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BLACK BEST-SELLING BOOKS AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CONCERNS: THE *ESSENCE* BOOK PROJECT

Jacinta R. Saffold and Kinohi Nishikawa

On October 27, 2021, the Bibliographical Society of America (BSA) sponsored the first in a series of virtual interviews about the *Essence* Book Project.¹ Founded by Jacinta R. Saffold, the BSA's inaugural Dorothy Porter Wesley Fellow, the *Essence* Book Project is a database of the books that appeared on *Essence* magazine's bestsellers' list from 1994 to 2010. In talking about the project with Kinohi Nishikawa, Saffold highlights how Black best-selling books contribute new paths of inquiry to bibliographical scholarship and explains why it is important to archive contemporary Black print culture. Presented here is a modified version of the conversation.²

Kinohi Nishikawa (KN): I'm honored to be part of this public launch of the *Essence* Book Project. Based on what I've seen, the project has tremendous implications for a number of scholarly fields, including bibliography, book history, and textual studies. Describe the *Essence* Book Project in your own words. What was your inspiration for creating it? And what insights do you think are afforded by studying Black best-selling books?

Jacinta R. Saffold (JS): The *Essence* Book Project grew out of a need to understand the literary landscape at the turn of the twenty-first century

from an archival perspective. When I started researching contemporary African American literature, I had more questions than answers. One of the biggest questions I had—that felt monumental to me—was based on book covers.

One of the books I engage in my forthcoming manuscript, *Books & Beats: The Cultural Kinship of Street Lit and Hip Hop*, is *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) by Sister Souljah. Several editions of the book have banners on the front cover that say, “Over a million copies sold” or “Author of the *New York Times* bestseller.” I wanted to know how to verify this information. How do we know that a novel has really sold as much as it is purported to have sold? Where do we find this information?

For answers, I started with more obvious quantitative sources, like Nielsen BookScan and online data from major retailers like Barnes & Noble and Amazon. But I did not find pertinent information there, certainly not the statistical and financial information I was hoping to find. After hitting this wall, I started asking my questions to people who could explain what I was missing. In a conversation with author Omar Tyree, I explained the

trouble I was having. He laughed and said, “You won’t find that information.”

And I said, “Oh, why not?”

He replied, “Most of us authors have had to work in nontraditional ways to be heard, to have our books published. We had to use the networks available to us, and those often looked different than traditional methods. What you are trying to do here are very traditional things. So, if you are looking to see where these books were sold, how many copies, and those sorts of things, you are not going to find that information. But you can find other things.”³

Around the same time, I was sneaking off to the Library of Congress every chance I could get while working in the Admissions Office at Howard University. After a year of frequent visits trying to access hip hop magazines printed in the 1990s and early 2000s, I finally got frustrated enough to broaden my search to African American magazines generally. This led me to *Essence* magazine. The first issue I happened to pick up had *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah topping the bestsellers’ list for paperback fiction. My heart skipped a beat. I was so excited.

But after seeing the fifteenth issue of the magazine that had *The Coldest Winter Ever* as the number one bestseller, I said to myself, “I need a system to keep track of this data.”

Just to give you a reminder of what the bestsellers’ list was or a first look if you have not subscribed to *Essence* in the last thirty years: the list was usually published in the back of the magazine alongside other advertisements and housekeeping notes from the magazine. It was a monthly staple from 1994 to 2010 and was split into four sections: hardcover fiction, hardcover nonfiction, paperback fiction, and paperback nonfiction. It included a surprising array of works written by, about, and for Black people.⁴ I’m intentionally using the word “Black” rather than “African American” because what I’ve come to find is that this list is quite expansive in situating Blackness within the African Diaspora.

KN:

That’s a great overview of the database and what inspired it. It strikes me that the *Essence* Book Project is not only a cultural and historical recovery of these lists but also a systematization of the book titles that it contains. I wonder if you can run down the numbers to give us a sense of the scope of the

collection. How many titles are represented in the collection and how many authors do we find?

JS:

For the list for fiction there are nearly 500 titles. I believe the number is 498, to be exact. I can't give you specific information about the non-fiction list because that is still being compiled. I believe the fiction list contains between 250 and 300 authors.

The list was created through a data schema of collecting sales information from Black independently owned bookstores across the United States. Not only is this a comprehensive list of titles published within the Black experience from the 1990s and early 2000s, but it is also a snapshot of what Black-owned bookstores existed at the turn of the millennium.

KN:

It seems the way *Essence* compiled these lists drew on a network of retailers that situated these works in a Black reading public, even when those works were brought out by mainstream publishers. This is a history that the *Essence* Book Project helps illuminate. The lists entailed a wealth of data gathering that would have covered a range of social, cultural, and entrepreneurial

practices that shaped Black literary engagement.

JS:

Exactly: the list not only captured the literary landscape at the time, but it also made sure that these authors were not being left out. This list was a way to put books on the radars of various mainstream presses.

Omar Tyree's follow-up to his debut novel *Flyy Girl* (1993) is an example. While *Flyy Girl* was a successful, independently published title in the Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) region, its sequel *For the Love of Money* (2000) was an instant nationwide bestseller published with Simon & Schuster. Tyree didn't just benefit from Simon & Schuster's increased scale of production. He adopted a similar marketing approach to hip hop music for his mainstream sequel. Omar told me about how he called his publisher asking for a drop date. After picking their jaws up off the floor and finding the courage to ask what a drop date was, they told him that drop dates don't exist in the book industry.

He replied, "Well, if you can't give me an exact date when my book will be on shelves, can you give me a range?"

To which they said, "Absolutely. It will be on the

shelf between this time and that time of month.”

He said, “Okay, great. I pick Tuesday,” which referred to August 15, 2000.

He picked Tuesday because Tuesdays are when major hip hop albums were released because the record labels wanted to take advantage of the Nielsen SoundScan week, which directly informs the Billboard music charts. Tuesdays became a culture deluge, almost every week at the turn of the twenty-first century. Tyree realized this was an opportunity to capitalize on a culture that was already in existence. He correctly assumed that fans would go from Sam Goody, or FYE, or Circuit City, or wherever they were buying their compact discs (CDs), to the nearest Borders or Barnes & Noble to buy his book.

He was absolutely right. The sequel to *Flyy Girl* was one of the Black best-selling novels of 2001. It netted him an NAACP Image Award among other book awards that he may not have won, but I’m convinced that he absolutely deserved. This list gave credence to books that would have been overlooked otherwise.

KN:

That’s an impressive capsule history of Tyree’s place on this list. But it also shows how your

project ramifies across bibliography and the book-historical fields. To understand Tyree's literary production, we need to situate him not only in conversation with printers and booksellers but also with adjacent culture industries that had long appealed to existing Black interests and tastes. You mentioned drop dates. We could also think about the process of hyping and self-promotion, all the things that make literary and musical cultures intertwined in the Black community.

As we have explored in our respective writings on Black popular fiction of the 1990s and 2000s, do-it-yourself (DIY) authors were thinking carefully about other media because they saw how literary culture and commercial culture were interwoven in the Black reading public. Far from being confined to Black literary production, these cross-media tactics and strategies have become widespread in literary culture as a whole today.⁵ Jacinta, this is where DIY authors of the 1990s and 2000s might be said to have paved the way for what everyone does now. Do you have an example of that grassroots savvy percolating into the literary mainstream?

JS:

I do! Within a few months of Tyree beginning to promote *For*

the Love of Money, Scholastic Books began promoting the first *Harry Potter* midnight book release party. Of course, this was akin to Tyree's drop date. Tyree remains steadfast in his belief that Scholastic Books saw what he was doing and gave it a try as well.

What we see over time is that a lot of the authors on this list grew to be quite resentful of the American mainstream publishing industry because mainstream popularity was most often the marker of death in creativity and innovation.

Once *The Coldest Winter Ever* was ranked on the *Essence* bestsellers' list for nearly four years consecutively, all the publishers expected African American writers who wanted to be bestsellers to write in the styles of Zane, Terry McMillan, or Sister Souljah. Those were the options: hypersexualized erotic stories, novels about Black women's relationships with friends and romantic partners, or gritty coming-of-age narratives for young adults.⁶ With such expectations, there was little room for authors to write what they wanted to write.

In my last conversation with Eric Jerome Dickey—who passed away recently, so rest in peace to him—he talked about his frustrations with wanting to write mystery and thriller

stories but not being able to get buy-in from publishers to do so. Thankfully, after much persuading, he did manage to publish a mystery and thriller series that complemented his romance writing. But that was in 2017. It took more than ten years as a successful author for Dickey to convince his publisher to take a chance on books like this.

And what was interesting, I think, about this precarious situation Black authors found themselves in were the similarities to the situation of hip hop musicians who signed exploitative contracts with major music labels. Like musicians, some Black authors were able to get six-figure advances and multibook contracts, but when it came time to write the books, they were severely restricted by what the publishers would agree to print. It became a precarious situation where these authors were publishing a minimum of a book a year to meet their publishers' demands. But a lot of them were contractually obligated books rather than the ones that they truly wanted to write.

KN:

I think this is where bibliography, understood as the detailed study of texts across their physical embodiments, can help us see the possibilities, but also the

problems, of the mainstream uptake of Black books. The relentless promotion of *The Coldest Winter Ever* as a kind of story that is supposed to stand in for a whole population is something that, if I'm correct, Pocket Books exploited and capitalized on.

JS:

Yes, I want to expand a bit about Pocket Books, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, and the novel's impact on the literary marketplace. One thing I found interesting is that the edition most prevalent on the list retailed at \$6.99. This is 35 percent lower than the average paperback for fiction published on the fiction list. The book was more closely aligned to how much an album or even a single song cassette or CD would cost. The idea of a hip hop listener spending \$7 on a book seemed far more reasonable than spending \$17–\$18, especially given how young the demographic of hip hop was at that time.⁷

What I also found fascinating was that it was much smaller in page size than most books published at the time, which was convenient and appropriate for its target audience. A lot of hip hop listeners would consume their media on the go, when they were on the train headed to school, or work, or wherever they were going. Then they would pass

it along to the next reader. Pass-along culture was how hip hop spread at that time. It was very reasonable to spend \$7 on a novel and, once you were done with it, pass it onto one of your friends with no expectation that it would be returned. The conversations that would come from having read the text in community was really at the heart of this story and hip hop more generally.

The cultural reverberations of texts like this, and the ways they have been able to remain relevant in Black communities, speak to the ways Black people have created communication networks that look different from our assumptions.

And one of the things that I find frustrating is that after these books were accepted into American mainstream publishing, the new techniques used to make them popular were not properly attributed to their inventors. I believe publishers would benefit from revisiting some of these techniques and recognize that these books should not be stripped from the promotion and distribution networks that made them successful. Books on the *Essence* list were in community with annual Black book expos, local and digital book clubs, and even Oprah Winfrey's Book Club television show segment.⁸

Unfortunately, we don't see the same kind of support for such spaces today. But social media is a wonderful opportunity for us to creatively reconstitute these communities online.

KN:

How does the history of reading that the *Essence* list points us to complicate the way academics and scholars value Black writing, which tends to be based not on what readers want but on encrusted notions of aesthetic sophistication or literary prestige? What do you see in this project that challenges our conventional notions of Black writing?

JS:

I think the list points to how Black authors have been engaging a lot of difficult subjects before it was popular to do so. For example, E. Lynn Harris was one of the first African American authors to really push the boundaries of Black same-sex romance novels. I'm also thinking about Zane, who was writing urban erotica well before E. L. James and *50 Shades of Grey*.

Another author I want to call our attention to is Carl Weber. Contributing to his relative obscurity is that his name is quite popular, yet not because of anything he did.⁹ The Carl Weber ranked on the *Essence* list is a successful book entrepreneur. *Vibe* magazine ran a profile of him

in the early 2000s, hailing him as the Puff Daddy of Black books, which is a deserving title. Not only did he own Black bookstores and write best-selling novels—he also became a publisher in his own right. Today, he has shows and films airing on cable television networks like BET.

Indeed, many of these books have taken on a second life with television and film adaptations. *Devil in a Blue Dress*, for example, was a popular 1995 movie based on Walter Mosley's 1990 hard-boiled detective novel. It featured Denzel Washington as Easy Rawlins in one of his breakout roles.

I can't help but get excited at the possibilities of seeing streaming platforms like Netflix investing in more film adaptations of novels. I'm hoping that texts from the list will be considered when they are doing deep dives into the archives to figure out which books would be great candidates for those adaptations.

KN:

It strikes me that Black bestsellers attract a wide, class-spanning readership during the very years that elite institutions facilitated the steady canonization of African American literature. In this sense, the *Essence* list is tracking a shadow canon that has just as much of an interest in representing collective

experience, telling stories about marginalized populations, and so on, as the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Except this shadow canon is doing so in the key of Black life as lived outside of elite institutions. Your database allows us to revalue the very idea of the literary by putting readers who have historically been disadvantaged at the center of analysis. It opens up our sense of what a diverse literary culture can look like.

To tease out the implications of this inquiry, I want to return to the point that you raised through Carl Weber about publishing and self-publishing. The list certainly includes major publishers like Doubleday and Dutton. It also includes Black-oriented imprints like Dafina and Atria. But the list is most exciting, at least for me, where it includes independent, DIY publishers like Triple Crown and Express Yourself. Can you tell us what this mixture might reveal about Black writing during this period? It is an incredible range.

JS:

We are looking at the benefits from the rise of micropublishing, as Kinko's and mom-and-pop copy shops allowed Black authors to circumvent a lot of the publishing industry gate-keeping mechanisms to reach Black audiences directly. Several of the books on the

list were originally circulated as independently published manuscripts. *Flyy Girl* was rereleased by Simon & Schuster because one of its representatives called Karibu Books in Maryland and asked, “What are some of the indie books that we should be paying attention to?”

The owner said, “This kid, Omar, he is at Howard University, and he has this book that he printed off himself. He is selling them like hotcakes. You really need to pay attention to him.”

Authors like Omar Tyree and Carl Weber felt that once they got a sense of the publishing industry landscape, it was their duty to help to broaden access for other Black authors by creating their own publishing companies.

KN:

The list shows how the priorities of Black readers have little to do with name recognition of publishers and more to do with whether the stories resonated with their interests and tastes.

We can expand on this point further. Many of the independent, DIY publishers that appear on the list made sure to include incarcerated people in their understanding of the market for Black books. Incarcerated readers had long been overlooked by publishers, not least because

of the challenges of distributing books through the prison bureaucracy. However, smaller imprints like Weber's and Terri Woods's not only appealed to incarcerated readers but also started working with some of them who wanted to tell their own stories. These imprints gave their readers a chance to publish with them.¹⁰

JS: And a lot of the smaller publishers were willing to work with system-involved authors. Similar to drop dates, some of the mainstream publishers saw what the little guys were doing and realized that they were overlooking a vibrant book-buying audience. In response, they created outfits like Striver's Row, which was an imprint of Penguin Books.

KN: Again, it's this grassroots effort that alerts the old guard to where the energy is at. These are people who have long been reading and buying books but who have escaped the attention of not only mainstream publishers but also the institutions—the *New York Times* bestsellers list, *Publishers Weekly*, and so on—that define the industry's market horizon.¹¹

JS: Absolutely.

KN: Let me ask, Jacinta, in closing: what is the future of the *Essence* Book Project?

JS: That is a great question. There are so many things I want to

do with this project. But the motivation for me has been to celebrate the authors on the list. So I am taking my lead from them. I have been told by nearly every best-selling author I've spoken with that they are facing extreme difficulty finding a home. Meaning archival space for their papers, manuscripts, and ephemera related to their books. Therefore, I'm pushing to find an archive that is willing to partner with the *Essence* Book Project to create a physical repository and host the digital project.

Second, my pie-in-the-sky dream would be to curate some celebratory activities during the next *Essence* Festival. I would love to have a stage, a platform, an opportunity to be able to bring some of these authors and editors and publishers and all of those involved in creating this list to have conversations about their experiences, the importance of this list, the future of Black books, and how culture spaces like *Essence* can be supported.

KN:

This is an inspiring call to action. Your point that archives are integral to this project, and that linking data and compiling lists ought to have a physical, infrastructural component to their practice, means that we need to reckon with the kinds of material we seek to house

in Black archives. Are special collections ready to acquire not just canonical or celebrated figures but genre writers and book entrepreneurs? What different kinds of materials would we collect in archives if we approached literary culture from the perspective of a popular Black readership? I, for one, will be taking these questions to heart, and I hope that all of you will join me in thinking about what Jacinta has asked of the field, of the profession, and of us. I also hear an invitation, which is to book our tickets to the next Essence Festival. Thank you, Jacinta, for having me be part of this launch of the *Essence* Book Project.

Jacinta R. Saffold is the endowed chair in Africana Studies at the University of New Orleans and a digital archivist. She researches twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American literature, hip hop studies, and the digital humanities.

*Kinohi Nishikawa is an associate professor of English and African American Studies at Princeton University. He is the author of *Street Players: Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground* (2018) and other studies of Black print and popular culture.*

NOTES

1. For more on the *Essence* Book Project, see <http://essencebookproject.com/>.
2. Jacinta R. Saffold and Kinohi Nishikawa, "Black Bestselling Books and Bibliographical Concerns: A Conversation between Kinohi Nishikawa and Jacinta R. Saffold," Bibliographical Society of America, YouTube, November 3, 2021, <https://youtu.be/bhtOYkHAbbA>.
3. For excerpts from the conversation, see Omar Tyree, "Always Been a Hustler: Legacies of Hip and Urban Fiction—An Interview with Omar Tyree," by Jacinta R. Saffold, *Words Beats & Life: The Global Journal of Hip Hop Culture* 7, no. 2 (2019): 13–19.

4. Jacinta R. Saffold, "Celebrating 50 Years of Essence as a Black Women's Archive," *Black Perspectives* (peer-reviewed blog), African American Intellectual History Society, July 1, 2020, <https://www.aaihs.org/essence-as-a-black-womens-archive-celebrating-50-years/>.
- Jacinta R. Saffold, "Street Lit as an Economic Backbone of African American Lit: A Data Project," *Cultural Front: A Notebook on Literary Art, Digital Humanities, and Emerging Ideas* (blog), April 30, 2018, <https://www.culturalfront.org/2018/04/street-lit-as-economic-backbone-of.html>.
5. Kinohi Nishikawa, "The Kindle Era: DIY Publishing and African-American Readers," in *The Edinburgh History of Reading: Subversive Readers*, ed. Jonathan Rose (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 313–32.
6. Eric Jerome Dickey's Gideon is a five-part thriller series published by Dutton between 2007 and 2017.
7. Jacinta R. Saffold, "Pricing Black Girl Pain: The Cost of Black Girlhood in Street Lit" in *#MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching About Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*, ed. Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 71–82.
8. Monique Greenwood, Lynda Johnson, and Tracy Mitchell-Brown, *The Go On Girl! Book Club Guide for Reading Groups* (New York: Hyperion, 1999).
9. Max Karl Weber is also the name of a famed German sociologist.
10. Megan Sweeney, *Reading Is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
11. Kinohi Nishikawa, "Black Women Readers and the Uses of Urban Fiction," in *Are You Entertained? Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Simone C. Drake and Dwan K. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 268–87.