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Politely Disregarded: Street Fiction, Mass Incarceration, and Critical Praxis

At the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, a luminous Hester Prynne emerges from the imposing prison edifice brandishing baby Pearl and the meticulously embroidered red A as evidence of her transgression. The grey-clad citizens and bearded officials search her face for signs of submission; they hope her stint in jail has rehabilitated her into someone who accords with their laws and morality. Yet Hester, resolved to stay true to her own sense of justice, walks with pride before her peers—she refuses to bend beneath the weight of their judgment. Her decision to break the law comes with its price. But anyone who reads the novel sees she finds a certain freedom and strength in her estrangement from the “good graces” of society. While her position as an outsider and a criminal complicates her life in many ways, it simultaneously liberates her to act according to her own morality, and it empowers her to resist the hypocrisy rampant among the people in her community. The contradictions and complications at the heart of the relationships among people and the society in which they live (including the penal system) are part of what makes *The Scarlet Letter* a work of American literature that captivates readers to this day.

*The Scarlet Letter* may seem like an unlikely story to reference in a discussion of street fiction and mass incarceration. However, if we imagine what Hester’s story might look like if it were recast in a contemporary urban setting, we might meet a young black woman who chooses to go to jail for her boyfriend instead of incriminating him and betraying his confidence. When she gets out of prison, she must reconstruct her life under new circumstances. Her relationships change while she is in jail, and the freedom she anticipates dissolves in the harsh realities of a world that continues to punish her for her crime long after she leaves her cell.

The story we’ve just described has already been written. In Black Artemis’s novel *Picture Me Rollin’*, young Esperanza goes to jail to protect Jesus and his crew from punishment for a robbery. Though Jesus captivates her, Esperanza must reconsider their relationship as she wonders whether he is capable of fidelity and loyalty. She struggles to cope with the internal and external challenges of the criminalization of her identity, and she attempts to renegotiate her life against forces that stigmatize her. Even before she went to prison, Esperanza wrestled with her aspirations and the limits society placed on her as a poor, undereducated, Afro-Latina woman. Now, Esperanza must also bear the mark of “felon” and determine whether she should give in and fulfill the world’s low expectations of her or find the courage and resources to remake herself according to her own terms.

Though Hester and Esperanza grapple with many of the same forces, most English teachers that we know would find it easier to read *The Scarlet Letter* with their students than *Picture Me Rollin’*. We fall for the seduction of the safe distance and sanctioned lessons “classics” provide, and though we may hint at the contemporary implications of the texts we read in our classes on the last day of the unit, we stop short of making the kinds of connections that might light fires in the hearts and minds of the students we teach. We are afraid to indoctrinate, to lift off the thin veil of neutrality we adopt as a habit of “professionalism.” But literature has always been an avenue for the critique of social injustice; for the exploration of the tension between the rights of the individual and the needs of society; for the imagination of new social futures. Ignoring this opportunity means neglecting the power inherent in the study and creation of texts. What might it look like if we used critical approaches to texts to put texts such as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Picture Me Rollin’* in conversation with each other? What might we learn about the intersections of social problems we face today? What relationships might we begin to see between our classrooms and our prison cells? Due to prevailing attitudes about the prison industrial complex and African American and Latino/Latina communities, the literary production of urban street fiction has been politely disregarded by our society. Through the use of critical praxis, utilizing urban street fiction in the classroom is a necessary and urgent act of social justice.

**Street Fiction as a Genre**

Street fiction, sometimes called *ghetto lit*, *gangsta lit*, *hip-hop lit*, or *urban fiction*, is a thriving literary genre (Hill, Pérez, and Irby 76; Marshall, Staples, and Gibson 29). Authors and readers point out distinctions among the labels applied to the novels. Indeed, street fiction is not monolithic; there are a range of messages, voices, and authorial intentions in this corpus of stories. In this article, we treat street fiction as an inclusive term that applies to novels with specific characteristics, including “gritty, uncompromising language,” “sex and extreme violence,” and plots that take place in urban settings (Marshall, Staples, and Gibson 28). The risqué themes and graphic content of the books sometimes prompt parents, educators, and cultural critics to question their appropriateness. Simultaneously, readers point to these very characteristics as the source of the novels’ authenticity. Despite controversies surrounding their morality, artistic merit, and their place in the African American literary tradition (Brooks and Savage; Chiles; Stovall), hundreds of thousands of street fiction books are sold each year, and the genre’s most celebrated (and once self-published) authors have contracted with major publishing houses to purvey their novels under...
trade labels (Rosen 31). The books are most popular among young African American women ages 13 to 30, especially those who live in urban areas (Rosen 32). We know less about the young men who read street fiction, but it is clear they comprise a portion of the readership (Stovall 56).

Another notable feature of street fiction is the specter of mass incarceration that looms across its pages. Many street fiction authors, such as Vickie Stringer, Wahida Clark, Kwame Teague, K’wan, Shannon Holmes, and Kiki Swinson, have served time in prison (“8 Urban Fiction Authors”). Some writers reclaimed the void of their prison sentences by using the time and space to begin writing. They often express a motivation to reach out to youth with authentic “cautionary tales” that might make a lesson from their experiences. The characters in street fiction novels live in landscapes shaped by the plight of mass incarceration and social forces that contribute to it, such as poverty, racism, and diminished educational opportunities. Even in street fiction novels that are primarily love stories, characters’ lives often tangle with issues of criminality, and the possibility (if not the guarantee) of incarceration exists.

Readers and authors of street fiction often express a desire to write and read “real” stories. Surely some of the “realness” of these texts comes from the attention to the crisis of mass incarceration and its particularly devastating effects on the lives and communities of black and Latino/Latina urban populations. “When analysis proceeds from within the belief system actually brought to bear upon a text by its readers, the analytical interpretation of the meaning of a character’s behavior is more likely to coincide with the meaning as it is constituted and understood by the readers themselves” (Radway 78). Therefore, street fiction readers may find the genre more relevant than other literature because it provides a landscape in which the reader can negotiate “real” social problems without limitations. In this space, readers have the chance not only to see life as it is for the characters, but they have the opportunity to imagine a world in which the criminal justice system is not used as a front for bankrupting the humanity of large swaths of the American population.

Far from being a meaningless trope, incarceration lends a gravity and significance to street fiction stories. The genre deserves critical attention in all American classrooms because it may be one of the few sources we have for nuanced stories showing the hypocrisy, racism, and utter injustice of our “justice system.” Because the genre is so inextricably bound to the issues of mass incarceration, a full understanding of these texts necessitates an understanding of the effects that this system continues to have on African American and Latino/Latina communities.

Mass Incarceration as a Dehumanizing Force

According to Michelle Alexander:

What is completely missed in the rare public debates today about the plight of African Americans is that a huge percentage of them are not free to move up at all. It is not just that they lack opportunity, attend poor schools, or are plagued by poverty. They are barred by law from doing so. And the major institutions with which they come into contact are designed to prevent their mobility . . . the current [American] system of control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy. (13)

Her work, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, argues that the prison industrial complex of today’s America is essentially a new system of control working on black and brown bodies in place of the evolving structures that have been in place since American chattel slavery. Alexander explains that the rise of the Black Codes and Jim Crow, subsequent to legal slavery, were both no coincidence and no surprise given the racist climate that has governed this country since before its founding. She writes, “following the collapse of each system of control, there has been a period of confusion—transition—in which those who are most committed far from being a meaningless trope, incarceration lends a gravity and significance to street fiction stories. The genre deserves critical attention in all American classrooms because it may be one of the few sources we have for nuanced stories showing the hypocrisy, racism, and utter injustice of our “justice system.”
to racial hierarchy search for new means to achieve their goals within the rules of the game as currently defined” (21), and elsewhere, “following the Civil War, it was unclear what institutions, laws, or customs would be necessary to maintain white control now that slavery was gone” (27).

Alexander spends the early portion of her text delineating and contextualizing the rise and collapse of system after system set in place to control African Americans, from slavery to the Black Codes to Jim Crow to the present prison system that she argues serves the same function as the former. A key proponent to each of these structures was their power to strip victims of their humanity. Each structure limited or completely denied African Americans of their rights to freedom and equality. Alexander notes the first prison boom in the United States took place during the Jim Crow era and filled the jails with a criminal population that was disproportionately black. During this time, she wrote, “convicts had no meaningful legal rights . . . and no effective redress. They were understood, quite literally, to be slaves of the state” (31).

Of today, Alexander reveals that “as many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives. These young men are part of a growing undercaste, permanently locked up and locked out of mainstream society” (7). It is from these spaces of confinement, within and without the physicality of prison cells, that pens are wielded toward the literary production of urban street fiction texts. And further, it is this vast percentage of young people that fill our classrooms and our suffering black and brown communities today.

Literacies, Literature, and Humanity

As English educators, the relationship among humanity, literacy, and literature sits at the center of our professional concerns. Expression of the self through words (whether written or spoken) is intimately bound to our notions of freedom and individuality, and we often speak of our desires to make our classrooms more humane sites of possibility and openness, places where our students can leverage words powerfully across media and contexts to shape the world as they would have it. We have cast off a singular notion of “literacy” in favor of a pluralistic perspective that more accurately represents the range of human experiences. As such, we have learned that “literacies encompass not only the ability to read and write, but also to make sense of our lives and to critique multiple positions and perspectives . . . questioning our roles in the world, assuming multiple identities to experience empathy, and interpreting complex meanings of texts that may not include our voices, stories, experiences and truths” (Kinloch, Harlem 145).

Narrowing the definition of “literature” by barring street fiction texts from classrooms undermines efforts to build literacies, and it sends the message that the people behind school-sanctioned texts are more human, more valuable than those we disregard (or too often, openly disparage). For African Americans in particular, questioning the “worthiness” of a literary production is an often employed, longstanding strategy to cast doubt on the humanity of the author. We should not wield literature as a tool for exclusion. The irony of an educational system that uses a love of literature to mark certain stories invalid is as palpable as that of a prison system designed for its economic benefits rather than its potential for rehabilitation of the individual. As Toni Morrison writes,

Silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate . . . the system is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. (9–10)

When educators sidestep street fiction, we join the social forces that silence, limit, and restrict the youth we intend to serve.

Well-meaning educators often guide young people away from street fiction because they regard
it as a potentially corrupting force due to the stereotypes, misogyny, violence, sex, drugs, and crime that figure into its plots. Just as critics of hip-hop “linked rap music to social pathology” (Hill 4), some worry that texts foregrounding these issues encourage youth to engage in negative behaviors. However, making discourses illicit by disregarding street fiction marginalizes and pathologizes its readers and that which they find “real” in the texts. We send a clear message about the social constructions we consider legitimate, and those which have no place in our conversations. However tacitly or unintentionally, we contribute to a system of social control of “vulnerable” black and brown urban youth by censoring their reading and writing, the same type of control used by the criminal justice system to control the same populations. To fail to give youth who consider prison an inevitable part of life a space in English classrooms to challenge and critique these social forces is unjust. Moreover, failure to open these conversations with youth outside of the communities most drastically affected by mass incarceration quietly assures them they need not worry about the problem, denying them the opportunity to “choose [themselves] as persons of integrity, persons who care” (Greene 127).

We believe critical engagement with street fiction and other texts that explore the relationships between individuals and the prison is valuable learning for all students. Fiction plays a unique role in our pursuit of truths because it allows us to layer, mirror, blend, and test our experiences with those of others—all in a single moment. This means that we are the subject of that which we read. We locate ourselves in the hearts, motivations, and egos of the characters we encounter. Novels and other literary works fuel our passions, touch our bruises, remind us of joy, and move us toward a greater understanding of our own humanity. Asking students to read and respond to street fiction “may well be to confront the students with a demand to choose in a fundamental way, to choose between a desire for harmony along with the easy answer and a commitment to the search for alternative possibilities” (Greene 129). To the benefit of our students and our discipline, instead of sneering at critiques from students and parents who suggest that our study of texts in English classrooms is irrelevant, we might consider how linking literature to human experience might redefine our study of texts to make room for social change.

**Polite Disregard**

“I was born.” These three words, along with other conventions to affirm the humanity of the souls bound in the American chattel system of slavery, became a traditional opening statement for authors of the slave narrative genre. Prefaced by a handful of testimonials from white abolitionists, these desperate efforts appealed to a white readership governed by centuries of white supremacist legislation and propaganda and often fell on deaf ears that refused to acknowledge or take the literary productions of slaves seriously. Today, much like the desperate narratives of slaves, which sought to give voice and credence to their raw realities, the literary productions of urban street fiction have been largely met with polite disregard. It is important to emphasize the idea of “politeness” that characterizes this disregard. Much like our general notions of political correctness, these “polite” attitudes have become a popular way to mask neo-racist thought. Dismissing the genre as “not for me,” for example, bears very obvious but politely communicated value judgments about the quality, content, producers, and primary consumers of street fiction.
of these narratives were forced into such desper-
ate acts of advocacy as they were viewed as illit-
erate, hypersexual animals that needed systems of
control, lest they ruin themselves and the larger
American society with their barbarism and primitive
violence. Yet today, the criminalized authors
and primary consumers of urban street literature are
largely viewed as illiterate, hypersexual animals
in need of some system of control, lest they ruin
themselves and the larger American society with
their sagging pants, hip-hop, and unrestrained
violence.

Because of the sheer number of African Amer-
ican and Latino/Latina people affected by today’s
prison industrial complex, it clearly functions as yet
another system that works to control these commu-
nities, complete with the stripping of freedoms and
humanity, disproportionately incarcerating people
of color at rates unheard of throughout recent his-
tory. Resonant of commonplace thinking during the
Jim Crow era, it is not uncom-
mon to hear someone today
speaking from their soap box
of meritocracy, lending cre-
dence to the idea that if only
these people would stop being
so violent, and crude, and un-
civilized, they would not be
under the auspices and control
of such a system. But if we are
still human enough to cringe at the thoughts of the
everyday Jim Crow citizen, then we must, in turn,
look deeply within our collective consciousness sur-
rounding our ideas about these groups of people
victimized by a system that seems appropriate for
their lot in life. Further, just as the antebellum and
postbellum citizens of this country, we are guilty of
turning a deaf ear to the literary productions, the
raw realities, testimonies, and artistic reflections of
masses of criminalized people because of our col-
lective ideas about who they are and what they are
worth. In essence, even our disaffirming thoughts
about these communities and their literary produc-
tions work to further dehumanize them. Much like
the slave narrative of yesterday, urban street fiction
is an assertion of humanity within a dehumanizing
structure in that it gives voice to an otherwise po-
litely disregarded population and in that it projects
and negotiates a reflection of reality onto an imagi-
native landscape. There is urgency in these facts
because these politely disregarded populations in-
clude the students that we serve.

In many ways, the worlds of urban street fic-
tion resonate with African American and Latino/
Latina students in urban communities. It follows,
then, that engaging such texts in the classroom,
even in the face of the canon, becomes an act of so-
cial justice for several reasons: (1) it affirms the iden-
tities and humanity of the authors who are largely
writing from confined spaces within the prison sys-
tem or within their communities that have been
affected by the prison system; (2) authentic engage-
ment of these texts requires a level of critical praxis
(critical literacy, engagement, and reflection) on the
part of educators that is humanizing for both them-
selves and students; (3) it affirms the identities and
humanity of many students and cultivates the criti-
cal lenses of those students who see themselves re-
lected in the literature; and (4) it draws those who
would rather distance themselves from the plight of
mass incarceration to a human-scale experience of
the consequences of criminalization.

To use urban street fiction, productions of
“parallel discursive arenas” (Fraser), in the class-
room is an act that moves the work of marginalized
groups to the center of academic inquiry and en-
gagement. Reading these texts alongside canonical
texts allows the voices of a largely ignored group of
people to be heard in the classroom. This is an act
of social justice in that it validates a dehumanized
population by turning an ear to their reality and its
implications and perspectives about the society we
exist in.

To get to the point where educators of all
backgrounds can engage these texts carefully and
readily, however, it is important that educators work
to contextualize and analyze these works while re-
dressing their own internalized biases through criti-
cal literacy and praxis.

Playing with Fire: Risks and
Responsibilities for Educators

While we envision many benefits in the critical
study of street fiction, we also acknowledge that
engaging these texts in the classroom involves
We must also recognize that the choice to exclude street fiction from our curriculum sends clear messages to young people about the identities that are worth our attention. The grave issues presented in street fiction novels touch young people's lives in serious ways. Before we admonish students for reading street fiction or jettison the genre by saying it isn't "literary" enough, we must first understand why students read it and what meanings they draw from it.

Street fiction, like any other genre, is composed of a wide range of texts. Educators should invest the time and energy necessary to tune their ears to this genre so they can choose texts that are meaningful for the students, contexts, and themes that resonate with those who populate their classrooms. Students who read street fiction are potentially excellent resources for educators who wish to explore the genre, and we encourage teachers to ask their students about them. Approaching street fiction in a critical spirit of co-discovery presents a unique opportunity for educators to dismantle the traditional classroom power structure in which the teacher is the primary arbiter of knowledge and the sole authority on literature.

Most urgently, we call on educators to consider how they might use street fiction texts to challenge assumptions about criminalized, dehumanized members of our society for the purpose of inciting social imagination that makes way for new possibilities. How might we design units that put street fiction in conversation with traditionally school-sanctioned texts such as "Letter from Birmingham Jail," The Autobiography of Malcolm X, The Scarlet Letter, Cool Hand Luke, or The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail? What might assessments that ask students to critically examine the role of the prison in our minds, neighborhoods, and societies look like? How might students compose writing or other media for the purpose of addressing injustices resulting from mass incarceration?

There is no singular answer to these questions; they must be answered at the local level. However, we feel certain that street fiction texts require us to ask ourselves why we take prison for granted, and we may even use the interpretation and creation of literary worlds to begin the "great feat of the imagination" (Davis 19) necessary for a real world free of incarceration.


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

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Young adult literature is dominated by stories of middle-class teens, but many young people face a different set of challenges, constrained by poverty, neglect, or abuse. They live in foster care, in group homes, in shelters, or on the streets. This podcast from ReadWriteThink.org describes an assortment of old and new literary titles featuring teens who live on the margins of middle-class society—teens whose lives too often go unseen. http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/teens-margins-30888.html