KRISTINA GRAAFF

Street Literature

Black Popular Fiction in the Era of U.S. Mass Incarceration

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to Randy Kearse and James Spady
for the shift in perspective

to my Parents
for continuously supporting my paths /
(glass) diamonds and all

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1 Introduction

1.1 Interlinking Fictional and Material Spaces of Ethnoracial Confinement

> He realized that a great majority of his childhood friends were either dead or locked up; only a selected few from back in the day were still on the street. And still in the [drug] game. How they'd managed to avoid death or prison was beyond him.
>
> Shannon Holmes (Holmes 2004, 29)

Corey, the protagonist of Shannon Holmes' novel *Never Go Home Again*, addresses the two major narrative spaces of street literature: the streets and the prison system.[1] By outlining the confining spaces between which characters usually move, his observation also hints at the most common storylines in this popular form of African American fiction. Set in urban, predominantly black, low-income areas in the contemporary U.S.,[2] most novels portray an African American male protagonist who attempts to leave the marginalizing environment by getting involved in the local drug trade, in particular the street sale of crack cocaine. The streets are usually presented as the only platform that allows for income generation in an area otherwise devoid of employment opportunities. As a limited spatial resource, the streets are a highly contested territory in which characters engage in fatal fights over the most lucrative sales spots. At the same time, they are the location where law enforcement, usually in the form of white police officers, is omnipresent and characters are regularly arrested.

[1] In chapter 2, I define what the spatial perimeter of 'the streets' entails. Chapter 3 elaborates on the U.S. prison system.

[2] For reasons of brevity, in the following I will omit the term 'predominantly' and simply talk about 'black low-income areas' or use similar expressions, like 'black low- opportunity areas.' However, this does not mean that I assume that these areas are exclusively inhabited by black residents.

This linkage between streets and prison[3] that I conceptualize as the *street-prison symbiosis* is not only relevant on the narrative level, but also manifests itself in the production, publishing, distribution and consumption of street literature. When the first narratives of this kind emerged in the late 1990s,[4] which are also referred to as 'urban fiction' or simply 'street lit,' none of the mainstream publishers considered them to be commercially viable since they are written in street slang[5] and address issues such as racial injustices and imprisonment. For that reason, authors began to distribute their self-published works on the urban streets of black low-income neighborhoods such as Harlem and North Philadelphia – the neighborhoods in which many of the authors had grown up. To this day, street vending is an important book distribution practice in communities that often lack retail infrastructure, including bookstores.[6]

Having grown up in areas with few employment opportunities, many of the authors have first-hand experience in the drug trade and reapply these entrepreneurial skills to the outdoor selling of street literature. Due to the disproportionate law enforcement conducted in disadvantaged minority neighborhoods that is specifically aimed at petty subsistence practices, hundreds of street lit authors are also currently in prison or have been incarcerated in the past, usually for street-level drug dealing. Since the popular novels are also widely read among the imprisoned, a diversified network has been established that mutually connects the

[3] I use 'prison' in the singular when the term refers to the entire prison system, which comprises jails, states and federal prisons.

[4] The two novels that established the literary form on the streets were Sister Souljah's *Coldest Winter Ever* and Teri Woods' *True to the Game*, both published in 1999.

[5] This is the term most authors use when referring to the language that many of the novels are written in. While (white) linguists usually refer to it as 'African American Vernacular English,' 'Black English' or 'Black Vernacular English,' many authors perceive these terminologies as stigmatizing. Moreover, 'street slang' is a very specific language that also varies from city to city and cannot be subsumed under a generalizing term like 'Black English.' In the search for a more complex terminology, the concept of 'Hip Hop Nation Language' by the linguist Samy Alim can be of help (e.g. Alim 2006). This is especially the case since street literature can be viewed as part of a larger hip hop culture, as I will show further below. Developed to analyze the language of rap lyrics and hip hop stage performances, Hip Hop Nation Language includes the formation of a street-related vocabulary, specific syntactic and conversational techniques as well as non-verbal strategies, such as body movements and clothing styles.

[6] In the essay *Ethnic Contestations over African American Fiction. The Street Vending of Street Literature in New York City* (Graaff 2015, forthcoming), I investigate the role of street vending for street literature in more detail.

streets with the prison system. Novels written and published out of prison are sold on the street markets, while specialized distribution channels ensure the availability of narratives in the nation's correctional facilities.

The book revolves around this street-prison symbiosis, which I define as a form of ethnoracial confinement particularly affecting African Americans from low-income areas.[7] Using an interdisciplinary approach that juxtaposes the analyses of selected novels with ethnographic fieldwork, in particular interviews I conducted with authors and publishers, I examine how the street-prison symbiosis plays out both in the narrative and physical spaces of street literature.[8] More precisely, my work investigates the extent to which the fictional texts rewrite the racialized spaces of streets and prison, and how street literature authors and publishers (re)configure the marginalizing environments through their writing, publishing and distribution practices.[9]

I argue that street literature, both as a form of writing and a cultural-economic practice, is a response to specific urban, penal and economic changes that started in the 1970s. While the novels reflect the high degree of segregation and neglect in post-industrial urban areas, they are simultaneously viewed as an economic resource by their authors, most of whom are affected by similar economic and spatial marginalization. By portraying highly competitive drug dealers as the only characters that are capable of generating an income in these areas, most novels also voice the U.S.'s shift to neoliberal capitalism that favors individual responsibility. At the same time, many formerly incarcerated authors follow the neoliberal ideology by necessity. Well aware that most of today's reentry programs provide little support toward successful

[7] The term 'ethnoracial confinement' emphasizes the fact that 'race' and 'ethnicity' are inextricably intertwined in the discrimination of minority populations. I take this terminology from the urban sociologist Loïc Wacquant whose research on the contemporary penal state is central to my work.
[8] I use the terms 'narrative space,' 'fictional,' 'imaginative' or 'literary space' synonymously to refer to the location of streets and prisons as they are portrayed in street literature novels. I also use the terms 'material,' 'physical' or 'geographical space' interchangeably to refer to the streets and prison as locations where the novels are written, marketed, sold and read.
[9] Due to my focus on the writing, publishing and distribution of street literature, I do not examine how readers navigate the relation between streets and prison through works of street literature. However, scholars like Megan Sweeney and Vanessa Morris have contributed groundbreaking reader-oriented studies to the research on street literature (Irvin Morris 2011; Irvin Morris 2010; Sweeney 2010; Sweeney 2008).

reintegration, they venture into self-publishing and self-distribution and strive to become self-reliant entrepreneurs.

Most notably, street literature can be viewed as a response to racially biased law enforcement, implemented with the so-called War on Drugs, and the system of mass incarceration that currently imprisons over 900,000 African Americans, most of them from lower-class backgrounds. Black men represent the largest share of today's prison population, a fact that is manifested in the novels that mostly display male characters as caught in the street-prison symbiosis. It also becomes visible in the disproportionate number of male street literature authors behind bars.

This gender imbalance is apparent in the novels selected for my close readings, all of which feature male protagonists. They include *Street Life* by the author Jihad (2004), J.M. Benjamin's *My Manz and 'Em* (2010a) and *Convict's Candy* by Damon Meadows and Jason Poole (2007). However, although all of these novels are written by men, I have not selected them because of the gender of their authors. In fact, there are equal numbers of female and male authors in the street literature scene. Rather, they were chosen because they are good illustrations of the confining ties between streets and prison. They also demonstrate the great variety of ways in which the street-prison symbiosis manifests itself in the popular narratives. Moreover, the widely circulated works are prime examples of the most common street literature narrative patterns.

The fact that most incarcerated street literature authors are male finds expression in the book's ethnographic part that investigates how the (formerly) imprisoned writers Jihad, J.M. Benjamin, Wahida Clark, Seth Ferranti and Kwame Teague navigate the confining linkage between streets and prison in their writing, publishing and distribution practices. The case studies of female publishers Susan Hampstead and Teri Woods reflect the predominance of women in the street literature publishing business, especially among those publishers who are producing works by prisoners.

The book's central analytical tool, the concept of the street-prison symbiosis, derives from the notion of the ghetto-prison symbiosis developed by the urban sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2001). Wacquant deploys this spatial terminology to illustrate how the disproportionately black prison population is not related to a rise of *criminal* insecurity, but is instead a response to the *social* insecurity of the neoliberal state. In this view, black low-income areas and prisons serve as mutually complementary institutions to govern dispossessed minority populations (2009b). While my work confirms the governmental function of Wacquant's symbiosis, this book rewrites his rather top-down approach

as a more practice- and agency-oriented one by replacing the notion of 'the ghetto' with that of 'the streets.'[10] Adding the spatial perimeter of the streets – a space that is also shaped through the social practices and cultural imaginations of street literature – allows me to examine the confining ties between the two locations from a more actor-oriented perspective. While 'ghetto' is an abstract term that often entails stigmatizing connotations, 'the streets' place an emphasis on how everyday practices and experiences are interlinked with institutional powers.

With this book, I intend to contribute to the study of space in literary studies and to complement the existing research on street literature that so far has not examined the ties between streets and prison. I situate my work in the framework of literary studies after the spatial turn that no longer considers geographical space as a 'self-sufficient' environment that exists independently of social practices and cultural expressions, but as an entity that is performatively created through these practices and imaginations, including literature (Bachmann-Medick 2006, 310). Thus, I examine the fictional and physical spaces of street literature as mutually constitutive. At the same time, I deploy space as a methodological-conceptual tool (Bachmann-Medick 2008, 665). The spaces of streets and prison are thus not merely a topic in street literature; the street-prison symbiosis itself is the analytical concept that structures and guides my examination.[11]

Increasingly, interdisciplinary theories and methods of literary analysis have considered how literature performatively (co)constructs space. They include geocriticism that examines the referential relationship between a geographical space and its different textual representations (Tally 2011; Westphal 2011); ecocritical approaches that examine how literature represents the relation between human cultures and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996; Glotfelty, Lynch, and Armbruster 2012); and literary cartography that views literary portrayals of space as a cartographic practice that creates cognitive maps (Moretti 1999; Moretti 2005). However, methodologies

[10] I place 'ghetto' and 'streets' in single quotations marks when I refer to them as analytical concepts.

[11] My analysis of literature as a performative medium benefitted greatly from extensive dialogues with geographers, urban planners, anthropologists and architects that I have had in the context of the *Transatlantic Graduate Research Program Berlin – New York* at the Center for Metropolitan Studies.

are still evolving that address the interrelation between culturally shaped physical spaces and the literary (re)configurations thereof.

In this book, I intend to illustrate how physical and fictional spaces are mutually contingent and constitutive. I do this by juxtaposing literary portrayals of streets and prison with social practices taking place on the streets and in prison. This approach allows me to show how, among other things, physical environments, such as prisons, are written into fictional narratives while the narratives enable authors to write themselves out of these confining spaces. At the same time, this conjunction of cultural expressions and social practices reveals the ambiguous position street literature takes toward the street-prison symbiosis. While many narratives critically address the ties between streets and prison, authors largely draw their sales from these marginalizing environments. By applying a geographical spatial concept – the street-prison symbiosis – to the study of literature, I also intend to expand the narrow perception of fictional spaces as mere representations.

Moreover, I aim to contribute to the existing research on street literature that so far has primarily been conducted in the disciplines of library and educational sciences and that has been focused on the literacy potential of the popular novels for readers in disadvantaged minority neighborhoods (Irvin Morris 2012; Jones 2006; Irvin Morris 2010; Vernon 2008; Lamont Hill 2005; Lamont Hill 2008; Ratner 2009; Gibson 2009) and in prison (Guerra 2010). As studies in this field argue, it is the fact that the novels are written in slang and set in areas that many of their readers can relate to, that makes them a useful tool to promote adolescent and adult literacy. While this assumption is based on a correlation between geographical and fictional space, the studies do not conceptualize this relationship.

Much of this research has been conducted in response to the initial refusal of public libraries to integrate the popular novels into their collections and the resistance of schools to use street literature in the classroom. Opponents usually explain their reservations concerning this form of writing with the often violent and misogynist content of the male-dominated narratives and the sexual explicitness that also finds expression on most covers (Chiles 2006; Chiles 2009). As I will show in my analyses of selected novels, this is indeed a justified criticism. However, when this criticism serves as a point of departure, as is the case with many scholarly works in the library and educational sciences, it automatically places researchers in a position of having to ‘prove’ street literature’s worth. It is my intention to avoid taking sides in such a good-bad dichotomy. By focusing on the contradictory position street literature

takes toward the street-prison symbiosis, I argue instead that it cannot be assigned to either side.

While much existing research examines reading practices, usually in the context of book clubs organized by the researcher, I found no studies that conduct an extensive analysis of individual novels. Streets and prisons are indeed acknowledged as elemental narrative and physical spaces (Gifford 2013; Honig 2010; Irvin Morris 2012; Sweeney 2010). However, no examination so far pays close attention to their interconnectedness. Two recent studies on street literature by literary scholars proved useful for my examination. In *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons* (2010), Megan Sweeney analyzes the reading practices of female inmates in the context of the non-rehabilitative setting of the current prison system. While my work does not focus on the novels' readers, Sweeney's observations of how correctional staff censors street literature novels confirm racially biased punishment practices also found in my study. The second work, *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing* by Justin Gifford (2013) includes a study of the street literature publishing industry. Acknowledging the important role that incarcerated writers play for this form of writing, Gifford shows how this vulnerable, predominantly male prison population is often exploited by publishers. In the ethnographic section of this book, I provide a case study that details what Gifford refers to as "prison-industrial-literary complex" (13).

1.2 Street Literature Today

While initially not considered as here to stay, street literature is now well established in the U.S. book market. Today, the novels are sold simultaneously by individual writers, full-time street vendors and independent as well as chain bookstores like Barnes & Noble and Books-A-Million. However, quarrels between owners of independent bookstores and street vendors are not uncommon. Since outdoor sellers often receive the books at wholesale price directly from the authors and do not have to pay overhead costs for their street strands, they are able to sell them at a much lower price than bookstores.[12] As I will show in chapter 10,

[12] Bookstores sell street literature novels for the cover price of $15, while they usually go for a maximum of $10 on the street markets. Beginning around 2005, when street

independent bookstores in black neighborhoods often struggle to compete with the street vending scene.[13]

Once mainstream publishers recognized the commercial potential of street literature, presses such as Random House, Warner and St. Martin's Press also began to publish the popular narratives, usually under separate imprints.[14] However, the largest share of novels is still either self-published or produced by one of the many independent street literature presses that have emerged over the past fifteen years.[15] Street literature thus represents an opening of the literary market. This is the case not only because affordable printing techniques and easily accessible word processing programs lower the threshold for entering the business and give writers more control over their work,[16] but also because street literature has led to an entrepreneurial boom so far unheard of in the U.S. book market. Many authors who start out as self-publishers eventually establish their own presses, publishing and distributing the works of other street lit authors. As I will show in the book's ethnographic part, the success of self-published authors and independent publishing houses is inextricably linked to the streets and the prison system. In contrast to commercial publishers, self-publishing authors and owners of independent presses realized early on that it takes an infrastructure that caters to readers in urban low-income areas and the prison system.

Taking a closer look at street literature's authors, most are African Americans in their 20s through 40s. While very few are white, an

literature reached its saturation point, street vendors began to sell the novels for even lower prices, ranging from $7 to $10. Older or less popular novels even go for less.

[13] The same chapter also discusses how independent stores are often reluctant to take on the popular novels because they want to distance themselves from a form of writing that they consider as 'non-literary.'

[14] They include the imprints Atria and Strebor Books, which are subdivisions of Simon & Schuster; Dafina, an imprint of Kensington Books; and One World, which is part of Random House. Frequently, these imprints are formerly independent publishers that have been acquired by the larger presses.

[15] In chapter 9, I address the high number of independent presses that publish the works of incarcerated authors.

[16] Indeed, the practices of self-publishing and self-distribution have been used by black authors in the past. E. Lynn Harris, for instance, sold more than 10,000 copies of his novel *Invisible Life* (1991) at book parties, barber shops and beauty salons before his title was picked up by *Anchor Books* (Dietzel 2004, 167). However, no other type of African American fiction has been self-published and distributed on the streets to the same extent as street literature.

increasing number of Latina/o authors are entering the scene.[17] A large number of authors who have become successful publishers are female, among them Teri Woods, Vickie Stringer and Nikki Turner. The majority of those purchasing the novels at street stands or in bookstores are also women, ranging in age "from teens on up to people in their 40s" (Adero cited in Jones 2006, 5). However, this does not indicate that the majority of readers are female, since many buy the books to send them to their boyfriends or husbands in prison.[18] The high number of street literature readers behind bars, both male and female, is confirmed by authors, publishers and bookstore staff who ship books to correctional facilities (Benjamin 2010b; Hopkins 2010; Clark 2009b).

Although street vendors and other distributors confirm that sales began to flatten in 2005, street literature has a steady readership and new authors are still entering the scene on a regular basis. Over the past years, street literature has also begun to diversify into subtypes, among them urban Christian fiction,[19] urban erotica[20] and so-called "teen-friendly street lit," less sexually and violently explicit narratives for adolescent readers (Irvin Morris 2012, 45).[21]

1.3 Framing Street Literature as Popular African American Literature

I conceptualize street literature as a contemporary form of popular African American fiction. The novels can be categorized as popular literature in regard to their narrative content and their production,

[17] Among them are the authors Ivan Sanchez and his novel *Next Stop: Growing Up Wild-Style in the Bronx* (2006), Jeff Rivera's *Forever My Lady* (2004) and Sexy's *A Better Touch* (2007).

[18] Not all correctional facilities allow relatives to directly send books to inmates. In many prisons, books have to be sent by an official source, such as a bookstore or an online retailer like Amazon.

[19] Works of urban Christian fiction include *Peace of Me* by T. N. Williams (2010) or Mylow Young's *Against the Gates of Hell. A Crack House Exodus* (2011). These novels are also located in an urban setting and often also deal with issues such as drugs and incarceration, but with a religious underpinning.

[20] Most prominent are the erotic novels by the authors Zane, Noire and Carl Weber.

[21] They include works like *Dymond in the Rough* by Precious and KaShamba Williams (2005), *The Absolut Truth* by Precious and Juwell (2005) and Kia DuPree's *Damaged* (2010).

distribution, marketing and consumption practices.[22] Revolving around the attempts of characters to extricate themselves from the street-prison linkage, most street literature novels follow clear generic conventions. The paradigm around which the narratives are built can be defined as ethnoracial confinement, and most novels contain clear political statements on the omnipresence of racism in the U.S. Nevertheless, built around plot, action, and character conflict, most novels are written primarily with the intention to entertain their readers. By portraying how a protagonist enters the drug trade before being shot or going to prison where territorial contestations continue, the majority of street literature narratives are characterized by fast-paced developments and a rapid culmination of the conflicts. For most authors it is thus more important to keep the reader's attention than to engage in creative storytelling.

It is not only the stories that follow generic conventions. Street literature is also marketed and consumed generically: Readers often purchase novels by publishers because they are well aware that presses like Triple Crown or Wahida Clark Publishing solely publish works by street literature authors. The covers also allow for the books to be immediately identified as street literature. They show photographs or illustrations of characters on street corners, in front of housing entrances, and in prison, or display common items associated with the drug business, such as weapons, crack vials, dollar bills and yellow crime scene tape. Titles such as *Street Life* (Jihad 2004), *Married to Da Streets* (Silk White 2006) or *E.O.S. End of Sentence* (Mendez 2009) and *Never Go Home Again* (2004) also reference the novels' two central narrative spaces. Many novels also appear in series, a common strategy of popular fiction authors to secure a loyal readership.

Authors maintain close connections with their readers. Street marketing and book signings are typical marketing practices, and most authors maintain Facebook, MySpace and Twitter accounts to keep their readers up-to-date about their publications and personal lives. The quantity of works authors write and publish is also of great importance. Especially incarcerated writers emphasize the great number of books that they were able to "crank out" during their imprisonment. The author Relentless Aaron, for example, claims to have written 30 books during a six-year prison sentence (Aaron 2006).

[22] The following discussion of street literature as popular fiction is based on the characteristics that Ken Gelder establishes in *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004).

Just as authors tend to emphasize the speed with which they are able to finish a narrative, readers measure the quality of a book by the time it took to read it. It thus speaks for the quality of a novel if it can be devoured within as little as a day. While readers stress the importance of being able to identify with the locations and themes, street literature novels also serve an escapist function. Especially incarcerated readers practice reading as an act of refusal to submit to the regiment and confining environment of the facility. Allowing readers to mentally leave prison, street literature also ties them back to the streets. Many thus see the novels as "a reminder of home" (Sweeney 2010, 148) that enables them to "stay in touch with the streets" and remain up-to-date about the latest speech patterns and clothing styles (149).

While the categorization of street literature as popular fiction is not contested, opinions differ as to whether street literature should be situated within the tradition of African American literature and other black cultural expressions. Librarian and educator Vanessa Morris, one of the most prominent street literature scholars, opposes the categorization of street literature as black fiction. As she suggests in her *Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature* (2012), a guide primarily intended to support librarians in developing their collections, the term 'street literature' applies to any novel that "depicts tales about the daily lives of people living in lower-income city neighborhoods" (2). According to her, street literature belongs to the same category as narratives "written about the American inner-city experiences of Irish (Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, 1893), Jewish (Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, 1896), and Italian (Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, 1964 but set in the 1920s) immigrant families" (14). Morris also views British classics such as Daniel Dafoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) as belonging to the same "historical continuum of literature that tells similar stories in different time periods" and different geographic locations (12).

Situating street literature in the context of literary classics by placing a focus on the notion of 'class' is a useful approach for motivating librarians to overcome their reservations toward this form of popular fiction. It also aims at the broadening of reading choices by endorsing the placement of street literature novels right next to other books that deal with life in urban low-income neighborhoods. With her broad framing of street literature, Morris also intends to counter racial stereotypes by pointing out that the novels' portrayals of violent and sexual encounters are not to be essentialized as 'black.' As she stresses "[t]he historicity of street literature isn't chronicling cultural norms or stereotypes about

certain ethnic groups inasmuch as chronicling the challenging socioeconomic realities of diverse peoples, *whomever they may be*" (16).[23]

While Irvin Morris' definition of street literature is adapted to the library context, for the purposes of this book, I will conceptualize street literature in a narrower sense. Instead of labeling the novels as a multi-ethnic form of writing, I read street literature in the tradition of two African American cultural expressions, the so-called "pulp fiction" or "ghetto realist fiction" of the 1960s and '70s (K. E. Campbell 2005, 92) and rap music. With this, I intend to place a focus on the specific experiences of racialized and spatial marginalization made by African Americans, and how they have found expression in a variety of black popular culture products. My conceptualization also intends to demonstrate that street literature reflects very specific urban experiences, while it can also be read in a historical continuity of institutionalized racism.

1.4 Street Literature and Its Predecessors

Among the most prominent black pulp fiction authors are Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, whose novels tell similar stories of survival in the streets of disadvantaged black neighborhoods in the 1960s and '70s.[24] They are comparable to street literature in that they are written in street slang and aim to achieve verisimilitude by deploying a matter-of-fact tone, short sentences, direct discourse and generally a language that is "descriptive and rather denotative than connotative" (Dietzel 2004, 162).

Indeed, many street lit authors claim Donald Goines as their role model. However, street literature diverges from its literary predecessor in a number of ways. Whereas the earlier novels portray a variety of alternative income practices, including the heroin trade, procuration and sex work, street literature revolves around the selling of crack cocaine in the 1980s and '90s. Moreover, the pulp novels display more interactions between black and white characters.[25] Street literature, on the contrary, is

[23] Italics in original quote.

[24] Their most prominent works include Iceberg Slim's *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1976) and *Trick Baby* (2004) as well as Donald Goines' *Dopefiend* (1971), *Whoreson* (1972), *Inner City Hoodlum* (1975) and *Black Gangster* (1977).

[25] Donald Goines' novel *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief* (1973) elaborates on hierarchies and interactions between black and white inmates, something rarely

characterized by a much more regulated inter-racial contact that usually takes place in form of encounters between black residents and white representatives of the state, such as police and parole officers or prison staff. Street literature thereby speaks not only to a new extent of urban segregation, but also to an increased presence of law enforcement in minority poverty areas. This translates into the greater importance of prison for street literature and the mutual linkage between correctional facilities and the streets. Although some of the pulp novels are also set in prison and address law enforcement on the street level, the linkage between the two locations is not constitutive for these narratives.

The two novel types also vary considerably regarding the authors' gender. While the pulp fiction novels were exclusively written by men, women participate equally in the writing of street literature.[26] Another major difference between the two can be found in their form of production and distribution. In contrast to the narratives of Goines and Slim that were published by the white-owned Los Angeles presses Holloway House and W.W. Norton's Old School Series, street literature is largely self-published or produced by independent black-owned presses. While Holloway House, in particular, was known for paying minimal royalties despite selling pulp novels by the millions,[27] due to the alternative publishing opportunities, street literature authors are able to negotiate deals with commercial presses that are said to have paid up to six-figure advances in street literature's most flourishing times (Kilgannon 2006; Barnard 2008; E. Brown 2011). Although the pulp novels were also distributed through alternative sales outlets such as barbershops and newspaper stands and were popular among prisoners, there was neither a comparable street selling network nor a specific distribution system that catered to incarcerated readers at the time. On one level, this can be explained by the fewer number of pulp authors. Aside from Goines and Slim, less than a dozen authors have written

found in street literature. The novel *Inner City Hoodlum* by the same author portrays the interaction and differing perspectives on urban life of two partnering detectives, one black, one white.

[26] This observation has also been made by Gifford in *Pimping Fictions. African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Publishing* (2013).

[27] It is estimated that *Holloway House*, who owns the rights to sixteen of Goines novels, has sold at least ten million copies (Stallings 2003, 191). However, Goines – and his family after his death – continuously received twelve cents per copy although the book price increased from $1.45 to $6.95 over time (Goines Family 2001, 15).

similar novels.[28] In contrast, street literature comprises hundreds of authors and new ones are entering the scene every month. On another level, an extensive prison book distribution network was not yet profitable in the 1970s since the system of mass incarceration had not yet developed and the prison population remained relatively small.[29]

Much more infused with the street-prison symbiosis is the other predecessor of street literature: rap music. It emerged in the mid 1970s, when the pulp novels began to diminish in popularity. The streets are the music's geographical place of origin since rap, a form of percussive music that features rhymes over beats, surfaced on block parties in New York City's South Bronx. They are also a relevant narrative location in the music's lyrics, which frequently tell survival stories that take place in the streets of disadvantaged minority neighborhoods. Just like street literature novels, rap music addresses issues like racially biased law enforcement, such as stop-and-frisk practices. The location of the streets is also acoustically present in rap songs through the implementation of urban sounds, like police sirens and traffic noise, and also represents a visual backdrop in most music videos. Apart from the streets, the location of the prison also plays an important role in rap music. Many artists, among them Lil Kim, DMX, and Beanie Sigel, have been incarcerated. Besides, many rap songs deal with prison experiences and address the disproportionate incarceration of African Americans in the current prison system.[30] Shout-outs to prisons – like "Coxsackie, Greenvale, Greenwald, Attica […] Rahway […] and Rikers[31]" – speak to this.

In addition to the similar themes dealt within rap music and street literature, both expressions share the same protagonists, mostly male figures from urban low-income neighborhoods. Both cultural forms have also been the subject of controversy due to their endorsement of violence,

[28] Information on the less well-known pulp authors is difficult to find. Among the authors I am aware of are Joseph Nazel, Nathan Heard, Herbert Simmons and Robert Deane Pharr.

[29] However, although the prison population in the 1970s was small in comparison to today, African Americans were already disproportionately incarcerated at the time. Chapter 3 will give a detailed overview of how the prison population developed over the past decades.

[30] A few of the many songs dealing with the issue of prison to be named here are Saigon's song *Drugs* that links the War on Drugs to the inflation of the black prison population, X Clan's *Prison* that equates the mass incarceration of blacks to a genocide, and Killer Mike's *Reagan* which notes that the Thirteenth Amendment still allows slavery within prison.

[31] Chubb Rock Lil' Dap: *Rich get Rich* (1999).

sexism and homophobia. Moreover, both street literature and rap music were established through entrepreneurial practices. While authors began to sell their popular novels on the sidewalk, rap music was first circulated through the musicians' selling of mix tapes on the streets. What represented the next step in the commercialization of hip hop music – the foundation of independent music labels such as Def Jam and Death Row Records – can be compared to the establishment of independent street literature publishing firms. However, in contrast to the rap business that is still dominated by male artists, women writers and publishers play a central role in the street literature scene. Rap music and street literature are also comparable in the next stage of commercialization. While rap music was eventually taken up by major labels such as Time Warner and Sony Music Entertainment, street literature was integrated into the product lines of commercial publishers.[32]

Rap is generally acknowledged to be part of hip hop, a lifestyle that also comprises break dancing, DJ-ing and graffiti. I argue that street literature can be viewed as the most recent addition to this urban culture. Aside from the parallels mentioned, street literature is written in a street slang similar to that of rap, while characters often wear the same brand-name clothing displayed by rappers. Street literature novels also integrate rap music into the narratives, usually in the form of club scenes in which characters dance while they cite lyrics from well-known songs. Belonging to the same cultural movement, the two expressions share the same kind of consumers. Many readers grew up with rap music and are familiar with its overall aesthetics. Finally, with the continuous growth of street literature, rap artists even begin to venture into the book business. Rappers like Made Man and C-Murder have not only written their own Street Lit stories; in 2007 the rap artist 50 Cent even launched the street literature imprint G-Unit Books, a division of Simon & Schuster. At a time when many claimed that rap had arrived at a commercial dead-end, it is street literature that picks up the narrative locations, themes, and characters and transposes its narratives into a novelistic register.

[32] Just as commercial publishers buy up formerly independent street literature presses, major labels take over formerly independent record labels, as was, for instance, the case with the Universal Music Group that bought up the label Def Jam.

1.5 Book Overview

The book is divided into three parts. The first frames the street-prison symbiosis conceptually and historically. The second part, entitled "Street Literature's Narrative Street-Prison Symbiosis," presents close readings of selected novels. The third addresses street literature's material street-prison symbiosis and represents the book's ethnographic part.

The conceptual and historical section elaborates on the study's two elemental narrative and physical spaces: the streets and the prison system. It further develops the concept of the street-prison symbiosis by connecting the two. Since the book's theoretical framework draws heavily on Loïc Wacquant's notion of the ghetto-prison symbiosis, chapter 2 first investigates the spatial terminology of 'the ghetto.' Here, I also interrogate Wacquant's usage of 'the ghetto' as an analytical category and explain why I refrain from using the term. I will then proceed with a brief definition of how I spatially frame the perimeter of 'the streets.' My definition is based on how actors in the street literature scene use the term and how the streets are commonly portrayed in their novels. In order to situate historically the role that the streets play in street literature, the final part of chapter 2 provides a short overview of the importance of the streets both as an imagined space in black cultural expressions and as a physical space in African American urban history.

Chapter 3 discusses the study's second important location: the prison. This part explains the U.S. system of mass incarceration and how it has developed since the 1970s. It focuses on racially biased law enforcement on all levels of the U.S. criminal justice system, which results in a disproportionate number of incarcerated African Americans. After illustrating how the growing prison complex is motivated by profit interests, this part concludes by showing how imprisonment cannot be examined separately from the low-income minority neighborhoods whose residents are most affected by incarceration.

Chapter 4 further explicates this linkage between prison and black low-income neighborhoods. It elaborates on Wacquant's concept of the ghetto-prison symbiosis and his view of this spatial linkage in a historical continuity of institutions that have successively performed what he refers to as the "task of defining, confining, and controlling African Americans." Wacquant argues, that the confining ties between black low-income neighborhoods and prison can be considered neoliberal tools of poverty governance. While I agree with his argument, in this chapter I draw upon the concept of the *scale* – developed in human geography to examine space as constructed – to rescale his ghetto-prison symbiosis as

a more practice-oriented street-prison symbiosis. The aim of this rescaling is to develop an analytical tool that allows me to scrutinize how those who are most affected by this confining linkage navigate the two locations.

In part II, I employ the concept of the street-prison symbiosis in the analyses of three selected street literature novels. As my close readings show, the narrative street-prison symbiosis can express itself in a variety of forms and thematic contexts. Specifically, I analyze the extent to which the varying storylines show a perpetuation of the linkage, challenge the marginalizing ties or display a contradictory stance by simultaneously feeding into and undermining the connection between the two locations.

In chapter 5, I examine Jihad's novel *Street Life* that displays narrative conventions of the bildungsroman. The novel provides a good introduction to the racial component of the street-prison symbiosis since it illustrates how it affects the black protagonist at all stages of his coming-of-age process. By drawing upon concepts informed by developmental psychology, my analysis will show how the protagonist's racial identity development is inextricably tied to the streets and prison, in particular to his growing awareness of racial injustices taking place in both locations. As *Street Life* portrays a protagonist who successfully frees himself from the confining linkage, I will investigate how the narrative that the author defines as "self-help street fiction" is framed as politically uplifting.

Chapter 6 examines J.M. Benjamin's *My Manz and 'Em*, a novel that I categorize as 'circulation narrative' because it tells the story of a protagonist who circulates between streets and prison without being able to extricate himself from the symbiosis. *My Manz and 'Em* centers on the process of reentry after incarceration and portrays the various obstacles that former inmates who return to disadvantaged minority neighborhoods face. While the novel acknowledges structural impediments, especially the difficulty of finding employment as a black male with a prison record, it emphasizes behavioral reasons for his eventual reimprisonment by suggesting that it is mainly the protagonist's 'street mentality' that leads to his return to illicit street practices. Since this problematic behavioral approach holds black men co-responsible for the existence of the street-prison symbiosis, I specifically interrogate the novel's implicit neoliberal ideology that holds individuals liable for their own actions and well-being.

The third novel that I analyze in chapter 7 is *Convict's Candy* by Damon Meadows and Jason Poole. It revolves around Candy, a pre-op