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Street Dreams

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In New York,
Concrete jungle where dreams are made of,
There's nothing you can't do,
Now you're in New York,
These streets will make you feel brand new,
Big lights will inspire you,
Let's hear it for New York.

Jay-Z, 2009

Street Dreams

Carmela Muzio Dormani
Hip Hop Street Literature Narratives
Dr. Mark Naison & Kristina Graff

10/14/09

"Every successful person in the world is a hustler in one way or another."[1]

"'The drug game in New York is gonna change for the better...Not the poison itself, Cutty, but the way we do it. With all the money that we haul in off this shit, our hoods shouldn't be all messed up. I'm gonna do what the fucking government won't. These kids out here need something to call their own. It might take a while, but I'm gonna do my part...If not me, then who?' "[2]

K'wan presents us with a contemporary and complex street tale within which reference is made to the language, life and code of the streets, as well as the roles of different populations in the lived experience of young people in the hood, including: hustlers, women, cops, white people and members of the older generation. What is more, there is an overt political consciousness to Street Dreams wherein references are made to racial injustice, the destructive impact of "slinging poison", and activists of the older generation who were once involved in challenging the system. Street Dreams is relatable and contemporary in its usage of New York slang, complex themes and substantial characters. Due to its complexity and K'wan's attention to detail and accuracy, Street Dreams feels more fleshed out, reflective of real life and more emotional to read. K'wan avoids sensationalizing the violence and glamour of an up and coming hustler's story and opts instead for some depth and complication. It is unclear – as it might be in real life – what would be least destructive to the characters we come to know intimately. The choices and struggles of Darius, Trinity, and the rest of the players in Street Dreams are laid out and understood within the context of the spatial and economic outlines of New York City in the early 2000s.

Represent New York

Part of the appeal of Street Dreams lies in K'wan's attention to detail and accuracy in his depiction of New York City and in particular the Douglas Housing Project in Manhattan Valley.

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[1] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 6

[2] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 281

The narrative is inextricably intertwined with the physical, linguistic, and cultural context within which it occurs. K'wan represents New York and accurately describes the streets and precinct of the neighborhood while making natural references to other areas of the city. It is the written perspective of a native and that allows for a smoother means of connecting with the characters. Street Dreams carries the specific flavor of contemporary New York in the depiction of housing style (project apartments), modes of transportation (constant taxi rides) and references to specific ethnic groups within and without the black community (Alexis is Trinidadian, Marco is Salvadoran). Moreover, we know we are in New York because Central Park and the contemporary, picturesque Upper West Side are both minutes away from the 'hood. From the beginning we encounter white people and those of the more comfortable classes, not because they are living the same experience as those in the Frederick Douglass Houses but because they are, in a way, living side by side. There is a close physical proximity but almost no shared experience or social interaction. The reality of "development" and gentrification in 2000s era New York is unmistakable. Prince comments on the burgeoning presence of white people early in the novel:

> "Prince stopped near the mouth of the park and took in the scenery. White folks were walking their dogs, riding bikes, and doing all sorts of outdoor activities. All carrying on as if they were oblivious to the fact that there was a crack-infested housing project a block away.
>
> 'Look at this shit,' Prine said, motioning toward a young white couple strolling through the park. 'Strangers in a strange world. Few years ago you wouldn't have seen no shit like this. This whole area was black and Spanish. Now we got the 'Caucasian Invasion'.
>
> 'I feel you,' Rio said, lighting a cigarette. 'Hood don't seem the same, do it?'
>
> 'Hell nah. Man, we had all this shit in the smash, now the crackers done took over[3]".

[3] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 5

Rio goes on to comment on the housing conditions for the black population living in the Douglas Houses. This displays a recognition that is difficult to miss living in New York: the disparity in living conditions between those with access to some power and resources, and those with none.

Although the novel takes place in the early, post-9/11 2000s, it is clear that within and around the Frederick Douglass Houses, echoes of the crack epidemic remain. The ravaging effects of crack itself and of the respective laws that were instituted, jailing entire neighborhoods worth of young men for exorbitantly long periods of time, seem not to have faded into the too distant past at Douglass. Only a decade prior to the writing of Street Dreams, *The New York Times* commented on the anti-gentrifying effect of the drug and crime infused housing projects[4]. Frederick Douglas Houses are cited as being particularly resistant to the fading of the epidemic. In the 1980s, in the wake of rapid deindustrialization crack swept through New York City decimating neighborhoods and providing tens of thousands of young people with the access to more money and power than any other population in the neighborhood. The older generation was being beaten by job loss and addiction and even in the 2000s, Rio's references to the older generation incorporate these realities. While some older community members were once involved with political movement and the black panthers, there is little to no reference made to a member of the older generation who has not been defeated in some way, except for the Prince, boss of the drug game. Even Jamal, who works with the Minority Education Movement, has done time and manages a job interview but no job. Surveying the impact of "poison" on his neighborhood, Rio observes that, "People who used to be on top were sucking dick and selling ass to get they high on. It was sad, but a grim reminder of how fucked up it was to be a product

[4] http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/25/nyregion/manhattan-valley-s-long-awaited-boom-ends-up-just-a-fizzle.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2

of the ghetto."[5] Although Rio is concerned about the effects drug have on his community, his primary motivation is economic. He is the direct provider of the very drug that he describes so distastefully but ultimately he too is being taken down by the crack game. As a young man with a record and with little access to resources, he signs his soul away and becomes deeply involved in a trade that is as destructive to him as it might be to a crack fiend. One main characteristic of the crack epidemic was an increase in violent crime, especially among teenagers and young men of color.[6] Rio hopes to change the drug game in New York – especially unnecessary brutality – but he is trapped in it and instead, it does not take long to change him. As Rio becomes more deeply entrenched in the violence of the game, his humanity and regard and passion for life begin to fade. Biggie Smalls articulates this sentiment in the song "10 Crack Commandments," saying, "I been in this game for years, it made me a animal." Rio follows this same trajectory. By the time Trinity is kidnapped, he has no reservation in slaughtering anyone who stands in his way in finding her.

Dreams.

Three main paradigms through which the novel can be viewed are: Choice versus Destiny, Dreams versus *points of no return*, and deep, sustained interaction with street law versus with criminal law enforcement. A central theme is the sustainability of dreams. Both Rio and Trinity are presented as fully human characters and both have dreams of becoming legitimate and getting out of the 'hood. What makes the eventual trajectory of their story all the more tragic are the potential openings that are presented early on and throughout the novel. The reader is teased with the potential for escape. Darius' associate's degree, general distaste for the streets, and tantalizing job search allow the reader a sense of hope which is subsequently chipped away at

[5] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 62

[6] Levitt, Steven and Kevin Murphy. How Bad Was Crack Cocaine?

and punctured again and again as Rio gets deeper in the game. The same holds true for Trinity who survives the grips of her father and is on the path to passing her GED and shouldering the responsibility of raising her brother when she is interrupted by "the streets com[ing] to claim their due[7]". Although Rio's goals – and by extension, Trinity's goals – change throughout the novel, Rio never gives up on having dreams for himself, even if one of them is basic survival. Toward the end of the novel, after being elected the new boss of the drug operation, Rio says,

> "'The drug game in New York is gonna change for the better...Not the poison itself, Cutty, but the way we do it. With all the money that we haul in off this shit, our hoods shouldn't be all messed up. I'm gonna do what the fucking government won't. These kids out here need something to call their own. It might take a while, but I'm gonna do my part...If not me, then who?' "[8]

Even after all that has changed in him over the course of the novel, Rio still has it in him to see a path forward for himself and the people he cares for. However, the violence and drama of the crack operation mean that, as in most cases, the game has more control over Rio than he does over the game. Before he can change the ruthlessness of "slinging posion", it forces he himself to become ruthless.

The Points of No Return

The anti-dreams of this story are those weighty decisions and incidents which dramatically and *necessarily* alter the course of the characters' lives. While the characters dreams are sustained, these *points of no return* are the moments where such dreams shift permanently. *These are the moments which cannot be undone* and Street Dreams revolves around them. The first, and most impactful, of such moments comes with the killing of Trinity's father and his young sexual partner, Tracey. Before this moment one of the main descriptors of Rio is that he is not a killer. We know that he did time – although we later find out he took a bid for someone

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[7] K'wan. *Street Dreams*, back cover

[8] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 281

else – but one of our most concrete characteristics about Rio is that he has not killed and does not intend to start. More than once later on we are reminded of how radical a departure this is. K'wan chooses to highlight several times that "If you had told Trinity a few months ago that Rio would become a killer, she would've laughed. *Rio was too passionate about life to take it*"[9]. This passion for life along with Rio's intelligence and good character lead the reader to believe that he and Trinity have got the potential to "make it out"; but as soon as he pulls the trigger on Baker, and more disturbingly, Tracey, Rio becomes irrevocably entrenched in the streets. This is a main turning point in the novel with direct, significant implications; and which lays the groundwork for the immense carnage that follows. This is the first significant moment with which we are exposed to Rio's rage and also the defiance of the powerlessness within which he and Trinity find themselves. It is this rage, constructed by and operating within a reality of limited options and outlets, which feeds the destructive spiral Rio embarks on. The immediate result of this first point of no return is Rio's indebtedness to the Prince and consequent positioning as the newest Capo in the game. The agreement to step into this position is the next point of no return as both Rio and the reader are aware that Rio has just become a full-time hustler, a lifestyle from which there is no longer escape. These two main events construct the context of the entire novel. They provide for a complete shift in the options and paradigm within which Rio, Shamel, Trinity, Cutty and other main characters operate.

Rio's fate is more concretely indicated by at least four other points of no return: the killing of Kev and Boo, the decision to attempt to fill Prince's spot after he is killed, the kidnapping of Trinity and unnecessary killing of Joyce, and the massacre in the Hunts Point warehouse. Any who had held out hope for Rio and Trinity's escape or salvation must finally have realized at the

[9] K'wan. *Street Dreamz* 250

beginnings of the forced entry into the warehouse that there is no return from that degree of rage and carnage. The killing of Kev and Boo concretize Rio's movement into the crack game. The decision to step in after Prince closes off a major and last opportunity for escape that might have been available to Rio. The kidnapping of Trinity is Rio's final trigger for the killing of Joyce which indicates the completion of Rio's full transformation into gangster. He no longer felt any real regard for life. He extracts the information he needs from her and then, "As soon as Joyce began to relax, Rio put three shots into her face. It happened so quick that even Shamel jumped. Rio got to his feet and emptied his clip into Joyce's body. At this stage of the game life meant nothing to Rio."[10] At Hunts Point, Rio rushes head on into his fate. The tension between dreams and points of no return interacts intimately with the struggle between choice and destiny.

Choice Versus Destiny

Darius is set up as a great mind with a potential way out of the game but regardless of potential, the hood won't let him go. But he also makes choices that allow for his continued participation in the game. Some focus is placed on the decisions he and Trinity make and sometimes the decisions feel satisfying but sometimes there is a very real frustration reading this novel. At first it is an anxious feeling over wasted talent and then, as the reader becomes more closely tied with Rio, it is the feeling of having no way out. As more and more points of no return alter the paths and options available to Rio and Trinity, the frustration of increasing limitation becomes more and more confining for the reader. Right after his failed job interview, Rio has an interaction with Jamal from the Minority Education Movement. Rather than going with Jamal, Rio has begun to open himself to the option of returning to the streets. This is a decision but it is not made out of laziness but rather a true conviction that a committed

[10] K'wan. Street Dreams 291

engagement with community work would render Rio unable to "eat" and care for his mother. He "'believe[s] in what the movement is doing, but...also believe[s] in survival.'"[11] The obvious implication is that the two are contradictory. While it is true that Rio and Trinity sometimes seem to make the less wholesome decision – like continuing to hustle instead of working with Jamal – it is made clear that they are operating always within the paradigm of the 'hood. And it is clear that in this case, that means hustle or "starve". Much later, after being shot and hospitalized and making the pivotal decision to try and step into Prince's open spot as boss, Rio reflects that "The hustle was not pretty but Rio had *been chosen* to play and play he would... 'Til death do them part, Rio was one with the streets"[12]. From the phrasing of this reflection it can be implied that the characters are not the only ones making choices here. According to this frame, the streets are claiming him but so are the decisions he and Trinity make. K'wan focuses on these choices – which sometimes seem poorly made – but he also takes the reader along with Rio as he transitions into full time hustler and thus creates a more complete insight into the events and decisions that lead Rio there. Because the reader is following along closely with Rio, she feels the limited options and confines of the streets for herself. Rarely is there a true opportunity to break away from the life and when there is, it is fleeting and easily taken away.

Role of Women

Women occupy a role of support and servitude in Street Dreams. For the most part, it is taken for granted that they have a purpose only in so far as they can serve or sexually pleasure the men in the novel. Few women occupy prominent supporting roles and those who do are essentially voiceless. The exception of course is Trinity who serves as a complex character in that she is initially presented as a victim but is also on the receiving end of Rio's unwavering

[11] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 60

[12] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 236

devotion – which is powerful. Although Trinity characterized as a strong, loyal and intelligent force within the clique, ultimately, her character is defined and validated by the men in her life – namely her father and her boyfriend. Even with some positive and powerful characterizations, Trinity's purpose remains one of support for Rio. If Trinity is the idealized object of Rio's love, Joyce represents the ultimate evil and weakness. Between these two women, there is no spectrum of womanhood represented. Even Sally remains more or less silenced except for a few key phone calls or conversations toward the end of the book. Whether for "good" or "evil" the efforts of the women in Street Dreams are almost entirely focused on achieving the pleasure and satisfaction of the men in their lives, whether that be sexually or occupationally. Minor scenes involving female characters where male characters are absent mostly incorporate bickering and the quest to "get money". Ultimately, Darius' deep love for Trinity is seen as a weakness in that it becomes a mechanism for unleashing his rage. This intensifies throughout the novel as Trinity increasing becomes the only thing he has to hold onto of his former self.

Government Law vs. Street Law: Codes & Enforcement

Throughout the novel, K'wan speaks intimately to the interaction young people in and around Douglas have with two different laws and means of law enforcement: state law and street law. Loyalty is a huge theme here as, our most loyal of characters, Shamel, asserts in conversation with Rio about "snitches" soon before his death that,

> "'Shit,' Rio said, stroking his machine gun. 'This is bad. What the fuck went wrong with us, man?'
> 'Destiny, my man. Everything is going downhill cause of a fucking snitch. What are we gonna do, dawg?'" (297)

Street law places snitches – or people who "rat" on other members of the community by giving police information in order to reduce their own sentencing – as the lowest of the low. What is more, it is dangerous to be a snitch because punishment in the streets is not that same as state

punishment. Punishment in the streets is a beat down or a bullet, depending on the offense. As Biggie outlines in his "10 Crack Commandments:" "If you ain't got the bags, stay the fuck from police. If niggaz think you snitchin', ain't tryin' to listen. They be sittin in your kitchen watin' to start hittin." The code of the street is a way of life. One of the loudest declarations of street code comes when Cutty is arrested and faced with a lifetime in prison. In response to a bargaining offer, he laughs maniacally and screams out: "I'm a real fucking gangsta. Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you."[13] A "real gangsta" lives by the code of the streets, even – or perhaps most especially when forced with the other "justice" system – and snitches are the lowest of the low.

Throughout Street Dreams the presence of law enforcement is a constant. For all the young men living in the projects, and particularly those involved with the crack game, police presence is a pervasive, negative, and violent concern. The dynamic between young men of color in the 'hoods of New York and police officers is a tense and often oppressive one. There is no attribution of justice to the supposed "criminal justice system" in large part because of the explicit violence and *injustice* perpetrated against men of color in that area. Rio emphasizes this to his mother after she suggests he go to the police following Trinity's kidnapping, "'That's a joke right? Mama them pigs ain't got no love for poor ghetto kids. If we don't look out for our own then nobody else will."[14] Even though Rio is a big time drug dealer in his community, he still views himself as more concerned for justice than any cop might be. It is true in this case that Rio is a drug dealer and has murdered several people but we know also that the majority of the 24th precinct is not concerned so much with the execution of justice, but rather with the rewards that their personal actions might bring them. In the streets, cops do not serve and protect; they are the imposers of violence and injustice. KRS-One speaks to this dynamic in his track "Sound

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[13] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 289

[14] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 287

of Da Police" and goes on to compare contemporary officers with overseers in the period of slavery. This is mirrored in K'wan imagery and characterization of School Boy as he makes a run for it: "School Boy was moving with the speed of a runaway slave."[15]

As compared with some other street literature authors, K'wan creates more diverse and less caricatured representations of cops. In particular he addresses the figure of the black cop in two different characters: the undercover rookie and the older cop with a conscious. Of the police we encounter though, the white cop is the most ruthless in his quest to bring down Rio and advance himself in the official rankings. When it comes to it, as the saying goings, it doesn't matter what color, all cops are blue. When Mikey, the snitch realizes that he is going to be exposed because of an early bust by the police, he yells at undercover Officer Jenkins, "'This is some bullshit. You fucking pigs are all the same, no matter what your skin color. All you give a fuck about is screwing niggaz.'"[16] KRS-One also addresses the black cop in "Sound of Da Police" saying, "Black people still slaves up til today but the Black police officer nah see it that way. Him want a salary, him want it so he put on a badge and kill people for it." We do not see the struggle of Officer Jenkins, although we do hear that, having come out of the 'hood himself, his philosophy is to try and clean out the drug dealers. Officer Brown on the other hand seems constantly to be cornered between two options: "He could either do his job or do the right thing."[17] He, however, does not manage to bring justice to the precinct, just as the precinct surely does not bring justice to the streets.

There is some twisted justice in K'wan's ghetto. In an almost sacred moment on the last page of the novel, Truck is cut-up by the last survivor of Rio's crew. Cutty destroys him, with

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[15] K'wan. *Street Dreams*. 295

[16] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 294

[17] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 269

assistance from Kane and the Hound, and will live like a king in prison because so many people wanted Truck taken down. The others die because the streets claim them: Truck dies because of his own snitching betrayal. In the end, the law of streets wins out over the law of the police. What then is ultimately valued in the world inhabited by the major players in Street Dreams? What is the cost of playing the game? Is it worth it? Virtually everyone we are introduced to is killed. The only consoling after effects are Trucks murder Trinity's posthumous GED pass. A narrative that started out with hope and glimmers of potential ends with mass carnage. Particularly in the lives of poor people and people of color, fleeting moments and "choices" made within nearly choice-less contexts dictate not only one's conditions of living but also survival. When people outside of this daily experience attempt to analyze and prescribe solutions to "urban issues", there is often an oversight of this reality whereby young men and women who are provided with inadequate access to education, resources and support are expected to "rise above", which is construed to be entirely possible through sufficient hard-work. Part of K'wan's reference to destiny is a challenge to this idea. Although Rio and Trinity, and many of the other main characters in Street Dreams, make a number of impactful decisions, in some ways the streets have already claimed Rio and Trinity long before this particular narrative begins. It is not a hopeless or fatalistic story but it more closely approaches reality than those who assert a fantasy of meritocracy in the United States.

LIKE BIRTH AND DEATH"

(Davis 2003: 15)

Why We Can't Wait:

Representations of Prison in Street literature As Part of the Anti-Prison Movement

Carmela Muzio Dormani
Hip-Hop Street Literature Narratives
Dr. Mark Naison

"Even though I signed a plea agreement for ten years, the judge sentenced me to eleven. Six years for my drug offenses, and five for the gun I told them, like a dumb ass, I had under my seat at the time of the arrest. When the judge passed sentence, he sure seemed happy at seeing the despair on my face. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I was too smart to be in this trick bag. But what could I do now? I made my bed, but I wasn't tryin' to sleep in it. ***Ten years of my life were being raped away unless I pulled a Houdini."***[1]

Introduction & Thesis

When Angela Davis published her scathing critique of the United States prison system in 2003, more than two million people in the United States were being held in prisons, immigrant

[1] Jihad. *Street Life* 235

detention centers, jails and youth facilities.[2] In Are Prisons Obsolete, she contextualizes the extremity of these numbers by pointing out that while the United States consists of only five percent of the world's population, more than twenty percent of the global prison population is incarcerated in United States facilities. Although "the prison is one of the most important features of our image environment," the experience of incarceration is remote for many sectors of the population.[3] However, incarceration does play a central role in the lives of poor and working-class young men – and increasingly women – of color. Davis highlights this disparity in the introduction of her work:

> "While a relatively small proportion of the population has ever directly experienced life inside prison, this is not true in poor black and Latino communities. Neither is it true for Native Americans or for certain Asian-American communities."[4]

In illustrating this highly visible disparity, she makes a related claim:

> "If we were already persuaded that racism should not be allowed to define the planet's future and if we can successfully argue that prisons are racist institutions, this may lead us *to take seriously the prospect of declaring prisons obsolete.*"[5]

Davis argues compellingly in this work against the social, economic, and political realities and implications of the U.S. system of incarceration, alternatively termed "the prison-industrial complex". Five years later, by the end of 2008, the United States prison population *–excluding Immigrant Detention Centers and youth facilities* – included 1,610,446 individuals.[6] This is why we cannot wait. Hundreds of thousands of men and women, disproportionately of color, are "caged" in the experience of "a second-by-

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[2] Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 10
[3] Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 18
[4] Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 15
[5] Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 25 [emphasis mine]
[6] Bureau of Justice 2008 Statistics

second assault on the soul, a day-to-day degradation of the self, an oppressive steel and brick umbrella that transforms seconds into hours and hours into days."[7]

The mass incarceration of communities of color and the prioritization of profit over people has no place in our global future. Critiques such as those presented by Angela Davis and Mumia Abu-Jamal have a role in challenging this systemic injustice; but so too do truly popular forms of expression. Prison narratives and interactions with law enforcement have been deeply interwoven in hip-hop tracks and culture almost since its inception. One particularly poignant prison-related narrative is Nas' "One Love" from his 1994 album, *Illmatic.* The track starts out with the line "What up kid? I know shit is rough doin your bid" and goes on to recount daily happenings on "the outside" before reminding the recipient of the track to "say what up to Herb, Ice and Bullet" and Cormega. The second verse takes a more sinister slant with references to the sexual assaults and encounters experienced by some men in prison. By the final verse, Nas is smoking a blunt with a twelve year old kid from the neighborhood but cannot seem to convince the young man that there is a life away from the streets. The end of the track is not encouraging – a trait that is shared by what seems to be a majority of street literature novels – but it is real. Nas' companion seems to represent the perpetuation of street life and the inevitability of the streets and prison for young men in the neighborhood. At the time, the voicing of these realities of the incarceration experience in a hip-hop track served as a powerful voice for young people growing up in poor neighborhoods. The appeal is not in a neat ending, but in the voicing of an experience that mirrors the one around them.

[7] Abu-Jamal, Mumia. *Live from Death Row* 64

The same can be said of many works of street lit. Narratives of the prison experience play a central role in this increasingly popular genre. The novels, many of which are written and consumed by a prison-based audience, voice a strong criticism of the prison system by illustrating a variety of realities and experiences of incarceration. The purpose of this essay is not to re-state Angela Davis' already outstandingly illustrated argument in its entirety but rather to apply the discussion she presents to the genre of street literature and explore the role street literature has the potential to occupy in the popular movement against the prison system. I will look closely at the social and economic history out of which street literature has risen as well as the varied depiction of prison in the novels. Particular emphasis will be placed on Jihad's Street Life and K'wan's Street Dreams but reference will be made to other works, including Wahilda Clark's Thugs and the Women Who Love Them, which represents a less politically conscious perspective which is important to include in discussion of street literature's role as a popular medium in the anti-prison movement.

Exploring the Link: Representations of Prison in Street Literature

The development and production of street literature is strongly reminiscent of hip-hop's history. Like early hip-hop, street literature is produced by and for marginalized communities, often with few available resources to aid in the writing and publishing process; and also like hip-hop, street literature is criticized as a counter-productive and "not real" artistic form.[8] The most striking aspect of the genre is that it is largely written, produced and consumed by people of color, especially African-Americans.[9] Moreover, it is often written and read by an audience with

[8] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?

[9] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?; Fialkoff, Francine. "An African American author raps the genre, but librarians defend it"

personal experience with the incarceration system. Many of the authors have spent time "inside" and quite a few write the first drafts or entirety of their novels while incarcerated. In the Acknowledgements section of Street Life, Jihad shouts out to his former prison companions saying "Much love to all my revolutionary brothers living in hell behind federal prison walls and fences."[10] This authenticates his writing as relevant and informed by personal experience, before the novel even truly begins. Furthermore, Jihad's characterization of the federal prison system is imbibed with a palpable realness that stings the reader through his words – "*revolutionary brothers living in hell*." Wahida Clark too makes explicit her personal connection with prison and the connection street literature has with hip-hop in her acknowledgements. Her dedication page reads: "This book is dedicated to all the brothas and sistahs on lockdown, and to the entire Hip-Hop generation."[11]

Street literature thus has a real and authentic tie to the prison culture and population as well as hip-hop culture and the black – and increasing the Latino – population.[12] Carl Weber, a New York publisher, author, and retailer explained to the Black Issues Book Review in 2004:

> "'Our audience is fifteen to fifty,' he says. 'Most of the fifty year olds were in their early twenties when The Sugar Hill Gang came out with the first rap record that hit the Billboard charts, so they still have some tie-in to hip-hop. We definitely intentionally appeal to black people.'"[13]

While creating fictional works, street literature authors incorporate strong aspects of their personal experience into the narrative.[14] In particular, authors turning out truly high quality street literature seem to be those speaking truthfully to their own lived experience or that of those around them. While a discussion of "authenticity" in hip-hop and street literature is beyond the

[10] Jihad. *Street Life* 8
[11] Clark, Wahida. *Thugs and the Women Who Love Them* vii
[12] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[13] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[14] Duffy, Peter. "Life of Crime, and Time Behind Bars, Inspire a Drug Dealer to Turn Author

scope of this essay, recognizing that these fictional works, whether autobiographic or not, are authentic in that they speak to the readers who are consuming them, is central to the proposed argument. Thus, popular works of street literature are legitimized and authenticated by their popularity among the prison population – a community that is rarely reached through literature and would presumably connect less with the literature if it were less representative of their lived experience.

In many instances, prison is portrayed as an inevitable aspect of the community's experience. Almost without exception, central characters in the literature have had or are having direct experience with incarceration. Prison is a normalized, black experience. Even for those characters who are not directly threatened with a prison sentence, incarceration is a normalized aspect of the "ghetto" experience. Davis speaks to the root of this perspective by reprinting the numbers and percentages of black men who are incarcerated:

> "In 1990, the Washington-based Sentencing Project published a study of U.S. populations in prison and jail, and on parole and probation, which concluded that one in four black mean between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine were among these numbers. Five years later, a second study revealed that this percentage had soared to almost one in three [32.2 percent]. Moreover, more than one in ten Latino men in this same age range were in jail or prison, or on probation or parole. The second study also revealed that the group experiencing the greatest increase was black women, whose imprisonment increased by seventy-eight percent...African Americans as a while now represent the majority of state and federal prionsers, with a total of 803,400 black inmates – 118,600 more than the total numer of white inmates."[15]

In 2008, blacks still represented the largest percentage of the state and federal prison population with 38 percent of all prisoners identifying as black, 34 percent as white and 20 percent as Latino.[16] Thus for the African-American and Latino communities at large, especially in poor and working-class neighborhoods, incarceration is an intensely routine occurrence.

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[15] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 20

[16] Bureau of Justice 2008 statistics

Many works of street literature challenge the notion that prison is just; as well as the idea that it is linked equitably with crime. These works illustrate injustice in court proceedings and legal representation, unethical law enforcement agents, the role of race and class in incarceration rates and the repercussions of a criminal record. In other words, street literature challenges the myth of justice in the criminal *justice* system. This challenge takes place at different levels in portrayals of the justice system. In Street Dreams, we are introduced to a series of police officers, not all of whom are crooked, but several of whom are ruthless and profit-seeking in pursuing Rio. Several chapters are told from the perspective of the officers and so the reader is privy to their schemes and conversations. One representative exchange is as follows:

> "'Don't worry Stark. You'll get you chance at the kid but we gotta be smart about it.'
>
> 'Okay, I'll play nice' Stark might've agrees with Jenkowitz vocally but in his mind he was planning another angle to try and catch Rio. If Jenkowitz thought he was going to steal Stark's shine then he was crazy. He would be the one to bring Rio and Prince down. In a squad car or a meat wagon, it didn't really matter to him. It would be a raise in his pay and two less niggers on the streets."[17]

This narrative is an explicit challenge of motivations behind law enforcement. Furthermore, the focus on increased salary and prestige and the racial slur expressed at the end eloquently questions the value of black life in the United States. Critiques are also offered of processes related to actual jailing. In Street Life, Jihad shares the experience of Smithbay, the protagonist's cellmate:

> "James Smithbay was serving a 47-year sentence for conspiracy to traffic two kilos of crack cocaine... no physical evidence was found. His conviction was solely a result of testimony given by two convicted drug dealers already doing time...Despite his excellent standing in the community, James Smith was indicted under a law called conspiracy, where physical evidence wasn't needed to convict...The DEA, FBI, and ATF had no qualms about accepting coerced or

[17] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 215

> false testimony...After all, the government, whenever drug cases were concerned, seized the convicted one's assets."[18]

This broadens the scope of the questions introduced by K'wan about the value of black life and the profitability and social agenda of incarcerating men and women of color. Jihad makes explicit the profit motivations and systemic racism that play a role in forming Smithbay's experience.

Depictions of various elements of prison life – the court proceedings, the release, the arrest, the actual experience in jail – are central in the plots of many works of street literature. Unlike other mediums where prison depiction is popular though, such a Hollywood films, street literature is written by individuals and members of populations with a close (imposed) tie to incarceration. Furthermore, the lens offered by street literature is often critical or one in which the reader is invested in a character and is thus emotionally impacted by the prison experience. Moreover, street literature novels seem rarely to affirm the link of punishment as a logical extension of crime because, as demonstrated above that is not necessarily the reality for the characters, their authors, or many other members of the populations to which they belong. Even lower-quality street literature often includes graphic, if one-dimensional, depictions of injustices experienced in the incarceration process.[19] The challenge to this myth serves as a grassroots cry as part of the anti-prison movement addressing the economic and social injustices institutionalized in the prison system, with particular focus on racial, educational, and economic injustice.

Economic & Social Perspectives: Post-industrialism & the 'hood

[18] Jihad. *Street Life* 233-4

[19] Clark, Wahida. *Thugs and the Women Who Love Them* 173-180

A main aspect of the Davis' argument is the role of capitalist interests in dictating the growth and usage of the prison system. She links incarceration with capitalist processes, employing the term "prison-industrial complex":

> "The exploitation of prison labor by private corporations is one aspect among an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correctional communities, and media. These relationships constitute what we now call a prison industrial complex. The term 'prison industrial complex' was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit."[20]

Throughout her book Davis argues that the increases and demographics in the prison population are a product of a system which prioritizes capital accumulation over people and which disproportionately exploits people of color as part of a system of racial injustice which contributes to capital accumulation by stratifying the poor, working-class, and lower to mid-middle class along lines of constructed racial identity. Furthermore, this racial construction has served capitalist interests since the beginnings of the United States, most notably through a system of chattel slavery, and the sustained repression sustained by Jim Crow, de jure and de facto segregation, and intentional marginalization.[21] Davis states:

> "The prison has become a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited. Mass imprisonment generates profits as it devours social wealth, and thus it tends to reproduce the very conditions that lead people to prison. There are thus real and often quite complicated connections between the deindustrialization of the economy – a process that reached its peak during the 1980s – and the rise of mass imprisonment."[22]

Her claim begs an understanding of historical processes which contributed to the economic positioning of poor, urban populations of color.

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[20] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 84
[21] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 24-5
[22] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 17

The irrevocable lure of the streets is central to street literature as is the inevitability of "the streets com[ing] to claim their due."[23] The pull of the streets is not new to hip-hop culture. 2pac references the community offered by the streets in his 1995 track "Dear Mama" with the lyrics: "I hung around with the Thugs, and even though they sold drugs/ They showed a young brother love/ I moved out and started really hangin/ I needed money of my own so I started slangin/ I ain't guilty cause, even though I sell rocks/ It feels good puttin money in your mailbox/ I love payin rent when the rent's due/ I hope ya got the diamond necklace that I sent to you.[24] The construction of this kind of relationship with "the streets" is dependent on the historical development of the urban neighborhoods within which almost all street literature takes place.

The history and development of urban segregation and gentrification lay the foundation for the street conditions described by Jihad, Joe Black and K'wan. In American Apartheid Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton outline the processes of the creation and maintenance of contemporary segregation and the urban underclass. They describe the post-World War II phenomenon of white flight asserting that "The suburbanization of America proceeded at a rapid pace and the white middle class deserted inner cities in massive numbers."[25] As whites left the city, over 500,000 manufacturing jobs left with them, and as the city's tax base shrank, expenditure on public services was sharply reduced."[26] Furthermore, Massey and Denton argue that "despite this rapid transformation of American cities…one feature of urban geography

[23] K'wan. *Street Dreams*, back cover
[24] Shakur, Tupac. "Dear Mama"
[25] Massey, Douglas and Nicole Denton. *American Apartheid* 44
[26] Curtis, Ric. "Crack, Cocaine, and Heroin" 48

remained unchanged: the black ghetto."[27] The rapid departure of stable working-class jobs in combination with explicitly racist bank lending practices consolidated recently migrated blacks – and increasingly post-1965 immigrant groups of color – into *racialized* urban 'hoods. This notion of directed and intentional segregation is central in discussing the *ghettoization* of black urban centers and the continued drawing on this population to feed the prison system. The experience of the segregated black "ghetto" is further underlined by the economic context within which it occurs.

In The Global City Saskia Sassen explores deindustrialization and the role it plays in people's economic experience in New York City (as well as London and Tokyo). She puts these economic and population changes in the context of a globalized capitalist market. Sassen illustrates this framework explaining that:

> "Two ...developments in global cities have ...contributed to economic polarization. One is the vast supply of low-wage jobs required by high-income gentrification in both its residential and commercial settings ...Furthermore, there is a continuing need for low-wage industrial services, even in such sectors as finance and specialized services."[28]

Sassen highlights the perpetuation of "economic polarization" which characterizes our contemporary economy, through the demand for upper-class amenities provided by low-wage service employment. She expands her economic argument,

> "A second development that has reached significant portions is what I call the downgrading of the manufacturing sector, a process in which *the share of unionized shops declines and wages deteriorate while sweatshops and industrial homework proliferate*. This process includes the downgrading of jobs within existing industries and the job supply patterns of some of the new industries."[29]

[27] Massey, Douglas and Nicole Denton. *American Apartheid* 44-5
[28] Sassen, Saskia. *The Global City* 9
[29] Sassen, Saskia. *The Global City* 9-10

Here Sassen summarizes the economic experience of post-industrial New York City as one which includes fewer and fewer secure, well-paying union jobs with benefits and the opportunity for upward mobility and many more unstable, low-wage, low-benefit service jobs. She presents the idea of "low-wage jobs as a function of *growth* trends" as implying segmentation within more traditional categories for defining occupational class. In other words, the service sector may include a dual labor force consisting of both highly-educated and rewarded occupations such as doctors and "low-wage dead-end jobs" such as many maintenance positions. Saskia Sassen further argues in her 1991 study that:

> "It is impossible to disregard the facts of race and nationality in an examination of social and economic processes in New York...immigrant and native minority workers...are still, in the end, disproportionately concentrated in large, central cities and in low-wage jobs and casual labor markets."[30]

This changing economic and social environment figured prominently into the landscape of the crack epidemic in New York.

In the 1980s, in the wake of rapid deindustrialization crack swept through New York City decimating neighborhoods and providing tens of thousands of young people with the access to more money and power than other populations in the neighborhood. While some older community members were once involved with political movement, many were subsequently beaten down by heroin, and the reactionary policies and manufactured consumerism of the 1980s. At the same time, Angela Davis notes, "It was during the decade of the 1980s that corporate ties to the punishment system became more extensive and entrenched than ever before."[31] In Street Dreams, by K'wan, the central character of the novel, Rio, observes while surveying the impact of "poison" (crack) on his neighborhood that, "People who used to be on top were

[30] Sassen, Saskia. *The Global City* 299-300
[31] Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 89

sucking dick and selling ass to get they high on. It was sad, but a grim reminder of how fucked up it was to be a product of the ghetto."[32] Although this is a fictional account of the impact of crack on a public housing community, it echoes the observations of non-fictional literature and, like many works of street literature, rings of authenticity in its representations of the lived experience faced by entire communities.

Although Rio is concerned about the effects drugs have on his community, his primary motivation is economic. Rios jail record is mentioned only briefly, but it lays the foundation for the points of no return which characterize Street Dreams. As a young man with a record and with little access to resources, he is unable to find work, going so far as to be nearly offered a job, only to have it snatched away from him on the basis of his criminal record. Unwilling to risk complete dismissal on the basis of his record, Rio had not mentioned his gun charge – a felony – on his application. He enters his second interview at B and T marketing firm but "At the mention of a background check, Rio felt a lump build in his throat."[33] Although his potential employer comments that he would have gotten the job if only he had admitted to the charge, Rio speaks from experience in his assurance that this is not true. He points out to the Vice President of the marketing firm "'we both know the working world got no place in it for a felon.'"[34] This is a powerful social critique about the long-lasting restrictions and social consequences of a felony charge. Although we later find out that Rio took the bid for somebody else, as a young black man with a prison record, it is clear to the reader that this job interview is exemplary and that "legitimate" routes to economic and social mobility are largely closed to Rio.

A dual murder later, he signs his soul away and becomes deeply involved in a trade that is as destructive to him as it might be to a crack fiend. One main characteristic of the crack

[32] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 62
[33] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 30
[34] K'wan. *Street Dreams* 31

epidemic was an increase in violent crime, especially among teenagers and young men of color.[35] As Rio becomes more deeply entrenched in the violence of the game, his humanity and regard and passion for life begin to fade. By the time Trinity is kidnapped, he has no reservation in slaughtering anyone who stands in his way in finding her. Yet one of the most gripping aspects of Street Dreams is the ease with which the reader follows Rio's trajectory into the crack game. His post-incarceration experience, the ease with which he is driven into the game and the maliciousness of some of the cops, intent on framing him are disturbingly believable. If Rio were to have survived, he would be a clear example of Angela Davis' claim that prisons breed more prisoners.

It is within an economic and social context wherein capitalist interests fuel both the creation of a prison population and the creation of the prisons themselves that street literature is being produced and consumed by a largely prison-based community. The writing, production and selling of these books, while capitalist to a degree is anti-corporate. This is important in connecting with Davis' argument about the prison-industrial complex.

> "Today, the growing social movement contesting the supremacy of global capital is a movement that directly challenges the rule of the planet – its human, animal, and plant populations, as well as its natural resources – by corporations that are primarily interested in rthe increased production and circulation of ever more profitable commodities. This is a challenge to the supremacy of the commodity form, a rising resistance to the contemporary tendency to commodify every aspect of planetary existence. The question we might consider is whether the new resistance to capitalist globalization should also incorporate resistance to the prison."[36]

The implication of Davis' manifesto is that it must. The role and function of global capitalism in the running of prisons and the exploitation of prison-based labor is too extensive, too central in the perpetuation of the increasing repression in our justice system to be ignored. Davis offers

[35] Levitt, Steven and Kevin Murphy. How Bad Was Crack Cocaine?
[36] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 45

constant numerical comparisons to the state of incarceration in the United States in the 1970s. She points out that "there are now more women in prison in the state of California than there were in the entire country in the early 1970s."[37] This is a staggering comparison that begs explanation. The racial disparity highlighted in Davis' writing is augmented by the history of prison expansion and the role of corporations in the construction, provision of goods and services, and use of prison labor.[38] Poignantly Davis asserts that while there is no evidence that increased incarceration of the population led to a decrease in crime or increase in safety, one pattern is affirmed: larger prison populations breed even larger prison populations.[39]

The Role of Street Lit: Economically, Socially, and Educationally

> *"The fact, for example, that many corporations with global markets now rely on prisons as an important source of profit helps us to understand the rapidity with which prisons began to proliferate precisely at a time when official studies indicated that the crime rate was falling. The notion of a prison industrial complex also insists that the racialization of prison populations…is not an incidental feature. Thus, critiques of the prison industrial complex undertaken by abolitionist activists and scholars are very much linked to critiques of the global persistence of racism."*[40]

The prison industrial complex feeds off a lack of education. In any capitalist system it can be observed that a well-educated and demanding mass population is counteractive to the accumulation of capital. As part of a 1994 crime bill, the opportunity to receive Pell Grants for higher study was prohibited for prisoners. Angela Davis observes that "precisely at a time of consolidating a significant writing culture behind bars, repressive strategies [were] being deployed to dissuade prisoners from educating themselves."[41] This is indicative of a concerted

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[37] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 13
[38] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 12
[39] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 12
[40] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 85
[41] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 56

effort to deny education as well as a contemporary pattern of dismantling educational programs behind bars in particular.[42] Furthermore, this is one symptom of the complete disregard for any pretense of the existence of strategies of rehabilitation in prison, "particularly those that encourage individual prisoners to acquire autonomy of the mind."[43]

Attempting to alleviate this educational gap is perhaps the most tangible role that street literature plays in the anti-prison movement. The insertion of street literature – largely written by and for a prison-related audience – is significant in sparking reading and self-education in prisons.[44] By producing and nurturing this entire genre of literature, and allowing prison to be a central aspect of many characters' experience, the writers, producers, and consumers of the genre are making a direct challenge to the non-rehabilitative structure of incarceration. Moreover since life in prison is represented frequently, and in a variety of different ways, the books provide a direct connection for incarcerated readers. Many, such as Joe Black and Victoria M. Stringer, author of the 2001 street literature novel Let That Be the Reason, subsequently become writers and, as in the case of Stringer, play a role in publishing or production.[45] For those who do not have direct experience with incarceration, the increasing popularity of street literature offers the potential to more widely publicize and spread the hidden processes and conditions of incarceration.

In Street Life, Jihad presents a fictionalized version of the role for urban literature in sparking literacy. Lincoln begins his jail sentence with a cellmate who tells Lincoln that "we don't read it if massa ain't gave it to us in a schoolbook or advertised it in the media or told us

[42] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 56
[43] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 57
[44] Duffy, Peter. "Life of Crime, and Time Behind Bars, Inspire Drug Dealer to Turn Author"
[45] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?

about it."[46] Smithbay (Lincoln's cellmate) is highlighting the similarities between physical and mental imprisonment, imposed by a dominant white elite, with the system of United States chattel slavery. After Lincoln remains unengaged by Visions for Black Men or Christopher Columbus and the African Holocaust, Smithbay gives him a copy of Pimp, Story of My Life by Iceberg Slim. Lincoln becomes obsessed with Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, and what he calls, "gangsta pimp shit", the forerunners of street literature.[47] He connects with the narratives presented in those books saying "This was my world. This was my reality."[48] When his cellmate again offers him Visions for Black Man, Lincoln asks for some more of "that gangsta shit." Smithbay tells Lincoln "this is as gangsta as it gets. This book is so gangsta, it's real. This is the book they, the ones who are in power, hide from you. They don't want you to wake up. They fear that if you do, you may wake up everybody and free the slaves."[49] This time Lincoln finishes the book in a day and is catapulted into a new passion for serious and political literature. Although this is a fictionalized account, it is largely representative of Jihad's personal experience and details a central role for street literature as a mechanism to connect young men and women of color – particularly those in jail – with reading and self-education; because it tells stories that relate to their experience.

The intimate interlinking of the prison system with corporate consumerism feeds directly into the perpetuation of incarceration. By 2000, according to Angela Davis, "there were twenty-six for-profit prison corporations in the United States that operated approximately 150 facilities in twenty-eight states."[50] Part of the role that street literature plays in the anti-prison movement is as a challenge to traditional processes of corporate marketing. While the books are sold for

[46] Jihad. *Street Life* 253
[47] Jihad. *Street Life* 255
[48] Jihad. *Street Life* 255
[49] Jihad. *Street Life* 255
[50] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 97

profit, an overriding theme of the street literature genre seems to be "Everybody has to have a voice."[51] A number of popular street literature novels are self-published and many are sold at the popular stands that adorn 125th Street in Harlem and other neighborhood locations, while others are only available on the internet.[52] Street literature authors have tended to bypass agents all together and several have even started up their own publishing companies.[53] The emphasis on access to the novels is underlined by the fact that street literature seems to be reaching audiences previously un-engaged in literature.[54] Although some criticize street literature for its depiction of ghetto fabulous, racialized drama, others proclaim that the benefits of "getting a new audience excited about books" outweigh the negatives.[55] In particular, the entrance of the novels into prisons themselves has served to engage members, such as Joe Black, author of Street Team, of the prison population in both the reading and the writing of street lit.[56]

Although the novels stop short of providing an alternative to the prison system, it is clear in novels ranging from Jihad and K'wan's conscious works to Clark's more objectifying piece that the prison system is fundamentally flawed. This allows the reader an easy jump to imagine the potential obsoleteness of the current system of incarceration. As a relatively new genre – the modern version having been jump started by Sistah Soulja's 1999 The Coldest Winter Ever – street literature has the potential to grow in many directions.[57] As distribution continues to grow, and consequently engage more community members in writing and production of the literature, the written documentation of fictional accounts of the prison experience may allow for a physically manifested communal voicing of grievances to go along with shared oral histories.

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[51] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[52] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[53] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[54] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[55] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[56] Duffy, Peter. "Life of Crime, and Time Behind Bars, Inspire Drug Dealer to Turn Author"
[57] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?

Furthermore, as street literature begins to attract more attention and wider audiences, the consistency of the presence of prison and the varied depictions of an unjust system of incarceration may serve to garner interest and discussion into prisons even amongst members of populations that are less obviously ravaged by the prison industrial complex.

Thus far control over the publishing and distribution of works of street literature has remained in the hands of black writers and publishers, and black-owned bookstores.[58] As already discussed, the *racialization* of the prison population and experience is deeply rooted in historical associations of criminality with blackness as well as in a directed economic interest in the marginalization of communities of color.[59] By maintaining control over the popular medium of street literature, black writers and distributors are resisting a system which limits and controls people of color. Modern day racism, argues Davis, "surreptitiously defines social and economic structures in ways that are difficult to identify and thus are much more damaging."[60] Contemporary racism manifests itself visibly in United States (and global) social structures such as the criminal justice system, the education system, and the economic system. The control that African-Americans and other people of color have thus far maintained over the production and consumption of street literature is a challenge to the ideology of "color-blind" racism which serves as a cover for the prioritization of white interests in these institutions that structure United States society. Not every work of street literature is imbibed with a progressive political consciousness or is geared toward black and brown empowerment; however, the placement of the genre largely in the control of the populations about whom it is written goes directly against a tradition of disempowerment and control by whites.

[58] Veneble, Malcolm et al. "It's Urban, It's Real, but is this Literature?
[59] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 28-30, 34, 85
[60] Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? 38

Street literature represents the prison experience in overlapping but varied manners but the point is that is does indeed represent it! Like Malcolm X or Piri Thomas, Jihad speaks to his encounter with reading and education in prison and the role that has played in his formation. K'wan makes more fleeting references to prison but explores in depth the aftermath and repercussions of having a prison record – especially painting prison experience as an inherent part of the hood and the hustle in that a wide cross-section of the characters have had prison experience for various periods of time and various offences (Rio, Jamal, Cutty...). K'wan and Joe Black explore the conspiracy and injustice associated with the justice system, as well as the theme of snitching. Even Wahida Clark's fleeting and two-dimensional references to the food and hustle Jaz encounters in her incarceration speaks to a certain element of the prison experience.[61]

The uncovering of a variety of differing perspectives on prison being painted by people who have a closeness and experience with the system is a challenge to the main stream media representation of prison and as such to the hegemonic acceptance of prison as an inevitable aspect of life. Whether seven years of prison experience is relatively ignored and passed over, as in Thugs and the Women Who love Them, or explored in depth as in Street Life, representations of prison in the life experience of our characters and the dominance of prison as a theme in street literature beg inquiry into the very centrality of the institution to the populations they are part of. The hope then, is that such inquiry on a widespread basis will prompt the contesting of race and class-based marginalization and the contemplation of decarceration alongside alternative methods of justice which are geared toward rehabilitation rather than repression and punishment.

[61] Clark, Wahida. *Thugs and the Women Who Love Them* 273-280