti especially uses material possessions to distinguish her status as the wife of a college educated black man over her sisters who are not (Tyree 15). Similar to Mrs. Santiaga in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Patti Ellison’s life is wrapped in her husband.

Even in the blissful moment of a six year olds’ birthday party, Patti endures embarrassment and disappointment caused by her husband, who shirks out of helping host the party and cleaning up afterwards (Tyree 17). Dave is the head of the Ellison household, he brings home the bulk of the family income, expects for Patty to cook and clean, and he occasionally cheats on her. He also is able to unilaterally decide that Patti’s sisters are banned from the family home, when Patti is allowed to sleep in their shared bed, and when the couple has sex. Nevertheless, Patti stays with Dave because of the lifestyle she is able to live being his wife. According to one of Patti’s sisters, Dave is tricked into marriage when Patti fakes a pregnancy (Tyree 17).

Dave and Patti’s dysfunctional and abusive relationship coupled with their propensity to spend lavishly on jewelry, clothes, and electronics help to ingrain a desire to be a flyy girl in their young and impressionable daughter, Tracy. After relinquishing her virginity to Victor at the age of thirteen, having only met him a few weeks’ previous, Tracy
thinks, "Now I know how my mother feels, dealing with my father" (Tyree 182). Dave wields his power as the primary family wage earner to control Patti. As their marriage deteriorates, Dave moves out of the comfortable townhouse in northwest Philadelphia to avoid scrutiny for his many indiscretions. Yet, he frequents the family home as he pleases and expects for Patti perform wifely duties like being monogamous, supportive, and understanding despite his unwillingness to be a husband. Tracy uses her parent’s love story as a guide to her own young love relationships but is not old enough to understand that her parents, though the most socio-economically successful people in her family, are not good role models for a healthy, loving relationship.

Despite Dave being primarily responsible for Tracy’s ambitions as a flyy girl, Patti shoulders the bulk of the blame. Dave provides the majority of the family's disposable income that they spend on expensive clothes, jewelry, shoes, and beautification services for Tracy. He moves out of the family home and only spends time with his daughter sporadically during majority of her formative years. By his example, Dave also encourages Tracy to have high economic standards for her romantic partners. But Tracy is not taught to care if that status is obtained by legal means. Dave’s semi-absenteeism provides fractured stability and role modeling for his young daughter, though Patti ultimately is blamed for Tracy’s inappropriate flyy girl ambitions because Patti is forced to raise Tracy virtually as a single parent (Tyree 280).

While having an honest conversation about boys and men, and the way they act in romantic, hetero-normative relationships, Patti advises Tracy, “That's just how they are, honey...They just wanna do whatever pleases them.” In this instance, Patti cannot provide satisfying answers about relationships to Tracy. Patti’s blanketed acceptance of men’s emotional and physical abuse by her own actions and admonishment of men’s propensity and ability to “do whatever pleases them” is not enough for Tracy. But Tracy decides to turn
inwards rather than continue the fruitless conversation with her mother by thinking, “And what about us... I know I want what I want, and you do too, mom. But she decide to keep her thoughts to herself...” (Tyree 251). Mother and daughter become passive actors in their respective romantic relationships by Patti’s verbal admission of men’s power and Tracy’s non-verbal, and therefore never registered, protests of the like. The men in this novel are at the heart of constructing the desires of flyy girls by providing the means for a flyy lifestyle and elevating shallow, physical attributes like eye color, physique, and hair texture over good moral qualities like self-esteem, ambition, and self-respect. Yet, the women are solely to blame for the devastating effects that accompany flyyness. Patti must suffer through infidelity and virtual single-parenthood as a consequence of “trapping” Dave into marriage. Tracy is violently assaulted by one of her boyfriends (Timmy) and is statutorily raped by another (Victor) as consequences of taking their money and benefitting from their popularity, respectively. Flyy Girl presents a mother and daughter who both remain in unhealthy relationships with men for the sake of socio-economic security.

Contrastingly, Gena in True to the Game does not have a father figure at all. Additionally, with the exception of the character Quadir, Gena’s main love interest, all of the characters in True to the Game are part of the black underclass.95 No one has legitimate or secure employment. There are no parental aged adults96 in the story aside from Quadir’s

95 I am using black underclass as defined by William Julius Wilson in his article, “The Black Underclass.” Wilson describes the black underclass as the social problems of urban life in the United States that disproportionately affect black people, including “rising rates of crime, drug addiction, out-of-wedlock births, women-headed families, and welfare dependency...” (88).

96 Adult aged characters in this case would be in their latter 30s or 40s, characters who are mothers, fathers, aunts, or uncles to the young main characters who are mostly in their late teens.
mother who only enters after her son has been murdered and she wants to lay claim to all the deceased’s material possessions. Gena, the protagonist, effectively does not have a mother. The narrator states, “she didn’t even remember her mother, not one memory” (Woods 47). The lack of parental figures, mothers in particular, breeds a culture of listlessness and immorality within the novel. Half of Gena’s friends had inattentive parents who went to parties, used mind-altering drugs, or simply ignored their children. To that effect, the narrator states, “a whole generation sat back, and said, ‘Fuck it. I’m not gonna raise my kids’” (Woods 9). The young adult characters are left to fend for themselves and make up the rules of life as they grow. Thus, being “true to the game” requires that characters like Gena, Quadir, and Sahirah (Gena’s best friend) learn alternative strategies to win at the game of life. Often times these non-traditional strategies have damaging, even fatal, effects.

Gah Git, Gena’s grandmother, who raises Gena from the age of four, is the closest character to a mother figure in the novel (Woods 20). According to Gena, Gah Git at sixty-two, “had patience and a lot of wisdom. She definitely had taken care of her grandbaby Gena. Gah Git took care of all her grandbabies... Gena loved her grandmother; she was the only mother she knew” (Woods 48). Even in this role, Gah Git becomes more of a burden to Gena than an authoritative, guiding force in her life. Mainly because Gah-Git, “had raised four boys and three girls, then at one point had three of her children and their children, a total of twelve, in a three-bedroom project unit” (Woods 20). Gah Git’s time and attention is so fractured by the many children and grandchildren she is responsible for that she cannot possibly be the kind of mother figure to keep Gena away from the same streets and the

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97 Gena also has an absentee father who went to prison around the same time as her mother’s death (Woods 47).
same game that claimed the lives of Gah Git’s children through drug dealing, drug abuse, and drug related violence (Woods 106).

Evidence of Gah Git’s emotional negligence of Gena and her other grand children comes in two accounts. First, when Gena’s best friend Sahirah is fatally shot because of a gang war Gena calls Gah Git for guidance and consolation but Gah Git gets Gena off the phone quickly because she has to tend to multiple other grandchildren (Woods 106). Second, Bria and Brianna (two of Gah Git’s other grandchildren) complain “about homework, and teachers and why Gah Git didn’t go up there98 and defend them like the other parents did for their kids” (Woods 250). Gah Git does not have the time to console her grandchildren individually or make their educations a priority enough to interface with their educators. Nevertheless, she often tells her descendants to pray, stay away from the drug infested streets, and be morally upright.

Within this complicated role of family matriarch, Gah Git cannot help Gena deal with the difficulties of living a life in “the game.” Instead, Gena provides monetarily for Gah Git while ignoring the elder woman’s advice. After Quadir’s death, Gena moves back into Gah Git’s project housing unit and spends a portion of the drug money from Quadir she has left on fixing up the unit (Woods 246). Gah Git easily fits within the welfare queen caricature as defined by Patricia Hill Collins. Further, she is a continuation of the mammy image, which is the women counter part of the Uncle Tom figure. Both mammy and Uncle Tom are “asexual, safe, assimilated, and subordinated black people” (Collins Black Sexual Politics 57). Collins also positions mammy alongside Aunt Jemima (another asexual and safe women caricature created in slavery and is ever pervasive today in local supermarkets on pancake syrup

98 “There” in this case means Bria and Brianna’s school.
labels). Collins posits that during slavery and into the twentieth century, "Black women were confined to domestic service, with Aunt Jemima created as a controlling image designed to hide Black women's exploitation" (Collins Black Feminist Thought Kindle Locations 1099-1100). Gah Git is valued for her ability to serve in a domestic capacity, albeit for her own family. Her name stems from her constantly sending her children and grandchildren to the store because she has “gotta get” one thing or another (Woods 20). Even her name is inextricably linked to her role as a domineering matriarch. She is so busy in her three-bedroom project unit, corralling her loved ones, that she cannot slip away for a few moments to retrieve essential items from the corner (or neighborhood convenience) store.

“The game” and all of the devastation that comes with it further complicates the role of archetypal caricatures like mammy and welfare queen. Gah Git is a cross between mammy and the welfare queen, which according to Patricia Hill Collins’ evolutionary spectrum of black womanhood in the United States can be seen as progress and retrogression. Mammy was a United States based slave era articulation of black womanhood and the welfare queen image was constructed as a political tool to respond to the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s. Gah Git was a turn of century amalgamation of these two figures in literature set in urban America and was proof that healthy and positive representations of black womanhood were still illusive in the consciousness of America.

Parenting in street lit novels was considerably compromised by the social and cultural surroundings that permeated urban America during the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of crack cocaine, Hip Hop, and unemployment seriously eroded the capabilities of black women and men to care for their children. Women who were busy with drug addictions, social lives that involved the “dopest” Hip Hop parties, and trying to find alternative money making means had very little time or energy to devote to their children. Further, their
reckless and seemingly careless examples gave passive permission to the younger
generations to live lives with no care for moral or legal rules. But through analyzing novels 
like *The Coldest Winter Ever*, *Flyy Girl*, and *True to the Game* and their characters with a Hip 
Hop feminist lens we can use this literature to help with young urban people of color work 
through similar situations. Also, we have the ability to use these novels to spark candid and 
real conversations with readers who would not otherwise come into contact with or 
understand such lifestyles and behaviors. Using a Hip Hop feminist approach to street lit is 
imperative because it allows for honest conversations without the denigration of the 
characters or the literature and by association, the people who identify with the characters 
and literature.

"It became an achievement for a girl to have a drug-dealing boyfriend."99 Character 
relationships in Street Lit

In street lit love and money were fiercely entangled. Both women and 
men characters come to realize that reverence, respect, and admiration was 
attached to power. And the person possessing the most money and the best 
means to attain more had the *juice*.100 At the turn of the century, on the street 
and in print, only men possessed juice and women liked men because they 
had juice. Further, men with juice usually only associated with the flyyest

99 Taken from *Flyy Girl*, page 269.

100 *Juice* was a late 1980s/early 1990s urban slang term for the concept of power, respect, 
and like-ability. For more on the term see the film "Juice" starring Tupac Shakur and Omar 
Epps.
girls and the baddest bitches (as stated previously, physical attributes serve as measures of flyyness and badness). But in order for a woman to be deemed a flyy girl or a bad bitch in street lit, a character had to be associated with a high earning illegal hustler. These associative needs created a destructive cyclical pattern of dependency to obtain shallow, ill defined, and stagnant social statuses. Sexuality and deviance were inextricably linked within street lit stories about black people in urban America whereby, the women characters were measured by their physical attributes and the men characters by how much money they made. The narrator in Flyy Girl, when talking about the culture of north Philadelphia in the latter 1980s states, “it became and achievement for a girl to have a drug-dealing boyfriend” (Tyree 269).

In addition to the black women characters in The Coldest Winter Ever being associated with the bad/black bitch archetype, these characters were also hyper-sexualized. The hyper-sexualization of black women’s bodies in this text re-inscribed older stereotypes of black women as sexually insatiable and exotic (Collins Black Sexual Politics). Throughout the text Winter is commonly viewed in overly sexual and exotic terms, not only for her physical attributes, but also for the way she is raised for the majority of her formative years. In trying to convince Winter that Midnight (one of Winter’s many love interests) is sexually attracted to her, Winter’s mother says, “Trust me, there is no way he don’t like my baby. You’re young, fine. You got everything a girl could want, pretty hair, beautiful eyes, clothing, jewels” (39). Instead of
highlighting Winter’s intelligence, loyalty or some other immaterial attribute.

Mrs. Santiaga focuses on her physical characteristics that are typically viewed as sexually desirable. Mrs. Santiaga believes that Winter need only be a bad bitch to attract a hustler like Midnight.

This hyper-sexualization is also highlighted with Bullet, who views Winter as exotic. Bullet sees Winter as a trophy and a necessity for his persona as a major drug lord. He tells Winter that he wants her because he knows she was raised to behave like a princess who is worthy of a lavish lifestyle. Her physical attributes qualify her as a good life partner rather than any good moral characteristics or intelligence. Additionally, he idolizes Winter’s father and obsesses over recreating Ricky Santiaga’s life for himself. Ricky was known in the ‘hood for having the baddest bitch as his wife and Bullet wants the closest thing to Mrs. Santiaga—Winter. After taking Winter on an exotic vacation Bullet believes that she is now his possession. Bullet says to Winter, “you belong to me from here on in.” The penalty for betrayal is death, he said, with deafening seriousness. He continues, “If I catch you lying to me about anything, no matter how small, the penalty is pain” (375). He proves the sincerity of his words when Winter is not truthful about where she goes for a few hours. According to Winter, “For two nights and three mornings, [she] was held hostage by the dogs” (409). Bullet uses his ‘bitches’ (his female dogs) to subjugate Winter by restricting her movements and instilling a debilitating sense of fear. Bullet’s perverse desire to completely control the subject of his affection is not fully explored or problematized in
the novel. Winter casually mentions that Bullet is crazy and his threats should be taken seriously. But the detriment caused to the perpetrator of that kind of all-consuming infatuation is not meted out. In fact, Bullet is able to literally walk away freely when Winter is apprehended by the police with his drugs and illegal firearm. Winter receives fifteen years in prison for being an accomplice in Bullet’s crime and Bullet retains his freedom. In turn, Winter is happy to momentarily be with a hustler who can provide the kinds of clothes, shoes, cars and homes her father once could. Neither character pauses to consider if they could love each other without money and power. Black women’s sexuality and how black men perceive it is a driving force in this novel.

The protagonist in *True to the Game*, at the age of eighteen, has had twenty-nine sexual partners before she enters into a long-term relationship with Quadir Richards (Woods 48). Gena trades her body and sex for material possessions as evidenced by her abusive relationship with Jamal at the beginning of the novel. Pertaining to the men Gena sleeps with the narrator states,

“Gena’s whole entourage of male companions were young, handsome, and very wealthy drug dealers. Hustlers who loved to come on a set and just break a nigga off. It was too good to be true, and don’t talk about sex. You were definitely getting broke down for dropping down, wasn’t no questions asked. Gena and Sahirah dropped down, way down, for the lifestyle they were living. The only way not to give the sisters their props was if they weren’t getting

101 See the section above on sexual violence
Gena’s sexual partners are mainly nameless and faceless black men who are violent (they will “break a nigga off”) meaning they would cause bodily harm to any male foe), socially deviant (“very wealthy drug dealers”, and hyper-sexual (“don’t talk about sex;” meaning they have a lot of sex). Implicit in her body count (and Tracy's and Winter's relationships) was an accepted culture of young urban girls having inappropriate sexual relationships with older men. Further, the narrator intimates that Quadir is the first partner to completely satisfy Gena sexually, which infers that Gena does not have sex with men for sexual satisfaction but for what these partners “broke down” for Gena “dropping down” (Woods 87). Gena, Tracy (*Flyy Girl*), and Winter (*The Coldest Winter Ever*) justify these age disparities by the material possessions they receive in exchange for sexual favors. From the outset of their sexual lives, these young women characters are not taught to associate sex with love.

Even Gena’s best friend, Sahirah, knows “...Gena was a con” (Woods 25). Sahirah knew that Gena would not hesitate to entice Quadir with sex despite knowing that he is involved with another woman. In the “game” allegiance was won by money among women, not respect for prior relationships and certainly not for gender solidarity. In fact, romantic relationships were often approached like employment opportunities. When discussing men and relationships Gena tells Sahirah, “I know they a pain in the ass, but it’s like a
job. Besides, niggas sweat you half to death when you got a man. You stay single too long, then niggas gonna think that there’s something wrong with you” (Woods 39). Gena knows that her body is viewed as a product to be sold to the biggest and best hustler. Further, she attempts to impose the same denigrating mentality onto her best friend who is having trouble securing a rich hustler.

In addition to submitting to the sexual whims of the hustlers she dates, Gena also endures domestic violence and emotional abuse from her partners. Jamal, one of Gena’s drug dealing boyfriends, tells her, “Gena, don’t make me kill you out this motherfucker. Where you been? I said where the fuck you been all night long” (Woods 13). Not only does Jamal verbally threaten to kill Gena, he also physically assaults her in an effort to ascertain her whereabouts the night before. After enduring his emotional and physical abuse in a public spectacle she elects to stay with Jamal. She does not leave Jamal until she knows for sure that she will be with Quadir and that he is willing to financially provide for her, as evidenced by the international vacation he pays for and all the spending money gives her while abroad. Her relationship with Quadir is similar to her other material romances because both know that the relationship is predicated on money. When Gena inquires about where Quadir spends his time he replies, “Baby, I was taking care of my business, that’s all. If I was fucked up and broke, you wouldn’t want to talk to me.” In the face of Gena’s rebuffs Quadir says, “No, you wouldn’t. Don’t no woman want no broke-ass man” (Woods 122).
Street lit novels primarily offered hetero-normative, sexually explicit partnerships. Men were expected to be primary wage earners, macho protectors, highly competitive with other males, and to dominate the women in their lives. Women were expected to be submissive, beautiful, materialistic, disloyal, and passive-aggressively combative with other women. Within these rigid gender roles healthy displays of love, parenting, and friendship rarely appeared. The breakdown of kinship and friendship circles because of the gender expectations in street lit created space to discuss historically and location specific conversations about urban living, real and imagined. In order to fully comprehend the magnitude of these gender roles and, by extension, the diminishment of close relationship bonds feminist theories can be of tremendous service.

Issues of sexual violence, parenting and sexual relationships have been all important feminist issues. Feminism was created for protection against physical and emotional domestic abuse, the preservation of healthy kinship structures, and as an alternative to unhealthy cross-gender relationships (among other noble causes). In particular, feminism for people of color has required race to be central and issues that disproportionately affect them be addressed. Black feminist thought, Womanism, and Hip Hop feminism were all created specifically to address issues like sexual violence, parenting, and sexual relationships with the needs of people of color in mind. Street lit can be a particularly productive site of people of color-focused feminism. Stories about African Americans navigating life in urban settings mired with
unemployment, illegal drug traffic, and the deterioration of the black family cannot help but touch on pointedly feminist issues.

Hip Hop feminism, in particular, was created as a necessity for those who did not want to choose between the music and culture they loved and their beliefs in feminist agendas. This particular iteration of feminism was squarely rooted within a larger tradition of feminism engineered for communities of color. Hip Hop feminism was also for those who were willing to interrogate contradictions, contend with hypocrisies, and love Hip Hop music and culture with all of its misogyny, patriarchy, and anger. Street lit required the same balancing act from those who have enjoyed the genre and feminism. According to Aisha Durham Hip Hop feminism “uses an intersectional mode of analysis to articulate group experiences in order to transform the social reality of communities of color marred by structural inequality” (Durham “Hip Hop Feminist Media Studies”). Street lit explored some of the same issues pertinent to people of color in urban settings with the same kind of uncompromisingly honest style as rap music and Hip Hop culture more generally. Further, a Hip Hop feminist framework can provide a semi-rigid theoretical structure for introducing street lit as effective analytical and critical thinking data in college and secondary education classrooms. The issues street lit characters face often mirror those faced by people of color in urban settings and promoting reader/text dialogue in a pointedly Hip Hop feminist manner will allow for the “intersectional mode of analysis to articulate group experiences” as Durham defines as integral to
Hip Hop feminism. Hip Hop feminism is a lens that can be used to examine street lit stories written on concrete cityscapes. Using Hip Hop feminism as a tool to unpack street lit allows for the gray areas of stories pertaining to blackness, urbanity, and womanliness to be explored and celebrated.
CHAPTER 4

DOORKNOCKER EARRINGS AND DANGEROUS LIAISONS: STREET LIT AND COLLECTIVE MATERIAL CULTURAL MEMORY

“The dollars had my nose open at first too, but not anymore…”

-Juicy, G-Spot

In 2012, a young black boy was shot to death in Sanford, Florida. The youth was perceived as a menace and threat by a neighborhood watch volunteer. The boy’s skin color, hooded sweatshirt, or “hoodie,” and bulging pockets were markers of difference and un-belonging. He was read as a danger to safety and order simply because he was black, young, and present. In the wake of his unnecessary death and the unsuccessful murder conviction of his killer, Trayvon Martin and, by extension, the hoodie he wore have come to represent the plight of young black men and the cyclical violence of black men being stereotyped as violent and dangerous, and therefore having their lives placed in peril. Material items such as clothes, shoes, and jewelry have the potential to become politically charged meta-symbols with myriad meanings based on pivotal moments or occurrences and how those moments are collectively remembered.

Perhaps, consider your initial reaction to hearing a song from your adolescence that you have long since forgotten. The song’s lyrics, beat, or even its intricate bridge riffs might induce the memory of pivotal moments, both personal and social, that you associate with that song. Images reflecting monumental
occasions in your life might similarly be able to transport you back to specific occurrences, if only for a brief period. A fleeting waft of a familiar scent can possibly prompt lifelike images of a particular person or place in your mind. When our senses trigger our brains to remember our pasts, we have unique, however fleeting, access to our personal narratives. These organic moments of inward reflection encourage us to take stock of our lives, the decisions we have made, and our missed opportunities. Novels help turn these personal moments outward by creating a literary record of memories that are shared amongst readers and characters alike.

Broadly, collective material cultural memories are group remembrances of lived experiences, specific to a space and time that are elicited by the use and/or recognition of a material object. Literature is able to employ collective material cultural memories and their symbolic representations to draw allusions to real events, places, or stories. In particular, street lit as a genre had a preoccupation with consumerism and materiality, which relied heavily on how its collective audience remembered the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The connections between fictive worlds and social realities have the power to draw readers closer to characters through a common recollection or cultural understanding. In this way, literature (street lit in particular) becomes a living and breathing social contract between text and audience, which can be renegotiated every time the reader visits the text. As a form of social commentary, street lit allowed authors the creative and political freedom to address some of the most horrendous and crippling aspects of living in black urban enclaves at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹⁰² Street lit used collective material cultural memories as conduits for telling difficult coming-of-age or

¹⁰² According to Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, “The hood is generally understood as the urban space occupied by black working-class and poor people” (Ogbar 6).
coming-to-awareness stories. These stories have the potential to change lives.

Literature, generally, relies on the abilities of readers to recall. Recollections move stories from the impersonal to the intimate. Street lit used the power of memory to fuse important Hip Hop moments and sentiments together with personal narratives through materiality. In order to unpack the framework of memory and material employed in street lit, this chapter first considers collective memory theory, ideology, and representation. Next, “Doorknocker Earrings and Dangerous Liaisons” explores twentieth century black cultural frameworks aimed at theorizing the connectivity of blackness, specifically with Stephen Henderson’s mascon concept and Amiri Baraka’s “the changing same.” The overall purpose of this chapter is to articulate how Hip Hop and street lit built on theories of memory and black culture through hyper-consumerism. Further, this chapter illuminates how hyper-consumerism and materiality are important to understanding issues of gender and control in street lit.

Street lit, like its literary predecessors, has often been categorized as low-brow fiction. Gifford states that, “While street literature has garnered a loyal constituency of readers, there has been a growing controversy concerning the genre’s popularity, its quality, and its social message” (Pimping Fictions 152). Nevertheless, it evolved to include sub-genres such as gangsta lit, urban erotica, and sista lit. The genre has often been denounced for its misogynistic, hyper-masculine, romantic character relationships. Many

103 Such as the gangster and pimp novels by Donald Goines and Iceburg Slim, the hard-boiled detective stories written by Chester Himes, and the Blaxploitation era urban experience novels by Herbert Simmons and George Cain. The preceding era of black urban fiction urban literature novels tended to concentrate on detailing the grimmest and most perverse aspects of urban underworlds and were created by both the aesthetic interventions of the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement and the emergence of Blaxploitation era film and its prevailing culture.
street lit novels struck a precarious balance between telling cautionary tales and glamorizing a street culture of prostitutes, pimps, gangsters, drug dealers, and abusers. Further, street lit was culturally distinct from the New Negro Renaissance, Post-Modernism, and the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement urban literary periods because its authors had more access to self-publishing, promotion, and distribution. However, street lit was connected to previous urban literature periods through the continued use of geographical specificity (i.e. landmarks and street names) and locational variation (i.e. different cities). Street lit evoked the pungent smells of human struggle, the texture of urban decay, and the bated breath of hope that emanated from city living. It was an urban and artistic response to an ever-evolving culture of Hip Hop, claims of a post-racial America, the advent of social media, and the ascendency of the first black president of the United States. Drawing on contemporary cultural moments and societal issues, the genre was able to register the black urban voice, along with the images and political symbols that informed it, into the literary record.

At the turn of the twenty-first century street lit employed materiality and the collective memories of its readership to create political messages and social commentaries on contemporary black lives and culture. In so doing, street lit authors experienced widespread and lasting publishing success in an age when reading among Americans was significantly declining. Many street lit novels were coming-of-age stories that resonated with urban black youth through familiar language, real geographic landmarks, and materiality that invoked vivid

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104 Refer to the introduction for a fuller explanation.

105 See “The Decline of the American Book Lover.” By Jordan Weissmann.
remembrances. The genre’s success was attributable to the authors’ ability to use material artifacts as signifiers of the then current black cultural moment in the United States. Through these signifiers, readers were invited to share in meta-memories, which were co-created between text and audience.

*The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah, a defining street lit text, deftly employs collective material cultural memories to captivate readers. The novel depicts a young woman of color who is forced into maturity on the mean streets of New York City. Winter Santiaga is preoccupied with maintaining the lavish lifestyle her father had always provided until he is incarcerated. With only a small sum of money left, no prospect of getting more, and a family who desperately needs her financial support, Winter elects to get a new dress and tells the reader, “My Nicole Miller dress was not that expensive. It was the shoes and the bag that sent the bill soaring…” (Souljah 124). The text’s reference to an actual fashion brand that was popular among urban black youth at the turn of the twenty-first century, encouraged readers to draw intimate connections between themselves and Winter based on a shared experience of buying Nicole Miller clothes, or being able to readily identify the brand from some previous advertisement, or recognizing the brand name as one worn by friends. Souljah was able to transform this connection between reader and text into a moment of critique by qualifying Winter’s decision to irresponsibly spend money on a new dress with what transpires thereafter. Winter says:

I had to take off my dress and switch my bag before I met Momma or else she’d be pissed that I spent her money on clothes. I took the tags and clothing receipts out of my white
pocketbook and laid them to the side just in case I needed to return everything to get some extra cash. The idea was painful to me because I couldn't see anybody wearing that dress as good as me (Souljah 127).

Winter knows her decision to buy a new outfit rather than save the money for family-related expenses might have deleterious consequences for herself and the rest of her family. She goes to great lengths to conceal the decision from her mother and attempts maintain access to the money she used to pay for the clothes by preserving the receipts. Through her actions, Winter is imploping the reader to consider the benefit and costs of her decision and how small decisions involving material possessions and wealth have larger ramifications beyond the point of sale. Throughout the novel Winter chooses to be defined by her possessions and at every turn her situation worsens because she clings ever tighter to superficial symbols of material wealth. Her obsession with the material helps Winter leave an indelible impression on street lit readers and links her story to broader representations of Hip Hop culture as obsessed with hyper-consumerism, the allure of fast money, and overnight success.

“Back in the Day”106: Theorizing Collective Memory

For several centuries, scholars have been occupied with defining and denoting the differences between memory and representation. According to Olick and Robbins, “memory

106 “Back in the Day” is the title of a rap song by Ahmad released in 1994 that recalls generic coming-of-age events common among minority youth in inner cities. The chorus states, “Back in the days when I was young, I’m not a kid anymore/But some days I sit and wish I was a kid again. The song uses a plethora of material as points of remembrance, which supports the premise of the Hip Hop generation collectively remembering through materiality. Specifically germane to this chapter, the song says, “and, all the girls had they Turkish link/If it broke then they made earrings to it, like they meant to do it.”
is a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are not simply mediated but are structured by social arrangements” (109). Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, asserts that memory is simultaneously a moral system, cosmology, and history. Contrastingly, representation, he continues, is “The only means of having a very material end in view,” especially within religious constructs. Durkheim backs away from the physical manifestations of memory and representation by considering when the past is “represented for the mere sake of representing it” or simply put, for history. His claim assumes that representation, in any form, can be transmuted without bias or individuated motivation. The longstanding debate on the impartiality of history alludes to the troublesomeness of Durkheim’s assumption. Within literature, however, personal motivation and self-interest can serve to strengthen the connection between reader and text, given that each reader comes to the text with a unique set of experiences and ideas that impact how the text is understood. This chapter attempts to reorient the relationship between material, memory, and cultural constructs in society, especially in regards to contemporary popular African American urban fiction; or street lit.

Durkheim’s theory on memory has been taken up, expanded, and rebuffed by Maurice Halbwachs who asserts that moments of remembering are collective efforts by an individual and whoever else can recall the occurrence; or, “When some new reminder helps us to piece together small scattered, and indistinct bits of the past” (Collective Memory 5). We are able to create a *collective memory* when moments can be shared with others. Memories are most often distinguishable from dreams by the collaborative nature of recalling the past and are usually a communal act. To collectively remember is a public and shared exercise. Often individual remembrances have small variances due to our myriad experiential standpoints; however, the strong correlation between memory, people in a collective, and the sensation induced by the memory creates a strong connection that can
overcome difference. History, Halbwachs continues, disrupts collective memory and is necessary when generations can no longer recall certain events from personal experience (Collective Memory 80). Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka similarly assert that, “The specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture is not seen to maintain itself for generations as a result of phylogenetic evolution, but rather as a result of socialization and customs” (125). If this is the case, memory—especially shared cultural memory—is able to outlast generations through the medium of literature.

In the case of African Americans (particularly in the twenty-first century), the memories that were collectively recalled like the deaths of Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice were often shrouded with trauma and overwhelmingly silenced by mainstream media.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the act of re-visiting painful memories, especially in literary texts that have explicit political messaging for contemporary African American readers, was often denounced and denigrated. Gatekeepers and critics (such as teachers, librarians, and bookstore proprietors)¹⁰⁸ preferred to point out the flaws of street lit rather than focus on how these texts could have healed a generation of black young adult readers or save future generations.

Similar to Halbwach’s assertions that collective memories are lost or forgotten with every passing generation, I assert that material cultural mimetic

¹⁰⁷ This was a peculiar silencing, given the heavy coverage of these deaths and the constant loop of video footage from the incidents. However, the media reconstructed the lives of victims in such a way that muted the positive aspects of their lives while extolling the negatives.

artifacts can evolve to symbolically represent various memories or events for different generations. The ways that these material artifacts are immortalized in history, both intra-generationally and for the long historical record, influence how stories are told in literature. At the turn of century, American authors were writing in an age of hyper-consumerism in the United States, which inevitably impacted the fictive alternate realities they created. According to Bakari Kitwana, “an intense focus on materialism is characteristic of our generation and is a critical variable in the shaping of [Hip Hop generation] relationships” (Kitwana 104). Street lit authors painstakingly detailed what their characters wore, drove, and bought to symbolically represent the effects of hyper-commodification in urban spaces. Money, and its purchasing power, was frequently a silent driving force for street lit novel plots. Most street lit characters were commonly preoccupied with amassing large amounts of money and assets quickly, mostly through illegal means, and their free time was consumed with devising schemes to flaunt their riches.

Through these quests for wealth and prosperity, street lit authors were able to make moral meanings and teach tangible lessons for street lit readers. Street lit novels did more than glorify drug trafficking, violence, and sex. They enticed readers to enter the lives of characters through shared memories. The close connection forged between the street lit text and its audience encouraged readers to personally identify with the characters.\(^{110}\) The

\(^{109}\) Members of the Hip Hop generation were born between 1964 and 1984. They are the direct descendants of the Civil Rights/Black Power era. (Kitwana XIV).

\(^{110}\) In a diverging sense, readers were encouraged to also dis-identify with street lit characters. Authors hoped that their prose would call readers to make better decisions than
consequences faced by the characters, then, were weighed not only for the character but also for the readers themselves. When the twenty-first century opened, a number of the more successful street lit novelists, including Omar Tyree, Sister Souljah, and Wahida Clark, believed that they had a moral obligation to insert practical lessons for black urban readers in their literature. For these authors, writing was not simply an occupation—it was a civic duty that required a fortified moral compass and sensitivity towards the plight of the street lit readership.

“U.N.I.T.Y.”\textsuperscript{111}: Collectively and Ideological Representation

In 1968, Louis Althusser published an essay interpreting ideological representation and how representations are entangled with real conditions of existence. In “Ideology and Ideological State Appartuses” Althusser promoted two central theses. First, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” Second, “Ideology has a material existence.” Under the premise of ideology existing materially, Althusser posited, “Material existence of ‘ideas’ or other ‘representations’ is indeed necessary if we are to advance in our analysis of the nature of ideology.” This point was especially poignant within the twenty-first century literary urban imagination that relied heavily on the consumerist nature of society and the reader’s ability to identify the street lit characters. For a full definition of dis-identification and its applications see José Munoz’s \textit{Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics}.

\textsuperscript{111} U.N.I.T.Y.” by Dana Elaine “Queen Latifah” Owens was released in 1993 on her album \textit{Black Reign}.  

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political stakes associated with commodification (695). According to Althusser, material existence is a set of practices predicated on a system of beliefs (religious, moral, lawful, etc.). His argument can be moved beyond practice to tangible materiality in literature simply because material culture within fiction, similar to physical material existence, is formed based on a set of ideas or representations which are rooted in physical artifacts and real cultural signifiers. In particular, street lit was able to reproduce what Althusser terms *representational ideologies* for fictive characters through real and collectively remembered occurrences, which replicated realistic impressions\(^{112}\) on readers, prompting them to associate street lit stories with “Movies playing in their minds.”\(^{113}\)

In the same era of Althusser’s theory on ideological representation, some proponents of the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement were interested in finding unifying representations of blackness throughout the African Diaspora. Stephen E. Henderson described terms like tradition, roots, soul, and spirit as mascons in his article titled “Saturation: Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry.” Mascon, appropriated from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), has been defined as, “The massive concentration of Black experiential energy” (Henderson 108). Henderson uses this term to explain words often associated with a metaphysical blackness that is difficult to define or reduce to monolithic

\(^{112}\) For a fuller discussion on street lit’s uses of realness, magical realness, and authenticity see chapter one.

\(^{113}\) See Vanessa Irvin Morris, library sciences and street lit scholar’s *The Reader’s Advisory Guide to Street Literature* for a full explanation of how readers are able to insert themselves and their stories into the fictional worlds street lit creates.
experiences. Mascons allow for authors to signify a very specific emotion or encapsulate a pointed experience through a simple word or phrase that has come to be closely associated with similar, but varied, black standpoints. Mascons, in addition to symbolic values, have come to represent a quest for an essential blackness.114 Black artists and critics, especially during the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement, sought to find great unifiers that could transcend geography, socio-economic class, language, local culture and practices, and age.

Mascons are able to create multiple and varied signs based on the circumstances of their use; meaning, mascons are multimodal devices that are adaptable to differences in time and circumstance. For example, tradition as a mascon is used to describe not only a repetitive ceremony, but also a method of remembrance, a symbol of kinship, and an indescribable link between people who are connected through shared experience. Similarly, roots are both the portion of a plant that digs deep into the earth to keep the plant grounded and a symbol of heritage or ancestry that, especially pertaining to the black experience, is often vague or undocumented. Soul and spirit are the essence of a person’s being that is unseen and unheard but is felt through the mannerisms, incantations, and emotions of said person. In everyday practices soul becomes the indiscernible vibes within the pauses of life or the fervor and relentlessness of a determined person. Spirit is

114 Scholars such as Gaytri Spivak (In Other Worlds), bell hooks (“Post Modern Blackness”), and Ann Stoler (“Political and Psychological Essentialisms”) aptly pointed out the narrowing and flattening effects of essentialism (and in the case of Spivak, add dimensions), especially in regards to people of color and their experiences. This chapter attempts to further the conversation about mascons in particular without weighing in about whether a quest for essentialized blackness is possible or necessary.
the ethereal presence in worship services. It is the haunting and protection of one's ancestors, and it is the guiding whisper in the wind. Over time, these general terms have come to define the connective tissues of blackness. Often, poets use such elusive terms (such as roots, soul, and spirit) to espouse the unspoken, undefined macro-unifiers that are able to provide credence to notions of a collective black community or a shared black experience that are able to operate over space and time.

Mascons were at the heart of the aims and literary works of the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Arts Aesthetic Movement attempted to establish a black aesthetic to culturally redefine how blacks perceived themselves (Collins and Crawford 7). In addition, the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement encouraged a deeper appreciation of black life via literature, photography, spoken word, and other forms of artistic expression. According to Kellie Jones, “The Black Arts Aesthetic Movement championed the aesthetic pleasure of Blackness and focused on reception by Black audiences” (Jones 43). In many respects the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement helped to reformulate black identity in America. The Black Arts Aesthetic Movement was the creative component of the militant Black Power concept during the late 1960s and 1970s. The Black Arts Aesthetic Movement sought to give a voice to the wide array of emotions African Americans felt during the turbulent second half of the Civil Rights era. In a time where some of the most prominent Civil Rights leaders perished at the hand of horrendous hatred, like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers, African Americans needed to express their anger and frustration in a positive
and constructive manner and the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement provided the platform. Generally the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement has become popularized by the poetry, short stories, and visual arts produced. Black art was created by the likes of the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AFRI-COBRA) and the Umbra Poets Workshop, among others. Also, Black art was published by printing presses like Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press, which provided black artists a space to create art that was for Black people by Black people. The various organizations that bolstered black art helped create a climate where conversations about defining blackness on a macro-level were necessary (Smethurst). Stephen Henderson’s mascon was one such attempt to find grand unifiers that could give credence to notions of essential blackness.

While mascons are freeing for the author, they can be extremely restricting and alienating for the reader. If the reader finds him or herself unable to relate to the mascon on a personal level, the meaning and entry into a set of black experiences embodied through the mascon is nonexistent regardless of the reader’s race or other social constructs. Additionally, the concept of a mascon is more effective in poetry than in short stories and novels. When mascons are applied to short stories and novels, where there is more space to develop concepts and themes, the symbolism becomes saturated. With more literary space, novels and short stories are able provide experiential examples of Henderson’s mascons. So for example, soul in a novel or short story can be meted out in scenes involving soul fashion, soul food, and soul music, which then become physical representations of the soul mascon. Even in these realist iterations of soul, the ability to definitively
indicate what separates urban fashion from soul fashion, or foods made by black people from soul food, or music created by black people from soul music is often lost.

Henderson's article about cultural saturation in African American poetry defines mascons as abstract and/or nonmaterial concepts in African American art. Usually, these ideas come to represent aspects of African American life and culture.

According to William L. Van Deburg:

Black folk expression (here defined to include the visual, linguistic, and culinary arts; folklore, music, and religion) mirrored the impact which 'living black' in a white-dominated land could have on a people. Their unique cultural expression was by no means racially exclusive in the sense that it was transmitted through genes. Nor was it, as the black psychologists revealed, induced solely by poverty and low socio-economic status. (193)

Van Deburg uses black folk expression in a similar manner as Henderson’s use of mascons. Furthering the continuity between black folk expression and mascons, Van Deburg attempts to define one of Henderson’s examples of mascons: soul. Even in Van Deburg’s concrete examples of soul fashion, soul food, soul music, and other iterations of soul, he uses vague descriptors like, “that indefinable ‘something’” and “this quintessential in-group concept” (194, 203). The inability of both Henderson and Van Deburg to definitively elucidate the essential characteristics of a mascon and/or a black folk expression highlights the limitations of the mascon concept, in particular, and cultural memory more generally. Further, mascons and black folk expressions do not automatically or clearly designate when meanings shift over time to accommodate a new set of experiences. Collective material cultural memories overcome these limitations by employing physical materials as the
inspiration for recalling experiences and memories. In this way, large unifiers of “Massive concentration of Black experiential energy” can be defined by their source through time and locational specificity.

Further, Amiri Baraka’s ‘the changing same’ concept complicates the concepts of mascons and/or black folk expressions. Baraka posits in his essay, “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)” that while African American life, especially in literature and music, has evolved over time, it has maintained an essence that allows for continuity over time. Inevitably, the idea of the changing same undermines the notion of a singular massive concentration of black experience because mascons are meant to be static rather than dynamic and transient. Though Baraka maintains that what separates these experiences are not as important as what unites them, these differences make the idea of universal mascons virtually impossible. Simply, the weight of personal experiences and how they vary over time and location is too heavy for the mascon concept or the black folk expression idea to overcome. But, if we invest in material symbolisms, which embody the unifying principle of the mascon concept, we can access the universalism of mascons while being able to provide time and locational specificity for varying concentrations of personal experiences.

The concept of a material mascon is not from the outset uniquely African American, but through experience they have become closely associated with African American life and culture. Further, being associated with African American life and culture is not indicative of a material mascon only being within the realm of black experience. If mascons help identify undergirding elements of unifying blackness,
then material mascons help to provide geographical and time context to tangible signifiers of blackness.

Collective material cultural memory comes from the mascon meta-framework and the contemporary evolution of black culture commodification. Since the 1980s, Hip Hop culture has heavily influenced what clothes, shoes, jewelry, and other materials youth consume. Kitwana claims that, “images and ideas that define youth culture for this generation—such as designer clothes, like Sean Jean, Phat Farm, and Tommy Hilfiger, ever-changing styles of dress and local colloquialisms—are beamed out to a captive national audience” (202). From these fashion and aesthetic trends emerged a material culture, which created a specific type of cultural memory. The texture of an Adidas track suit, the weight of a Nike shoe, or the coldness of a Jeep’s metal were all material and Hip Hop cultural signifiers. People, the world over, have been influenced by Hip Hop culture and they accessed and created their own memories associated with these commodities through Hip Hop. Because this kind of collective memory making was contingent upon both specific materials and one kind of overarching culture, we created shared material cultural memories. So when a street lit character (like Victor in Flyy Girl) described as a “playboy” or a member of the Hip Hop generation wore a Kangol bucket hat, movie-screen eyeglasses, a three-striped Adidas tracksuit, and matching Adidas sneakers, an iconic image (most commonly associated with the rap group Run DMC) was invoked. Further, this image conjured specific memories for sharers of Hip Hop culture who may have worn similar fashions. These iconic images and localized memories shared in a particular cultural moment, which simultaneously projected a meta-cultural understanding and allowed for individuated difference. This “play” in the structure was how street lit was able to resonate with its most enthusiastic readers.
The consumerist nature of Hip Hop culture implores us to consider how street lit characters’ sartorial choices impacted their narrative arcs. Clothes, and shoes, and jewelry all have became status symbols in stories about urban life, which codified characters at varying levels of coolness, flyyness, and desirability. Twenty-first century literature, especially street lit, relied heavily on shared cultural memory to transport readers to familiar places they had never been; in other words, readers may have recalled the feeling of wearing a Gucci bucket hat with a matching velour suit but did not have the same experiences as the rapper Jay-Z who helped popularize the look in the late 1990s. Or had the same story as Quadir in True to the Game who wears Gucci, Prada, and other high-end fashion brands to project an elite urban and financial status. The outcomes for these three (reader, Jay-Z, and street lit character) wearing specific clothes produced similar lived experiences, which produced a sense of closeness or shared memory between literary characters, iconic figures in Hip Hop culture, and urban consumers. This perceived closeness allowed the consumer to see him or herself within Hip Hop culture and by extension in street lit stories.

Thing theory, a turn of the twenty-first century response to the heavy focus on materiality in history, anthropology, and sociology, considers the process of objects becoming “things.” According to Bill Brown, “Human actors encode things with

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115 Exploring the politics of African American dress and style has been an important non-traditional approach to understanding salient periods and figures. For examples see Tanisha Ford’s Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul; Anne Cheng’s Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface; Monica Miller’s Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity; and Shane White’s Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture, From its Beginnings to Zoot Suits.
significance,” which helps delineate “things” from objects and can be reasonably applied to material culture. Things are also mutable based on context. Street lit authors elevate the connections among objects, things, and subjects by assuming the reader has linked certain objects with specific subjects and made them things already. Thing theory, at its core, is an individuated process and the meanings of things are hyper-transient. Collective material memory however, is a group-thought process that requires a consensus, which adds semi-rigid specificity to “things.”

Within literature, artifacts such as clothes, shoes, blankets, and jewelry add texture, depth, and richness to narrative understanding. What we wear, how we wear what we wear, and why we wear what we wear are integral to the stories of our lives and our place in history. The fields of anthropology and sociology have done the most work to consider the implications of material culture, especially in contemporary Western society. However, the connections between memory, material culture, and fictive narrative were plentiful, varied, and are deserving of serious inquiry. In order to truly appreciate the consumerist turn in African American urban literature (which took place at the turn of the twenty-first century), we must begin to consider how commodification impacts character arcs, plot angles, and reader response.116

Street Lit authors employed luxury materials, especially expensive jewelry and clothes, to establish a social hierarchy among characters. The more material possessions a character was able to amass, the higher their status. Often, authors selected possessions that were popularized through Hip-Hop music and fashion. For example rap artists often adorned their necks, ears, and even teeth with precious metals and gems, especially in the

116 For a fuller explanation of the commodification in relation to urban culture and literature refer to chapter two.
1990s and early 2000s in an effort to enhance their image as an MC (master of ceremony). The materialistic images projected by Hip Hop artists were consumed and imitated by “black youth [who] are turning to rap music, music videos, designer clothing, popular black films, and television programs for values and identity” (Kitwana 9). Arbitrary standards of success based on money and rare materials were established and maintained due to this glorification of hyper-consumerism.

In street lit novels status symbols that were typically financially inaccessible to the masses and were reserved for Hip Hop superstars became obtainable, commonplace even, among ordinary characters that were meant to be emblematic of the twenty-first century black urban experience. A superficial hierarchy emerged as access to a life of luxury expanded among street lit characters. The characters that were born with the most appealing physical features or those that were able to be the most domineering, aggressive, and violent were the main beneficiaries of material excess. This transference of opulence to ordinary characters created a false reality for readers who came to identify closely with street lit characters, as it tacitly set expectations of hyper-consumerism among street lit readerships.

Authors were also able to impart moral messages through these false realities117 of hyper-consumerism. For example, Gena, the main character in Teri Woods’ *True to the Game*, uses her physical beauty to attract men who can financially provide a life of luxury for her. Towards the end of the novel, Gena is left

117 False realities are imagined possibilities meant to emulate life, as it exists. False realities in street lit were intentional shortcomings; or were the ways in which authors “played” with the structures of traditional literature and the strictures of reality.
distracted and financially destitute when rival drug dealers murder her main love interest, Quadir. In an attempt to preserve what she values most in their relationship, Gena puts all her jewelry away for safekeeping:

She opened her bag and carefully began to deposit her jewelry: the ten-karat diamond engagement ring, the cluster diamond ring, the charm bracelet, the diamond initial G that Rik and Lita had given her, two Rolexes, one Ebel, one Omega, one Cartier, all of which were diamond bezel, two gold Gucci watches, and one stainless steel and 18k Movado...

Of the five tennis bracelets she owned, she put four in the box and only kept one. She put her two-karat diamond earrings in the box and kept her quarter karats in her earlobes. Then she placed fifteen pairs of gold earrings in the box, keeping only three pairs...

She deposited strands of gold chains, diamond pendants, diamond pins, bird pins she never wore, and a total of seventeen gold and diamond bangles. They all went in the box except for two, which she put on her other hand, letting the smallest 6-karatt tennis bracelet lay over the Rolex, instead of the twelve (Woods 250).

In all, Gena places thousands of dollars worth of jewelry in a safety deposit box despite being cash poor, openly admitting to not ever wearing the majority of the jewelry, facing the threat of fatal retribution from “the streets” (meaning the most dangerous people in her neighborhood), and knowing that she is hoarding valuable possessions without adequate protection. Gena’s obsession with the material symbolizes her obsessive relationship with hyper-consumerism and becomes a dangerous vice.

Her unwillingness to sell or otherwise divorce herself from the jewelry that puts her in mortal peril indicates her detachment from reason (and arguably sanity), which is often a side effect of “true love.” Gena’s love for her lost partner is displaced onto the material objects he has left behind. In the aftermath of her beloved’s death, Gena’s perceptions of his love and admiration are shattered when she learns that he fathered a child outside of their
relationship and that she is unable to claim ownership over any of the high-value items they shared, including their houses and cars. Despite these troubling revelations, Gena resolves to remain steadfast in her belief that the jewelry, clothes, shoes, and other material possessions are evidence of his unwavering love. When having a private conversation with the late Quadir she says, “Qua, I know you you’re here, ‘cause your money is here...” (Woods 286). She uses material possessions as an access point to the happy and loving memories they once shared. Gena’s attachment to the material has the potential to resonate with readers because the jewelry pieces she places in the safe deposit box have been popularized and commercialized in Hip Hop song lyrics, in rap videos, Hip Hop magazine advertisements, and on cable television networks like BET and MTV. Woods uses collective material cultural memory to tether Gena’s character to a historically and geographically specific moment in Hip Hop through the hyper-consumerist nature and specific popular materials of the mid-1990s in urban spaces on the East Coast of the United States.

The concept of a collective material cultural memory is not inherently uniquely African American, but through experience it has become closely associated with African American life and culture. Further, being associated with African American life and culture is not indicative of a material cultural memory only being within the realm of black experience. If mascons helped identify undergirding elements of unifying blackness, then material cultural memory helps to provide geographical and temporal context to tangible signifiers of blackness by allowing those encountering a culturally significant object to associate it with a particular time or place or space. Further, collective material cultural memory for African Diasporic people inherently has overt and high political stakes, given that familial histories and inter-generational traditions have been either partially preserved or
lost completely to slavery and its reverberations. Collective material cultural memory provides access to a co-created, ever-changing historical framework for black people, which has been previously missing in mimetic theories.

“Big Pimpin’:”\textsuperscript{118} Selling Culture One Earring at a Time

When Hip Hop evolved in the 1990s and early 2000s, geospatial belonging and lifestyle branding were integral to commercial music success. Many rap artists asserted unwavering allegiances to their hometowns, states, or regions. As a result, a feud between East Coast and West Coast artists arose, culminating with the deaths of Tupac Amaru Shakur (representing the West Coast) and the Notorious B.I.G. (representing the East Coast) in 1996 and 1997, respectively. Additionally, many of the era’s popular rap artists belonged to Hip Hop labels or artistic groups that adopted specific kinds of jewelry to represent their brands, then extended those brands to clothing lines and alcoholic beverage companies. For example, Roc-a-fella Records was a music label and lifestyle brand founded by Jay-Z and Damon Dash, and Kareem Burke in the 1996. Roc-a-fella created an urban wear clothing line, Roc-A-Wear; a shoe line, S. Carter (fashioned after Jay-Z’s birth name, Shawn Carter); brokered advertisement deals with high-end champagne companies; and gave new artists who signed with Roc-A-Fella Records a “Roc Chain,” a diamond encrusted link necklace with a monotype pendant in the shape of a vinyl record with a musical

\textsuperscript{118} The title of a popular song by Jay-Z featuring UGK from Jay-Z’s 1999 album \textit{The Life and Times of S. Carter, Vol. 3.}
note overlay. Roc-A-Fella even created a specific hand sign for fans to gesture at concerts, in pictures, and out of admiration for the artists, music, and brand. This kind of intentional marketing and branding was also a fundamental element of the literature created out of Hip Hop culture, with many street lit authors employing similar marketing practices.

Early in his career Omar Tyree was intentionally known as an “urban griot.” He created promotional t-shirts surrounding the release of new works for his fans. Tyree insisted that his books have Tuesday release dates, which allowed him to emulate the marketing schedules of rap artists who promoted their albums on radio and television. Additionally, many street lit authors made strong allusions to Hip Hop realities by creating characters that employed similar branding practices, which were familiar to readers and Hip Hop fans, alike.120

The street lit industry adopted Hip Hop marketing and purchasing models as both a business prototype and creative fodder; street lit stories frequently include references to people and objects readily recognizable to Hip Hop audiences. Often these Hip Hop references, like the cultural movement itself, are bifurcated along gender lines. The evolution of ornamental ear jewelry for African American women in the twentieth century is an excellent example of the symbolic distinction of black

119 See Jay-Z...And the Roc-A-Fella Records Dynasty by Jake Brown

120 Tyree is not the first producer of black popular art on the urban experience to employ the use of material devices like t-shirts; however, Tyree was the first to expressly borrow Hip Hop promotional techniques for literary promotion (Tyree Author Interview; Preface to Representing the Urban Landscape by Keenan Norris). For a more on Hip Hop and street lit release dates see chapter 2.
womanliness and the functionality of material cultural memory, especially in regards to Hip Hop culture and its commodification. In the mid 1980s, around the same time that Hip Hop was becoming mainstream, a new twist on an established fashion trend emerged among urban black women. Large ornamental earrings, often with a hollowed middle, have been associated with black women’s glamour and political activism from the mid-twentieth century to the present. According to the *Fairchild Encyclopedia of Fashion Accessories* these ear decorative pieces are called hoop earrings and are defined as, “1. Circlet (or oval) of metal, plastic, or wood that swings free from a small button. 2. Incomplete circlet that fastens around the earlobe. May be hinged and clip into place” (139). Actresses like Dorothy Dandridge and Pam Grier, singers like Lena Horne and Tina Turner, and political activists like Angela Davis, and first black first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama all have been photographed wearing large, ornamental circular earrings. The pervasiveness of hoop earrings helps to connect the fictional urban women characters that are obsessed with such ornamental jewelry and to very popular, very real black woman figures.

Historically, black women have been most valued for their labor capacity, a reality that has placed black womanhood in direct opposition to aesthetic beauty in the popular imagination.¹²¹ Images of black women laboring from the slavery era, Reconstruction, and even into the early twentieth century show black women either

¹²¹ For more information see *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* by Jennifer Morgan and *Beauty Shop Politics: African American’s Activism in the Beauty Industry* by Tiffany Gill.
wearing no earrings at all or very small and conservative ones. However, in regards to hair and head, “many accounts of African American life testify to the fact that the Africans, and later African Americans, never totally surrendered to Western values in matters of personal adornment” (Simkins 167). This statement implies that African-descended people continued traditional African practices of personal embellishment, including wearing elaborate ear jewelry. Nevertheless, large ear ornaments are not practical for intensive labor and are often associated with royalty and wealth. Therefore, the historical stereotypes of black women in the North American context have been devoid of large earrings. Further, politics of respectability mandated that women, regardless of race, should be pious, chaste, and conservative, meaning that wearing attention grabbing head decorations would be unladylike. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, with the establishment of New Negro ideas and the steady influx of African Americans into urban northern spaces, a popular night scene grew. Women who sang the blues, were casted in major film roles, and frequented nightclubs began to wear large, decorative earrings. In these spaces, unlike in the spaces where they cooked, cleaned, and tended to children, black women’s labor demands did not put them at risk of damaging their ears when wearing earrings. Further, these spaces afforded black women the opportunity to be

122 See Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* for more on historically enduring stereotypes of black women.

viewed as beautiful, glamorous, and desirable and not just for their manual labor capacity.

Black women’s head jewelry had also served as political messaging, especially during the Civil Rights era. By the 1960s and 1970s large earrings had become closely associated with political statements. More specifically, the black power era marked a high point for large earring wear because they were meant to compliment large afros and, at times, emulate similar decorative styles from ancient queens in Africa. Earrings for women during the Civil Rights Movement, especially large dangling earrings, were a way to differentiate between men and women because both wore the same style of afro and sometimes the same style of dress. Further, the earring was a way to feminize women in a movement whose militant stance demanded the rebuking of femininity for the purpose of reclaiming black masculinity. Large ornamental earrings like hoops, doorknockers, and other attention garnering variations were able to claim specific culturally relevant moments. Although, hoops and doorknocker earrings are still worn by people today and by a large number of people who do not associate with blackness, the original popularity of these two fashion jewelry styles can be attributed to specific cultural moments.

Sam Greenlee, in his Black Arts novel *The Spook who Sat by the Door*, writes about the importance of large earrings for his character that becomes known as The

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125 Look at Eldrige Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* and Kathleen Cleaver’s article “Black, Women and Revolution.”
Dahomey Queen. While working as a CIA agent Dan Freeman, the main character, indulges with a prostitute that he calls a Dahomey Queen. After he tells The Dahomey Queen about who she looks like and urges her to change her appearance to better resemble her ancestors, the narrator recounts:

She had never worn red before, she had been told all her life that she could not, because she was too black, but Freeman had told her that she should wear it because she was a Dahomey queen. She had gone to the library to find out what he had meant because he wouldn’t explain, and asked for the book he had written down for her. She had found that he was talking about Africa and at first had been angry. But there was the picture if a woman in the book that had looked enough like herself to startle her, hair kinky and short-cropped, with big earrings in her ears. She had taken the book out of the library and painfully read it in its entirety. Then she bought a red dress and, later, several others when she found the tricks liked it, but mostly because Freeman liked her in red and said so. She wore big round and oval earrings like the queen in the picture, but she could not bring herself to wear her hair short and kinky; but sometimes she would look at the picture and see herself there and for the first time in her life, she began to think that she might be beautiful… (Greenlee 38)

The big round and oval earrings, for this character, became a political statement of historical education and racial pride. When the Dahomey Queen first realizes that Dan Freeman is comparing her to an African past beauty ideal, she rejects and repudiates the connection. But after seeing an image of a Dahomey queen in the book, she is able to see herself, not only as she is but also, as she could be. The earrings in this passage stand out because they are the only decorative piece that

126 The Black Arts Aesthetic Movement, according to Addison Gayle, was “the aesthetic sister to the black power concept.” Many of the ideas present in Black Arts Aesthetic novels were also prevalent in the Black Power Movement.
she does not alter; The Dahomey Queen wears red, but in dresses that her sex customers like which, insinuates that they are scantily clad and sexually suggestive and she completely refuses to don a short, kinky hairstyle. More broadly, this passage highlights a few major points of the Black Arts Aesthetic Movement and by extension, the Black Power Movement. Greenlee uses the prostitute/Dahomey Queen’s narrative as a teaching moment for his audience by urging his uneducated black character to pick up a book. The image of kinky hair and large afros became associated with both the Black Power and Black Arts Aesthetic Movements and the Dahomey Queen’s refusal to wear her natural hair points her continued struggle with her black identity or her self determination to wear her hair as it naturally grows. And the Dahomey Queen’s large earrings are an accompaniment of the afro and by extension, the political messages associated with afros and the black power concept.

Though Greenlee makes allusions to an internal struggle some black people have with an African past and finding ways to represent that past in their appearance, afros and large, round earrings have typified 1960s and 1970s black radical fashion. In the time since afros and large round earrings went from being a practical fashion fad to a political statement, this style also was a material mascon. When considering the widely political and circulated images of Angela Davis, and Kathleen Cleaver with large afros and earrings, the connection between black women’s head and hair adornment and their political ideology fused in a manner that allowed similar images to signify a specific timeframe and purpose. Contemporarily, there has been a resurgence of black women wearing their hair
kinky, coily, and curly. Most often the women donning these hairstyles pay tribute to the iconic figures of the black power era. This connection between then and the contemporary has been extremely important for two reasons. First, the need to pay homage to the black power era closely ties large round earrings to the 1960s and 1970s, which was one of the criteria for a material mascon. Second, the reemergence of this style meant that black people still had access to this particular massive concentration of black experience. The recent natural hair movement had a completely different politic and purpose but nevertheless, the kinks, curls, and coils have been just as closely associated with blackness today as they were during the Black Power era. Though the message behind this reemergence has been markedly different, natural hairstyles for African American women has been the true embodiment of Baraka’s changing same concept.

Similarly, earrings in the 1980s and 1990s were closely associated with the prevailing black social movement at the time, Hip Hop. The large earrings that were popularized during the black power era took a different and larger frame in the subsequent decades. In the 1980s, with the rise of Hip Hop music and the establishment of Hip Hop culture, women traded in their black power afros for asymmetrical short haircuts but kept the large earrings.

Instead of earrings being a method to connect black femininity to an ancient African past, they had become a marker of material wealth and a barometer of ‘flyyness’ in Hip Hop culture. The flyy girl trope was a young urban black woman who desired expensive material possessions despite being faced with poverty or at
The term had varying implications in several popular spaces and media outlets including the Boogie Boys 1985 classic Hip-Hop rap song, “Fly Girl” and the resident dance group on the widely popular 1980s television variety show, *In Living Color*. The flyy girl was a by-product of three distinct North American urban manifestations: the rise of the crack-cocaine North American ghettos, which put a new angle on the black wealthy gangster archetype; the increase in popularity of Hip Hop music, and the introduction of the same as not just music, but a lifestyle; and the trickle-down effects of the War on Drugs coupled with Reaganomics.

Black women and young girls in the 1980s and 1990s wore doorknocker earrings, which were also referred to as bamboo earrings. Most often these earrings were extremely large, gold-plated, and monographed. The earrings received the title doorknockers because of their resemblance to ‘knockers found on the front doors of homes. The term “bamboo” came from the engravings around the perimeter of the earring, which loosely resembled the jointed nature of a bamboo stick. Regardless of name, these earrings were almost always gold-plated, which has had real and symbolic implications. First, if the earrings were solid gold, they would be too heavy to for the earlobe to support. Therefore, the exterior of the earring was dipped in gold, while the interior was made of a lighter, cheaper metal. Second, the doorknocker earring came to signify a level of material wealth, as young men and women in Hip Hop culture became obsessed with outward displays of prosperity.

\[127\] For a fuller discussion on the flyy girl trope see chapter 3.
Third, this value system was inherently flawed. Irrespective of the quality of gold used on the exterior of the earring, the insides were cheap, symbolizing a shallowness and material trickery that was closely associated with flyyness and eventually became repudiated by novelists and social critics like Sister Souljah and Omar Tyree.128

In 1990, LL Cool J released his fourth studio album titled, "Mama Said Knock You Out." From the album, he released a single titled, “Around the Way Girl.” The first bar of the song states, “I want a girl with extensions in her hair/Bamboo earrings/At least two pair.” LL Cool J's desire to possess an “around the way girl” (which is synonymous with a flyy girl) was indicative of several pervading essentialist notions that made the categorization of flyyness comparable to earlier metaphysical mascons like soul and roots. An around the way girl has an indescribable element that elevated her from an undistinguished black woman or girl to the most popular, sought after, and sexiest young woman in a neighborhood. Unable to capture in the words the essence of flyyness, LL Cool J settled for describing signifiers of flyyness, which included large bamboo (or doorknocker) earrings. The rap line indicated that a flyy girl had “at least two pair,” which pointed to a strong connection between material wealth and flyyness. The quality of most doorknocker earrings evidenced the cheap wealth that pervaded Hip Hop culture. Having multiple pairs indicated not access to the economic resources to acquire the

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128 For related examples of this critique see No Disrespect by Sister Souljah; dialogues between Winter Santiaga and Sister Souljah (the character) in The Coldest Winter Ever, and author interview with Omar Tyree.
earrings, but a detachment toward expensive possessions; meaning the earrings, even though monetarily expensive, become oversaturated and devalued items for “an around the way girl.”

Doorknocker earrings in the appropriate cultural and historical context became a shared material cultural mimetic device that in many ways typified and subverted Henderson’s original meaning of mascons and expounded Durkheim and Halbwach’s theories on collective memory. Flyyness, like soul in the 1960s and 1970s, became a massive concentration of black experience that was embodied by material goods, like doorknocker earrings. While flyyness was very similar to mascons, the connection flyyness has to doorknocker earrings subverts Henderson’s assertion of not being able to pinpoint elements that express flyyness (or what Henderson uses in his article—soul). Though doorknocker earrings were signifiers of flyyness, simply wearing doorknockers did not mean that one had experiences as a flyy girl. There is a certain amount of slippage in the collective material cultural memory concept that allows for the appropriation of a shared material cultural memory by someone outside of the massive concentration of black experience without ushering that person into the particular black experience (or any shared material cultural memories pertaining to a specific group of people).

Doorknocker earrings as a shared material cultural memory was also taken up in street lit novels in the 1990s and early 2000s. In writing about the lust for material possessions and the allure of the criminal lifestyle, Omar Tyree allegorized the flyy girl in ways that irrevocably bound materiality and flyyness. The covers of the all three editions of *Flyy Girl* have varying representations of the protagonist.
wearing large doorknocker earrings with her name etched in the middle. Though the clothes she wears and the style of her hair changes in each edition, the doorknockers remain large, gold, and monographed. This visual representation of doorknocker earrings came from a turning point in the novel, when Tracy officially becomes a flyy girl. The possession of doorknocker earrings became a rite of passage into flyyness for a generation. The narrator describes this ceremonial occurrence with Tracy and one of her many love interests, Timmy:

He took her downtown to the Market Street Gallery and to Chesnut Street that Saturday afternoon, where he bought her huge, triangle-shaped gold earrings with Tracy etched in gold across the middle. He bought her leather pants with matching pocketbooks. He then charmed Patti into liking him with his greens when they arrived back at Tracy's house. Tracy lied to her mother about where Timmy's finances came from, and together they were a match of teenagers headed for no good (243).

Tracy's possession of monographed doorknockers elevates her status past the other girls in northern Philadelphia who were vying to be the flyyest girl and pushes her further into the trappings of ghetto street life.

Her mother, Patti, takes the jewelry away as a last ditch effort to reorient Tracy's path away from destruction. To that end the narrator says, “Patti held the relatively weightless gold in the cup of her hands.” Patti then says, “Cheap. If you tried to pawn this stuff downtown, they'd barely give you fifty dollars for it” (315). In calling Tracy's most prized possession cheap, Patti gives voice to several distinct
ideas. First, calling what her daughter values most cheap is a read on Tracy. Patti is attempting to shift Tracy's value system to a less materialistic aesthetic because Patti, in her motherly wisdom, knows that investing in material possessions will not propel Tracy’s life very far, nor will it ensure her economic prosperity. Second, the cheap earrings become a metaphor for Tracy’s shallow personality, which appears to be desirable and rare externally but is devoid of substance internally. Tracy’s character may appear to be shiny, alluring, and expensive on the outside but her personality is devoid of value or substance. By insulting her daughter in this way, Patti hopes that Tracy will explore other, non-material aspects of her personality. Third, Patti is trying to show Tracy how easily the flyy girl persona can be tarnished because it is not substantive.

From this point in the novel, Tracy refuses to listen to any voice of reason, whether it be her parents, her close friends, or her love interests. This descent continues until two dramatic acts successively take place. First, Tracy sees that her flyy girl hero, Mercedes, is heavily addicted to drugs, which causes Mercedes to perform sexually demeaning acts to support her drug habit. Seeing Mercedes in such a deplorable state, for Tracy, is magnified by Patti’s attempt to eject Tracy from the home despite being a legal minor. Ultimately, Patti recognizes that Tracy learns a valuable lesson from seeing Mercedes’ demise and decides to let Tracy stay at home, but not before she demands all the material possessions that made Tracy feel flyy.

129 Read, is an insult or a clever way of bringing about shame by inverting the significance of an object or idea. The Signifying Monkey by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains reading in great detail.
Even as Tracy sheds her flyy girl image and opts for educational success, the material markers of the “glamorous and exciting ’80s” still remain. Just as flapper dresses have come to represent a certain type of woman from the 1920s and skinny jeans in the late 2000s became closely tied with a youthful punk rocker image, shared material cultural memories are able to signify a collection of lived experiences that are specific to a time and location. Though Henderson intended mascons to be used for finding essential characteristics of blackness and Halbwachs’ theory on collective memory focuses on recollecting stories and events, shared material cultural memory widens the entry into collective cultural experience. However, despite there being certain shared material cultural memories that are very closely associated with a particular black experience, like doorknocker earrings, that does not mean that these materials are inaccessible to people who are not black. Nevertheless, material items are able to symbolically represent what Henderson says are, “Massive concentrations of black experience” because they are most closely associated with black experience. Meaning, though a middle class white American woman can very easily wear a pair of doorknocker earrings, those who know the specific history of doorknocker earrings in urban communities and their clearly defined connections to Hip Hop culture will most likely view that woman’s stylistic choice as mimicry and the woman as a crude impostor.
“It’s All About the Benjamins, Baby”: The Gender Control of Material and Money

For street lit, material cultural memories connected the most intimate moments of life to money and all that dollar bills represented in urban black America. The contrast between rich and poor in street lit was blindingly stark. However, the line that separated having money and not was so flimsy that a slight gust of wind or an admiring look could change a person’s fortune. For women in particular, money became the most important material cultural memory. The feel, touch, and smell of big green faces were reliable sensory triggers street lit authors used to connect characters and readers. Further, the painful absence of money and the moral lows people stooped to acquire it was a hypnotizing story to tell at the turn of the twenty-first century, especially because America had become obsessed with the rise of black drug dealing gangster figure and responses to the crack cocaine epidemic.

Similar to the infinite possibilities the American Dream narrative presented to the citizen wishing to change socioeconomic positions in a single lifetime, street lit offered stories of escape and purposefully repositioned people from the bottom to powerful roles. Most street lit stories engaged money in indistinct and impractical ways. Powerful male characters seemingly had unlimited and inexhaustible streams of cash that they used to control everyone around them. Their every move, including

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how they navigated intimate relationships with family and friends, were calculated, ruthless business transactions. Love, for them, became a liability and money reigned supreme. Women, by contrast, almost never had their own sources of revenue and struggled with inhabiting roles that expected them to use their bodies as commodities for male pleasure and divergently build meaningful and loving relationships with men. Black women were expected to combine public and private labor expectations through sex. These impossible expectations added to meta-narratives that portrayed black women as invincible work mules and superhumans.131 Women characters in street lit were durably constructed in such ways that denied them any space to be fragile, vulnerable, or fully human. Money had turn men and women into monsters.

In a quest to tell urban coming-of-age narratives at the turn of the twenty-first century for a popular culture audience that was growing up on Hip Hop, authors turned to a love of money to entice readers.132 By focusing on material cultural memories rooted in money, street lit dangerously conflated black women, hetero-patriarchal sexual liaisons, and consumerism. Black women were presented as dynamic commodities and resisters of logic. However, there was something very cold and detached in viewing black women in this way and made warm romantic relationships difficult to achieve.

For example, the street lit novel, *G-Spot* by Noire details the quest for sexual

131 See Patricia Hill Collin’s *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*

132 In fact, Omar Tyree’s *Flyy Girl* sequel was titled, *For the Love of Money.*
freedom of a young, alluring, voluptuous black girl known as Juicy, who is so called because her panties "stay wet." Juicy is embroiled in an emotionally abusive relationship with an old school Harlem gangster named “G,” who is twenty-seven years her senior. The novel begins with G choosing Juicy to be his concubine and beauty trophy when she is seventeen. Though G waits until Juicy is of legal age to consent, has been keeping a watchful and lustful eye on her since she was fourteen; just as she is entering puberty, but before she can be “soiled” by any other Harlem “playas.” In first person narration, Juicy admits that “G inherited [her] from [her] grandmother” and provides details into how G placed her on a modern day auction block in his nightclub the day he decided to possess her. In exchange for owning Juicy’s body, G provides a life of luxury for her and her brother. Though she initially is excited about being G’s girl, Juicy is never given an opportunity to weigh in on the terms of the arrangement or given any autonomy in their subsequent relationship. Her every move is subjected to G’s approval and he foolishly assumes that financial stability, haute couture, and being lauded as the baddest chick in Harlem at G’s nightclub every night laid a solid foundation for a healthy relationship and unyielding loyalty. Throughout the novel, she is unable to escape the trappings of an urban underworld because she is completely financially dependent on G. At the center, the novel G-Spot interrogates the complicated—and often impossible—task of sexual maturation for young urban women of color.

Though G more than provides for Juicy’s financial needs and wants, he never lets her touch money. He uses money, sexual violence, and Juicy’s younger brother (who is the only family Juicy has left) to control her. When Juicy does something that displeases G, he sodomizes her. While the novel is superficially about the protagonist’s journey to find her “g-spot” it also considers the repercussions of sexual repression and how sex fits within the street lit terrain. In a moment of
honesty, Juicy tells us, “the dollars had my nose open at first too, but not anymore” (Noire 7). G positioned himself as an intermediary between Juicy and what he assumes will keep her happy. He has created an environment where Juicy’s entire life is centered on him and what makes him happy. After years of being the “baddest bitch” in Harlem and growing more disenchanted with a life devoid of happiness and fulfillment, Juicy decides that her sexual freedom is worth more than material and status. It is this journey to awareness that allows G-Spot to access Audre Lord's “Uses of the Erotic” and alleviates the novel from the pornographic to an erotic exploration of black women’s pleasure and strength.

When conversing with Dicey, a former drug addict and prostitute who currently works for G preparing his drugs for street distribution, Juicy realizes how G has her trapped. Dicey boldly asks, “he ever put any cash in your hand, or do he just go out and buy what you ask for” (58)? The absence of cash exchange in their relationship symbolically represents G's ongoing distrust of Juicy. Further, G does not allow Juicy to accumulate any asset-based wealth through property ownership or marriage. G did not make provisions for Juicy’s well being in the event of a tragedy. His willful disregard for Juicy’s future indicates that he is only interested in the status having a young attractive woman on his arm provides in the moment. In this way, Juicy becomes disposable. In this narrative, money turns people cold, cruel, and ultimately is not worth compromising morals or an unfulfilled life.

Throughout their relationship, Juicy demands a fuller articulation of her burgeoning womanhood than G makes room for by taking small subversive actions. When enrolled in a dance course at a local college, she elects to partner with an
attractive young man for a few risqué dance routines. Watching Juicy dance passionately and intimately with another man incites rage and jealousy for G, who displays his dissatisfaction through closing his wallet. G is presented as a total emotional villain who pumps lethal drugs into his neighborhood, profits from women selling their bodies as strippers and prostitutes, and is ruthless enough to beat his cousin within an inch of death for an unpaid twenty dollar debt. G, nevertheless, is characterized as a handsome, well-groomed, desirable older man. Arguably, G’s money and his financial generosity redeem him in the minds and hearts of other characters in the novel. The novel’s grand narrative explores the old adage, “money cannot buy love” from a Hip Hop vantage. In this way, G-Spot and street lit as a genre expresses the danger of a consumerist culture that assumes everything and everyone is for sale. It also demands that readers parse out where the line between financial advancement and moralistic integrity must be drawn.

In the novel, Juicy is confronted with the sobering reality that sexual freedom is not cheap, nor something that is often entitled women like her. Myths of hypersexual black women have pervaded our national consciousness since the time of slavery with the jezebel, an archetypal figure that has been characterized as an African American woman, with an insatiable sexual appetite and low or no moral standards. According to Pat Hill Collins, the modern day sexual exploitation of working class black women was not considered to be rape. For dramatic effect, Collins further posits, “the jezebel couldn’t be raped.” G-Spot takes up this sobering declaration and invites us as readers to contest this myth by considering what women of color embarking on journeys of sexual discovery gain. The novel also
highlights how black women’s sexuality is often paradoxically curtailed and shamed in the popular imagination then hyperbolized for spectacle and the benefit of men. The novel smartly implores us to reclaim women’s rights to be sexually satisfied and emotionally safe while remaining true to the street lit literary form of brash language and indecent subjectivities. Furthermore, this bildungsroman taps into an aspect of coming-of-age that traditionally goes unaddressed in young adult fiction. The audaciousness of the author, Noire, creates space for young girls and women of color to have necessary candid conversations about their sexual safety and pleasure.

*G-Spot* artfully builds on hyper-consumerist Hip Hop infused stories by Sister Souljah, Teri Woods, and Omar Tyree. At their core, all four novels *G-Spot, The Coldest Winter Ever, True to the Game,* and *Flyy Girl* grapple with young girls attempting to find and assert their womanhood through material possessions. Material cultural memories for street lit novels boil down to money, what it represents, and what women will do to obtain it. However, it is important to note that these novels did not take issue with the desire to have money. In fact, many of these coming-of-age narratives offer alternative avenues for making money which are healthy and legal. These stories call attention to how young girls acquire expensive materials and why they desire these things in the first place.

When Winter Santiaga purchases her white Nicole Miller dress and matching purse with her last bit of money, the dress becomes a material cultural memory to be shared between text and audience. How the story progressed to this point and why Winter has the purchasing power to acquire an expensive dress, purse combination is Sister Souljah creating a discursive space to interrogate young
women of color and their material desires. Growing up, Winter has unlimited access to money, unfettered. Her childhood does not properly prepare her for the ways men use money to control women. Adding to her social disconnect, Winter has never been employed or expected to perform domestic labor in her life. Her relationship to money is fantastical and dangerous, which is exhibited in how she quickly and foolishly exhausts the sizable sum of money Midnight (her father’s protégé) gives her. When giving her the money, Midnight suggests that she spend wisely and find alternative streams of income for the future. Midnight is arguably an extension of Winter’s father and is the last man to give her money with no strings attached. In spending the last of the money, Winter is more afraid of a reprisal from her mother than disobeying and disappointing Midnight. Within this dynamic, men are in positions of symbolic power because they control the cash flow. However, this not true or sustainable power, given that a woman has more exacting influence over Winter’s purchasing, and returning merchandise, decisions. The dress becomes a larger social commentary on how young girls of color understand money in relation to men, come to possess materials, and what they are taught about being financially independent.

Gena in True to the Game similarly, possesses material items through her relationship with a man. Though Quadir is presented as a loving, trusting, and caring companion who delights in showering Gena with expensive gifts, these actions rings hollow in the aftermath of his death. Again, a man uses his purchasing power to influence how a woman loves and admires him. Further, Gena is established as a chronic victim of violent relationships before she meets Quadir, making her an
unreliable narrator in regards to the health of her romance with him. After Quadir is murdered, Gena finds herself needing to put the jewelry he buys her away for safe keeping. Quadir is the sole owner of their material possessions, which legally go to his mother after his death. Quadir, through his actions, is only invested in what Gena could give him the moment, as he did not make provisions for her financial future. Gena is also unconcerned about her financial future because she assumes Quadir loves her enough to make provisions for her. Ultimately, Quadir’s mother, like Winter Santiaga’s mother, possesses the meaningful power and Gena is left with nothing to show but unusable jewelry for her love lost. More to the point, True to the Game highlights how material possessions like jewelry are deceptive symbols of love and commitment. And how the money necessary to acquire it controls how men and women treat each other.

Green eyed Timmy buying Tracy Ellison a pair of doorknocker earrings in Flyy Girl not only elevates her social status on the North side of Philadelphia, the earrings also symbolically represented Timmy’s possession of Tracy. Timmy is a paranoid, possessive, hotheaded stick up kid. He is in the business of stealing other people’s property for his personal gain. This includes taking Tracy. As such, he reasonably wants to ensure that everyone in the neighborhood knows that Tracy is only his. Though the earrings have Tracy’s name etched across the middle, they signify to “the streets” that she belongs to a powerful man who had access to money. In this way, the money is a controlling agent for Timmy and Tracy both. Timmy robs and steals to have the money necessary to entice and control Tracy. Their relationship based on monetary access and outward appearances quickly
deteriorates into an unhealthy arrangement that leaves Timmy incarcerated and Tracy at a life altering moral crossroad. Money motivates Timmy and Tracy to disregard conventional moral wisdom in favor of short-term wealth, thrilling stories of deception, and reverence from others in their neighborhood. *Flyy Girl* considers how money becomes a catalyst for bad behavior and the basis for material cultural memories for a generation of urban young adults.

Street lit, as genre and site of cultural production, was obsessed with telling economic stories. Money, the lack thereof, and the desire for it, fueled the material mimetic devices at the center of these coming-of-age stories. There was an important validating aspect in street lit focusing on seemingly trivial and insignificant things like dresses, earrings, and other gaudy jewelry for youth who were navigating an urban terrain where what you owned defined who you were. In masking moral lessons about the power of money in material cultural memories, street lit was able to appeal to what most interested its readership while slipping in important messages about social and economic maturation at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this way street lit authors utilized material cultural memories to re-imagine the urban present, rather than a distant unlikely future.

As we begin to consider and complicate the entangled history of Hip Hop music, culture, and the literature it has produced, we must look to various forms of cultural memory, which include (but are not limited to) materials like photographs, clothing, jewelry, footwear, and incorporeal materials like poems, song lyrics, and music videos. When thinking about literature that responds to specific cultural and historical moments, collective cultural memory is an effective concept to illuminate
what is shared between audience and text. Whereas history is the achieved account of multiple representations of an event, literature asks the reader to continue to participate in the process of memory making. Therefore, collective cultural memory is especially germane to the personal interpretations of literature. Furthermore, shared cultural memory is strengthened through material items that the reader can see and feel and with which the reader can recall their own interactions. Material objects in literary contexts produce shared symbols and iconic images for participants, observers, and admirers of Hip Hop. Street lit was able to use these symbols and images to make stirring commentaries concerning the socially constructed lives of urban black people at the turn of the twenty-first century.
CONCLUSION

READY TO DIE: THE FUTURE OF STREET LIT

Street lit is dead. Or at least popular culture has prematurely prepared its eulogy. Dead or alive, street lit undoubtedly has taken on a different form. In light of a rapidly changing terrain in urban experiences, technology, and leisure readership how stories about blackness and urbanity have necessarily changed. Cities across the United States have undergone gentrification processes that have brought desperately needed revitalization to some of the most economically depressed neighborhoods. Gentrification breathed new life into a stagnant, congested America. Historic renovations, new small businesses, and large-scale housing development initiatives have changed the cultural landscape of the street. The major cocaine, heroine, and crack dealers of the 1980s and 1990s have died, gone to jail, or have found new ways to hustle. Most of the failed high rise low income housing developments have been bulldozed and poor black and brown families have moved to the outskirts of cities with the assistance of affordable housing vouchers and rapidly inflating inner city real estate premiums. The poor have become too poor for the inner city, which was once a sanctuary for the struggling and the destitute. Similarly, technology has all but eradicated the need for print material. Social media and constant streaming has made it more difficult to hold the attention of readers for the expanse of an entire novel. Technology has also helped connect people across racial and geographical divisions.

In order to remain viable, street lit must evolve to fit the changing needs of the new urban America. A shift imperative has been demanded by sluggish book sales, disappearing small black owned bookstores and African American book conventions, and the elimination of black-authored book segments on daytime talk shows hosted by African Americans. Street lit giants like Omar Tyree and Sister Souljah, even with their established cultural
capital from being considered the grandparents of street lit, have failed to gain any significant popular audiences for their latest books. *All Access: The Price of Fame* by Omar Tyree and *A Moment of Silence: Midnight III* by Sister Souljah were both published in 2016. Tyree boldly took a new path in street lit by tackling contemporary subjectivities of social media intimacy and the shrinking delineation between reality and television. Tyree also left his career publisher, Simon & Schuster, to bolster his own brand Omar Tyree, Incorporated. Contrastingly, Sister Souljah elected to remain her current course and release her third installment of the *Midnight* story, which is a spinoff from *The Coldest Winter Ever*, with Simon & Schuster’s Atria books. *Midnight III* is Souljah’s fifth novel published by some division of Simon & Schuster and is a continuation of Souljah grappling with the allure of illicit street life and the gripping consequences of immoral decisions. Though Tyree and Souljah employed different approaches in messaging and delivery to post-2007 Digital Turn street lit, both have fallen short of their previous literary fame.

Nevertheless, the stories they tell still matter. The newest generation of urban black and brown bodies deserves to have their struggles inked onto immortalizing paper. They are entitled to coming-of-age narratives to help them navigate today’s treacherous post-racial and post-factual society. Interestingly, Tyree and Souljah have both sold the movie rights of their most popular novels to major motion picture corporations. They, like Zane with her debut novel *Addicted*, are seeking different mediums to cast the greatest street lit stories into a new Hip Hop generation and its collective popular imagination. Street lit authors, on the whole, have been taking the necessary steps to ensure that their stories will
More specifically, street lit is the story previous African American literature could not afford to tell and the story future generations will not have to tell.

In addition to preserving the Tracy Ellisons (*Flyy Girl*), Winter Santiagas (*The Coldest Winter Ever*), and Zoes (*Addicted*) in film, street lit novelists have began venturing into other forms of cultural production. Omar Tyree launched a mobile device application that features exclusive content like artist performances, reviews, interviews, and events across music, books, and film. Wahida Clark has partnered with Brian “Baby/Birdman” Williams and Ronald “Slim” Williams from Cash Money Records to establish Cash Money Content, a publishing house for urban stories of color, most of which are the works of previously or currently incarcerated persons. Zane not only adapted *Addicted* to the big screen, she also has transformed two of her short story series into adult miniseries on the *Showtime* network. Street lit is not dead, it simply has transfigured.

While a prognosis of life for street lit should be celebrated, the ambivalence of the American public in the face of a perceived death calls into question the overall health and future prosperity of street lit as a genre and cite of cultural production. How long can street lit survive on re-packaging old stories? Do street lit stories have something to teach young adults who are not growing up in a society riddled with drug abuse, cyclical poverty, and sexual violence? How can gritty urban novels compete with stories of comfortable black middle class life like ABC Network’s *Blackish* and glamorous reality television programs that promote black financial elitism like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta, Love and Hip Hop, and Married to Medicine*?

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133 See chapter four a discussion of the significance of “stories not to pass on.”
“Stories Written on Concrete: Understanding and Re-Imagining Street Lit and Culture, 1990-2007,” is a literary history project that inserts street lit, a contemporary African American literary genre and site of cultural production, into a larger history of African American urban literature. The dissertation argues that street lit novelists have shone a different light on how Americans remember the post-Vietnam War era and has told how a generation of black and brown youth came of age. Street lit was how African Americans creatively responded to socio-economic pressures, including the explosion of crack cocaine in major North American cities, Reagonomics, the War on Drugs, and the rise of Hip Hop. This work uses understudied novels like *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah, *Flyy Girl* by Omar Tyree, and *True to the Game* by Teri Woods to track how the law and national economic shifts impacted black and brown bodies. While most African American literature at the turn of century was invested in reclaiming an African diasporic past or envisioning new Afro-futures, street lit focused on (re)articulating blackness in the present. The genre illuminated how previously incarcerated people of color, civic-minded urban dwellers, and people who write outside the strictures of formal education have responded to the world around them. The decision to focus on street lit texts and socio-historical conditions at the turn of the century allows “Stories Written on Concrete” to move beyond a series of close readings and textual analyses to an interdisciplinary examination of an expressive culture that has forever changed the African American literary landscape. The dissertation explores four major paradoxical aspects of street lit across four chapters including: marginality and popularity within contemporary literature, hyper-visibility and invisibility in the publishing marketplace, third wave black feminist thought within Hip Hop culture, and materiality and collective memories within genre novels. Ultimately, “Stories Written on Concrete” disrupts the commonly studied literary subjectivities within twentieth century African American literature.
Street lit coalesced around the bitterness and beauty of surviving on American metropolitan cityscapes. These stories have lifted readers up several feet above their lives. In this suspended space, street lit helped its readers to see their own lives from a different vantage and dared them to (re)vision their circumstance and believe in the power of alternate realities. Street lit was rite of passage literature for a generation. Street lit is plurality. Street lit is a chorus of powerful voices that demanded better through its frank, direct storytelling.

“Stories Written on Concrete” begins by focusing the long history of African American urban literature and how the genre changed at the turn of the twenty-first century. The urban experience has been a focal point in black American literature since slaves in the northern colonies took pen to paper and described the condition of their bondage. African American urban literature was transformed by the Great Migration era with authors seeking to immortalize the sentiment of leaving the rural South for northern big city living. Throughout the twentieth century, the confluence of urbanity and coming-of-age (or coming-to-awareness) has come to define the most celebrated novels in the genre like *The Sport of the Gods* by Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Native Son* by Richard Wright, *The Street* by Ann Petry, and *Maud Martha* by Gwendolyn Brooks. In the 1960s and 1970s African American urban literature became a popular culture phenomenon with the success of hard-boiled crime and detective novels by Chester Himes and Walter Mosley. During this time, biographies of controversial urban figures like Malcolm X and Icerberg Slim and quasi-autobiographical novels by Donald Goines and others experienced wide circulation and added a component of authenticity to African American urban literature. Street
Street lit simultaneously was aligned with the long history of African American urban literature and dramatically diverged from it in style and content.

Street lit overwhelmingly concentrated on social issues that plagued urban dwellers in the 1980s and 1990s like the proliferation of drug dealing and drug abuse in light of the over availability of crack cocaine in inner cities, cyclical poverty caused by urban decay and failing education systems, sexual violence in heteronormative romantic relationships, and the breakdown of atomic families in the face of social dysfunction. The genre also intentionally delivered stories in vivid and candid detail replete with location and time specific colloquialism and slang terms. Street lit, in contrast to previous African American urban literature, rebuffed traditional novel form and grammar to preserve what has become characterized as street authenticity. Street lit and other forms of creative black cultural production refused to allow the social ills plaguing America’s inner cities to kill urban humanity.

"The Streets Never Change: African American Urban Fiction in the Twentieth Century" examines African American urban literature from the twentieth century to identify when and how the genre has evolved over time. This introduction reframes how African American literature is categorized by prioritizing subjectivity over time period and geographical location. Choosing to focus on black American urbanity rather than historical periodization or literary form helps (re)vision street lit as African American literature and makes the case for (re)writing the genre into the African American literary canon.

"The Streets Never Change" presents three distinct periods in African American urban literature throughout the twentieth century. The origination period
of African American urban literature inaugurated important but contentious linkages between blackness and urbanity. This period concentrated primarily on Great Migration narratives that were fictional, quasi-biographical, and autobiographical, alike. These stories weaved a grand narrative of how black and brown bodies became inextricably bound to inner city streets through unrealized aspirations of socio-economic upward mobility. The later origination period in African American urban literature dealt with narrowing access to financial stability and fulfillment through professional and personal attainment for African Americans in North American cities. This period was also a creative response to the devastating effects of the Great Depression and two world wars on African American urban communities. Many of these novels grappled with themes of disillusionment and dystopia. The origination period captured the collective sentiment of African Americans who were subject to restrictive covenants in urban housing, segregation in education, and overall discrimination based on race in a land that was promised to be freer than the racially oppressive rural South.

The middle African American urban literature period ushered in stories about how African Americans were able to survive in deplorable conditions. The novels in particular presented characters that existed and even thrived in criminal and alternatively moral underworlds. The middle period began to creatively (re)imagine how African Americans could live in urban America. This was also the literature of protest with many works coinciding with and responding to the Civil Rights era. The middle period arguably was bifurcated by competing subjectivities of political commentary and personal struggle due to outside circumstances. Novels
like *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* by Sam Greenlee and *A Rage in Harlem* by Chester Himes were politically charged literary attempts to tackle civil issues like segregation, integration, and black social, political, and economic independence. While works like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as Told to Alex Haley*, *Pimp: The Story of my Life*, and *Dopefiend* illuminated the personal ramifications of racist public and political policies. This bifurcation in subjectivity extended to the co-created spheres of influence within popular black books during the 1960s and 1970s with the print material of the Black Arts Movement and the Holloway House imprint. The middle African American urban literature period differed from the origination period mainly through its concentration on creative solutions and personal agency rather than succumbing to disillusionment and dystopian thought.

The third phase of African American urban literature, or street lit, was the convergence of origination literature’s imagined alternate realities and middle period political and social commentary objectives. Additionally, street lit came to define how blackness and urbanity was ushered into a new millennium. Street lit endeavored to lessen geospatial and cultural divisions by providing common and relatable narratives about a black and hip hop urban experience. Street lit became a cultural cousin to the various modes of creative Hip Hop production, including MC-ing, DJ-ing, breakdancing, and graffiti. The genre sought to preserve the metaphysical sentiment of closing one century and opening another for black and brown urban youth in the grandiose style of Hip Hop. Street lit, as a continuation of the African American urban literature tradition, was invested in how black and brown bodies navigated the politics of coming-of-age. The genre was written on a
city landscape of urban blight, black social death at the hands of a choked welfare state, a crippled economy, and a fatal bullet wound from the wars on drugs and crime that disproportionately relegated urban black and brown bodies to the criminal justice system. The long history of African American urban literature provides a chorus of voices, fictional and real, to the most defining moments of the twentieth century within the black American experience and “The Streets Never Change” illuminates how African American urban stories are able to persist on an ever-changing metropolitan terrain. This introduction exemplifies how African American urban literature undergoes metaphorical death in order to be (re)born and (re)imagined to fit the evolving needs and circumstances of urban dwellers of color.

“Stories Written on Concrete” builds vertically on the linear history of African American urban literature by highlighting the nuance among various forms of street lit stories. The first chapter provides a scope and concrete definition of the “street,” and street lit. The genre was made possible by unlikely and unwilling sources; mainly the early 1990s success of Terry McMillan as an author who deftly transformed realist novels about simple African American life into a cultural brand that sold millions of books, movie tickets, soundtrack albums, and movies on VHS. Though her multimodal success proved that a substantial and lucrative audience existed for contemporary black stories, she intentionally and vehemently distanced herself and her work from the likes of contemporary popular African American urban fiction. Street lit was also able to gain a wide audience with the help of the “Oprah's Book Club” segment of The Oprah Winfrey Show. Admittedly, no street lit
novel was ever selected for Oprah’s list. However, Oprah’s book club encouraged American women to read for leisure and fomented the creation of numerous local book clubs across the nation which often times would select books that were not always on Oprah’s list, including street lit titles.

Arguably, street lit was able to succeed mainly because of the heightened leisure reading in the middle 1990s, especially within communities of color. A congruence of technological innovation, affinity towards a hyper-aware blackness, and access to comparatively considerable discretionary income made an explosion of popular black cultural production possible across music, film, and print. Musicians were able to record and release music to the public with the assistance of affordable recording equipment that could be set up virtually anywhere and the Internet that delivered their art to as many people that dialed up and were willing to listen. In the same manner, movies with black casts and/or black film crews were able to add pluralism to the kinds of stories being told about black life. Many of these films (like *Friday* and *B*A*P*S*), though not initially widely circulated because of limited promotion and bad reviews, have grown into cult classics and are being revived through being aired on television outlets directed towards black audiences. The increasing of affordability of personal home computers and laptops in the late 1990s made it more feasible for African American authors to get their work out to the public through self publishing and the use of the Internet, especially online communities and email listservs. Black cultural production also greatly benefitted from a climate of economic stability in the United States during the late 1990s and
early 2000s and an expanding black middle class with access to discretionary income to support such artistic endeavors.

Urban communities and black targeted cultural outlets attempted to support the culturally expressive endeavors of the middle to late 1990s, as evidenced by the advertisements of black music, movies, and fashion brands in black magazines raging from *Ebony, Essence, and JET* to *Vibe, The Source, XXL, Word Up! and Sister to Sister*. Black radio and television also made room for black popular cultural production by interviewing new artists across mediums on air. Often times black culture producers had to solely rely on black outlets to positively promote their products because mainstream sources would often miss the importance or brilliance of the work and blanketedly denounce it. Though black popular cultural production was created and supported by a mainly black and brown public, these forms of artistic expression have failed to enter into academic discourse concerning African American culture. There has been a staunch divide between “the street” and the academy that has prevented an important cross flow of ideas and a more accurate understanding of the contemporary African American urban experience.

The black cultural prosperity of the mid to late 1990s not only birthed street lit, it also provided enough fertile soil for the genre to proliferate into sub-genres. Street lit’s subgenres were outgrowths of the main premise of the genre, which was to tell coming of age or coming to awareness stories concerning people of color in urban spaces. But the subgenres tackled specific aspects of black life that were once considered too bold, too trash, and too honest to put in print. Urban erotica, which was spearheaded by the overwhelming success of Zane’s novels and short stories,
dared to imagine black urban women who were seeking or had already achieved sexual liberation in vivid detail. Gangsta lit endeavored to add depth to the black menacing brute archetypal figure by giving him a family, a purpose, and a capability to love in addition to adding texture to the standard ruthlessness that begat drug dealing and crime violence. Sista lit built most directly on the successful literary style of Terry McMillan by centering strong black women friendships in stories about navigating the everyday issues of black middle class life. Street lit’s subgenres proved that the black urban experience was not monolithic or simple at the turn of the twenty-first century. The street lit subgenres also point to how street lit was simultaneously relegated to the margins of the academy and enjoyed immense popularity and success as a popular black cultural form. A decade after the height of street lit prosperity, a major economic recession ravaged the burgeoning black middle class that had single handedly supported popular black cultural production which effectively killed the genre and other modes of black cultural expression. The death of street lit, the latest installment of African American urban literature, was not permanent however. This social death simply demanded that new ways of telling stories about the black urban experience.

Though street lit was generally only popular in African American communities, the genre did undergo a mainstreaming process that required a careful negotiation between “street” authenticity and more traditional literary expectations. Street lit authors came to realize if they wanted to sell their novels in mass quantities like Terry McMillan they had to give up a certain independence that came with self-publishing and be willing to submit to the requirements of major publishers. Street lit entering the mainstream books industry through large publishing houses like Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, and Random House
also afforded them more visibility and better distribution across a national market. Three main contentions of the street lit mainstreaming process were: how to market street lit novels, who should be (and who actually was) the genres target audience, and optimal pricing of print books. Interestingly, street lit’s mainstreaming process ran parallel to that of Hip Hop music in the 1990s and early 2000s. Street lit borrowed some of Hip Hop’s marketing techniques and the two cultural production forms sometimes converged to create elaborate marketing schemes to promote books, movies, and music simultaneously.

Arguably, the mainstreaming of street lit and Hip Hop brought about a symbolic death, or a metaphorical rebirth, to both cultural production forms. The mainstreaming process complicated how and why black culture was produced. Street lit and Hip Hop was both created as attempts to express growing frustrations with the socio-economic conditions of urban minorities and arguably had an obligation to “the street.” However, both mediums of expression found more mainstream success when certain aspects of the black urban experience were highlighted and moral messages were left out. The mainstream wanted authentic blackness without the burden. Many authors and musicians were presented with a tough ultimatum; become rich and famous telling contorted stories of struggle that hollowed and reduced black people’s pain to drug dealing, pimping, and violence or remain true to the original art form with its freedom to infuse moral messaging. This impossible choice left artists in a metaphorical limbo where they attempted to vacillate between competing strivings and created a strange juxtaposition of hyper-visibility and invisibility in the marketplace. Overwhelmingly, the hyper-visible Hip Hop deviated furthest from the original purpose of the cultural art form. The paradox of hyper-visibility and invisibility extended to street lit and the national books marketplace. Street lit was immensely popular within African American print culture but ultimately failed to gain a wider audience. In bookstores across the nation, street lit titles were relegated to small
sections where all the “black books” are housed. But street lit titles were usually the bulk of the black literature section. Street lit was strategically left out of what has commonly been understood as American literature. This intentional oversight provided the genre enough space to (re)define how African Americans understood their socially constructed differences.

Hip Hop feminism (re)visioned articulations of being both black and woman at the turn of the twenty-first century. This version of feminism has been able to work through the inconsistencies of loving Hip Hop in all its forms—from the music, to the fashion, to the misogynistic men who create woman hating raps—and demanding black women’s empowerment. Hip Hop feminism was a willed pluralistic existence in the face normative logic, which demanded that young people choose between gender and Hip Hop. A Hip Hop feminist framework gave young urban adults at the turn of the twenty-first century the language to refuse societal pressures to minimize or eliminate parts of their humanity to fit the narrow perimeters of a feminism that never was intended for them. Using a Hip Hop feminist lens to interrogate street lit novels gave readers a platform to have viable post-reading discussions that often led to concrete plans for dealing with some of the most difficult parts of growing up black or brown and urban. Ultimately, Hip Hop feminism gave street lit a theoretical discursive framework that rejected the traditional bounds of feminism and provided a platform to interrogate the troubling aspects of Hip Hop rhetoric.

Street lit stories after the digital turn of 2007 necessarily had to evolve in style and content to fit the newer ways young adults consumed information and to create African American urban stories that were closer aligned with current daily urban realities. Post-Digital Turn, the controlling image of the 1980s drug kingpin was nothing more than myth and fantasy of a bygone yesteryear. Crack was whack and designer prescription drugs were all the rage. The flyy girls were no longer relegated to local neighborhood popularity, they
were able to gain a global audience by simple but salacious posts on Instagram. Bad Bitches transferred their dependence from rich and powerful men to the whims of social media fame to maintain their “boss” status. And selling Hip Hop as music, movies, books, or clothes was no longer a lucrative endeavor. The Digital Turn forced innovation in how culture was consumed, which had the world switch from owning personal copies of music and movies to subscribing to streaming services. Technology creatively stripped consumers and artists of power by eliminating the necessity of ownership through promoting streams and downloads over copies and ticket sales.

The interconnectedness of the post-Digital Turn era also overhauled certain controlling images of African American urban women. Instagram models and boss bitches, like the images of the flyy girl and bad bitch before them, had a fleeting and appealing veneer that could not withstand any real adversity. Also like flyy girls and bad bitches Instagram models and social media boss bitches needed Street lit. They needed stories that compelled them to critically examine their own lives and decide for themselves how to navigate their intersections of race, gender, class, and cultural affinity. Ultimately, Hip Hop feminism in street lit rebuffed the life and death binary and emphatically determined that Hip Hop and street lit, or African American stories more generally, could never die. They could only be transformed to fit the ever-changing needs of those coming of age in urban America. Pairing Hip Hop feminism and street lit provided a blueprint for how African American cultural production could and had to undergo major change to fit the needs of the newest generation of urban dwellers.

In addition to being malleable to the changing needs and circumstances of urban America, street lit has been able to preserve the metaphysical moment when blackness, urbanity, and creative culture converged at the
turn of the twenty-first century. Hip Hop was an economic enterprise invested in selling urban black cultural capital through material. Street lit took seemingly petty Hip Hop artifacts like doorknocker earrings and imbibed them with enough cultural symbolism for them to become material monikers of a generation. The clothes, shoes, jewelry, and cars made popular by Hip Hop culture became sites of collective material cultural memory. The ability to sell all things Hip Hop provided fertile moral ground for street lit authors to interrogate the troubled relationship between consumerism and Hip Hop. Ironically, consumerism became the basis of how street lit got a generation to (re)member and then (re)consider how they govern their lives.

A Collective memory is an achieved narrative based on the amalgamation of a series of singular interpretations of an event or a time. Remembering Hip Hop required more than a compilation of dates, facts, and figures. Hip Hop was revolutionary because of the way it made people feel. And capturing that feeling was how to properly remember the cultural moment that spurned Hip Hop. The problem with collective memories is that they die when the generation who can recall the actual events, times, and sentiments die. However, using material artifacts to symbolize salient moments and sentiments means that the Hip Hop spirit can live on forever. In addition to immortalizing the spirit of moments, collective material cultural memories provided street lit authors a fertile theoretical framework to make salient social commentaries concerning race, gender, age, class, and desire. Collective material cultural memories helped street lit overcome the incongruence of material and memory to produce lasting and clear understandings of what urban America felt like on black and brown bodies at the turn of the twenty-first century.
“Stories Written on Concrete” was literally born from a dream that dared to question why urban black stories have not been taken seriously. And a preponderance of what the academy says to major segments of Americans whose lives are similar to those of street lit characters by not accepting this literature. Finally, “Stories Written on Concrete” is a brief braveness that rebuffs the naysayers who proclaim that street lit not only is dead, but that is should have never existed. Street lit is not dead. For the sake of future generations, Street lit must live audaciously.
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