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Roots and Branches: Towards an Aesthetic and an Acceptance of Urban/Street Literature

By

Joyce Russell, Ph.D.

I. ROOTS: ICEBERG SLIM AND DONALD GOINES

No sun will shine in my day today; (no sun will shine)

The high yellow moon won't come out to play:

(that high yellow moon won't come out to play)

I said (darkness) darkness has covered my light,

(and the stage) And has changed my day into night, yeah.

Where is the love to be found? (oo-ooh-ooh)

Won't someone tell me?

'Cause my (sweet life) life must be somewhere to be found -

(must be somewhere for me)

Instead of concrete jungle (jungle!)

Where the living is harder (concrete, jungle!).

--Bob Marley

The above lines from the song "Concrete Jungle" by Reggae singer Bob Marley are well suited to help define an African American literary genre that has not yet fully engaged the attention of the literary community. This under- explored genre, called urban literature by some, is more commonly known as street literature or hip hop literature and centers on African American characters that elite, erudite, or politically empowered individuals might regard as failures. (The term "street lit" will be employed throughout this essay to accord with the way that most of the authors identify their novels.) As Marley's "Concrete Jungle" suggests, street lit characters seem always to be looking for life, love, and sunshine, which, one discovers after exploring a fair amount of street lit, means simply that the characters are on a quest for economic prosperity. However, the concrete jungles of the cities can often make this quest an arduous one. Marley was referring, of course, to Trenchtown, Jamaica, the concrete jungle where he himself grew up. The creators of street lit choose as their concrete jungle the Urban North of the USA, specifically, cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia. While street lit may now be receiving the attention of a few literary scholars, and while some mainstream publishers are beginning to see street lit as potentially lucrative, this fast-paced, gritty genre is not without its critics. An abundance of four-letter words; crime-ridden, drug-infested lives; and the free-flowing sexual activity of the characters are some of the main reasons that critics find fault with this genre that some have described as plain thuggish. More thoughtful reflection on street lit, however, may very well reveal that this genre and its creators have something to teach us all. These lessons were first introduced by the forefathers of street lit, Robert Lee Maupin (1918-1992), who adopted the pseudonym of Iceberg Slim, and occasionally the pseudonym of Robert Beck, and Donald Goines (1936- 1974), who sometimes wrote under the name of Al C. Clark. One of the most important lessons that these two taught was that even individuals who are considered worthless by society are capable of articulating their innermost feelings while critiquing society—just as more mainstream writers do. But Slim's and Goins's critiques are accomplished not by

storytelling. Instead, these early Fathers of street lit employ the method of counter storytelling, which is one of the main characteristics of this kind of fiction.

Counter storytelling, as defined by critical race theorists, is a methodology grounded in the experiences and the knowledge possessed by African Americans. Counter storytelling challenges the hegemony of an America where whiteness, wealth, and political empowerment determine what society values the most. Take, for example, Slim's own personal life, which from the beginning appeared dismal, and worthless. Growing up in a community known then as a ghetto—but known now as an inner-city or the Hood—placed Slim and his mother in the margins of society. The mother and son were abandoned by Slim's father when Slim was three years old. His mother worked as a maid, and as a hairdresser-manicurist, the latter being an occupation which was a house-to-house business. Mother and son, by the estimations of mainstream America were, for the most part, poor and worthless. Slim's mother, nevertheless, was able to give her son the semblance of prosperity, and for a while Slim attended Tuskegee University, reportedly while novelist Ralph Ellison was also a student there.

Slim's mother's customers included men wanting manicures who, as Slim later found out, were hustlers and pimps. They always had money and lived a lavish lifestyle. Admiring these men caused Slim to resort to the same kinds of criminal acts that produced these men's wealth, which eventually caused Slim himself to become a pimp and, later, a drug seller, and a heroin addict. For twenty-five years Slim was pimping, using drugs, or serving time in prison.

Goines, unlike Slim, came from a well-to-do family that owned a dry cleaning business. It was assumed that Goines would carry on the business, but instead he enlisted in the Air Force. When he returned from his overseas duty in Japan, he was addicted to heroin and resorted to pimping and other criminal behavior to support his addiction. While serving time in prison, Goines was introduced to Slim's

autobiographical novel, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967), which influenced him to write *Whoreson* (1972), also an autobiographical novel, which is about the son of a prostitute who becomes a pimp.

Perhaps with the exception of underworld figures, few individuals would admire or value the criminal lifestyles of Slim and Goines. In fact, Slim and Goines themselves seemed not to have been highly valued even as human beings. Goines was shot and killed in his own home, presumably because of a drug deal that went wrong. To this day his murderer has not been found. Slim died of liver failure at the age of seventy –two after years of abusing his body with street drugs. While Slim and Goines lived dangerous and crime-filled lives, their writings, nevertheless, depicted a side of American life that in the mid and late twentieth century was quite real. In a 1989 article critic Les Stone reminds us that the fiction written in the style of Goines and Slim was at that time described quite simply "ghetto realism." Such realistic, direct, personal reports as those offered by Goines and Slim evince an important tenet of counter storytelling, specifically, the responsibility of people of color to reveal how they have been disadvantaged or injured by the hegemony of whiteness. Put another way, a financially secure life for many, perhaps most, Black men during Slim's and Goines's lifetimes (when racism was more rampant than today) was virtually unattainable—unless one resorted to some sort of illegal money –making venture. America's "story," or at least the one that is promised to all but attained mostly by non-Blacks, is one of equality, wealth, and prosperity; Black America's "counter story" is one of the grim reality depicted by Slim, Goines, and, more recently, the street lit authors of the twenty-first century, who will be discussed in a moment. Before doing so, however, I wish to speculate on additional reasons why Slim and Goines (and now the new street lit authors) have tended not to be the subject of serious scholarly inquiry.

The works of these authors, in addition to being labeled as ghetto realism, have also been labeled as black pulp fiction. Pulp fiction was originally produced on low quality, wood pulp paper, and almost always used as subject matter romance, crime, and high adventure. In short, pulp fiction has traditionally

been viewed as inferior literature produced on inferior paper. Moreover, pulp fiction was priced cheaply, making it easy for the masses to purchase the books. That black pulp fiction was read by ordinary people, and that it dealt with themes that were not necessarily clean and pretty, made pulp fiction (and ghetto realism) unworthy of serious academic study, at least as far as most literary critics were concerned. Such a view raises serious questions about the aesthetic standards by which critics were judging this genre. Are the true-to-life experiences of Black Americans, however ugly or negative, unworthy of scholarly attention? Must academics always subscribe to an aesthetic which evokes the normative values of a white (or Black) upper or middle class?

Limited scholarship on Slim and Goines does exist; such works, however, tend to be sketchy and tend largely to be biographical. One of the more thoughtful long studies on these two is a 2004 doctoral dissertation by Candace Love Jackson: "The Literate Pimp: Reclaiming and Revisioning the Pimp-Authored Text." In it, she discusses the African American underworld and connects it to the activities of street life. Jackson also contributed "The Literate Pimp: Robert Beck, Iceberg Slim, and Pimping the American Novel" to New *Essays on the African American Novel from Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead* (2008).

II. BRANCHES: SAPPHIRE, SISTA SOULJAH, AND OTHERS

When Ramona "Sapphire" Lofton's 1996 novel *Push* became the source material for the 2009 film *Precious*, street lit became more respectable than it or its close relative ghetto realism had ever been. Producers Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry collaborated to bring *Precious* to thebig screen, which created new interest in Sapphire's novel of sex, drugs, theft, HIV, and domestic violence, all of which find expression in both the film and the novel. Without millionaire Winfrey's interest in *Push,* one wonders if the novel would have found the second life that currently it is experiencing. Professors are making *Push* a reading requirement; a few scholars have presented papers at conferences, as will be revealed shortly. In some respects, Sapphire, along with Sista Souljah, should be regarded as the Mother of the new street lit just as Slim and Goines are regarded as the Fathers of ghetto realism.

It has been demonstrated above that the use of the term "street lit" to identify this hard, gritty genre may very well be new; however, African American literature focusing on the lives of hard core drug dealers, prostitutes and pimps, sexual deviants and other kinds of thugs, certainly is not new, as Slim's and Goines's works demonstrate. Now, however, we turn our attention more directly to street lit, its crimes, deviance, and thuggery-- and to its Mothers, Sapphire and Souljah.

In one respect, street lit is sad in that it often depicts abject African Americans living on the fringes of society who, against the odds, are, in their own minds, simply trying to make their way in the world in the only ways that they know how. Often, those means of survival are less than honorable, something to which even street lit characters themselves sometimes admit. So on the

one hand, street lit does evoke sadness and despair, but, on the other hand, street lit can be uplifting and inspiring when, for example, those who are abject somehow sublimely turn their lives around. And that is the case with Clarisse Precious Jones, the protagonist of *Push,* who moves from being a victim of incest to becoming a survivor of the hardships of her life.

While there are a few street lit novels of the 1990s that predate *Push* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) by Sista Souljah, not one has received the popular attention or critical acclaim that these two novels have received. Still, however, there are other street lit novels that also deserve the literary critics' attention. Perhaps such novels are not being discussed or critiqued simply because they and their authors are unfamiliar to scholars and critics. (Some of the more complex street lit authors and their works will be identified at the end of this essay.) To demonstrate that street lit can be subjected to rigorous academic analysis, I call special attention to *Push* and *The Coldest Winter Ever.*

A few conference papers have been presented on Sapphire's and Souljah's novels, and some insightful websites have appeared. For one example, in Ocotober 2009, a conference was held at Penn State University where the works of both Sapphire and Souljah were analyzed. The conference was "Celebrating Contemporary African American Literature: The Novel since 1988." At the conference the keynote speaker, Alice Randall, compared *The Coldest Winter Ever* to *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (1881), a Brazilian classic by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis; Robin E. Field presented a paper entitled "*Push:* Reconsidering the Incest Novel*."* Thus, it does seem that there is a place for street lit in the academy if scholars are willing to seriously consider the social and political complexities of the genre. Scholars, furthermore, might

acknowledge that street lit has its own aesthetic which is not necessarily the one that scholars are accustomed to embracing. For one thing, street lit authors' creations are linguistically different –(fresh!), especially where lexicon is concerned. Note the following examples: *fresh*, meaning attractive and new; *cheddar*, meaning money; *B-More*, meaning the city of Baltimore; the *ATL*, meaning the city of Atlanta; *bling*, meaning jewelry or the appearance of wealth. And for another thing, many street lit authors know how to artistically tell stories based on the legislation that has limited Black Americans' opportunities for wholesome, productive lives. Poor schools, unequal access to housing , jobs, and health care; disparities between Blacks and Whites in the judicial system—all provide subject matter for street lit authors, allowing them to offer critiques of government in one way or another. Let us take a brief look at *Push* in order to see its critique, and indictment, of education in America.

Push, among many other things, makes a political statement in its indictment of America's failed efforts to reform education so that all Americans—Black or white, rich or poor—can become educated. The protagonist, Precious, has been seriously underserved by the schools of New York, so much so that at the age of sixteen she cannot read. Under the Improving America's Schools Acts of 1994, enacted during the administration of President Bill Clinton, the Title I program included provisions for giving extra academic support to disadvantaged students. Moreover, Title I also stipulated that schools would be held accountable for their students' achievement or lack thereof. Precious, practically illiterate and unable to make plans for a

meaningful life, is but a representation of the many disadvantaged children of America who emerge from schools with limited academic skills.

KK Elliot comments in a post on <Bookstove.com> that Winter Santiago, the protagonist of *The Coldest Winter Ever,* similar to Precious, has limited chances for success because she has acquired material possessions by using her body as currency. When Winter and her female friends can no longer use their bodies to acquire things, they have nothing left, quite simply because they have no education to sustain them. Hence, Souljah, similar to Sapphire, offers a critique of America's failed promise of an education to all.

Not all street lit novels are critiques of America's failed promise of an education. However, all are commentaries on the social ills that plague some of the Black neighborhoods of the urban areas of the United States. What this means is that street lit authors work with diverse themes: child abandonment, child neglect, larceny, auto theft, illicit drug use, HIV and AIDS, unemployment, and truancy (just to name some). And, street lit authors are also diverse as far as the range of their characters is concerned. Where the ghetto realists, like Goins and Slim, tended to populate their works with adult characters who were pimps, drug dealers, drug users, and con artists, street lit authors often choose to populate theirs with ordinary people who have fallen on hard times: young gang bangers, professionals, and children who engage in sexual activity for money. And, yes, there are also adult prostitutes, murderers, and shoplifters—criminals of all varieties. As was pointed out earlier, however, what remains important is that the authors of street lit are voicing the real life experiences of marginalized individuals who deserve to have their stories, or counter stories, told. What is also important is that even though many of the

characters in street lit novels are in a moral abyss, usually the criminals are apprehended and brought to justice. They therefore learn that their crimes cannot go unpunished. That crimes are punished challenges the views of those who maintain that street lit is nothing more than a glorification of the underworld. In fact, the opposite is true: You do the crime, you serve the time.

Street lit authors, like their ghetto realist predecessors, frequently have led unlawful lives. There are, of course, exceptions like Sapphire—a former educator and Souljah—an activist and writer. One must remember, however, that just because an author has led a wayward life is no indication that that author's literary productions are worthless and without merit. Jess Mowry, for instance, the author of the highly successful *Way Past Cool* (1992), dropped out of school at the age of thirteen and worked in a scrap –iron business. Vickie Stringer, the author of *Dirty Red* (2006) served time in prison for selling cocaine. Shannon Holmes signed a contract, his first, for a book deal while in prison. That deal was for *B-More Careful* (2001). While many street lit authors have served time in prison, so also have many more mainstream authors: Malcom X, Angela Davis, Oscar Wilde, just to randomly name three. Even so, their works are still studied and are highly regarded by scholars.

Street lit authors are known also for their bootstrapping abilities, which can only be seen as a positive attribute. Bootstrapping, as the term implies, means that writers begin their careers without the assistance of publishers or distributors. Ta-Nehisi Paul Coats, the author of "Hustle and Grow," which appeared in *Time* magazine in 2006, noted that a street lit author by the name of Relentless Aaron began selling his books in New York City from his car. (Yes, Relentless

served prison time for writing bad checks.) Since then, he has signed a fourteen-book deal with St. Martin's Press. Starting out with no external help does not make Relentless exceptional in the world of street lit authors. Many street lit authors began that way. Omar Tyree, for example, the 2001 NAACP Image Award winner for outstanding literary work and perhaps best known for his debut novel *Flyy Girl* (2001), also was a bootstrapper.

Counter storytelling, employing underworld themes, bootstrapping, calling attention to the disparities of race and class are some of the practices of street lit authors. Having a prison record, though not always, seems also to be associated with a street lit author's identity. Also, there is the tendency of street lit authors to adopt pseudonyms, a practice that is traceable to the production of pulp fiction when publishers did not want a particular author's name to appear too many times before the reading audience. That was precisely the case with Goines. After publishing so many books by Goines, Holloway House Publishers asked Goines to use the name of Al C. Clark to give readers the perception that a new writer had emerged.

Yet another characteristic of street lit is the concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a spirit of inclusion, interconnectedness, generosity, a special kind of essence found on the Mother Continent but which street lit also manifests. Ubuntu is an ethic or humanist philosophy focusing on human beings' allegiance to each other. In many ways the characters of street lit novels—though deviants and misfits according to America's criteria-- demonstrate an allegiance to each other. But, what is more important is that the authors and their characters demonstrate an allegiance to the truth. The truth about America's failed promises is revealed through street lit. But more about ubuntu at this point.

Ubuntu, regarded as a classical African concept, has been borrowed by academics, including literary critics, to assist them in doing their work. Rob Gaylard, for example, wrote an article in 2004 which he called "Welcome to the World of Our Humanity: (African) Humanism, Ubuntu and Black South African Writing." In his article Gaylard emphasizes that in South Africa where Apartheid constituted a systematic and deliberate denial of the humanity of Black South Africans, only when the construction of a more democratic and caring society began, did the system of Apartheid begin to break down. In other words, a common or shared humanity began to appear. Gaylard also mentions that this shared humanity, or Ubuntu, was central to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was a court-like body assembled in South Africa after the abolition of Apartheid. The TRC had two primary objectives. The first was to have the victims and victimizers tell the truth; the second was to have the victims and victimizers acknowledge their shared humanity.

It is easy to note comparisons between South Africa's system of Apartheid and the segregation of America's urban areas where Blacks live in neighborhoods where so much is lacking. What Gaylard said of South Africa, can also be said of America: Only when America acknowledges the humanity of all Americans can inner- city segregation be abolished.

Similar to the works of any other literary genre, some street lit books are obviously more complex than others in terms of theme, plot, character, and all of the other essential elements of fiction. But, some complex street lit books have been written and are still being produced by counter storytellers and bootstrappers who are simply telling the truth about their lives and the

America which they inhabit. Without the literary complexities to which I have alluded, no work of fiction, including street lit, can withstand the rigors of serious academic analysis. Another point to make is that street lit is actually being read, and frequently by individuals who otherwise probably would not even pick up a book. Some individuals have suggested that we get people to reading –by any means necessary! Because of the growing popularity of street lit, and because it is growing into a highly profitable business for publishers, it is understandable that some thin stories are bound to seep through. However, if literary critics begin to work with and evaluate street lit, the cream will surely rise to the top. Street lit is here. And it is controversial. Literary critics have the primary responsibility of developing an aesthetic and literary standard by which street lit can be judged. Then, a well-thought-out response can be given to those who ask this question: Is street lit really literature?

A Few Street Lit Authors and Ghetto Realists of Merit

Kwan.	*Section 8: A Hood Rat Novel*
Jess Mowry.	*Way Past Cool*
---.	*Bones Become Flowers*
Tracy Brown.	*Snapped*
Nathan McCall.	*Make Me Wanna Holler*
Claude Brown.	*Manchild in the Promised Land* (Ghetto Realism)
Erick S. Gray.	*It's like Candy*
Wahida Clark.	*Thugs and the Women Who Love Them*
Treasure Blue.	*A Street Girl Named Desire*
Alice Childress.	*A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* (Ghetto Realism)

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