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You'Re Not Really Black Unless You'Ve Been Shot-- Or So Says Black Urban Fiction

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You're Not Really Black Unless You've Been Shot

... Or So Says Black Urban Fiction

(TITLE)

BY

Erin A. Talley

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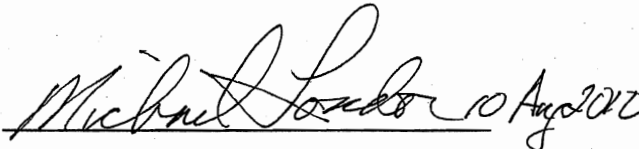FOR THE DEGREE OF

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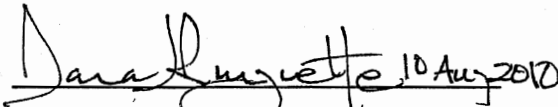CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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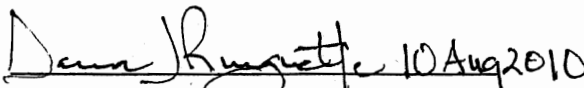
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Abstract

This essay seeks to identify the injurious and hedonistic patterns that emerge from contemporary black urban fiction, reinforcing negative stereotypes. This essay comments on codes that establish a sense of authenticity as well as trends of isolationism and essentialist narratives published as the unsuccessful progeny of didactic novels written to highlight conditions in underrepresented minority communities. Through a critical examination of earlier literary movements, this essay proposes that contemporary black urban literature grows less culturally conscious and less aesthetically aware in its pursuit of commercial success than the African American canonical texts that grounded cultural realism and literary experimentation.

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I would also like to acknowledge my parents; two strong black figures who have never conformed to anyone's expectations but their own.

And my brother, whose sense of self and understanding of his heritage is far beyond his years.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of the caring, intelligent, black professionals who serve their communities with commitment and pride. You forever serve as role models for all black youth in America.

Contents

"Young niggas these days were trying to get on the map, and they were willing to do anything to earn a name. They would rob, shoot, and kill, just to be the man on the block with the most respect. Duke already had respect because of his family, which put him in a dangerous position. Any nigga that wanted to rise up could knock him off and get automatic respect on the streets. And that's exactly why I had a team of young cats by my side— trained to kill. All I had to do was give 'em the word. Today was a small test of just how quick one of my li'l dudes could be on the trigga."

<div align="right">Chunichi</div>

I. Contemporary Urban Black Fiction: A Shift Away From Canon

The problem with the literature that comes out of the movement toward urban aesthetics is not merely that the city becomes a backdrop to our narratives; metropolitan areas provide us with plot, conflict, and characterizations that are generally subdued or muted in smaller community spaces. The urban setting does become problematic when these spaces and these faces become representational of an entire community and when writers do not simply admit their depiction is of a selected segment of the larger urban black community. When those representations become the primary illustration of that community from the perspective of the dominant social construction that too often perpetrate the legacies of white supremacy, these images, subsequently embraced by youthful black readers, become detrimental to conceptions of self identity within the larger black community. It is the framework of a novel-- who the characters are, what their world aspires to be-- that inspires greatness of work as well as greatness of its subject. As the genre of commercial urban black literature has grown, it has found its popularity in messy and titillating, if predictable, storylines. When did African American literature move from being instructive to being "salacious"? I use salacious because,

while many of the novels are fascinating and intriguing, they can be absolutely obscene. That obscenity undermines any progressive message even coincidentally found in the text.

It seems as if black urban fiction, in its unprecedented ability to promote literacy in groups that are some of the most difficult to reach academically, chooses to disparage its leading consumers. The stories that haunt the daily lives of a deprived and aimless people fly through the inner-city as entertainment faster than gossip at a hair salon. No one will ever be able to agree fully on the appropriateness of a story for the general public simply because everyone has different considerations of literary consciousness. The collective understanding of the culture and expectation of a populous and varied people, however, cannot rest on the images of only a percentage of its population, and the condemnation of one's own community cannot be made the primary sample of writing that spouts from the minds and pens of its own people.

The ability of urban literature to connect with its subject audience so attentively is phenomenal, but we are then presented with two major issues: why is there not more attention given to the political failings of the institutions that are intended to support its infrastructure, and why are there no critical responses from the recipients of such demeaning attention? Lawrence Levine writes that "the canon changes constantly because historical circumstances and stimuli change and people therefore approach it in myriad ways, bringing different perspectives and needs to it, reading it in ways distinctive to the times in which they live, and emerging with different satisfactions and revelations" (93). Still, as the canon shifts and expands to accommodate new styles and genres of text, the fundamentals of its appraisal remain intact as framework for literary

and cultural analysis.

As the movement of black population grows more diverse, the identity of black people from rural backgrounds, black men and women with formal educations and black immigrants to America finds fewer common principles with the collective black community as written into contemporary, urban black commercial fiction. Then again, if the images that are supposedly representative of who they are expected to be are so overwhelmingly negative, who would want to associate themselves with such depictions? It is not so simple merely to disassociate oneself as an individual from within a group when the dominant society applies the definitions so broadly and plunges so deeply into existing stereotypes. The danger, however, is not only from the appearances of a community from the outside looking in, but also of the integrity of the internal social structures that shape both individuality and consciousness of one's community.

The black community in America finds commonality in a shared history of all too often perceiving the community as having had no history. As African people with diverse heritage and cultures were separated during the period of the Atlantic slave trade in America, dark peoples of African descent and others of minority status created systems of knowledge, protection, and amusement in order to endure their bondage and to survive in unfamiliar terrain. To survive, they had to create a culture in which they could create an authentic identity of self and community. The development of an authentic voice extends from these early formations of identity, an identity disseminated through varying channels of communication. The questions that arise now of how to promote literacy in ever crumbling landscapes are countered by concerns over what texts are being read as the legacy of these strong impressions. If black identity rests in the predication of an

urban poverty, then the definition of blackness becomes more and more exclusionary of the larger black population and community than at any point thus far in the history and development of African American culture.

By no means should it be suggested that every story be predicated on happy, wealthy, emotionally sound and stable characters; that depiction in and of itself would not be realistic. Not long ago, it was normal to know that parents had been married, to know whether they were both around or not, and to expect that literature in some way reflects a model for beneficial roles of home, church, and community -if only as an aspiration- in addition to the dramatic and injurious, if more intriguing, stories. Tales of ruin were mostly oriented as cautionary tales in the form of parables out of folklore traditions.

Literary historians and scholars have begun to use the context of "black history" and "black art" as an opportunity to position commercial art and canonical art through differential frames. Rather they should look at all forms of black art as opportunities to review and reinterpret not only the literature unearthed from the past, but also their social and cultural understandings of present conditions that emerge in contemporary literature as well. Storytelling is integral to the black tradition and conveys considerations of social order, economics, and ancestry, among other concerns. Remembrance of the past gives readers the tools to address present conditions. Discussion of the present allows them to reconstruct their present realities and direct their future as individuals and as members of a community.

Though many forums of the black community--music, film, and various social organizations, among others--have transformed from spaces that openly engage with the various nuances of the black experience to insulated spheres that ultimately lend to a

division in the fabric of unity, literature opens a conversation with all categories and stations of blackness as assertions of power. The metropolitan space of the urban novel positions a realistic area for all forms of blackness to interact. Each rendering of urban awareness could enable new thought and visionary blending of ideals in commentaries that would serve to fuel and to fortify the black psyche in the same vein as black literature that has always provided insight into the workings of American culture and the significance of black presence in its various forms. The movement of literature to an urban representation has the potential to relate closely back to the dramatic narration and principled storytelling of canonical writings. Black middle-class conformity to dominant cultural performance in behavior and speech serve only to further fragment the bond with their underprivileged brethren. Frantz Fanon writes "Intellectual alienation is a creation of middle-class society" (224). Classes of the underprivileged have swelled because of this class segregation, but there would be no need for a "talented tenth," if writers could find ways to reach readers and to teach them through established and clear channels of the African American canonical legacy.

As it stands, urban black literature polarizes the black experience by refusing to include the stability principles of a black middle class in their depictions. There are few accurate representations of the figures who escape the urban ghetto portrayed in these new urban fictions; rarely are the complexities of entertainment industries and the effort required first to achieve and then to maintain success; similarly, the number of these portrayals reflects far greater percentages of accomplishment than can be expected in reality. By no means would it be appropriate to dash the dreams of a generation, but there cannot be one thousand ball players where there is room for one—and the only consolation

offered is a position as a "bag man" in a network of illicit underground economy. Urban literature has the capacity to gently prepare its readers for a future brighter than their present situations by encouraging planning as well as promoting enhancement projects that they could start in their own neighborhoods.

Literature has always been a medium for knowledge, community building, creation of unity, and formation of identity. Stories serve to give history, to give direction, to give values, and to give purpose. Contemporary black urban literature provides all those aspirations, but, inadvertently, those messages create erroneous histories, unguided directions, imprudent values, and reckless purposes which are damaging to the very core of self-identity. The black community, with so few widely recognized positive role models, is most devastatingly affected. The primary messages of violence and sexuality as power inscribed in emerging black urban fictions are immediately and inherently limiting. If the beauty of a people is not even embraced by themselves, no one else could be expected to respect them.

The black community faces just that kind of limiting force in the framework of an urban literature that glorifies and normalizes the degenerate lifestyle, the breakdown of family, community, and American values. Such fiction depicts a community whose identity rests in ignorance and whose aspiration becomes less to provide for and to enhance the welfare of its own people and becomes simply a desperate admonition to survive the night rather than suggest models for a world where opportunity and abundance could be the greatest goal, both individually and collectively. Role models become "successful" outlaws, and exemplary values are futile attempts "to become white."

Fiction, by definition, is the distinction of imagination from reality. The question why anyone, especially from a group with such a rich enduring history, would write a disparaging narrative when he could dispense with self-destructive characterization as the dominant model of "successful" behavior and create a model of cooperative community remains one of the fundamental issues of how the portraits of a community, a family, a person is framed in the minds of greater society; and, more importantly, for themselves. Historically, perceptions of blackness were so strong and familiar within their respective community groups that authenticity was implied. Black literature is a space defined through memory and enacted as a portal through which constraints of representational figures are open to being reworked.

Where are the fairytales? There is little enough inspiration that reaches us day to day. People speak of truth in literature; the truth is that there is possibility for greatness in every story told. Because black authorship is so preoccupied with maintaining an essentialist, caricatured authenticity, which is fabricated as a part of the responses to culture anyway, much urban literature, which has so much potential in its authoritativeness, has failed not only to fill that unique space carved for itself in a market in which the demand far exceeds its supply, but also failed to use that influence to create successful characters that black urban youth so desperately need to discover agency within themselves. It matters less how or where a story is set because when it comes down to it, it is still important to represent all aspects of the black aesthetic inclusive of all spectra in black society. It is only when those images become stagnant and seek to represent only the basest, most vile corners of a wide and varied community as a speaker on behalf of that space in its entirety, that any style or genre becomes one of the most

dangerous forms of propaganda.

  The depiction of traditions and individuals within the urban black landscape allows the urban audience to relate closely to the stories that they read as indicative of their own experiences. Through this connection with readers to the texts, the stories are easily accessible and interpretable by that specific cultural community. But urban fiction relies heavily on an association with and an intimate knowledge of inner-city life that makes it difficult for readership outside that demographic boundary, even black audiences, to view its stories through any but a lens of fantasy; with a gaze so distant, it almost becomes voyeuristic. This mystical perspective belies the truth and tragedy in the glamorized portraits of the "hood rich":

> That, my friend, is one kilogram of Mexico's sweetest blow. Street value, eighty-thousand dollars,' she said like a professor giving a lecture to students.
>
> 'Sometimes it goes for more, but this is only seventy-five percent pure. Still, you could put a five on it and still have a fiend lose his lunch.' (K'wan 104)

In the escapism, non-subject audiences fail to recognize the implications of a reader who encounters the same scenes regularly as reality. The inner-city readership appreciates the articulation of its terror; however, most contemporary urban texts stand as a mirror to what exists; no inspired response to the stories seems likely. Urban novels give voice to a community but provide no agency; when there is no attempt to evoke any inspirational response, there is no assistance in shaping the imagination of a reader toward possibilities of a community that nurtures its own growth rather than capitulating to and assisting in its own destruction.

II. *Coldest Winter Ever* and Black Agency in Literary Texts

Urban black literature can be adapted or modified to existing functional and structural definitions of blackness, but, since *Coldest Winter Ever* (2000), it has often forfeited the unique opportunity afforded in fiction writing to restructure history in the author's own image; to write personal and cultural narratives into didactic texts. Jane Campbell writes "Not only does the confession allow space to explore psychic complexities, it brings those complexities to the surface so that the audience can identify with the artist's personal and racial vision" (159). These writers, who occupy such far reaching positions of authority, bear the immense responsibility of fostering new vision, new direction. These influences of the black community must shoulder that legacy of conscious resistance to self-destruction and posit new models.

Benedict Anderson explains the close relationship of social structure to literature as "sociological entities of such firm and stable reality that their members can even be described as passing each other on the street, without ever becoming acquainted, and still be connected" (25). Values are reinforced through performance of "continuities of consciousness" by the people within its systems and through contextualization of a unified community in writing. As long as the world is portrayed as a place of no dreams, no improvement will be made. Acknowledging the existence of these hostile spaces with little hope for either self or community is a crucial step toward understanding how to better address problems within the community. It is not enough to leave possibilities at that diminished dimension. The literature now speaks: "This is where we are," but the

literature that speaks: "This is where we could be, where we need to be" grows more distant. Though not every story should relegate discussions of the physical consequences of poverty to the periphery of its narrative, there are few contemporary black urban texts that investigate and explore the emotional and psychological significance of the black experience in any of its forms at any of its historical periods of development and fewer still offer insight on reform within the individual and with benefit to the larger black community.

Sister Souljah wrote her debut novel in testament to the experiences of inner-city youth, drawing from impressions in her own childhood and her activism as an adult in community projects. *Coldest Winter Ever* became an iconic piece, helping pave the way for a new genre to emerge. The characters stand out from the page, written to be real as they engage in true to life situations with realistic opportunities and consequences. Unfortunately, that genre, now, more often focuses on the representation rather than the instruction. The urban novel is unique in its ability to entertain even the most reluctant of its readership. At the same time, urban literature only seems to limit itself by reinforcing established stereotypes of the black community in its minstrelsy of pimps, pushers, prostitutes, and the simple one man or woman who escapes singularly unscathed to then engage in another seemingly fruitless struggle, this time as part of mainstream culture.

The longing to be whole is a centermost concern of literature. The psychology of belonging, connecting with a common idea, group, or community transcends the ages. It is no wonder that contemporary urban fictions are so aimless; they have no trust, they promote individualistic desires and satiation to a fault. Sister Souljah identifies an unfortunate perspective plaguing urban communities in a discussion between Winter and

her father, "Look at my face Winter, and never forget what I tell you. Santiaga loves you. Your mother loves you. Don't confuse it. That's all you can depend on" (33). These characters are so searching because they have no identity foundations to draw from or build upon. If there is no alliance and no example of how to stand together, there is no way to connect one idea to another, no way to perceive an individual's obligation and contribution to the community and no way for the individual to trust the freedom to both belong to and to grow within the group. When those people who would speak of unification are silenced and hidden, the community fragments and crumbles because there is no common principle to which to hold. This sense of inevitable isolation makes such voices of unity vulnerable even to their own community.

The protagonist Winter in *Coldest Winter Ever* feels no loyalty nor trust for anyone beyond her immediate family. Even as her father is placed in prison and her mother is sent to jail, she runs schemes and spends what little money that she has for herself on expensive clothes, preferring to sleep in the street instead of a youth home in which she is placed until she turns eighteen. Winter's characterization reads like many youth from urban environments, hustling day to day without making any enduring investments:

> And less talking is better. A *whole lot less talking*. You know how we do. The less you know, the better off we all are. And don't get too comfortable just because we're out here in the suburbs. Play your hand close to your chest like you're still in the ghetto. Trust no one and answer no questions. Don't give anybody our phone number who doesn't already have it. Now don't get paranoid. Just don't get sloppy. (Souljah 63)

But what Sister Souljah offers readers in her novel is a wide scope of possibilities.

As we watch Winter, we are given the opportunity to observe the alternatives in every situation presented: the choice to finish school or to wander the streets to "hustle," the choice to live in a youth home with restrictions or to live as a prisoner, and the choice to play the girlfriend of a controlling older man whom she admires only for his reputation or to develop her own reputation by finding a way to live independently in a safe place. In a passage where Winter makes a decision to benefit her situation, she diminishes a character who supports her based on her limited personal experience, "Kathy Johnson, my social worker, recommended I finish school. I disagreed and told her to make arrangements for me to drop out. To keep things cool, I agreed to take my GED exam so I could get that bullshit equivalency. (Souljah 189) Winter would later recognize the virtue of prudence too late to apply to her own life.

Although choices are open to Winter everywhere and, also to those readers who relate to her story, much of the literature that has trailed in the wake of *The Coldest Winter Ever* fails to show any choice possible but early death or prison. Those who are fortunate enough to escape a warlike existence are considered anomalies within black urban literature and among readers. A much greater propensity exists for readers who live within these conditions to accept this predicament without possibility as incontestable truth, if these are all, or even the majority, of the stories they hear and the novels they read, be they accurate or not, be they fiction or truth.

One of the least recognized issues discussed in commercial black urban literature but fore grounded in *Coldest Winter Ever* is the concept of respect, namely self-respect which is equivalent to love of self:

When we hate ourselves we destroy our bodies with alcohol, drugs, casual sex,

and a bunch of stuff. Then we look at ourselves and hate ourselves even more.

When I first came in here, I said, 'What will I say to these women? They are all

dying.' When I looked at your faces I though to myself What have they done to

themselves? But in spite of everything, your children love you. Your daughter

needs you. Your sons miss you. We need you to live. We need you to want to

live. What is a community without you, the mothers? What will a community of

motherless children be like? Killers, haters, evil, negative, mat at the world,

unable to love, hug, and live because they hate themselves, because they needed

you to teach them how to feel, how to love, how to just be. (261)

Self-love becomes individual agency fostering perspective, voice, and, ultimately,

agency within the community at large. Agency is founded upon a sense of identity that

fosters community bonds. Community is unity, and unity is strength. Unfortunately, these

elements for both individuality and community tend to be lacking in the framework of

later contemporary urban fiction after *Coldest Winter Ever*. Through the literature one

can see a reflection, or perhaps, a construction as one does in canonical African American

literature, of black youth in their ideals of survival and emerging selfhood and self-

respect—and, inevitably, their respect for the black community that lies beyond the

street.

The canon of African American literature as an archive of the best quality and

highest thought would scarcely be considered in a conversation of this new black urban

literature, for such a literature, generally, brings little originality and virtually no

advancement to the craft of writing or to the esteem of the cultural elements that

canonical African American literature employs. However, the urban landscape, if used as a point of collective familiarity, has the potential to make a valuable medium to construct more affirmative models of the black community than the new black urban literature seeks to consider. If authors of urban literature could write legitimacy, political consciousness, and potency back into the authority of the canonical genre, the urban landscape sits at a perfect position to reach a multitude of audiences.

As it stands, most urban black literature is an extension of the chains established as systems of control that constrain the mind wherein images of dispossession occupy the links. Blackness has never been simply a question of race or of color but is classified by the intersections of these as they are distinguished from a western European ideal. Blackness, to this day, is unified as an American construct by difference, even apart from their history of objectification, their beauty, their bodies—in short, as a commodity. Frantz Fanon wrote "Each consciousness of self is in quest of absoluteness" (217). An understanding of a unified blackness, as opposed to essentialist blackness, continues to promote beliefs in solidarity, self-determination, group pride, preservation of ethnic identity and resistance to systematic division based on race, even as the acknowledgement of dark peoples as descendants from African origin lessens. The experience of blackness in America could be considered historically as a "nation within a nation", even long after Martin Robinson Delany described it as the condition of his community (Shelby 673).

Delany, considered the father of Black Nationalist theory, made evident the deprivation and exploitation of the black presence in America, urging separatism as a means of social justice and emigration from the US. He suggested that in order to lift or

resist oppression, black people need to form a socially and politically integrated society wherein race has no meaning. Though the creation of Liberia and the back to Africa movements did not sweep across the black community as the optimal, or even as a viable, choice for the entire black population in America, the concept of a racially integrated society persisted. The black community in America boasts a long history of storytelling in the creation and maintenance of its culture; no better way seems appropriate for the black community to share its diversity than in its literary vision of a common humanity.

Toni Morrison wrote in *What Moves the Margin* that the interaction between dominant American society and people coming out of the black community was frequently characterized by disgust and "an instinctive yearning for safety" (3). Urban literature could take an example from literature out of the Black Arts Movement and inscribe authenticity as individual voice within a collective consciousness. In that quest for black consciousness, the Black Arts Movement theorists, poets, novelists, and performers propelled black literature into conversations of identity politics. Don Lee, for example, becomes Haki Madhubuti and establishes the Third World Press, reaffirming the blackness of his poetics and extending his sense of community to the diasporic, international African community (Mullen 157). Resistance rhetoric to colonial bondage is historically situated in black texts.

Early black writers, beginning with slave narrative diaries of pre-revolutionary America, wrote along lines to justify their value in the developing American system. They wrote a self into being that would substantiate their presence as much for themselves in their survival as *persons* as for the budding American imagination in a time when they were mercilessly exploited and abused. White writers diminished the

significance of the African in America by imposing flawed standards of dominant society onto conceptions of blackness. The stories told by black authors became both a fortress and blueprint; they offered an honest assessment of who they were as individuals and what they had seen, where they needed to go, and how they could struggle to get there. Their work was not simply a question of whether these writers desired to create these fictions; their work was a necessary instrument to their own preservation in order to combat the physical manifestations of brutality toward an objectified commodity that dismissed black authenticity as irrelevant to humanity and stood in witness of the aggression against the larger black community, both free and enslaved, in ink that still speaks.

Literacy is, and has always been, a commodity in American culture. The ability to interact with a variety of texts enhances the significance of the individual. These first black authors challenged white assumptions of black intellectual inferiority simply in the act of publishing. These earlier black literature emphasized the didactic consequence of the text; the voice of the text was secondary, developed out of convenience or as a reflection of location and educational opportunities. Presently, the distinctive, individual voice has become foremost in creating an authentic text. The black aesthetic can be measured not simply by content and structure, but also must be assessed by complex, intertextual constructions of identity and community.

The discipline of American literature has tended to focus on African American literature as an inherently isolationist tradition, citing overtly political tones in its early periods as evidence of a diminished sensibility. Early African American canonical literature, even as it spoke forcefully to black people, urged them to move toward

appreciation of self and to embrace a belief in their own equality, to strive every day for

an aesthetic wherein blackness was no longer synonymous with difference that implied

inferiority but was worthy in its own right to make its own claims with its own voices;

these early black writers, indeed, inscribed blackness as a normative condition within the

broader sense of American society. Now the urban aesthetic, when written as a formulaic

pulp fiction, finds only images of scorn for those who have pursued formal literacy

within a black aesthetic.

III. Distorted Representations

The metamorphosis of literature is, and has been, an issue in the conversation of black art since the Harlem Renaissance. The argument rests in whether literature should show only the best that the black community can give or whether it should open the life behind closed doors to the view of the world. Arguably, all aspects of black culture, for better or for worse, are important in the creation and construction of the black aesthetic. Identity politics have long dominated the analysis of black literature, sometimes to the detriment of the black individual's voice, and fixates on that question: what is authentically black?

In the late 1960s, the movements in criticism tended to focus on nationalist attitudes or value systems in narrative. Black theorists borrowed Marxist structures as their foundation for reading race in American society and held that, in order to determine social relations, they must first determine consciousness which works to generate ideas. Western criticism subordinates readings that privilege discrete black aesthetic styles to a Eurocentric perspective. The literature that are published, and work within the structures of established discourse, imply the need for a distinct criticism in order to arrive at an accurate meaning of metaphor; the act of reading "within a tradition" enforces conformist, homogeneous structures to represent an authentic voice. Textual readings of black literature should not simply initiate the search for a beginning of the black aesthetic, but also delineate the subject matter in context of its unique cultural history. The developing black aesthetic in literature can only be accurately defined through the

connection of what is depicted and what is culturally relevant.

Toni Morrison connects the creation of the African American canon to nation building. The tendency in black art is to look for a single black symbol, a character or a situation to represent the entire spectrum of the black experience in America, but no essentialist blackness can found an ongoing discourse that is connected to the social construction of the black community. The classical narratives that emerge out of the oral tradition are instructive, moral, and representative. There is a transcendent quality to the characters inscribed in the framework of canonical texts that enables them to represent an entire history, their generation and ancestors as well as their progeny. Contemporary popular black literature finds itself frozen in metaphors that canonical African American writers have long fought to reverse.

Much of the urban fiction embraces institutionalized characters that, in truth, could be beautiful but are written as repulsive in order to maintain illusions of isolation to maintain separation from the black middle class and white society at large, thereby protecting the market for such fiction. Separation weakens the resolve of self; a collective weakness can provide no structure of support for independent thought or movement. Without that support of mind, no strength of moral authority remains; the black community loses its voice through the frame in which the commercial urban writers inscribe blackness as essentialist in the crude dynamics of a ghetto lifestyle: community leaders and models are continually removed from their presence as moral authority and as voice of resistance, both physically and in the collective imagination. They are gunned down and speak no more to the community's challenges and needs. The dualism that exists in the black mind that Du Bois called "double consciousness" becomes a

dichotomy of essentialist construction between what could be perceived blackness inscribed both as a malignant stain and as a mysterious specimen from the perspective of a discriminating western eye. Instead of using those frames to craft an identity based on the needs and desires of the black community alone, without consideration of established western thought, commercial black fiction plays to that very essentialist diminished stereotype of blackness as criminal being unlike the initial African American creators of culture that provided unity and identity for the community in the first place.

In 1901 William Stanley Braithwaite predicts a renaissance of black art in America (Locke 40); at the same time, Du Bois lobbies for black civil rights and takes an interest in a Pan-African movement for political recognition of the subjects of the diaspora who had been suppressed under colonial rule (Locke 385). Not until the 1920s and 30s, during the Harlem Renaissance, is there a climate that allows for genuine black characterization to be inscribed and published by black fiction writers rather than the familiar embodiments of "blackness" written as caricature in the American imagination. In urban black literature, the portrayals of vernacular black speech transmitted through lay channels without a contextual frame serve to reinforce the worst possible stereotypes of the black population, predicated primarily on its relationship to the urban dispossessed who are inscribed as having little possibility in life beyond that of criminal behavior. "'Nigga, you know ain't neither one of us long for this world, but I don't mind speeding up the process on your end,' Sticks told him" (114), author K'wan aptly characterizes in *Blow*. While the selection paints a vivid image of what is anticipated as a black man in the ghetto, the impression is almost wholly based upon long standing stereotypes, insufficiently developed to provide either character, nor their readership as an extension,

a sense of value; a life worth living.

Of course there are those people who are, in actuality, vehemently opposed to radical change. These attitudes are promoted, however, as the normal approach to advancement, and, as these sections of the black community, represented here in *Blow*, become resistant to change, such self-defeating attitudes seemingly fragment the population between the black intelligentsia and the undistinguished, between the urbane and the urban, attributed to outward patterns of speech, dress, and carriage; all are caricatured into the prison of urban literature:

> Prince of the ghetto!" a familiar voice called from behind them. The three of them turned around at the same time to see Scatter shambling towards them. Scatter was a dude who had lived in the projects longer than either Prince or Daddy-O had been alive. He was around their mothers' ages but always kept the lines of communication open with the young boys. His yellow face, which at times seemed to be dripping off his skull, was pocked and bore the signs of a hard life. His trademark shopping bag hung from his thin arm weighted down with God only knew what. Scatter was one of the hood's most seasoned boosters. Dressed in a three-piece olive colored suit and matching snakeskin shoes, you wouldn't know he was an addict unless someone told you. (K'wan 38)

Essentialist depictions of blackness become the equivalent of criminality—anyone who does not adhere to the caricature becomes suspect, regardless of skin color.

Early black scholarship seeks to determine whether the black community revokes distinction and its unique gifts of culture if it demands full integration into mainstream American society or whether it would simply become accepted as part of a whole, more

complex narrative of the American "melting pot." Arguably, if any community is ever to feel truly contented with the space that it calls home, it must allow itself to participate fully in all areas of social and political life. Likewise, as the black community in America persists in fostering a working relationship with its homeland, which is what America becomes after two centuries of separation from its motherland Africa, it must first develop an assured sense of identity for itself that can then be woven into the fabric of mainstream America instead of its abundant history of accomplishment in the US being tossed askew in caricature and set apart as simply a bottom layer of society. Du Bois focuses on the influence of race, constructed as identity, to ascribe particular functions in thought and behavior to a racial collective. Du Bois, too, believes that race must no longer be socially meaningful, if black individuals are to overcome the essentialist inferiority of blackness thrust upon them by a supremacist society:

> Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek,—the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack. (13)

Literature provides an opportunity to be creative, and the urban setting enables

imaginative collectivity while at the same time supporting individuality that contributes to that dynamic collective consciousness. Authorship of urban texts is presented with a moment where it can insert ambition, determination, confidence, and respect into conversations that have all too long and all too often been devoid of enthusiasm or pride. Urban black literature can engage the variation, the richness in the features of the assorted religions, customs, and black aesthetic values, so its readership can learn that its world, to these readers themselves, holds more possibility and promise than misfortune and devastation. Instead, urban literature tend to isolate urban life into its own literary ghetto where only criminality, hostility, fear, and conflict reside, and these readers, seeing no models beyond these caricatures, understandably, see no escape save for mindless imitation of suspect "heroes" who die or go to prison before any achievement that might endure for the benefit of self and community. There is no transformation of self or community in urban literature as there is in other genres of fiction; there is no fantasy, no invention; the only horror inscribed in daily lives of characters is the horror that these readers witness every day or read about, less artfully, in daily news:

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

At the sound of gunfire, the grill was quickly abandoned, sending people

scattering for cover. Jimmy too, heard the thunderous clap, but didn't register

what he was hearing until the slug from the .357 ripped through the muscle and

cartilage of his thigh before snapping the bone on impact. The force was so

powerful that if flipped Jimmy in the air and dumped him on his back. The pain in

Jimmy's thigh was so intense that he just wanted to lay [sic] down and fad away,

but he couldn't. The fear from what Sticks and Stone would do to him willed

strength to his arms as he tried to crawl away. (K'wan 80)

This scene, already an all too familiar reflection of a stifled impression of urban

landscapes, is echoed and reduplicated, reverberating as convention:

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Our conversation was interrupted by gunshots.

"Get in the truck!" I yelled.

Ceazia jumped in the back seat behind me. I pulled off immediately, glancing in

my rearview mirror. Shit was chaotic; people were running in every

direction.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The gunshots were neverending. I glanced in the rearview mirror once again. I

was not prepared for the image before me. (Chunichi 93)

A material stake in black subjugation and the exploitation of such caricatures occurs

when their chronic affliction is indeed "chronic"; such perpetuation of stereotypes

permits mainstream America to flourish economically in the abstraction of caricatured

"victims," aided by hidden real lives incarcerated by a profit-driven, often private,

penitentiary system. This framework of deprivation and depravity could not benefit black

writers, less their audiences, when, consigned to a life of loss and imprisonment, it would

seem readers only ensure loss for themselves.

IV. Assessments of Authenticity

The parameters of textual authenticity, as Ronald L. Jackson II identifies in seven primary assumptions upon which black struggle, and thus authenticity of voice, is predicated as:

> 1.) Struggle is a human activity that solidifies one's sense of community.
> 2.) Struggle is defined by group experiences (i.e., it is not that struggle is unique to Black males but that racial and gender group experiences of Black males contextualize struggle). 3.) Struggle is the centerpiece of the Black masculine identity model because of the complexity of defining and negotiating Black masculine identity. 4.) All identity theories in some way call for dialectics. In this case, Black masculine identities are enwrapped in an I-Other dialectic involving politics of recognition. 5.) Black masculine persons are usually preoccupied with a sense of self-efficacy, which, when achieved, offers a sense of life satisfaction, autonomy, and stability. 6.) Black masculine persons' motivation to achieve is culturally, historically, and socially founded. 7.) Without struggle, recognition, independence, and achievement, commitment to community is virtually impossible. (135)

What is often portrayed as *true* blackness is only a partial motif. The assumptions of blackness center around struggle, but where that struggle begins and ends is subject to the most discrepancy right within their own discourses. Cornel West writes "we confine

discussions about race in America to the 'problems' black people pose for whites rather than consider what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as a nation,"(2) which gives the arena of black literature quite an extraordinary opening to present a discussion on the position of blackness in the US and to comment on the way black people view themselves and are viewed by others.

Unfortunately, in much of the urban literature following *Coldest Winter Ever*, writers sacrifice politics for entertainment, as if the two were mutually exclusive. Their work does, however, reveal surprisingly more about the lens through which the black experience is viewed, by Western society at large, than they may imagine. The challenge to generate new leadership in the black community could be easily and quickly resolved by introducing examples of confident, not arrogant; efficient, not convenient role models who are dedicated to the maintenance of their own wellbeing, family, and their various communities. The real life leaders who fill this need for consistency are rarely acknowledged or depicted in urban texts. Without these positive reinforcements, it is difficult for populations who already feel antipathy about their circumstances to accept that these texts are not dictations of their lives.

Malcolm X taught that black people must work to find value in themselves apart from the systems that classify and consider them as inadequate, "We have to change our own mind... We've got to change our own minds about each other. We have to see each other with new eyes. We have to come together with warmth... -Malcolm X" (qtd in "Black Looks" 9). Urban novels have the opportunity to act as a window to a life not scripted as intrinsically victimized and to be a source of hope and empowerment. Instead, urban novels play to the nihilistic tendencies that have become almost epidemic in the

homes and assemblies of black America.

The most vital resource in the black community is its culture, crafted to be malleable, even through sophisticated culture and extensive history. Bishop TD Jakes says in an interview, "We hoped for heaven while we live in hell on earth" (Dir. Timothy Greenfield-Sanders). Black authorship needs to connect the images to all levels of black reality. The Black Consciousness Movement in the 1960s and 70s strove for depicting the realities of the black community in America that were often overlooked. The literature, then, becomes a representation of a system of values, and these representations are internalized by the society and community to which they are directed. Culture is cultivated; therefore, a culture that practices violence is subject to abuse and low morality. A culture predicated on self-interest finds worth only in commodification, thus crafts itself as such. Is this cultivation intentional or simply an inevitable consequence of images that are performed, then portrayed, thus re-inscribed and validated by their own action? The framing of urban literature plays a key role in the realism of its comprising elements. The literature creates a theoretical contextualization of what is real, what is truth, what is authentic.

The new urban black literature that has emerged following the success of *Coldest Winter Ever* reiterates the stereotypical anger, the internalized aggression and fear assumed inherent in the black persona, instead of creating new role models that promote self discipline and responsibility, "I walked right up behind him without saying a word and smacked the taste out his mouth. As a reaction, he reached for his gun and jumped up, ready to fire" (Chunichi 61). Authorship of black literature has the opportunity to reconstruct black identity; however, rather than shaping and cultivating the positive

models, urban literature rather unconsciously rapes what fruit the black mystique may offer in flower in the effort to "keep it real" when, really, we all live, we all die. It is what an individual chooses to make of herself, who he chooses to become in the journey between life and death that makes all the difference whether she is remembered or forgotten, whether he is feared or he is loved. But maybe there is no conscience in ink.

Why the movement of urban fiction fails to arrive at an exemplary plane of canonical discourse and rests merely at the popular esteem and healthy sales of pulp fiction can be summed up as relevancy. Early urban writers find a space for a new conversation into which they carved beautiful, deep niches to succor their successors. So few have been able to deliver relevant, moving narratives that fully address the conditions of the black experience in an urban environment, though the term *urban* only partially describes the domain. Urban writers tend to follow that alley into the inner-city black neighborhoods without ever catching the train back downtown. Culture, like the urban landscape, is a struggle over terrain: a struggle to find significance in a space where groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings inflicted in the interest of other groups with whom they compete for dominance. The conflict of black culture against the dominant American culture and European influences in America has been so protracted that, even in black literature, the struggle possesses an overwhelming presence. Black literature must combat pressures of industry to produce sensationalist work for the sake of sales projections. The audience is already there, built in and devoted.

Perhaps there is a more nefarious force at work. In sociological reviews of literature, critics re-conceptualize creative autonomy of texts, giving the readership more involvement in the text rather than simply receiving what the author writes as an

exclusive party. The urban fiction novel strives to identify with its audience, wholly

engaging its readers in conversational or journal-like prose placing the audience, as well

as the character, squarely in a position of self-deprecation, "Maybe those final shots were

meant for me. The ones fired before I even had a chance to pull the trigger on my gun. I

looked around to see who may have fired the shots, but saw no one" (Chunichi 95). There

has also been much closer attention given to the selective exclusion or endorsement of

specific texts by publishing, distribution and other institutions that convene in the

capacity as gatekeepers. Minority culture has been subject to an institutional amnesia in

the American aesthetic. Black authorship should endeavor more critically to articulate the

black experience so that the broader impressions of black collective history and culture

are not squandered but deepened. The drive to write these realities may be less a lack of

idealism than a bid for consumerism. After all, the urban fiction market is the most

independently successful branch of the genre.

The problem is that, when the urban landscape is written in such negative terms,

the men and women who support the spirit and integrity of these communities are

rendered invisible. These stories mask what faces of transformation there may be and

suppress voices of reformation. V.F. Calverton was committed to the idea that the origins

of black art and literature are rooted in the economics of American institutions (Mullen

145). However, as those principles form the foundation of black art, the black aesthetic is

structured so to accommodate a breadth of cultural material. Black culture was never

essentialist at the core; how could it be when it was comprised of an amalgamation of

languages, customs, and ethnicities woven to create a sound pillar upon which they sang

their survival and arrival as creative, equal human agents of their own making.

Black writers tend to mistake writing to achieve an authentic voice for a voice oppositional to Western traditions; however, in their pursuit, they unintentionally re-inscribe the very Western structures that they wish to subvert. The messages must be time and location specific and not relegated to interpretations of a dispossessed population in the inner city. Urban fiction tends to saturate its texts with images of an essentialist blackness to fully position an identifiably authentic voice of the character rather than allowing the narrative to move freely within its own framework of black identity at any point in the varied locations black culture is found. To adhere to a structure that denigrates a strong sense of self is to succumb to the subtexts of white supremacy built into American aesthetics.

Most urban fiction writers often fail to allow their characters to strategize, to articulate long term preparations as they work toward specific goals and investments. Instead, urban characters scheme, struggling in momentary bursts for immediate compensation and unsustainable reward. If these are the patterns that audiences are exposed to as models, how can the black community demand, let alone expect, stable principles and secure institution? James Weldon Johnson spoke of the power of African American literature to change racist white opinion (Biers 118). While the black texts that have made their way into the canon of American literature have definitely demonstrated the capacity of the black intellect, the current direction of urban literature tends to stumble toward a two-fold predicament: urban literature substantiates categorizations of black inferiority--further impressing the idea that black achievement is an anomaly of a few talented individuals--which leads to cynicism in the black mind and the disjointing of black identity. These contradictions tend to outweigh the canonical novels' varied

interpretations of blackness, these commercial popular urban novels being often more widely distributed and read as "true" representations of "black authenticity.

Examinations of urban lifestyles are vastly oversimplified in fictional texts. It is imperative for the collective black community to acknowledge and to valorize other ways of knowing and being in the world with others besides the legacy of urban decay. Experiences written into urban culture remain with the residents of that community, and the reader, as a spectator, responds with an anxiety that is not easily shaken or forgotten. Black readers in their youth deserve more accuracy than anxious depictions of their presumed selves; they need an all-encompassing history, not just an imagined predicament that reinforces its accuracy with statistical projections of a relatively small portion of the whole population.

The movement of black literature to an urban aesthetic sits at the mouth of self-discovery; readers should have an opportunity not only to simply legitimize black presence in America, but also to forge, once again, a space of power and actualization. Urban literature has the capacity to transmit concepts of growth from inside the diasporic narrative and to forge a new tradition through its textual expression. In this period of appreciation of multiplicities of constituent parts of any single identity, writers within the black community no longer need write to fill binary descriptions of good or bad, rich or poor, clever or slow; they are free to write about all the experiences of a person, a whole being, stepping out of a rich heritage formed out of necessity to combat confusion and upheaval, domination and terror. The urban, placed at the center of commerce and culture, provides a space to drive blackness back toward a sense of unity, a unity through understanding.

Urban literature writers must recognize that cultural criticism can be an agent for change. Little attention has been given to the investments in the promotion and protection of black culture in the past. In this moment, when there is not only opportunity to have better access to the voices of revolution in early black literature, but also a heightened responsiveness to cultural art, black authorship has the opportunity to reject racialism and to embrace blackness as an esteemed branch of humanity on its own merit, not simply on its distinction from whiteness. It becomes evident in most urban literature that the persistence of systems imposed to regulate the social life and capital development of black communities remains an obstacle for self worth and vigorous community health. It is the framework of these novels that must change.

Black urban writers face great challenges in moving forward past the prevailing images designed by their oppressors, if these authors continue to write the same caricatures into images of themselves. Even armed with the weapons to combat the stereotypes that force the black community to perpetually wear the tragic mask, urban literature finds it difficult to lift their characters from the ghetto. This wave of black cultural identity linked, almost indistinguishably, to urbanism can be traced to the Great Migration where rural and southern discourses transitioned into northern metropolitan destinations for cultural as well as economic transformation. However, blackness is still very closely tied to ideas of progress, even as the movement north became a new beginning and an escape from the tyranny of the Jim Crow South. The North becomes a radical space that showcased the respectable and virtuous as well as the mischievous, unscrupulous characters within their neighborhoods. E. Franklin Frazier, a sociologist who published through 1950, paid close attention to these migrations of black people

from rural to urban environments where common themes of delinquency and disorganization began as the problematic forces that would shape the urban imagination, or suppress it (Semmes 491).

Yet, even as the belief in urban "meccas" disintegrates, the most familiar representations of blackness are drawn out of those ruins and continue to inhabit that role. Few representations of blackness are portrayed outside the urban miscreant or the historical slave. It could not in good conscience be attributed to the Harlem Renaissance with its images of black beauty and its calls for intellectualism and radicalism. Nor could it come out of the legacy of black art which, alongside the Black Consciousness Movement, sought to reclaim the very stories of hereto for unexamined accounts of black history.

There is a difference between presenting what exists in present form as a definitive posture and demonstrating a movement toward a greater aspiration from whatever the present position. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams wrote in 1958 of how art and society are mutually influential. In *Culture and Society*, he states, "In the question of art, the first emphasis fell, not only on the independent value of art, but on the importance to the common life of the qualities which it embodied" (165). But what then if that emphasis rests upon a fallacy, a fantasy that is less common that it is constructed? The assumption of that art reflected back into society would be communicated in such a way as to subvert the dignity of the collective group in favor of a deficient model. If *Coldest Winter Ever* were stripped of the defining message of respect, wisdom, and preparation, the story becomes irrelevant, a tale told and retold, and, once embraced, the society it reflects becomes unimportant.

As testament to that very message, in the 2000 re-printing of Souljah's first novel, editors included a reader discussion and an interview in which she unpacks the significance of Winter's journey and her relationship with the community. Souljah's professed mission for *The Coldest Winter Ever* is "To put drug use out of style, ...To put drug dealing out of style, ...To get youth to recognize their talents and convert them into business, ...To get youth to use their time wisely, ...To recapture the black male identity, ...To redesign the black female identity, ...To put the black family back together again, and ...To expose how the American economy is fueled by drug dealing and drug money" (466). In answer to one of her most poignant questions "Is the *Coldest Winter Ever* a true story?", she discusses her desire to create "an authentic version of black girls, teens, and women" (438). Sister Souljah answers:

> Hopefully this one book will help to free black actors from having to fit themselves into the strangely written roles and characters that have been misrepresenting them for years, yet may have paid the bills. Additionally, I hope it will help girls living in and outside the hood to understand that there are many woman who you may model yourself after, as you attempt to come into your womanhood. You can be Winter or you can be Sister Souljah. You can be Mrs. Santiaga, or you could be Doc, the medical doctor who owned the building in which Sister Souljah lived. You could become Natalie, famous for blow jobs, or you could become Rashida, who took the help from concerned others and healed herself. I wanted to show all of these different girls and women and the consequences of their choices. (438)

V. Essential Blackness as a Default

Black people in America are not biologically homogeneous and are thus capable

of making broad connections with various groups and functions within American society.

Rather than segregate people of African descent as a collective to impressions of poverty,

urban writers could embrace the diverse cultural and social histories to create fuller, more

complex stories. Greco-Roman Stoics stressed interconnectedness within communities

and with the world. Fascinations with hybrid cultures makes identity even more fluid but

no less definitive than ever. Different communities have differential access to "modern"

ideas. However, the ability to appreciate art as a conduit of cultural empowerment

remains largely unrealized due to a separation of fine art from the everyday "art" of

commercial entertainment. The commercial urban fiction, in its simplistic observation of

a small segment of the black community, becomes an easy space to manifest impressions

of blackness primarily because most urban fiction uses the same tropes imposed by

European imaginations. Concepts of an ideal are completely illusionary, but, in

debunking that illusion, art has the greatest impact in shaping new perceptions.

Black writers who would later go on to channel that distinctly created history in

order to rally and to educate this community would be called *Colored*, *Negro*, and *Black*

until they finally achieved consideration as *African Americans*, no longer a second-class

citizen but recognized as crucial to what it means to be American. Now this movement to

reduce the significance of other experiences within the black aesthetic threatens to reduce

the entire black community to a position of inferiority, most dangerously, in its own

mind. Who, then, become heroes?

The face of blackness is overwhelmingly masculine which is then translated, for example in *Blow*, to hostile, intimidating, ignorant, inconsiderate, and severe caricatures:

Daddy-O thought long and hard on it for a minute. In his most sincere voice he told the detective, "Yeah, man. I wanna tell you something. Go fuck your mother!"

Rage flashed in the black detective's eyes as he leapt across the table and grabbed Daddy-O by the front of his T-shirt. He tried to yank Daddy-O from the   seat, but Daddy-O was too heavy. When he leaned over to get a better grip, Daddy-O threw all his weight in the opposite direction, sending him spilling out of the chair and onto the floor bringing the black detective down with him. Daddy-O could've punished the detective if he wanted to, but instead he held him on the ground and laughed. His laughter was short-lived when the red-faced detective punched him in the back of the head, causing the room to spin. It took some effort, but the two detectives were able to hoist Daddy-O off the ground and sit him roughly back in the chair. (K'wan 191)

This passage becomes even more limiting when the only redeeming figure is, seemingly, more ruthless than the "troubled" character. A discussion on frequent abuses is eclipsed by, not one, but two hostile and dangerous "black" characters. Beyond the gangster imagination, there are brothers in the black community that consider themselves as such and carry themselves accordingly.

Where is the literature that glorifies men who respect and nurture their mothers, sisters, lovers? The gracious, exploring, protective, teaching, strong figures are eclipsed

as the more notorious embodiments of the black community adorn page after page in bold. bell hooks writes "Mass media pays little attention to those black men who are opposing phallocentrism, misogyny, and sexism" ("Outlaw Culture" 110). But those alternative voices are not celebrated in the patriarchal structuring of urban culture. The stereotypical images are repeatedly reinforced in urban literature as men of limited success in the framework of urban narratives.

Americans of every heritage are both obsessed with and apprehensive of figures of blackness; black bodies are fixed in a gaze to be either scrutinized or restrained. At some point western standards must be lifted, more, eliminated from the black body. Characterization within the urban novel not only reflects, but also encourages the pursuit of a European standard in its illustrations of long, straight weaves and manicured nails, light skin and even lighter eyes as the embodiments of beauty. Sister Souljah makes note in a conversation that speaks to *Coldest Winter Ever* character, Winter:

> Yes. I saw how you did Lauren's nails. And your own are so beautiful. Your
> clothes are always so well-coordinated. Now that's a talent. Your hair looks as
> good if not better than I've seen any hairstylist around here do. That's a talent,
> too. So you just need to decide what you want to do and then get started.
> Otherwise, time will pass you by. You'll look up in five to ten years later and
> you'll have nothing. So what do you think? Souljah asked. (265)

This criterion stimulates the contempt held by black people as they are taught to refuse and to abhor their own bodies, with particular attention directed at their hair where "good hair" connotes loose curls or waves. Physical appearance is a fleeting and unreliable currency that is, nonetheless, continually impressed upon the black body as a singular

limited means of success. In bell hooks's discussions of representation, she emphasizes that little change has been made in respect to the portrayals of blackness despite advancement in areas of politics, economics, and education in contemporary society. The images that abound, even many images created by and for black people, re-inscribe Eurocentric power structures, the central basis of American institutions. Their bodies become the most lucrative commodity that they have, either through show or sales, "muling" or murder. It seems as if drug culture is pervasive in the creation of a black aesthetic in a way that is not addressed when the same phenomenon is equally as rampant and devastating in other demographic areas. hooks discusses James Cone's effort to educate American audiences of the injustices of racism, to penetrate their ignorance of supremacist systems, and to engage in anti-racist resistance in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* (hooks 11). Empowerment of any group only comes with a practiced self-love, but self-love and respect are only accessible if the group understands the structures that sit below those feelings. Black people are often unable to articulate their distress, be it in the inability to acknowledge the white supremacist structures of the society in which they reside or in the terror invoked by forcible silence and callous disregard.

The forums within which the black experience finds capacity to speak must also recognize that there has never been an essentialist black identity but many voices that blend through similarity of experience. If contemporary urban fiction writers take into consideration that there are varied and abundant stories, the figures used to represent the black community might no longer be so two-dimensional. Yet, what is written, and thus internalized, as urban black fiction is an impression of an entire population menacing, troubled, and suffering:

Okay. After serving time in jail for a crime involving Vegas, I was released and came home unannounced to surprise him. Well, I ended up being the one surprised. I walked in on Vegas, my best friend, and another female in the Jacuzzi getting high and making out." Ceazia paused to wipe the tears that were streaming down her cheeks then she continued. "BJ, I was numb with hurt when I saw that. I literally blacked out. It was as though I was in a trance as I shot continuously into the tub, killing Vegas and his two counterparts (Chunichi 191).

They are imagined to be a singular group, distinct from American society. One should be critical of this perpetuation of any image that singularly denigrates this portion of the population. There has always been intense struggle in black literature, from both internal and external forces; however, that struggle that is presented in early black literature is a struggle toward progress. Now the struggle becomes a circular sequence of events that eventually leads to more struggle than should be the case if black self-identity were free to shape itself and its own conception of community.

This impression of a cyclical regression alongside modernization may reflect more the rigid structures of society than the black community's own failure to adapt. Although the historical union of the black experience through the escape from enslavement and the achievement of legal freedom and subsequent suffrage is paramount to the historical development of its distinctive identity, its present cultural identities must include classifications of social class, faith, and location. The virtues of blackness are construed as vices. But blackness is an act of consciousness rather than a generalized symbol imprinted upon a body. Henry Louis Gates, Jr writes in *Figures in Black* : "'Blackness' is not a material object, an absolute, or an event, but a trope; it does not

have an 'essence' as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity" (40). What constitutes the complexity of the black intellectual is the rejection of all considerations of absolutism.

Urbanism, in its new grounding, has the opportunity to reconnect the political variations in knowledge dissemination by infusing the urban lexicon with relevant social, political, and economic concerns. Literature, being a window into the black experience, uses counter languages developed by assigning words with alternate and oppositional meanings so not to openly betray their frustrations. In the discursive realm of black art, an extended engagement with American tradition confronts issues of orders of meaning and relations of identity to signifiers. They function as a kind of writing that have found their way, once again, into literature through the legitimizing efforts of urban fiction. They stand as rhetorical structures, each with their own modes of interpretation. Gates also writes in his critical text *The Signifying Monkey* that: "If blacks were the subject of this sort of racist Signifyin(g) parody, they also were quite capable of establishing the necessary distance between themselves and their condition to Signify upon white racism through parody" (94). That distinctly ethnic patterns of black speech have persisted in literature despite censure from black and white critics alike is a testament to its consequence to black identity.

Perhaps it emerged from the growing focus on the culture of Ebonics as a socio-political element that gives legitimacy to a distinct black institution through authenticity of voice that was disputed by all cultural groups in America alike throughout the 1980s and early 90s when educators raised questions of the appropriateness of using the communication styles of their students in the curriculum and if the linguistic patterns

emerging from their students communities constituted a legitimate language. Often, the students were met with condescension because their exhibited patterns of speech did not match "standard" forms of speech and writing . There is no doubt that black idioms were not constructed to be seen as vulgar or coarse but as part of a vernacular to help foster a sense of belonging. Regardless, when these expressions are taken out of context, or even when they maintain their context presented to an audience unaware of their frame, these devices become exaggerated distortions.

Literary critics coming out of the Black Arts and cultural studies movements of the 1960s urged that literature should be read and judged using uniquely "black" methods since to analyze a black text based on the systems implemented by the very institutions they wrote against would obviously render whatever texts unsatisfactory or inauthentic. While reviewing a text on the merits of its own cultural relevancy would be optimal, the task has been difficult as there is no singularly established framework that accurately represents an acceptable black American aesthetic though one may find now more moderate scholars who advocate looking through "windows" of criticism to achieve a more intermediary approach that neither fully discounts black creativity nor abandons it to arbitrary methods of evaluation than might have been true for an earlier search for an adequate methodology. The efforts to couch scholarship into more general approaches to literature become equally problematic because they confuse textual identities in the process or, worse, remove them all together in their renderings which minimize the culture and heritage that ethnic texts trace through their accounts of origin, historical development, and self-perception.

The mental and physical bondage that was once enforced by external threats and

violence is now self-imposed in debilitating images of urban communities. The urban text would then be free of its slacking responsibly which repeatedly proves too weighty a task to shoulder, even for the sake of its own people. Mythification encourages writers, readers, and scholars alike to believe that the stock characters crafted to denigrate the black community no longer exist or they are now so suppressed that they are no longer dangerous. Unfortunately, often though the character may be different, the function is still the same. Where once there was a tragic mulatto, we now have a troubled mixed soul; where there was the mammy, we now have the ghetto queen; the pickininny child becomes the latchkey kid; where there was the coon, there is the dope fiend; the Uncle Tom, the snitch; the buck, now the thug. To this day, it is rare for a depiction of blackness to span the gambit of culture. It is most disheartening to see a medium with so much potential, that many black people identify with as their own, succumb to the misrepresentations that both have seen and have been the cause of much of their distress; their own racial anxiety is an extension of long held misrepresentations of a proud and noble people. Much of urban literature continues to cast the black mystique in terms of the exotic and the strange, or the violent, incompetent and uneducated; hyper sexual, or exploitable. The models disproportionately depict severely deficient examples of the black community. Automatically, these voices become crude and unreliable, unable to articulate their own needs, thus further reducing their agency. The assumptions of blackness center around struggle, but where that struggle begins and ends is subject to the most discrepancy right within its own discourses.

When we understand that textual meaning in black art comes out of metaphor; no where does it become more present than in urban fictions that incorporate spoken speech

patterns, music trends, and other nonliterary textual influences that form the urban black experience. However, in order to avoid ascription of all urban tendencies to the entire black experience, we must understand that cultural texts need an awareness of the framework before they can be analyzed. The tendency to appropriate western standards in the examination of minority literature trivializes elemental principles of a culture. The invention and adaptation of language structures unique to their circumstances have been long recognized conventions of the black communities in America. This dynamic convention has the ability to move and change with evolving culture and to maintain fundamental communication patterns as youth and geography propel it across the ages.

Efforts to attach these concepts of an essential blackness to conventional speech patterns have resulted in the burdening of discourse with meaningless jargon and the articulation of confused utterances on language, literature, and culture. Tradition has become so accustomed to review all black discourses as essentialist that there is a tendency to neglect the foundational roots of the underling culture, characterized precisely by its connected diversity. The efficacy of black representation relies on the accuracy of its most popular and wide reaching literature. This collective understanding makes it difficult to escape its categorization, regardless of origin. But urban fiction writers have the ability to defy existing stereotypes by creating characters that can be celebrated, impressing the importance of love, respect, and understanding for self and for society. Such an approach would ease the tensions within the black community by offering the same deference to every college graduate, hometown hero, and family fixture shown to every dope fiend, call girl, and child molester, so they could perhaps find better tools to get help, get cash and secure protection than are offered in the new urban black

fiction.

As urban literature move away from the variety that black America was built upon, they inevitably lose the voices that guide them through their history, a history that spans a multitude of cultures, colors and customs that have the ability to fuse and to fortify a diminishing conviction. Without those histories, they lose the presences that propel them into purpose and inspire innovation. Without these histories, they forfeit their legacies and risk becoming ambivalent to their own significance. A large portion of urban fiction, by entertaining the expectation of never knowing peace in their own neighborhood, of never being able to achieve a position of influence beyond terrorizing a population equally as vulnerable because the chasm between themselves and a society that claims supremacy makes for a seemingly unalterable disparity of power, rejects the artful language systems and expressive performance that preserved their very existence.

Perhaps it is a bit overwhelming to carry the responsibility of stimulating, innovative thought which is why many authors of urban fiction have found safety in the imitation of earlier literature that strives to set precedence over the black community in uncomplicated arrangements. What often can be found in urban literature are structures that depict danger for the sake of limited material wealth, often three or more singular individuals who find no trust in anyone or anything but their steel, and, rightfully so, as all other characters are depicted as equally as villainous, where all-- or all but one-- find themselves twisted in a series of mistakes and underestimations that leaves them in immediate peril, ending in death or in prison time. Or images of a broken family dominate that lead to further collapse of family structure spawning from trust issues within the immediate family or unsupportive, often abusive relationships that leads a

fragile woman to feel the need to disassociate herself almost completely from anything and everyone she ever knew to end with, not success, but with a vague assumption that she will just begin to attempt to heal scars that will take years, if not the rest of her life to heal and hope that those scars do no more damage to subsequent generations. Drop in a crack head for six pages and shake well: thus emerges the urban novel:

> My mother was doing time in the Virginia Women's State Prison for child neglect. One night after a three-day stay at the crackhouse, she came home frustrated and shook my little brother to death. She would often come home fien'in once her monthly welfare check was gone and there was no more money for drugs. This particular time, Momma was so sick that the constant cry of my 5-month old brother drove her insane. (Chunichi 4)

It is ironic how very like a feudal nation that the black community portrays itself. The mass impression of black presence in America shows an angry people who hold an extremely strong attachment to property that is not even their own, with class segmentation that can be recognized by dress and by speech patterns.

VI. *Coldest Winter Ever*: An Exemplary Text of a Contemporary Canon

Sister Souljah is the new classic, standing as a bridge between worlds; canon and popular literature, formal education and street smart, youth and maturity all bound with mutual dignity and respect. She realizes in the precarious space of urban black youth, one cannot be successful without the other. She shows that it is possible to occupy both realms, but dignity and respect start with understanding that there is choice. Sister Souljah writes *The Coldest Winter Ever* against a backdrop that is accessible and with a voice that is instructive. This powerful narrative transcends the boundaries of urban-presumed-blackness by providing a glimpse into the mind and world of a segment of the black community as it continues on the path to discovery and interacts with the varying levels of blackness along the way. In an insightful passage alluding to the accumulation of errors that contribute to a continuous plight on urban communities, Sister Souljah comments,

> Money is important, no doubt," Souljah said. "But there is some business we need to take care of before money comes into the equation."
> "...Like, how are we gonna have a business together when we don't even like each other? How we gonna trust each other when we don't even know each other? Think about it." (275)

Sister Souljah depicts in her novel a prismatic sense of the system that both supports and plagues the entire United States with her artful and realistic portrayal of Winter in her world. Winter is a multifaceted character who faces real life problems with

realistic consequences. But Souljah ensures that Winter is viewed as a singular example within a growing trend unlike more recent novels that characterize troubled communities as a normative occurrence, not only as a specific location, but also as an entire nation. We see the movement of growth in *Coldest Winter Ever* as Winter makes choices from an array of options. We see characters from each environment try to teach her, try to persuade her away from a general direction of ruinous behavior. Her actions result purely from her own decisions; she is never bound to any particular lifestyle. Sister Souljah accomplishes melding the two realms in seamless scenes, moving god and bad, light and dark, around themselves in an interplay of three-dimensional rendering of life:

"Why don't you do something with yourself," asked Midnight, annoyed.

I glanced up toward the mirror to check my appearance, I looked good to me. So I asked, "Something like what?"

"I don't know. What do you do? What are you into?" My mind drew a blank. "So what's up Shorty, what's the answer?"

I smiled, liking the fact that he was playing with me.

"The answer to what?" I asked. He shook his head, as though I was frustrating him or something. "What? Is there something you want to hear, something I'm supposed to say? What?"

I asked you a question. What are you into? What do you like to do?" My mind started clicking.

"I like to enjoy myself," I said with much attitude. "What do know about that Midnight? I like to feel good, relax, get high, fuck, dance, shake my ass, shop. I like to be turned on and I love to turn another mother-fucker on."

What do you read?" he asked. "What's the name of the last book you read?"

"I like movies, I like chillin' with my girls. Matter of fact, if I wasn't stuck here

with you I'd have plenty of good shit to get into."

"What you gonna be when you grow up, Winter?"

"Whatever. Maybe I'll get a job like yours," I said, cutting back at him and letting

him know me and him are the same kind of people" (Souljah 58).

Winter's material obsession is represented as the force that drives her interactions that

lead her down the dangerous paths that she travels. Though the character of Winter is

clever and resourceful, her aims are shortsighted and impulsive which often sidetracks

her progress. She mistrusts and misuses people, as evidenced by the sugar daddy she

keeps, whom she calls upon for money and transportation when it suits her but,

otherwise, avoids and deceives; or her friend Natalie who is her companion and confidant

but is quick to tussle and to double cross. But there are still figures in the novel that play

very heroic roles, Sister Souljah as the voice of a radio-cast social commentary and a

caring guardian; or Midnight, the loyal and adept assistant to Winter's father who takes in

and provides for her younger twin sisters. Rather than creating a static picture of black

people, Sister Souljah gives agency to the multiple realms at which point the black

community intersects.

However, in more recent popular black literature, the options afforded to the

characters are minimal, generally death or danger as a rule, with little investigation of the

repercussions. When loyalties are easily broken and corruption is the norm, no group

thinks to unite itself; to build strength of character or integrity. There is plenty of

conviction in the literature that comes out of the urban vein, though it generally ends in

ten to twenty. This is not life for all; it need not be life for most, but continues to be depicted as standard.

Coldest Winter Ever gave the black community an instrument for discussion that was taken and stripped of the redemption written so charitably, the love crafted so delicately to articulate in an accessible way that black people need not be bound by their present condition but that there are options, there are opportunities, there are support systems, if they are sought out, but always, there are consequences:

> Just then the aggravating voice of Sister Souljah leaped out of the radio and started choking me: "The Ancient African elders believed that what you sow, you reap. If you do something positive, something positive will come back to you. If you consciously do negative things, then negativity will rule your life." (Souljah 43)

The genre of urban fiction, unfortunately ending with *Coldest Winter Ever,* was created to provide a forum to give strength to an underrepresented population. Why has the conversation been silenced?

The commercially projected impressions of the black community are simply responses of the general population to the perceived definitions of the culture defined, on some level, by a knowledge of black thought and black culture sketched from personal interaction but, primarily, on the limited scope of mass circulated accounts. Even within the black community, the networks that would engage neighbors and acquaintances wan in influence as the texts that write them as a distinct group become less instructive and even less innovative. The spaces used to teach become more divided as a distinct rift between tests considered classical or canonical are set apart from the pulp fiction that

often finds greater circulation because of its scandalous and sensational storylines. It is possible that these books are truly so much more relatable to their urban readership than the historical fictions produced as a statement to the legacy of the black community, but issues of violence and depravity are not a purely African American phenomenon; nor are the consequences of these conditions.

Coldest Winter Ever becomes a pivotal moment and a point of break from the historical contemporary and classical black literature. *Coldest Winter Ever* represents a moment, an idea, a segment of the collective black presence in America as well as urges its readership to move toward more progressive ends in an equally exciting and instructive piece. Unfortunately much contemporary commercial literature has followed with formulaic, purely entertaining forms that, like the preconceived conceptions of urban backgrounds upon which the stories are lain, the stagnant and festering images of blackness are not only reinforced as popular, but also they undermine the beauty and strength in the ethics and morality of the actual residents who are rarely depicted as part of the standard cast.

Where we find fear, we can imagine strength; where there is pain, we have the opportunity to administer health. The stories that come out of urban fiction are positioned entirely as an ideal but are unsuccessful in the use of tools that would provide them power. The urban literature become less expressive, less culturally aware. They assume a posture of normativity that becomes particularly exclusive and simultaneously collectively destabilizing. The relationship between author and audience is immense; There is a complex relationship between the nature of the characters as depicted in urban fiction and the experience of the authors who influence the realities written into the text.

Urban literature, it seems, becomes a secondary movement stemming from what was initially opened to provide awareness and give better insight into the unspoken black world but the representations of the patterns of urban decay have made the grave imperfections that were once recognized in an effort to encourage change a popular trend. Images of the urban environment are synthesized onto the black body. The black body becomes a landscape imposed upon by representational structures that not only further subjugate, but also regulate individual agency. Urban literature scripts hyper negative impressions that are internalized and, when as often as they are left unchecked, become self-fulfilling prophesies. Authors write anger and mistrust into the materials that feed back into the space from which they are derived. The ensuing anger is developed from the anticipation of strangers projecting unfounded perceptions on an individual assumed to be angry by nature. These assumptions become debilitating as that anger grows and spills from the street into the home; though in urban literature we are rarely invited inside the home, less so if it is a man's home. As the structure of black community continues to fragment and erode under the weight of growing suspicion, fewer and fewer pillars buttress the weight of insecurity and aversion. Only when the processes to deconstruct the damaging portrayals and corrupt images of blackness cease in their own work may black people move away from the periphery of society into a comfortable engagement with mainstream American aesthetics without fear of having to negotiate their identity or to subscribe to one practice or another. The institutions that were, from inception, limited to assisting with the effects rather than the causes of urban decay cannot be expected to stimulate any measurable reformation in the urban community. These texts that reveal the undercurrents of present social climates then provide a firm platform upon which to build

stronger individuals, stronger communities.

The ghetto exists, there is no disagreement. But the movement of urban literature since the pre-millennium publishing of *Coldest Winter Ever* has made the oppressive conditions of the inner-city shine foremost on black neighborhoods and diminished the repercussions of emotional and psychological deficiency in exchange for voyeuristic excursions to economic underworlds. Scholars feel obliged in their literary archeology to find the intersection of historical text and current trends. Still, writers continue to use conventional narratives that give rise to the same critical analysis that reviewers have always resisted exploring; associations in the trends of current popular art and present society. We need not wait twenty, fifty, one hundred years to look closely at the systematic relationships of the articulation of a culture and its subsequent manifestation. The principles of the discursive structures built to contextualize the strategies of black aesthetic models are in need of reworking. The archetypal binaries--black is bad, white is good, and other such simplicities--that configure the western traditions of literary criticism are not sufficient to appreciate the multidimensional field of black literature. The enduring convention of racist black textual representation encourages white publishers to accept from black writers whose work reflects what has already been printed. The flawed belief in, and insistence upon, an essentialist black text has had a deadening effect on literature.

VII. Reconstructing Black Literature: Writing Consciousness into Urban Fiction

Urban fictions are missing the sound theoretical frameworks to underlie their texts that could elevate them from conventional fiction to canonical literature. As the divisions between public and private, real and imaginary dissipate, identity is immediately strengthened or subjugated. The urban landscape becomes an adept medium to engage with conflict, reformation, and legacy within social, economic, and political structures, but, by nurturing impressions of delinquency, writers destabilize what power they command. Because the expression of blackness lacks specificity, it is difficult to compare the representations in its popular and canonical works or as Stewart (1968) writes, "The black artist must construct models which correspond to his own reality" (3). The narratives that come out of urban settings should be entertaining and compelling, but they should also have something powerful and enlightened that guides their readership down brighter paths.

Urban fiction writers, it would seem, elect to embrace an essential blackness without taking full stock of the cultural history that affixes itself. So long as writers of black urban fiction remember that, though the collective black community shares many of the same general practices that come out of a common history, there is still, as has always been, variation in the cultural ideals. There is no need to fear being labeled in an effort to preserve a sense of blackness or to embrace an arbitrarily assumed authenticity to demonstrate cultural distinctiveness. Though the methodology may have differed, the need was explicit and cohesive in texts that identified with an assortment of communities

across the expanse of the black experience, which linked them in a common network with

a common cause. For example, Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) makes a

place for itself in the political discourse of Civil Rights while at the same time connects

to a broader scope of African American history. In a passage, character Nathan Brown

artfully states:

> I think that when people like you, Mr. Von Vampton, say "The Negro
>
> Experience" you are saying that all Negroes experience the world the same way.
>
> In that way you can isolate the misfits who would propel them into penetrating the
>
> ceiling of this bind you and your assistants have established in this country. The
>
> ceiling above which no slave would be allowed to penetrate without stirring the
>
> kept bloodhounds... I'm afraid that I won't be able to help you, Mr. Von
>
> Vampton. I am teaching a school to Harlem youngsters so that they won't be
>
> influenced by people like you... (Reed 117)

Black urban fiction, in the present moment, contextualizes a singular black experience

but is then marketed as the *only* black experience. Compare the resonance of *Mumbo*

Jumbo, then, to a scene that all too often summarizes the impression of urban life, "It was

well after 3:00 A.M., but there were still a sprinkling of people hanging out in the

projects" (K'wan 85). That perception is then wholly embraced by an American

perception-- by which I mean *all* American perceptions-- of blackness. In portraying the

nightly new horror that is recognized as the inner-city, the urban landscape, the authority

of a black text is never questioned by its readers. But their motives, their proposed

fundamental conventions that link their conversation and a community, seem unclear,

unfocused. Urban fiction has not yet found a way to project the entertainment in their

stories onto the significance of a struggle; it has yet to seek resolution to the scenes that they so skillfully render.

Urban fiction writers must realize that their imaginations silently, often with unforeseen consequences, merge with the realities on which they are predicated. They create a confidence in a space that is then reaffirmed by its appearance in text, legitimized by the idea that their world is no longer inaccessible. That same contextualization assumes a normative presence that also, often, becomes inescapable. Its communities become resigned to that position rather than risk a return to obscurity. What we find, however, is that these communities were never obscure: they were simply misrepresented to regulate the resources and control the development of spaces and populations that were not, and likely could never be, aligned with the dominant aesthetics and structures of society. Traditional American language and culture often are restrictive and exclusionary; resistant to modification and rigid in their consideration of other cultural systems. That is why black literature and its resilient concepts of community were so crucial to black polemics.

Urban fiction has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion by offering not only textual demonstration of the subjugation of the black community by pressures inside and outside its borders, but also to offer conclusions and suggest measures of uplift. Most scholars have little control over the outward social and economic forces that drive the reading and processes of canonization, but, if and when authorship takes accountability of their work, the central elements of canon are already rooted in the body of their texts. Urban fiction writers have so much space to travel in their writings but limit themselves in staying within their bubbles of comfort. The club, the crib, and the corner all become

metaphors indistinguishable from the experience of the street, but there are schools and shops and Sunday brunches that all become a part of the black scene that, so infrequently recognized in more popular works of fiction as contemporary sites of life, that prosperity and their respective locations in the black imagination are disregarded. The mentors and figures of success are relegated to the academic realm and placed on a pedestal within a system that excludes the populations that need them most, making them all the more inaccessible as models from the black experience to express possibilities of cooperation, respect, and love.

The portrait of freedom from the bonds of the ghetto comes with escape where escape, even in the realm of reality, is viewed as a highly unlikely occurrence. More texts must be written that foster community revival. The lens is clouded as these pieces are simply viewed as a moment, a snapshot of what exists at present. There are no panoramic views to set off the honorable enterprises from the corrupt. As an ideal space, urban fiction has the opportunity to forge new images, to plant seeds of new ideas just as the plans for urban renewal that come from the city planners. Authorship of black texts must show planning and confidence in its own communities. At present, most urban fiction simply follows established patterns of a standard of literature set long before any movements of black pride, consciousness, love.

It is no longer necessary, nor is it practical to attempt to unite a community so diverse and expansive by the means that subjugation once bound. Allowing urban aesthetics to be the primary image through which the community frames its identity becomes limiting and exclusionary. These texts that disparage the advancement of a people hinder their evolution. The key is to distinguish urban from ghetto; to redefine the

examples and reevaluate narrative meaning. Urban fiction writers cannot simply show a picture of an environment without attaching significance to its existence. They must accept accountability as authors as well as give accountability to their readership. Let the texts teach; give beauty in wisdom. Explain the politics of the origin of the performances of blackness in these settings; develop new styles of expression that give meaning to life and merit to thought; expose not only the consequences of choice of action as realistic consequences, but also portray opportunity as practical and accessible; write stories that attempt to write an all encompassing narrative of the circumstances of urban black communities.

Contemporary urban fiction, with its abundant opportunity to write in plurality and to no longer be bound by heightened political and ideological discourse on the black experience or American literature's depictions of tragic, dangerous black existence, enters in a moment when cultural exchange is embraced and representational practices are reforming. If urban fiction writers were to improve their strategies of cultural interpretation, if they were to explore the depths of the black experience rather than simply resting on the surface of an overly exposed way of life, they could guide their readership to find more didactic appraisals of the dysfunction and the redemption of these urban spaces.

The urban black communities are denied through their limited access to progressive literature the gestures of resistance that would give them power over their own spaces and own bodies simply because they are taught no other way. Urban blackness is characterized by collective apprehension and vulnerability—strong of body but not of mind. These same images that they challenged on the wings of reform are now

touted as the rule by which they measure their significance. Their vision has the ability to either resist or accept their circumstances. Urban fiction, as opposed to canonical black texts, chooses to fix its gaze on action, not impact, writing its narratives in the midst of conflict with little explanation of causal conditions. Urban fiction races with blinders in circles around a track with no foreseeable future. The vast majority of scholarship continually goes back to previous movements in literature that were prompted by or sparked political reconsideration and upheaval. But it is time for a modernization of the methods used to examine and write black fictions.

If black authors continue to write in a vein that is outmoded and limiting, they will write away the history that sustains them and urges them to press on despite the obstacles of the ghetto. Black writers can't escape the conversations left as their legacies for the continuation of a culture, but they can enter forcefully with new methods of transmission.

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