TRACING ZORA’S JANIE: REIMAGINING JANIE AS AN ARCHETYPAL CHARACTER IN 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

by

TRACEY MARCEL GHOLOSTON

YOLANDA MANORA, COMMITTEE CHAIR
MICHELLE BACHELOR ROBINSON
NIKHIL BILWAKESH
TRUDIER HARRIS
LYNNE ADRIAN

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937, African American women authors, consciously or subconsciously, have re-imagined Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie Mae Crawford character in various settings with conflicts pertinent to their respective era. Hurston’s Janie is an archetype for African American women characters who are involved in quest fiction. Janie’s primary objective is to experience romantic love and sexual expression. During her quests she combats intense influences in her life that threaten to ruin her dream, influences such as her Nanny’s Victorian principles of respectability and loveless marriages.

Despite her struggles, Janie is successful in her quest; therefore, she is a self-actualized character. A guiding question for this project is what becomes of Hurston’s once-self-actualized Janie? I address this question by examining Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) and *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiaga Story* (2012). These three texts by African American authors each feature a Black woman protagonist at the helm of the story. I read the main women characters as literary reiterations of Archetypal Janie. Petry’s and Souljah’s texts, which span more than eight decades, and emphasize realistic social, cultural and political issues, can be read as modernized versions of Archetypal Janie’s quest story.

This project does the following through literary and cultural analyses: 1) provides background on and justification for the pairing of street literature with canonical texts; 2) establishes a “Self-Actualized Janie” or a “Tragic Janie” as the two particular categories for Black women characters since Hurston’s Janie; 3) analyzes the internal and external factors that contribute to the character’s self-actualization or tragic outcome; and 4) emphasizes the importance of community and ancestral guides to the character’s development and actualization.
DEDICATION

“When they tell you, ‘you ain’t nothing,’ don’t believe ‘em!” – Tupac A. Shakur

I dedicate this project to anyone who needs a reminder that the greatest blessings are still to come. It does not matter which ‘hood’ or ‘borough’ you may find yourself in; do not give up on learning, go ahead and reach beyond your boundaries to succeed. As my beloved brother, Victor Undray Malone, said “You got to be able to go from Street to Wall Street in a matter of minutes!”

~Rest well, Dray~
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INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as love anymore; the kind that is so strong that you can feel it in your bones. You know we used to feel that emotion when we looked into the faces of our mother, father, sisters, brothers, family and friends. There is no such thing as love anymore at least not the deep satisfying kind that sits on your heart and influences every decision and action we take throughout each day. There is no reason to celebrate anymore. Just empty actions and empty reactions, calculated gestures and financial arrangements. … The era in which love, loyalty, truth, honor and respect died …


When Zora Neale Hurston writes, “Love is like the sea. It’s a moving thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from the shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 230), she signals a critical transitional moment in African American culture and literature, a moment when nineteenth-century politics of respectability, a doctrine that constrains Black female sexuality according to the principles that govern white women, gives way to a Black female subjectivity that is characterized by desire, both for romantic love and sexual expression. Hurston shows that a desire for love abounds in her era. Hurston, like her protagonist, Janie, deftly navigates rigid cultural and literary boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance era to depict a sexually conscious Black female character that appears to engage with, and then deviates from, cultural and literary norms of the Victorian principles of respectability.

Sexual propriety and civility become cornerstones of African Americans’ code of respectability. African American women are to subscribe to the specific virtues of piety and purity, in hopes of gaining the same status and respect as white “ladies.” However, in the article “Michelle Obama Presents Modern Image for Black Women,” Katherine Lewis quotes
sociologist Bart Landry as stating that nineteenth-century dominant white culture does not recognize nor give the title of “lady” to African American women (Consulate General). Thus, as contemporary theorist T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting argues, by design this notion of respectability is not intended for African American women:

[The Cult of True Womanhood is] a respectability yoked to sexual conservatism [that] emerged in post-antebellum America. While explicitly linked to the middle class, it became the overarching code dominating black conduct irrespective of class and despite stereotypes and myths of black disrepute. In matters of sex, relations deemed respectable were always within a heterosexual and preferably marital and monogamous framework. (Pimps Up, Ho’s Down 64)

As middle-class African American women follow suit of their white counterparts to adopt the Cult of True Womanhood ideology, literature also begins to build on a theme of respectability. In essence, nineteenth-century African American authors like Harriet Jacobs (Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl) and Frances E.W. Harper (Iola Leroy: or, Shadows Uplifted) create literature that mirrors a common ideology for African Americans of this period. As Candice Jenkins asserts in Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy (2007), the success or failure of African American women characters to adopt those cardinal virtues somehow translates to the success or failure of a “redefined” Black race in America (3).

As literature often reveals cultural attitudes and ideologies central to particular time periods, Hurston’s text does not align with outlined purposes of early twentieth-century Negro literature. Harlem Renaissance elites, which include W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, among others, determine that all authors involved in the “cultural outpouring” of literature should create works purposefully to elevate the literary and cultural standing of the Negro race. The

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1 I aim to use the term that correlates with the time period.
2 According to Ruth Randolph and Evelyn Roses, this is the phrase Alain Locke used to describe the Harlem Renaissance (Harlem Renaissance and Beyond Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers, 1900-1945).
esteemed works of literature portray a knowledgeable, socially-conscious “New Negro.”³

Additionally, as a continuation of the nineteenth-century politics of respectability, Du Bois calls for these authors to depict sexuality and sexual expressions cautiously; he urges authors to avoid any endorsement of negative stereotypes, such as Black hypersexuality (Gates and McKay 688).

Depictions of sex and romantic love by African American women authors such as Anna Julia Cooper, Gertrude B.J. Mossell, and Pauline Hopkins, serves specific purposes in their nineteenth-century literature. Cooper, Mossell, and Hopkins establish their literary aim as a mirror or depiction of the goals of African Americans in America. The aforementioned early authors approach themes of romantic love and sex from a Du Boisian perspective, which suggests that these themes are to be used for racial uplift. For example, in Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South (1900), Hopkins emphasizes that African American women are cultural bearers of the race. Hopkins’ character, Mrs. Willis, expresses this sentiment during a club meeting in which the topic of discussion is “the place which the virtuous woman occupies in upbuilding [sic] a race” (148). Mrs. Willis clearly states to the women in attendance: “… it will rest with you and your children to refute the charges brought against us as to our moral irresponsibility, and the low moral standard maintained by us in comparison with other races” (148). Thus, Hopkins, like Du Bois, assigns to African American women the role of representing the race in a favorable light.

According to Ann duCille’s The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction (1993), authors use themes of marriage and respectability, or sexual propriety,³ African American writers’ desire to produce material that would contribute to an equal racial standing within mainstream society leads to an ongoing debate between classes and schools of thoughts throughout literary periods, from the nineteenth century to present-day. The New Negro Movement, a term coined by intellectual Alain Locke, promoted an ideology that Black artists were to move in a specific direction with their works that would cast them in a more favorable light with white consumers, and they would demonstrate a similar intellectual capacity as their white literary counterparts. W.E.B. Du Bois challenged all Black artists and authors to use their creative and artistic talents to renounce stereotypes of their race. He states, “All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 22).
to portray positively a race of people who have only recently achieved their freedom (3). In essence, marriage also functions as a signifier of racial progress for nineteenth-century African Americans; legal marriage is a right that has previously been withheld from enslaved African Americans. Yet, duCille further highlights that although the modern idea of marriage may seem like an “oppressive, self-limiting institution,” contrarily, for nineteenth-century African Americans it is “signs of liberation and entitlement to both democracy and desire” (14). Therefore, a plot that centers on marriage also works as an indicator of honor and progress for African Americans. As duCille observes,

Nineteenth-century women novelists … were concerned with the vulnerability and sexual exploitation of black women, which stand [in their works] as hallmarks of the deep-seated hypocrisy of a world … that put white lady and ‘true womanhood’ on a pedestal and black slave and black womanhood on the auction block, even though they look the same. (The Coupling Convention 18)

Jacobs, for instance, writes with a sense of urgency to counter the mainstream/white hypocrisy that espouses Black women as morally inferior to white women. Darlene Clark Hine observes that “virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape. Two works come immediately to mind: Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Elizabeth Keckley’s Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House (1868)” (“Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women” 380). In Incidents, Jacobs recounts her thoughts of the fate of young white girls in comparison to Black girls:

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. … I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave’s heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning. (34)
Her narrative outlines the tragic possibility for enslaved girls and women who are oftentimes not allowed to embody Victorian principles of piety and purity. She continues to lament, “How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood. She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink” (34). Most nineteenth-century works, like Jacobs’ narrative, aim to empower a once-downtrodden race and to establish a civility for African Americans that resembled white dominant cultural values.

Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins proposes that Victorian principles of respectability are gender and race specific: “According to the cult of true womanhood that accompanies the traditional family ideal, ‘true’ women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied white women are encouraged to aspire to these virtues” (72). In order to assimilate into dominant society, nineteenth-century African Americans begin to negotiate policies of respectability that mimic those of propertied white women and men. In Private Lives, Proper Relations, Jenkins cites African Americans’ desire for mobility within dominant society as a primary reason for the adoption of a code of respectability (3). Jenkins claims that African Americans believe a conscientious denial of the stereotyped “sexual deviance” that many whites thought Blacks possess would increase their access to “civilized status” (3).

Therefore, as the literature moves into the early twentieth century there appears to be an unspoken consensus to portray African American women as reserved and aligned with the Cult of True Womanhood. One can conjecture from the texts and portraits that emerge in the twentieth century that in spite of a negation of their true womanhood by dominant society, certain African American women authors depict characters that embody a sense of respectability.
For instance, in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, women are lady-like, reserved, and in constant search of re-definition. *Quicksand* details a certain decorum that the African American women characters are expected to maintain. William L. Andrews pens, “The struggles and frustrations Larsen revealed in the black female protagonists of her novels *Quicksand* and *Passing* likely register the problems their creator faced as a sophisticated New Negro woman trying to find her own way in the supposedly liberated racial and sexual atmosphere of the 1920s” (“African American Literature”).

Even with the literary progress of the early twentieth century, some authors continue to broach reticently topics of sex and romantic love. In the article “When Did Sex Enter Black Literature,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. stresses: “[S]ex was a taboo subject throughout much of the history of African-American literature. In fact, black authors, male and female, traditionally were downright prudish, avoiding black sexuality in their texts like the plague. … Reading classic black literature might lead one to conclude that black people abstained from having sex!” (1). However, Hurston, in particular, places great emphasis on black sexuality in her literature. She departs from the politics and doctrines of the day with a particular focus on the simplistic living of common folk rather than tales of an aspiring African American middle-class.

Hurston writes in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), “From what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race problem. I was and am thoroughly disinterested in that subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color” (171). Hurston seizes an opportunity to throw daggers at her critics with this statement; her work actually does deal with the race problem, although race is not an overarching theme. Hurston chooses to look at the race problem only in relation to the common folk, and her focal interests are of what makes man and woman “laugh and cry and
work and love … [and] universally human” (“Separating the Dancer and the Dance”).

Consequently, Hurston’s Janie, a common Southern Negro girl who desires uninhibited sexual expressions, does not fit the mold for New Negro propaganda.

The literary criticism from elite intellectuals does not deter Hurston. Rather than conform to an elitist notion of the role of Negro literature, she connects with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman to become Queen of the Niggerati. The Niggerati is a literary group of young artists who strive to pay homage to southern culture and to mock Harlem Renaissance’s elites. Hurston, and other members of the Niggerati, opt out of a strict adherence to the politics of respectability and the DuBoisian doctrine. duCille acknowledges that Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen and other elite women writers follow protocol to capture the essence of nineteenth-century politics of respectability: “Largely unacknowledged benchmarks in the continuum of American women’s writing, novels like Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and Larsen’s *Passing*, both published in 1929, echo the racial and gender politics and the passionlessness of their nineteenth-century predecessors” (8). Yet, an unbothered Hurston takes great pains to usher in a bold, sexually-alert character; or, in duCille’s words, she “creates texts [that] anticipate the frank explorations of passion, power, desire and danger that would characterize black women’s novels of the 1970s and 1980s” (8).

Niggerati writers take more liberty to explore topics of Black sexuality and coupling with little fear of the elites’ perception. Even those texts that seem to comply with politics and doctrines reveal sharp reproaches to the dominant ideology. Hurston is at her subversive best in *Their Eyes* as she seemingly embraces and then critiques a system or an ideal structure to which the Black woman is subjected. In so doing, Hurston creates the foundational Janie who seeks,

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4 Niggerati is a play on the words “nigger” and “literati,” which is an attempt to mock Alain Locke’s “New Negro” movement.
craves, and fantasizes about a romantic union filled with satisfying sexual pleasure—in the face of popular cultural principles. Niggerati authors portray literary characters that are unapologetically Black. Though these authors write in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, their works demarcate a clear distinction between New Negro propaganda literature and Niggerati literature. Niggerati literature is a standalone genre that foreshadows the realistic, gritty literary portrayals of marginalized American residents in urban neighborhoods. Niggerati literature has an intrinsic connection to twentieth- and twenty-first-century street literature.\(^5\)

This project explores those intrinsic connections through Hurston’s female protagonist, Janie Mae Crawford, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). *Their Eyes* is set in an era where sexuality is political. Thus its protagonist, Janie Mae Crawford, follows a prescriptive path for young women who are coming of age in a time where public perception is very critical to the success or failure of African Americans. However, through Janie’s actions, Hurston takes a stance on the sacrifice women make as they are ushered into marriage for the sake of the race. Indeed, Janie moves through the text in constant search of fulfillment, yet the reader witnesses her exchange of freedom as a single woman for sexual activity in the marriage bed. It was the price of an assumed respectability. As she ends the novel alone, Janie can be read as tragic yet successful in her quest for sexual fulfillment and romantic love. Although her relationship with Tea Cake does not survive, Janie is a self-actualized character because she manages to experience a dualism of sexual pleasure and romantic love on her own terms. Still, the romantic and sexualized experiences with true love teach Janie that it is possible to fulfill and balance her personal desires as she maintains respect for herself. Hurston portrays Janie as a self-actualized, sexually-alert woman, inevitably placing her on the threshold of contemporary Urban Fiction.

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\(^5\) Street literature is also commonly referred to as Hip Hop Lit and Urban Lit. These terms appear interchangeably; See Vanessa Morris’ *The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature* (2012).
Hurston’s Janie serves as an archetypal character, one who is reimagined in contemporary works of fiction. Janie is the link from nineteenth-century Victorian principles of respectability to a new wave of cultural norms that emphasize sexual liberation. Janie Crawford’s narrative has reached legendary proportions as she serves as a heroine for African American women in quest fiction. Contemporary street literature provides literary space for character reiterations of Janie Crawford as sexually liberated—free to choose her lover(s). Literary characters throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), Winter Santiaga in Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), and Porsche Santiaga in the sequel *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiaga Story* (2012), reimagine Hurston’s Janie in modern literary and cultural settings of rural and urban areas. Hip hop culture, the basis of urban street literature, is a medium that allows for the exploration of possibilities in which to reimagine Hurston’s folkloric and Archetypal Janie in contemporary literary and cultural settings. Hip hop culture settings are not as centered on a continuation of nineteenth-century politics of respectability.

Readers of street literature will find that there is a great deal of discussion about sex and sexuality in the novels. In the text, “Expanding the Canon: Sister Souljah and Sapphire, Two Non-Canonical Black Female Writers Carving out Space to Shape the Black Female Image within the Tradition of Black Female Writers,” Kimberly A. Collins argues:

> Although non-canonical writers of the 1990s appear to endanger the Black female image with the distraction of sexually promiscuous women and pornographic details that relegate them to sex objects, in their own way, they too provide commentary [on] Angela Davis’s ideas about the revolutionary nature of ‘the objective forces at work in the society where they live. (7)

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6 Porsche on the Native American reservation is a rural reiteration of Hurston’s Janie; whereas Lutie and Winter in highly populated, marginalized areas are urban reiterations.
Regardless of whether critics⁷ consider this purported current sexual freedom for women characters as progressive or regressive, it is interesting to craft a reimagined, contemporary Janie in an urban setting, rather than in rural Eatonville and on the Muck.

_Tracing Zora’s Janie_ is a critical literary cultural study, which applies critical race theory and Black feminist thought to examine the intersection of society, culture, race, sex, and class through literary analysis. Those particular lenses ground this inquiry into the literary reiterations of Janie Crawford in twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts. While I do not specifically attend to the matter of whether Janie Crawford possesses a feminist philosophy in this project, I do employ Black feminist theory as a means to explore sexuality in the texts with respect to the evolution of culture and society that has given way to carefree, sexual expressions, which are not available for Janie Crawford during her quest. Kimberly Collins also highlights the ability of street literature to supplement canonical texts as the novels of this genre provide an alternative or more modern view of cultural and societal conditions:

Like their literary foremothers, non-canonical Black female writers write to mirror the reality of some Black women. … When they depict degraded images of Black women and represent Black females as powerless over the conditions which affect them, they debunk the gaze of the mainstream, which exploits their hypersexual image and vulgar language, to articulate their experience in a new way. To this end, these non-canonical writers continue in the tradition of Black female writers’ fearless efforts to reveal the reality of Black women’s lives. (7)

I assert that while Janie Crawford successfully actualizes her desires, her literary successors fall into two categories as they confront overwhelming external influences in their environments that contribute to the outcome of their quest. The character reiterations of Hurston’s Janie can be categorized as “Self-Actualized Janie” or “Tragic Janie”: Porsche Santiaga is the former as she has a successful quest, whereas Lutie Johnson and Winter Santiaga are the latter due to their

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inability to successfully navigate their environments. In order to explore the character reiterations of Janie, the following chapters address the influences that contribute to a successful or tragic journey for each character. I also detail the prevailing social, cultural, and political influences by which to assess the success or failure of the reiterations of Janie in the select contemporary novels.

Chapter One has three specific purposes: 1) to establish a continuum of street literature through three particular waves: the Niggerati literature, “Black experience” fiction, and urban street literature; 2) to highlight the ongoing debate among authors, critics, and scholars on the literary purpose of artistic expression; and 3) to make a case for the pairing of canonical texts, such as Hurston’s work, with contemporary street fiction literature, such as works by Souljah.

The first wave of street literature occurs in 1926—during the Harlem Renaissance—authors of the Niggerati exemplify a literary generational shift in which young artists intentionally produce risqué works that complicate the move toward a distinguished New Negro. These works, such as Wallace Thurman’s *Harlem: A Melodrama of Negro Life in Harlem* and Langston Hughes’ “Red Silk Stockings,” embrace literary expressions of Black female sexuality, prostitution, and crime. Here, I posit that the Niggerati literature is a precursor to contemporary street literature. This chapter analyzes the connection between street literature and canonical literature.

The second wave takes place during the 1960s and 1970s at a time when Black experiences are the topics of literature and art. “Black experience” fiction portrays the gritty harsh realities of life for African Americans in an underworld of crime, chaos, and poverty. This gritty literature gains greater acceptance from white publishers. Black experience fiction raises questions about audience and purpose as white publishers are very specific in the type of
literature that they are willing to accept. This genre peaks during the Blaxploitation film era of the early 1970s, in which there is a mass production and consumption of Black movies geared toward Black audiences. Some texts within this genre are written as firsthand accounts by pimps, drug dealers, drug addicts, and hustlers, such as Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. Sister Souljah’s work is usually closely compared to Slim and other authors of this genre. After the popularity of this genre quiets, it is nearly 20 years before street literature reemerges.

Lastly, the third wave is urban street literature, which Morris considers a rebirth of the Harlem Renaissance because it is widely popular among youth and young adults. While acknowledging the popularity of street literature among youth, critics G. Andi Rhos and Daniel Grassian\(^8\) agrees that “when done properly Street Literature provides a perfect platform for a Harlem Renaissance rebirth” (Rhos “Urban Literature Redefined”). I contend that this genre is reminiscent of the Niggerati literary subgenre of the Harlem Renaissance, not simply the Harlem Renaissance as a whole. Titles such as Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever*, which receives credit for the rebirth of street literature, and Vickie Stringer’s *Let That Be the Reason* exemplify the links between the waves. This chapter works to situate this genre within the continuous debate of high art versus low art. As many critics often overlook the literary merit of street literature, this chapter illustrates the rewards of pairing street literature with canonical literature.

Following the introduction of the waves of street literature, there is a thematic approach to the next three chapters. Chapters Two, Three, and Four examine the internal and external conflicts that contribute to the self-actualized or tragic character reiterations of Janie Crawford. Throughout this dissertation, I classify Janie Crawford and Porsche Santiago as “Self-Actualized

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\(^8\) Daniel Grassian (2009) states, “Similar to the Harlem Renaissance, the literature of the hip-hop generation … is a new category of related writings that should be considered in a different literary category to that of their postmodern or civil-rights-era forebears Morrison, Alice Walker, and Reed” (*Writing the Future of Black America* 16).
Janie” characters, whereas Lutie and Winter are “Tragic Janie” characters. The characters must overcome all of the conflicts and influences in their lives in order to achieve self-actualization.

Chapter Two, “Cultural Mythology of Success,” introduces the four main women protagonists and their revised definitions of the American Dream, or the mythology of success motif. Janie Mae Crawford and her literary successors reinvent the mythology of American success from the stance of an African American woman; their revisions, or lack thereof, ultimately lead to a successful self-actualization or a tragic outcome. As each novel shares the common theme of American success, I interrogate the characters’ background and motives in accordance with the tenets of Horatio Alger’s “hero model.” The hero model claims that while in pursuit of his definition of the American Dream, the character/hero usually comes from humble roots, has some menial job, experiences conflict, and attempts to preserve his family unit (Marsden 140).

I am aware that Alger’s model is a typical model for traditional white male success mythologies; however, that is precisely the reason for framing this chapter around such motif. Characters suffer when they model their life on the tenet that the American Dream is purportedly available for everyone. In *The Street*, Petry even goes as far as composing a several-page rant about the unattainable goals for her woman protagonist. This chapter intends to demonstrate the pitfalls that exist when African American women attempt to apply this theory to their lives as this myth fails to account for their diverse cultural and societal backgrounds. The four authors place their characters in a position to be the heroines of their stories; however, the settings of the novels play a large role in the characters’ outcome. For instance, the “Tragic Janie” characters fail to overcome their urban environment as the streets are so pervasive.
Chapter Three, “Lost Offa de Highway,” is an analysis of the longstanding legacies of institutional slavery and Jim Crow-era segregation that continue to reappear in the narratives. Janie, Lutie, Winter and Porsche face some residuals of slavery or Jim Crow, if not both. For Janie, the effects of slavery present themselves in the form of Nanny’s mentality. Nanny, as a formerly enslaved woman, attempts to take charge of Janie’s sexuality and agency because she fears the potential dangers that await a sexually-expressive Janie. As for Janie’s literary successors, each of their narratives has the central theme of American injustices that face African Americans in their respective eras. The legacy of disenfranchisement that Jim Crow births takes a more centralized form for contemporary African Americans; in urban cities, African Americans disproportionately fill American jails and prisons.

I use Michelle Alexander’s text, *The New Jim Crow*, to illustrate the many obstacles that African American literary characters endure in their quests to become self-actualized. Lutie directly confronts Jim Crow-era segregation and disenfranchisement. Her husband and father are unable to find honest employment, which leads to her taking a job as a live-in maid for a White family. Lutie and her son get trapped into a never-ending cycle of injustices as she finds herself unable to find a suitable, safe environment. Winter, like Lutie, finds herself trapped in the streets; however, Winter does not actively work to change her circumstances. She fails to see the disadvantages in her life. Winter’s younger sister, Porsche, on the other hand, is cognizant of how her environment, authority figures, and her mentality work against her. Thus Porsche, with the help of her community, is able to break the cycle of disenfranchisement in her life.

In Chapter Four, “You Got Tuh Go There,” I argue that a character’s development is favorably or adversely influenced by the novel’s setting, community and family involvement. I employ Venetria K. Patton’s theory on the roles of ancestors and elders within African American

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9 Winter possesses a “hood mentality.” She embraces her environment, even at the risk of her freedom or her life.
literary communities. The character’s inability to recognize and understand an ancestral or elder voice leads to her position as a Tragic Janie. I assert that the further we move through literature, away from guiding voices of the ancestors, the less likely African American women characters are to comprehend the guidance within their community. The location in which a novel is set has the power to dictate and overrule the character’s agency, which leads to a tragic fall for the character. In marginalized neighborhoods of America, there is an influx of poverty, drugs, crime, and casual sexual expressions. Thus, these influences can be problematic for a character that attempts to adapt Alger’s hero model to her environment.

With principal cultural forces, such as family, community, and American racial legacies at work, will a truly self-actualized Janie ever emerge on a full-scale again, or is she an anomalous character that will only occasionally reappear in contemporary literature as she does through Souljah’s Porsche? The overall aim of this project is to stress the importance of Hurston’s text as a point of departure for contemporary works, like Souljah’s material, in order to explore this question. African American literary portrayals of Self-Actualized Janie characters have potentially vast political, social, and cultural implications for young African American girls and women. In the urban settings that Souljah and Petry craft, Archetypal Janie is free to choose whom to love, when to love, how to love, and even the duration of that love for her chosen partner. Janie no longer has to pursue passionless couplings. She can be Winter Santiaga or even Porsche Santiaga now that generational boundaries, like the “old guarded code,” are not as forceful in the lives of African American women.

Urban fiction can very well be a gateway, not only to bring American authors like Hurston, Hughes, Thurman, and other canonical authors into conversation with the contemporary moment, but also to diversify and renovate the landscape of academia. Currently, urban literature
appears to captivate African American youth and young adults; thus, this trend provides an opportunity for academics to confront seriously the aesthetics of this literature while looking for solid connections to canonical literature. In the words of literary critic Houston Baker: “[T]o have a black intelligentsia who is out of touch with the people is useless; for him [or her] rap as a contemporary expression of culture, economics, and politics is an invaluable critical tool for studying and advancing black life” (qtd in Encyclopedia of Hip Hop Literature 29). Interestingly enough, at least in this project, there is space to interrogate African American women characters’ placement in America as they take the helm of their own narratives in the midst of social, cultural, and political influence. Reading the cultural landscape vis-à-vis Black people and where they are seems crucially important; thus, this project emphasizes the legacies of institutional slavery, Jim Crow-segregation, and community involvement as points of departure.
CHAPTER ONE

THE REVOLUTION OF ACADEMIA WILL BE WRITTEN: STREET LITERATURE APPEARS IN WAVES FROM THE NIGGERATI TO CONTEMPORARY URBAN FICTION

These street-lit books are representing a voice of what was never to be spoken or told … Not everyone can hear the cries of the inner-city streets. Not everyone cares to understand the tears on a Black face and what they represent or how to make them go away. This new-wave genre of street lit will always remind the human race of a people who were supposed to be forgotten, swept under a rug, put in a box—better yet a cell—never to have a voice, never to cry out, and never to be able to speak out against the injustice in which we live, see, experience in our everyday life just because of our demographics.


Literature, particularly African American genres, can contain functional works that often fill a void, or answer a lone call within its respective community. Autobiographies of enslaved men and women, the first known form of African American literature, illustrate this point. This body of work serves multiple purposes, such as to make declarations of enslaved persons’ humanity, to provide information on the plight of slavery, and to offer encouragement to the Black race. Toni Morrison states in “Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation” that the autobiography as a genre in Black American or African American literature is “representative” (*Norton Anthology of African American Literature* 2287). The selected texts of this project are also representative of African American culture, society, and literary trends with respect to the settings of the novels at the time of publication. Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Sister Souljah purposefully create literature that aims to inform audiences about the plight of African Americans in America, particularly in marginalized urban spaces. In this chapter, I situate street

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10 This phrase is a play on Gil Scott Heron’s poem “The Revolution Will Not be Televised” (1970), which can be found in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2004) on pages 80-83.
literature of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries as part of a larger continuum of literature. Specifically, I detail three waves of street literature:\footnote{Interestingly, each highlighted wave of African American literary outpouring accommodates or couples with a surge in production of African American music and/or film. For instance, the first wave of the 1920s accompanies the Jazz era, the 1960s corresponds with the influx of Soul music, and the 1990s couples with hip hop culture.} The first wave, Niggerati literature, is a subgenre of work that emerges during the Harlem Renaissance literary movement in the 1920s; the second wave is “Black experience” fiction of the 1960s and 1970s that occurs during an unexpected open market for literature that depicts America’s underworld characters; and finally, in the late 1990s, the return of street literature is the third wave surge in literary depictions of Black culture and lifestyles in urban literature.

These particular waves of African American street literature focus primarily on raw portrayals of routine life in urban areas. As such, the waves of street literature engage in the high art versus low art debate. This chapter outlines the concerns of and division among Harlem Renaissance’s intellectual elites such as Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson, to name a few, and the younger Niggerati intellects such as Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. I also address the debate as it appears within contemporary street literature among advocators, such as Vanessa Morris, Eve Dunbar, and Teri Woods, and opposing authors such as Nick Chiles, Daniel Grassian, and Zetta Elliott, who contest the literary merit of street literature.

As this project highlights the literary merit of street literature, I propose that the greatest justification for a pairing of contemporary street literature, like \textit{The Coldest Winter Ever} (1999), with revered canonical texts, such as \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God} (1937) and \textit{The Street} (1946), is to expand the landscape of academia. Lastly, this chapter addresses the roles of street literature within African American and literary communities. Morris, a former librarian and staunch street literature supporter, argues that street literature is not a new American
phenomenon: “When we consider authors like Charles Dickens, Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, we can understand that literary fictions have been telling uncompromising stories of marginalized Americans for centuries” (11). Morris calls on esteemed English and American authors in an attempt to validate the current body of street literature titles. While Morris assesses accurately that the third wave of street literature shares similar concerns as Dickens, Crane, and Sinclair, I contend that a more germane validation is an emphasis on the genesis of African American street literature by African American authors of the twentieth century (first and second wave authors).

“New Negro Renaissance,” as Locke dubs it, begins in the early 1920s and continues through the 1930s. Locke considers this movement “a cultural outpouring” of literature by African Americans (Rudolph and Roses xxiii). During the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Du Bois, Locke, and Johnson lay a blueprint that calls for a “New Negro” whose role is to produce literature that will equal or surpass that of their white contemporaries. In Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, Robert Hemenway describes the elitism of the founders: “A generation older than the artists emigrating [sic] to New York, Locke and Du Bois were the two most influential intellectuals urging an esthetic dimension to New Negroism” (38). Locke and his fellow literary arbiters clearly define the purpose of African American literature. Du Bois, for instance, demands that young authors take their literary roles seriously: “The thing we are talking about tonight is part of the great fight we are carrying on and it represents a forward and upward look … begin to see the world at your feet and the far horizon, then it is time to know more precisely whither you are going and what you really want” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 778). Johnson takes a paternalistic stance as he seemingly chastises young writers’ use of language:

[T]he Aframerican poet realizes that there are phases of Negro life in the United States which cannot be treated in the dialect either adequately or artistically. …
What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor … (“Preface” xli)

Accordingly, the young artists understand that his or her role is to create literary propaganda that uplifts the African American race as a true contender in American culture, life, and art (Locke). However, young Niggerati writers continue to create problematic material complete with dialect and street characters that collide with the conventions of Locke, Du Bois and Johnson. In *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*, Lovalerie King and Shirley Moody-Turner acknowledge that, “Artists such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and Richard Bruce Nugent refused to have their art confined to what they saw as the limiting criteria requiring that African American literature function only on behalf of ‘the race’” (2).

Historian George Hutchinson also marks the Harlem Renaissance movement as one that was “never dominated by a particular school of thought but rather characterized by intense debate, the movement laid the groundwork for all later African American literature and had an enormous impact on subsequent black literature and consciousness worldwide” (“Harlem Renaissance: American Literature and Art”). Locke states unequivocally that the stories about Blacks living in ghettos are complete, and have no place in this new literary cultural movement:

Separate as it may be in color and substance, the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting. The achievements of the present generation have eventually made this apparent. Liberal minds to-day cannot be asked to peer with sympathetic curiosity into the darkened Ghetto of a segregated race life. That was yesterday. (“Forward”)

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12 Locke implies that stories centered on Blacks living in ghettos have been written already, and that there is nothing new for African American writers to contribute.
However, Hughes, Thurman, Hurston, and other young artists find just as much literary value in the “ghetto” depictions of “yesterday” as in the portraits of a New Negro. Hemenway claims, “Hurston’s role in the esthetics of the Harlem Renaissance became part of the artistic politics of Locke, Du Bois, and the New Negro; she helped lead the revolt of the young artists against ‘propaganda’ by interesting them in the ‘pure art’ created by the black rural masses” (39). Thus, these young authors pointedly reject those implicit literary expectations to create their own versions of enlightenment and praise for African Americans, especially those of the rural South.

Subsequently, Hughes, Thurman, and Hurston, as well as many other young intellects, comprise “the Niggerati,” an informal literary club of the Harlem Renaissance. These authors and artists form the Niggerati in a reactionary move, which mocks the elites of the Harlem Renaissance while it embraces the young artists’ true intentions to paint the beauty that they find in the unpretentious living of African Americans. According to Hemenway, the members “met frequently to talk literature and politics, to gossip, and to party” (43). Members of the Niggerati create a distinct body of literature that literary arbiters criticize because of its subject matter and literary style. Their lifestyles and literary productions showcase the beauty of such urban and rural African American people, which the elites deem as off limit subjects within the New Negro movement. Consequently, Niggerati authors birth the first wave of street literature.

Thurman describes the authors of the Niggerati as sympathetic to the working-class. He states, “[The] contributors of [Fire!] went to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeois for characters and material” (“Negro Artists and the Negro”). Hurston and her Niggerati counterparts choose to depict the lived experiences of common Black people as they see them;

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13 Hemenway lists artist Aaron Douglas, Bruce Nugent, John P. Davis, Helene Johnson, Dorothy West, and Gwendolyn Bennett (Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography 43).
14 Wallace Thurman creates Fire! in 1926 as a quarterly magazine to provide a platform for younger Black artists and authors to perform their literary genius without the added burden of strict New Negro guidelines. Thurman’s and the Niggerati’s financial hardships limit the magazine to only one edition (Hemenway 47).
some of their subject matter centers on blues and jazz music, sex, relationships, fights, politics, and gender issues. The works by these artists portray their true love for the Black race, but they simply do not want to be shackled to it by the ideologies that come with the New Negro movement. For instance, Locke, like Johnson, critically disagrees with the use of rural dialect in the new literary works; nonetheless, Hurston and other members of the Niggerati find their niche in rural dialect and urban vernacular. Specifically, the dialect is the language of the working-class and is quite essential to the texts of the Niggerati.

As one of the more famous names of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes has an ability to treat racial problems as well as portray life for common Black folk life in his literature that catapults his success. Nevertheless, Du Bois believes that Hughes’ success is a concession given to him by whites in order to avoid a discussion of the country’s racial problem. Du Bois states, “With the growing recognition of Negro artists in spite of the severe handicaps, one comforting thing is occurring to both white and black. They are whispering, ‘Here is a way out. Here is the real solution to the color problem. The recognition accorded Cullen, Hughes, Fauset, White and others shows there is no real color line. …” (“Criteria” 20).

Hughes, in turn, ridicules Du Bois’ theory on the New Negro: “[Harlem Renaissance elites] were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke” (“When the Negro Was in Vogue” 1328). Hughes and his fellow writers of the Niggerati believe that their works are important because they are representations of a life that the authors are most familiar with. In his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes states, “Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meaning and rhythms of jazz. I am
sincere as I know how to be in these poems …” (29). He makes a succinct argument for
Niggerati literature that captures the essence of street literature. The collective subject matter of
the Niggerati deals intimately with the streets and its unsavory inhabitants: pimps, streetwalkers,
and criminals. Hemenway states,

[T]he Young Turks of the Harlem Renaissance did not want [Du Bois] to praise Fire!! as he had The New Negro. In fact, they had gone out of their way to
challenge the Victorian morality of the older New Negro spokesmen with
Thurman’s story of a prostitute, ‘Cordelia, the Crude’ and Bruce Nugent’s
elliptical monologue of a homosexual pondering his status, ‘Smoke, Lilies and
Jade.’ (48)

Although the young authors purposefully use salacious themes in Fire!! to display their rebellion
against older intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, many of their works since the time of
publication have received placement within the American literary canon. In “Red Silk
Stockings,” Hughes weighs the employment opportunities of a “Black gal” with “nothing to do,”
so the narrator advises that she puts on her red stockings and visit white boys to ensure that
“tomorrow’s chile’ll be a high yeller” (Poetry Nook). This traditional poem centers on issues of
marginality, unemployment, sexuality, colorism, and race relations; “Red Silk Stockings” could
describe a main character in contemporary street literature.

In the same sense, Thurman focuses on the allure of the streets in his play, Harlem: A
Melodrama of Negro Life in Harlem. African American Literature Book Club reports that
“Harlem received mixed reviews—ranging from ‘exciting’ to ‘vulgar’—but was generally
considered interesting. It was criticized by blacks who did not care for its focus on the seedier
elements of life, like illicit sex, liquor, wild parties thrown to collect rent money, and gambling”
(aalbc.com). In spite of criticisms, members of the Niggerati continue to craft stories that reveal
another side of America. As street literature author Woods notes, these are the stories of Black
people in the “hood,” or marginalized spaces of America, that many critics and elites choose to
not understand; but in this first wave of street literature, authors and artists of the Niggerati dedicate time and space to highlight the plight of these forgotten individuals (‘Foreword’ xi, xiv). Assuredly, for these young writers to comply with the rigid standards set forth by elites of the Harlem Renaissance would cost their freedom of individuality and freedom of literary expressions.

Among her Niggerati counterparts, Hurston stands out as she embodies all the contradictions of the New Negro; she clings to the culture that Locke argues is so “yesterday.”

Editors Steve J. Glassman and Kathryn L. Seidel state in the “Introduction” to Zora in Florida that, “At a time when it was believed that ‘real’ black writers should concentrate on the struggle … Hurston concentrated on themes of self-discovery and African-American culture, which her contemporaries did not hold in high regard” (x). Alice Walker further asserts that Hurston is the ultimate representation of African American folk: “Zora was before her time—in intellectual circles—in the lifestyle she chose … Her work, so vigorous among the rather pallid productions of many of her contemporaries, comes from the essence of black folklife” (“Foreword” xv, xvi).

Nonetheless, Hurston’s material receives strong criticism from the elites, even after the height of the Harlem Renaissance. In a review of Their Eyes Were Watching God, fellow writer Richard Wright claims Hurston has “no theme, no message, no thought” (“Between Laughter and Tears” 75). Locke, who was her one-time mentor, also likens her to a talented, but simple-minded writer (Kaplan 26). But the rural dialect, especially in Hurston’s work, is its own character in the texts of this subgenre, much to the chagrin of her critics Locke and Wright.

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, the dialect is clearly intentional as the narrator does not speak in any sort of dialect. At the beginning of Chapter Three, for example, the narrator states, “There are years that ask questions and years that answer. Janie had no chance to know
things, so she had to ask” (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 21). Hurston purposefully depicts characters that fully embody the spirit of rural Southern living through their use of dialect. Nanny says in one sentence of the same chapter: ‘Humph! don’t ’spect all dat tuh keep up. He ain’t kissin’ yo’ mouf when he carry on over yuh lak dat. He’s kissin’ yo’ foot and ‘tain’t in uh man to kiss foot long’ (23). Hurston, the folklorist, painstakingly captures the vivid language that is most familiar from her hometown of rural Eatonville, Florida.

Even though the dialect is a major source of tension in the debate of high art versus low art, it functions as a clear demarcation as the younger intellectuals’ move away from the New Negro elites’ designated purpose. According to Hemenway, Hughes writes that *Fire!!* “would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-White ideas of the past, *epater le bourgeois* into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists” (48). While there is dialect in Hughes’ poetry and short stories, he, unlike Hurston and Thurman, still manages to use it as part of a discourse on the plight of Negro mobility in America. Hughes’ versatile use of dialect garners him a seat at the table with the elites (Hemenway). Through their literary investment in rural, Southern culture and folk life, Hurston and other like-minded authors display their intention to carve a new, freer space within the Harlem Renaissance movement. Essentially, Hurston sees no point in joining a “temporary” movement for a New Negro. She states her opinion in a letter to Countee Cullen:

> I have always shared your approach to art. That is, you have written from within rather than to catch the eye of those who were making the loudest noise for the moment. I know that hitch-hiking on band-wagons has become the rage among Negro artists for the last ten years at least, but I have never thumbed a ride and can feel no admiration for those who travel that way. (“Jump at de Sun”)
Hurston remains unapologetic for her character portrayals because, in her words, she is “indifferent to the pattern of things” (“Jump at de Sun”). Michael North, author of *The Dialect of Modernism*, credits Hurston for her well-meaning intentions:

> In her own eyes, Hurston was … reviving black folklore that had been widely misused … Her own folklore research was meant to correct the distorted image created by dialect writers like Octavius Roy Cohen and Roark Bradford. It was to take back a language obscured by travesty and stereotype, so negatively charged that educated blacks were afraid to use it. (176)

In fact, as long as she captures the essence of rural Negro life, she does not seem to care how her white counterparts view her or her work. Hurston’s contemporaries wage a battle of high art or low art to deny her and those artists within the Niggerati movement the appropriate literary status because their characters and chosen subject matters often fall short of “political radicals.”

As their literature often goes against the elite’s literary guidelines, Hurston, Hughes, Thurman and other contributors of the Niggerati actually create a specific genre separate from the Harlem Renaissance. The literature of the Niggerati undoubtedly sets a foundation for the second wave of street literature in which African American artists and authors find an unexpected market in the dominant white publishing industry for their depictions of marginalized urban life. Whereas literature that centers on subject matter of the ghetto is risqué during the Harlem Renaissance, a select few white publishing houses in the 1960s and 1970s actually contend for this type of literature.

In “Something Like a Harlem Renaissance West” (2013), Justin Gifford, a scholar who specializes in street literature, states, “‘black experience’ fiction … like the street literature to which it is often compared … centrally featured stories of pimps, sex workers, hustlers, and revolutionaries told from the perspective of the criminal” (217). While these themes are similar

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15 David Headon addresses the politics of Hurston in “‘Beginning to See Things Really’: The Politics of Zora Neale Hurston” (1991, page 29). He notes that she was often accused of being apolitical.
to the first wave, Gifford, like other scholars, fails to make the connection to the Niggerati. Gifford cites Robert “Iceberg Slim” Beck and Donald Goines as pioneers of the street literature genre (217). However, Beck and Goines rebirth a popular literary trend. Within this second wave, Beck, a real life pimp in Chicago, and Goines, a street junkie, receive a platform to tell autobiographical accounts of an American underworld that boasts many criminal adventures and misfortunes.

Gifford reports that this genre, known as “black experience” fiction, occurs during and after the Civil Rights era and originates in Holloway House publishing in Los Angeles (217). This literature also coincides with the mass production of 1970s Blaxploitation films. Black experience fiction echoes Hughes’ proclamation of the Negro during the Harlem Renaissance: Blacks are once again in vogue (“When the Negro Was in Vogue” 1328). Bonnie Rhee Andryeyev tackles the aesthetics of Black experience fiction in her essay, “Whose Mean Streets” (2007). Andryeyev states:

During the end of the classic noir period in film and literature, black pulp writers of the late 1960s and [19]70s such as Iceberg Slim (also known as Robert Beck) and Donald Goines, writing post-white flight, presented narratives that not only exposed the city as no longer white but also characterized ghetto knowledge as an urban epistemology inaccessible to whites. (22)

This literature flies off the shelves, but only in particular places. For example, Gifford states, “Beck’s and Goines’ books have sold millions of copies in liquor stores, barber shops, and newsstands in black communities all across America” (Gifford 217). Whether there is genuine interest from the white market in Black literature or simply another form of exploitation, the authors of “black experience fiction” take full advantage of this opportunity to tell the stories that are usually reserved for those select Black spaces: the barbershops, liquor stores, and private kitchens; ironically, these books, especially Iceberg Slim’s Pimp: The Story of My Life, are
bestsellers (Gifford 219). This literature fills a noticeable void for African American audiences, and the authors hope to establish a “Harlem Renaissance West” in Los Angeles (Gifford 218-219).

Yet, black experience fiction authors Roland Jefferson and Odie Hawkins, whom Gifford interviews, explain that white-owned publishers like Holloway House are not as interested in the aesthetics of their work, which makes it difficult “to create a cohesive literary and cultural movement” (Gifford 219). Hawkins and Jefferson are writers of the post-Civil Rights era whose literary works fall into the second wave of “black experience” fiction. Hawkins recalls sending in an unedited manuscript for review and later seeing it in print. He states: “The company [sic] often sacrificed artistic quality for fast production, sometimes publishing rough outlines submitted by authors as full novels without showing authors the galleys” (Gifford 219). Also, during this time, publishing houses attempt to steer clear of literary works with overt political or racial messages. Andryeyev elaborates that, “As such, black pulp fiction or street literature has often been marketed to attend to (and critique) the white desire to voyeuristically inhabit the racialized ghetto” (22). Hawkins also claims that Holloway publishers either reject or ignore the themes of his novels. He recounts an experience where he has to shop around a novel about the Vietnam War because of its political theme. The publishers eventually accept the novel but still inaccurately bill it as “spectacles of sex and violence” (Gifford 219).

Even so, Hawkins and Jefferson attempt to maintain some distance between their works and the third wave of street literature. Hawkins and Jefferson write literary pieces that are not always initially accepted. Both writers speak of their desire to create more substantial work with political and social messages, or of a completely different genre, such as science fiction. However, the publishing companies’ interests lies specifically in pulp fiction. Gifford states,
“Marketed as disposable pulp by Holloway House, the popular novels written by Hawkins, Jefferson, and dozens of other black writers of the post-Civil Rights period were overlooked because they were considered neither literary nor political” (219). In order to publish their material, Hawkins and Jefferson grant white publishers complete literary reign to change themes, messages, and titles of the novels (Gifford 219).

In *The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature*, Morris argues that white publishers, usually, reject street literature “for the same reasons, be it 1890s or the 1990s—because the work is too raw, gritty, graphic, violent, and sexual” (13). However, during the second wave of street literature, there is a dramatic shift for African American authors as white publishers seek out street literature—the novels that are most graphic, violent, and sexual are in high demand. Publishing houses like Holloway House exploit this literary genre because of the vast profit that it generates. Publishers select literary narratives that they believe fulfill some stereotype about Black people. Ann duCille states, “For not only do white cultural keepers determine what authentic black art is, they control the who, how, where, and when of public cultural production and consumption as well” (76). But, ever the tricksters, many Black authors produce texts with covert agendas to reach their intended audience; in most cases, the common narrative outcome is that Black men and women win against white supremacy (Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp*). Such Black authors use the platform as testament to Black audiences that they are still here, that Black culture is still here. All of this is highlighted in narratives about their experiences of survival, greed, and reformation during their quests for the elusive American Dream.

The audience for street literature is a critical point of discussion. Hemenway and Gifford unknowingly engage in discourse about the importance of and differences in readership for the first and second waves of the street literature genre. Hemenway claims the sole purpose of
Niggerati literature is to refute the elites of the Harlem Renaissance in order to prove the worth of their literature and, in essence, the worth of common Black folk. Hemenway states, “The key to the paradox, however, is that while self-consciously mining the proletariat, Fire!! requires a bourgeois black readership for its esthetic and moral revolutions to make any sense. Fire!! is directed at the readers of what Zora calls ‘the other magazines’…” (49). The Niggerati creates literature that forces elite intellectuals to take note that the renaissance is far more than one-dimensional. The Niggerati draws inspiration from shunned Negroes, but most of the authors rely on white men and women to sponsor the text, which means a great deal of the material is for an elite or bourgeois audience. Although the purported audience may not always be the intended audience, the Niggerati still produces literature that adds another layer to the African American literary canon.

Contrary to Hemenway’s stance on the Niggerati, Gifford claims that black experience fiction directly targets a working-class African American audience to create necessary escape fiction. Gifford states, “[T]hese books established a literary renaissance of popular urban fiction that provided black readers with entertainment and escape from the real-world problems of ghettoization, deindustrialization, and incarceration in the emerging prison-industrial complex” (218). While black experience fiction reaches its intended audience (oftentimes at the cost of poorly written or edited texts), it owes a huge debt to the resistance literature of the Niggerati, which rejects elite intellectuals’ desire to distance themselves and their work from the common Negro. The first wave of street literature sets a foundation for the second wave. According to Gifford, Black experience fiction proves to publishers and elite intellectuals that African Americans are actually a viable audience: “At a moment when the publishing and bookselling
industry appears to be in decline, the rise of street literature reminds us that reading is very much alive in America today” (217).

Gifford continues, “Numbering in the hundreds and expanding upon the themes and urban vernacular established by Beck and Goines, the paperback books from Holloway House became the first coherent body of popular literature published for black American readers on a grand scale in the 1970s” (218). The readership created by the second wave slips into decline as publishers move away from the gritty tales of the hood. However, again in the 1990s, with the reemergence of street literature, the increase in African American readership proves that youth and young adults gravitate towards narratives that speak directly to their lived experiences.

Third wave of street literature reinforces the notion that African Americans are willing audiences for literature. Street literature, like the Harlem Renaissance literature, appears to have mass appeal. Morris and G. Andi Rhos claim that these novels appeal to African Americans particularly between 14-30 years of age. Street literature has chief appeal (and opposition) because it is a particular genre that invests highly in the locale of the novels. It is aptly named because the majority of titles under this label focus on the happenings in urban environments, in the streets,\(^{16}\) and in the hoods. The streets in the neighborhoods, where the actions of the novel take place, are usually real characters in these novels. Morris contends that “there has been no real exploration of the symbolism of the streets or unpacking of the nuanced meaning(s) of the streets or any thoughtful treatment of the streets as a motif for storytelling in the street lit genre” (20).

\(^{16}\) I offer Morris’ clarification, “When we say ‘the streets,’ we are talking about the actual streets that connect and intersect city neighborhoods” (The Readers’ Advisory to Street Literature 20).
The streets come to life in the novels as they are highly antagonistic and a constant source of conflict for the characters. Thus, Morris proceeds to clarify the significance of the streets in this body of literature:

[T]he streets are the permanent antagonist of the genre. … In street lit, the streets are the Pied Piper, the snake charmer of life. As such, it is something that we all must confront and deal with daily, as we use the streets as our major path through which we work, worship, play, live, and even die. (22)

The gritty, realistic portrayals of the streets are a primary standard of street literature. Street literature author Shannon Holmes, for example, states in Never Go Home Again (2004), “Through my novels, I invite the readers to journey with me into the streets. Come see what I’ve seen. … Let me show the gritty and grimy undercarriage of society. The side that some in the working class don’t acknowledge or are unaware of” (4). Seemingly, the authors and characters of street literature display a sense of pride in having a familiarity with the “undercarriage of society” and being able successfully to navigate those areas—or in Morris’ words, it is all about one common aspect: “surviving the streets” (16). Despite advocates’ shared championing of third wave street literature, the initial reception from publishing houses is very different than the welcoming acceptance extended to the second wave of street literature.

Whereas during the second wave of street literature white publishing companies were eager to grant book deals to African American authors for gritty literature, third wave authors seemingly do not find the same sentiments among contemporary publishers. However, third wave authors like Woods, Nikki Turner, and Sister Souljah do not allow the rejection from big publishing houses to deter their literary purposes as they create their own publishing companies to carve out a coveted space for contemporary African American street literature. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, African American authors write, edit, and mass produce their own
literature. For instance, Woods (like other entrepreneurial African American authors) sells her material out of her car and champions for shelf space in local beauty salons.

According to Gifford, “Dozens of independent imprints, each publishing several books per year, sprang up virtually overnight, and now thousands of street literature novels compete for the attention of an ever-growing black readership” (216). Morris further supplements Gifford’s stance with a librarian’s perspective: “Contemporary Street lit has a strong entrepreneurial bent that the library world must respect. Patrons will often come into the library suggesting or asking for titles that they saw on street vendor tables outside the library’s doors” (63). Once again, African American readership noticeably increases with the 1998 reemergence of this genre. During this time, African American authors also sign other African American street literature writers to their publishing labels.

The third wave street literature authors force mainstream publishers to take note of their success. Similar to the push in the 1960s for the latest profitable literature craze, publishers begin to offer “six-figure, multiple book deals” to the top selling authors (Gifford 216). Gifford claims, [I]t is clear that street literature is a growing cultural and economic enterprise. Driven by Internet fan sites, as well as the ever-expanding audience of black American prisoners, street literature represents an emerging popular genre of African American literature that cannot be ignored. (217)

Street literature authors, with an incessant drive to reach the streets and newer audiences, continue to build the genre and increase awareness of their material. Woods adamantly writes,

I don’t think anyone can undo that which I have done as a pioneer in this genre because the voice of the people is now too loud. … the groundwork has already been laid, the blueprint has successfully been implemented, and Black and Latino folks are writing and telling their stories and selling them, transforming the lives of readers. (“Foreword” xxii)

Therefore, Woods, and other street literature supporters such as Tarshia L. Stanley, editor of Encyclopedia of Hip Hop Literature (2009), credit this third wave for the visibility and the voice
that it provides for its marginalized audiences in American urban areas. Gifford asserts that this third wave is very popular in “American cities with large black populations, including New York, Detroit, Houston, Oakland and Atlanta” (216). Street fiction acts as a medium of escape. African American readers can recognize themselves or other familiar persons within the narratives of this genre, which contributes to its popularity. Stanley notes, “This genre speaks to an audience of teenagers and young adults who identify with the urban environment, specifically the flashy book covers that portray noticeable realities of urban life” (26).

The crux of emergent popular literature is the authors’ need to carve out a space that specifically speaks to issues within African American communities. Morris adds, “Because many street-lit authors are from the ’hood that they write about, readers who are from the ’hood have immediate entry into the novels, because the language, tone, settings, and characters are recognizable and relatable” (76). The aim of the Harlem Renaissance literature is to situate African Americans as worthy, smart, and creative human beings like their white counterparts. Likewise, urban literature also serves a dual role: the literature works as cautionary tales about the pitfalls of hood life and marginalized existences that are compounded by many internal and external struggles, while this literature also works to humanize the outcasts of the ghetto. Street literature of the 1990s is inclusive as boys, girls, women and men are equally gritty, raw, violent, and sexually alert; this wave paints girls and women in starring roles within the male-dominated underworld.

Morris (2009) and Rhos (2006) cite Sister Souljah’s 1999 publication of The Coldest Winter Ever as the rebirth of street literature and the marked emergence of leading women characters in this literary genre; Stanley also likens Souljah to a female version of Iceberg Slim (26, 47). Souljah’s lead character, Winter, makes a bold introduction for adolescent girls and
women in the drug game and throughout the streets of Brooklyn, New York. *The Coldest Winter Ever* boasts themes that are familiar to each wave of street literature; the themes also highlight the culture of the 1990s. Morris states that “today’s street lit stories have a central theme in common with street lit stories of yesteryear: navigating relationships within the circumstances of poverty, where relationships are a primary lens to the story” (31). Souljah uses her characters to make a bold statement, and as aforementioned, she purposes her literature to draw attention to a specific void in African American communities, real and imagined: the love is missing.

Souljah publishes *The Coldest Winter Ever* on the tail end of memorable political and social events that capture the attention of the “Hip Hop Generation.” That fact alone hinders a surface-level reading of her text. In 1991, the world witnesses the beating of Rodney King, an unarmed Black man who is brutally assaulted by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department after a brief car chase. King’s beating and the subsequent acquittal of the officers in 1992 results in mass riots throughout racially-polarized Los Angeles. It is noted that, “The acquittals touched off rioting and looting in Los Angeles that grew into the most destructive U.S. civil disturbance of the twentieth century” (“Riots Erupt in Los Angeles”). The African American community, in particular, is quite disjointed during this time. Morris notes that most of the contemporary texts are “set in 1980s and this is no accident. The black community had a community fallout during that time, with the crack epidemic and the ‘drug war’ both very active” (Stanley 95). Thus, from this context, Souljah writes with an emphasis on racial unity among African Americans—and a prevalent need for an individual and group awareness of political and historical facts and societal issues that surround the community.

Souljah uses her text to reach a hip hop audience of youth who are born into a post-Civil Rights era in which society has drastically changed: African Americans feel the sting of racism
in dominant society, yet many African Americans are functioning without a communal existence. In short, as Souljah professes in the “Dedication” of *The Coldest Winter Ever*, this is an era in which “there is no reason to celebrate anymore. Just empty actions and empty reactions, calculated gestures and financial arrangements. There is no such thing as love anymore …” (8). The 1990s is a time of heightened gang violence, racial backlash, as well as political and social tension. Stanley offers a critical point on the social changes that affect mainstream American and African American communities: “Furthermore, this institutionalized violence coupled with the dictates of new racism complicates the way in which black men and women view each other, especially with respect to intimate relationships” (Stanley 28). Therefore, Souljah’s text serves as the vocal response from and for the youth who are living in a new time that feels *cold* with limited communal dependence.

Through her female protagonist, Souljah attempts to depict the harsh reality for youth who are so consumed with selfish greed and little guidance, community or family structure, that they are anchorless ships in shark infested seas, known as American ghettos. Morris states, “This fictional characterization of the streets is inspired by real life conceptions of what the streets can do to people and communities” (19). Essentially, Winter is Hurston’s Janie without an anchor. Winter epitomizes the end result, from Souljah’s perspective, of African American youth who have been limited to no sense of a cultural-self: lack of self-respect, excessive value of material possessions, and a quest for social growth rather than personal growth.

Souljah, as a voice or interpreter of the youth, sees them as a collectively lost generation. The community that pulled together during such times of civil unrest and the fight for justice has all but dissipated from Souljah’s standpoint, which leads to the cryptic title of her debut novel. She claims that “There is no such thing as love anymore, the kind that is so strong that you can
feel it in your bones. … we used to feel that emotion when we looked into the faces of our mother, father, sisters, brothers, family and friends” (“Dedication” 8). Winter, as succeeding chapters further elucidate, is a victim of the streets because, as Souljah reports, love and communal guidance are absent. Souljah does not merely glorify the hood; she engages with an acute critique on the state of inner-city youth and the substantial lack of mothering within the community.

Souljah speaks back against hip hop’s move away from community and racial uplift to the inherent desire to benefit self. Grassian, author of Writing the Future of Black America, pinpoints a major critique from the civil rights generation: “their proverbial offspring [are] not striving towards what they consider to be personal, social, and racial improvements” (17). Although Grassian omits Souljah from his book,17 her text (1999) presumably agrees with his critique. Souljah’s text bridges the gap from Niggerati literature to contemporary street literature as she plainly details the trajectory of African Americans and marginalized African American communities in American urban cities. Souljah’s stance is that the prevalent, timeless theme of relationships, which is present in her text, is now devoid of love.

HIGH ART VERSUS LOW ART

Street literature scholars, such as Gwendolyn D. Pough, Morris, and Dunbar, regard Souljah’s text and the genre as important; nevertheless, there are many authors and scholars, like Zetta Elliott and Chiles, who remain unconvinced of the its literary merit or cultural necessity. The long-standing debate of high art or low art plagues each wave of street literature. Within the respective eras, intellectuals and elites attempt to determine which texts can serve as

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17 Grassian explicitly states in Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip Hop Generation (2009), “This book’s focus does not include Souljah, Turner, and other similar authors, not because of their novels are without merit but because they do tend to lack the intellectual depth I perceive in the work of writers explored in this book” (14).
representations of the African American community and which texts are outdated or unaligned with the desired mobility of African Americans in mainstream America. Zoe Ashton suggests that high art or low art describes the exclusivity of one’s preference, social class, or financial abilities: “High art was once an exclusive notion, reserved specifically for opera houses, galleries, and those who could afford the theatre. Low art was the trashy novel devoured in time off; a cheap alternative for ‘real’ art” (*Impact Magazine*). Apparently, within the Harlem Renaissance the need of intellectual elites to categorize artistic expressions as high art or low art causes divisions and rifts among artists. This debate is again prevalent in the third wave of street literature. The separation of this genre is noticeable wherever the books are present, especially in libraries and bookstores.

Author Eve Dunbar undertakes the task of attempting to liberate hip hop fiction from the high art low art debate. In “Hip Hop (Feat. Women Writers): Reimagining Black Women and Agency through Hip Hop Fiction” (2013), Dunbar states her literary purpose: “Thus, undergirding the framework of this essay is a desire to remediate the very high-low distinctions that negate the critical value of Hip Hop fiction” (94). Contemporary writers, like Souljah and Woods, whose central literary focuses are the lived experiences of individuals who deal with urban spaces, drugs, promiscuity, money, and fashion are also enthralled in this debate with mainstream society, and even with fellow writers, as they continuously justify the purpose and legitimacy of their works. Morris suggests that all productions of street literature have been met with some form of resistance (13).

As the debate rages among street literature authors, Morris attempts to ground the argument as she states that street literature did not simply originate inside of a vacuum; there is precedence for such a genre: “… it is clear that the contemporary renaissance of street-lit does
not sit alone and isolated on library and bookstore shelves. … [street literature] exist[s] along a historical continuum of literature that tells similar stories in different time periods” (12). These literary themes are not new or unique by any means; these stories have also been in circulation within the first and second wave of street literature. However, Chiles believes that street literature disgraces, rather than supplements, canonical texts. Chiles pens an editorial piece for The New York Times in which he takes issue with the pervasiveness of contemporary street literature, or “smut” as he calls it. In “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut,” Chiles poetically shapes his argument:

As a black author, I had certainly become familiar with the sexualization and degradation of black fiction. Over the last several years, I had watched the shelves of black bookstores around the country and the tables of street vendors, particularly in New York City, become overrun with novels that seemed to appeal exclusively to our most prurient natures—as if these nasty books were pairing off back in the stockrooms like little paperback rabbits and churning out even more graphic offspring that make Ralph Ellison books cringe into a dusty corner. (The New York Times)

As the subject matter is quite raunchy—a glorification of sex, drugs, crime, poverty, obscene language, and death—many critics and authors shun the material, and fear any literary associations with the genre. Dunbar adds, “Couple the lack of inclusion within the framework of African American literary studies with a tense debate among writers regarding the quality, nature, and validity of Hip Hop fiction, and one begins to see more clearly the vexed landscape of the genre” (94). The landscape appears vexed, indeed. Chiles’ objection resonates with writers, like Elliott, who set about distancing their work from the label, which they believe will hurt the integrity of their work.

Elliott takes great pains to disassociate with this genre and its authors. During an email conversation with Morris, Elliott states:
I don’t write Street Lit.’ The teachers [I know] don’t endorse ‘Street Lit’ or … use it in the classroom. ‘Street Lit’ doesn’t get considered for a Coretta Scott King Award. I felt that linking my novel (which is literary fiction) with the genre… was a huge tactical error, and I told my publisher that I found it deeply offensive. *(Readers’ Advisory 91)*

In no uncertain terms, Elliott refuses a book review from Morris under her “Street Lit” column because she does not believe that street literature titles belong “next to the novels of James Baldwin” (92). Elliott is exemplary of an author who remains biased toward any association with street literature labels. Morris includes her email exchange with Elliott in *Readers’ Advisory*. Morris writes of her justification for selecting Elliott’s text:

> I love your book—point blank. And I intend to review it for the “Word on the Street Lit” column, with a full introduction presenting a discussion about Street Literature being more than just novels about the rawness and grittiness of inner city living, but also, elucidating the fact that the genre is about the diverse experiences of a diverse population that live in inner city communities. Everyday experiences include the mundane AND the fantastical—everywhere—and that ‘everywhere’ includes the hood. (89)

Elliott, however, believes that labeling her work as street literature will actually cause her work to receive a bad reputation, as well as overcast any chances of her work competing for serious literary awards. Elliott adamantly states that her work does not share the classification of “street literature,” nor does it belong on the same shelf as *The Coldest Winter Ever*, which she views as a book with no real purpose. Elliott presumes that works similar to Souljah’s are simply “street lit” and not of the same caliber as her novels; therefore, she is among a vocal group of authors and critics who feel the label fits some literature, just not their particular works. Elliott situates herself as an elite author of contemporary fiction.

Morris addresses the paternalistic and classist undertone of Elliott’s statements. Morris responds, “Your stance on Street Lit sitting alongside canonical literature speaks to the same issues we have as a people. For example, when thinking about issues of class, wealthy citizens
tend to be socio-economically at odds with lower income citizens and vice versa” (93). In this statement, Morris briefly broaches an often marginalized point: there are measures of classism in the high art low art debate as it deals with street literature. According to Kristina Graaff, author of “Street Literature and the Mode of Spectacular Writing: Popular Fiction Between Sensationalism, Education, Politics, and Entertainment,” this genre is comprised of novels that “are often written by first-time authors—some of them former or current prisoners—and deal with street violence, prison experiences, and the drug business, the practices of self-publishing and street vending, these books reach a broad audience, particularly in black working-class communities” (113). As Graaff notes, street literature often falls into the low art category because of the topics and its primary readership.

Dunbar further places the Elliott and Morris’ exchange in context as she recalls Hurston’s jarring words:

In 1950, Zora Neale Hurston issued a critique similar to Chile’s, [Terry] McMillan’s, and [Percival] Everett’s, in which she argued that the multitude of black possibilities were denied by the publishing world, which believed readers would be unwilling to buy art that evidenced the fact that black people were capable of ‘high and complicated emotions.’ (96)

Morris continues to point out the fault in Elliott’s view: “I have noticed that what happens in a patriarchal, capitalistic society, like the U.S., is that it is mainstream America that ‘decides’ what ‘quality’ is and what is ‘literature’ for everyone, which includes citizens who exist on the margins” (100). Yet Morris, like Dunbar, is clear that the authors release authority once they publish their works, and it is the readers who decide the merit of the works.

Adam Mansbach, a fiction writer with a self-proclaimed hip hop background, becomes a sort of authority on street literature with his “Of Lit Hop” (2007), which was one of the first published critiques on the topic. Although Mansbach claims that the purpose of his essay is to
“explore some of the ways lit hop has been misunderstood thus far, in hopes of preventing future works from being dissed with the ease, ignorance, and prejudice that currently pervade the public discourse,” he spends a great amount of the essay in judgement of street literature aesthetics (92). While Mansbach is critical of the New York Times Book Review’s “hostilities, misreads, and belittlements” (99), he takes a similar stance in dealing with “so-called” street literature—he refers to this body of literature as “garbage” (101). While acknowledging its potential, Mansbach, like Elliott, unapologetically dismisses street literature in its current form as below par and unworthy of the status of literary fiction.

Gifford interjects the voices of second wave authors, Hawkins and Jefferson, into the debated dichotomy on street literature’s literary worth. Jefferson reveals that he publishes a contemporary “hip hop” novel, Damaged Goods, which appears in bookstores shortly after Souljah’s hip hop classic, Coldest Winter Ever. However, his book flops while Souljah’s receives paramount praise. Consequently, Jefferson separates himself and his titles from authors of street literature and takes a condescending tone toward works of the genre: “I don’t mean this in an insulting way, but it’s not a thug book. It’s not street literature. It’s something where I hope people will read it and say, ‘Gee, y’all really did that?’ To me it is the book that I hope would last” (Gifford 226).

Hawkins also opposes contemporary street literature as he believes it has limited literary merit. Among his numerous grievances, Hawkins finds that this literature is poorly written and unremarkable:

… I have to say that I find it hard to call it literature. I don’t want to give a Harvard/Yale definition of literature. I might make an unpopular statement by saying that the so-called urban literature we are being saturated with nowadays is not what I would call literature. … there are some exceptions. There are two black women I can think of. One is Sister Souljah. The other is Sapphire. (“Something Like a Harlem Renaissance West” 235, original emphasis)
Interestingly, Hawkins pointedly makes an exception for Souljah’s work as real literature. Even though Chiles and Elliott personally single out Souljah’s text as a staple of low art in this wave, Hawkins pinpoints Souljah as a positive contributor of the literary era. Indeed, Hawkins also disapproves of the onslaught of street literature but he states in his interview with Gifford that Souljah’s work (and Sapphire’s *Push*, 1996) will be of greater importance in the future: “I consider what they are writing literature because I think what they are writing will be considered of some substantial value in years to come” (Gifford 235).

Unlike the stances of Chiles, Hawkins, Jefferson, Elliott, and Mansbach to label clearly street literature in order to separate it from traditional literature and elite works of fiction, Souljah pushes for an all-inclusive labeling of literature by African American authors. Souljah does not debate the merit of street literature, but rather the supposed need for the labeling of African American literature. Souljah loathes the assumed necessity of such labels, which she repeatedly takes as an offensive snub. Souljah rejects “seg-book-gation,” a term that author Bernice McFadden coins to mean that in addition to the “street lit” and “urban” labels, books by African American authors are further separated in bookstores and libraries under an “African American” label, sticker, or section. McFadden claims this is actually harmful marketing because a “black section will limit audience readership” (*Readers’ Advisory* 104). Souljah disagrees with the labeling because it separates her work from American fiction. In response to the “urban” label, Souljah remarks, “I don’t want to be limited or ghettotized in any way” (“Souljah Rejects Any Labels on her Literary Output”).

For Souljah and other authors who consider their texts akin to Shakespeare or Tennessee Williams, terms such as “street literature,” “urban literature,” “hood classics” are bothersome because of the assumption that literature by African American writers needs to be clearly
separated or defined. Souljah states, “Shakespeare wrote about love. I write about love. Shakespeare wrote about gang warfare, family feuds and revenge. I write about all the same things” ("Souljah Rejects Any Labels"). Souljah makes no distinctions between the stories that she crafts and those of acclaimed American authors. Souljah wants her work to speak for itself without the label; she obviously believes that her work is not only as good as her contemporaries, but on the same level as uncontested traditional American classics.

Souljah, like Hughes does decades before her, publishes works that cross the spectrum of high art and low art, and she demands acceptance of her work as simply American literature. Souljah requests her seat at the table, while she continues to extend a metaphoric safety shepherd’s hook\(^\text{18}\) to the hood, or as Morris claims, “[street literature authors] are reporting back to their cultural communities to document their experiences into history and to offer warning to the perils of bad choices regardless of one’s environment” (53). Souljah’s argument remains simple: she is an American writer whose work highlights the oft-forgotten sectors and inhabitants of America. As Souljah vouches for the Americanness of her work, she also indirectly reaffirms the worth of her subjects who are confined to American ghettos.

Grassian credits hip hop literature, which is usually the categorization of Souljah’s work, as the new window into the soul of African American youth:

… the literature of the hip-hop generation provides important insight into the lives and culture of young African Americans, the very future of the community. With the struggle for civil rights seemingly over, these writers focus on one of the most important issues and questions facing the African American community: What, then, should we strive for or aspire towards individually and collectively for the African American community? (17)

Grassian dismisses Souljah from his analysis of hip hop literature because he reads her work as “academic and intellectually dense” with a limited focus on the “street” and the “ghetto or inner-

\(^{18}\) A long stick with a hooked end often used to save drowning victims.
city” (16). Grassian asks, “To what extent is popular culture and hip-hop empowering or enslaving African Americans?” (16). Souljah, as a crowned voice of the hip hop generation, answers him through her female protagonist, Winter, in quite the same defiant fashion of Hurston’s Janie. Hurston answered, and silenced, her critics by creating a complex, yet seemingly simple, female protagonist that spoke to the universal question of love. Janie was a warning to women everywhere to search, seek, and crave ultimate romantic and sexual love; likewise, Winter becomes a screeching siren of what happens when a misguided society dictates what that love should look like for women of the hip hop era. Souljah’s text proves that urban fiction—once viewed from a critical race lens—does appear to demonstrate literary value.

Souljah, in spite of Grassian’s slight, does take on the responsibility of interrogating, investigating, and chastising American and African American communities for their current state and condition of their youth. In essence, a thorough reading of Souljah, and many other contemporary writers, reveals that there is more to this genre than flashy covers and provocative themes. Since street literature authors explore Black sexuality without restraint on almost every page, skeptical readers probably find the shock-value of Black sexuality a hindrance to discovering the actual political, social and cultural critiques that these texts offer. *Coldest Winter*, with a serious, critical approach and proper guidance, can easily lead a young or hesitant reader to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

More importantly, beyond the debate of high art or low art, Morris’ research in public libraries suggests that street literature is the genre that draws the attention of contemporary youth. Morris advocates for scholars, authors, and educators to offer enlightenment and education to new readers and students in a space that is most comfortable or familiar to them; currently, that space is street literature:
Having worked with inner-city teens for nearly a decade (and having grown up as one myself), I have seen how street lit aids in teens’ overall comprehension of their surroundings. These teens of the hip-hop generation have learned to combine both urban literature (street lit) and music (hip-hop) to empower themselves.

While this project only focuses on Sister Souljah, street literature is an ever-growing genre with diverse authors, subgenres, and titles. As gateway literature, there are endless possible connections that street literature shares with canonical texts of different genres.

Gatekeepers of African American literature—like traditional elites Locke, Du Bois, and Johnson, as well as the contemporary arbiters Chiles, Elliott, Grassian, and Mansbach—are quick to read authors from each wave of street literature as apolitical figures whose writings do little to aid the condition of African Americans in America. However, contemporary street literature authors’ literary catalogue can actually be seen as necessary to the foundation of that very cause. Morris and Dunbar note that street literature contains a wealth of material that scholars, librarians, educators, and parents can access to reach and teach youth about the vastness of the literary field. As Rhos states, “Street Lit lends itself to our already rich culture. When done properly, Street Lit provides a perfect platform for a Harlem Renaissance rebirth. When done properly, Street Lit imparts knowledge, entertainment and a gateway to diatribes and symposiums regarding the concerns, struggles and triumphs of the Black Community at large” (“Urban Literature Redefined”). Street literature is posed as gateway literature that scholars and academics could possibly use to point young minds in the direction of works that are categorized by gatekeepers as traditional canonical texts.

To paraphrase Morris, street literature does not simply appear on the literary scenes in the 1990s; there is a legitimate literary trajectory for these works—most often, there is a void to fill or a sentiment to vocalize. Urban fiction revitalizes the racy elements of Niggerati literature, and

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19 See appendix.
it also has the unmistakable directness of the Urban Realism movement. The success of street literature proves that it is the language (and cries) of a marginalized sect, and this group is reading at record levels—although, as Kristina Graaff (2013) states:

> [E]xact sales numbers are difficult to determine, bestseller lists of the African American Literature Book Club (AALBC), Essence Magazine and the African American book announcement website, Books of Soul, indicate that Street Literature is currently one of the most widely read subgenres of African American fiction. (“Street Literature and the Mode of Spectacular Writing” 113)

In “Critiques and Controversies of Street Literature: A Formidable Literary Genre,” Wanda Brooks and Lorraine Savage add that “As a contemporary trend, however, this arguable increase in reading has not surfaced statistically but continues to reveal itself anecdotally to those of us working among teenage populations in both urban and suburban areas” (48). Brooks and Savage echo Morris’ sentiments: “the streets had brought street lit into the public library” (Readers’ Advisory xxi). So many young males and females coming into Philadelphia’s public library eagerly requesting titles from the street literature genre convinces Morris to take a look at the books to find their appeal. Morris becomes a supporter of street literature because she realizes the merit of the genre is that it inspires many people to read, some who are otherwise very reluctant to pick up a book.

If, as Du Bois states, all art is “propaganda,” then the purpose of all three waves of street literature is to enlighten the masses to a sect of marginalized people who struggle, thrive, dream, love, fight, and exist in America and who, oftentimes, fit many stereotypes that elites consider harmful. Despite these presumably flawed attributes, street literature authors manage to exhibit and laud the beauty therein of the various dialects from the streets of the hoods to galvanize readership among the masses. Just as librarians realize street literature is a force to be reckoned
with, perhaps soon academia will also make space to grapple seriously with this genre, which appears to be the chosen genre of this generation.

As bell hooks states, “The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated” (“Postmodern Blackness” 2478). It appears that hooks’ statement is applicable to the third wave of street literature and its detractors: perhaps this is an appropriate place in which scholars can start the interrogation. The value of street literature in educational and learning environments is nearly untapped. In the chapters ahead, I utilize this literature as a gateway, an avenue through which to return to established canonical texts. As it currently stands, a great number of literary scholars have located some merit in each previous wave of street literature, usually posthumously—or after the spike in readership. However, Morris’ research in *Readers’ Advisory* suggests that it is most beneficial to adopt relevant texts within this genre into the classrooms—and the American literary canon—while it still has the attention of youth throughout the country.
CHAPTER TWO

“IT’S ALL IN THE GAME”:\textsuperscript{20} CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LITERARY CHARACTERS AND THEIR SPIN ON THE CULTURAL MYTHOLOGY OF SUCCESS

The belief that all men, in accordance with certain rules, but exclusively by their own efforts, can make of their lives what they will has been widely popularized for well over a century. The cluster of ideas surrounding this conviction makes up the American myth of success.


The cultural mythology of success, or the American Dream, is a shared motif for African American women characters of contemporary fiction. Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Sister Souljah craft literary works in which their leading women protagonists set out on individual quests; each character desires some form of success. Although the settings and decades change, the desire for a self-defined ideal success does not change. In this chapter, I use Horatio Alger’s “hero prototype” to outline the notion of success in Hurston’s \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}, Petry’s \textit{The Street}, and Souljah’s \textit{The Coldest Winter Ever} and \textit{A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiaga Story}. American success was the desired goal for many Americans; however, it was usually reserved for white males. Thus, as African American women novelists explore the cultural influences of the American success motif with their leading women of color, the novelists highlight a critical point of tension: these four novels demonstrate that the individualistic notion of the American Dream, as shown in Alger’s motif, is unsuitable for women of color. Therefore, in order to engage in this discourse, the African American women

\textsuperscript{20} This is a common “hood” phrase that was used most notably throughout \textit{HBO’s television series The Wire}, 2002-2008. The meaning of this phrase is essentially that there will be wins and losses in the game—and the “game” can be any task or profession one chooses, but it usually pertains to illegal activities, such as drug dealing.
characters revise a cornerstone literary model of success (for men) so that the mythology now includes women of color, adapts to their individual environments, and accounts for their cultural differences. The revised cultural myth of success gives women an option to attach their hopes to successful men or to promote their own independence as they seek the mythic American Dream.

Phillipa Kafka has done extensive work on African American women writers’ reactions to the American male success mythology, particularly in *The Great White Way* (1993). Kafka begins her assessment with the adaptation of Benjamin Franklin’s model by Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. Kafka also notes the adaptation of the model by African American women, specifically, Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Jacobs. Kafka emphasizes that African Americans are astute signifiers, able to put forth one mask that seems to comply with societal standards, but covertly they actually remodel the dominant plan (22). I use Kafka’s scholarship to assert that twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American women characters, in their own right, offer unique revisions to the traditional mythology. This chapter attempts to show the limitations, and near impossibility, of applying this hero/success motif—as is, without modifications—to African American women’s lives.

In each novel, the American Dream undergoes a significant revision that highlights the different cultures, thoughts, and societal values in the respective periods. To illustrate this point, Richard Weiss states, “Any student of the success myth encounters the seemingly insoluble dilemma of finding any consistent definition of success. At different times, it seems to mean virtue, money, happiness, or a combination of all three” (15). However, in the novels where the motif appears with few changes to the cultural influences of the American Dream, the characters struggle to become self-actualized. Janie Crawford is an archetypal character that is revolutionary for Hurston’s 1937 setting, yet her story is commonplace in twenty-first-century
novels. Janie’s narrative has been retold, reset, and re-imagined. While the protagonist’s name changes, the setting varies, and the plot twists, Janie’s quest for self-actualization is a continual quest for the generations of African American women characters, like Lutie Johnson, Winter Santiaga, and Porsche Santiaga, who walk in her shadows. The narratives of Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche are representative of the shifts in the core definition of the American Dream within their eras. In their efforts to revise the American Dream myth, the four characters also attempt to represent the hero model while enduring the cultural influences of their environments.

The individualistic notion of the hero model is not conducive to the African American community. Kafka used an excerpt from Barbara J. Haile and Audreye E. Johnson to exemplify the importance of community for African Americans’ success:

> The Black American experience is derived from an African world view [sic] … The African world view values the group and the survival of the group in contrast to the individual and individualism; it values cooperation over competition, power, and dominance; psychological interdependence over independence, the oral tradition over the visual-written language; a holistic conception of the human condition over mind/body dualism [‘good me vs. bad me’]. (The Great White Way 22)

As the characters start to employ particularly American influences of individualism over community, and competition over cooperation, their tales veer toward a tragic course. At the onset, it is important to determine what success means for Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche in the scope of African/African American cultural and societal values. Hurston, Petry, and Souljah adeptly demonstrate how beneficial, or detrimental the lack of, community is to the success of their African American women characters. The characters’ quest for self-actualization depends on how skillfully they utilize their resources and community support. Contemporary reiterations of Janie’s character constantly battle the external conflicts and contingencies of their urban environments. In the quest to achieve their versions of success in a male-dominated society,
these women characters dare to revise and reshape the American success model, which brings their journey either to a tragic end or to successful self-actualization.

During their journeys, Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche attempt to demonstrate the four intrinsic parts of Alger’s hero model: background, personal moral code, preservation of the family unit, and confrontation with external conflict (Marsden 140). Alger’s hero starts his narrative as an orphan who struggles to survive with some menial job “as a bootblack, errand-runner, or some sort of street merchant” (Marsden 140). Since this hero is often alone, he has a strong sense of responsibility and a desire to maintain his family structure. Obviously, the hero has to face some sort of conflict in order to test his fortitude. For Alger’s hero, a distinctive key to success lies in his ability to remain innately good, in which “virtue is the necessary antecedent to good fortune. It alone is the spring [that] triggers the lucky payoff” (Marsden 140). While innate goodness is important, it is not the ultimate key for success in these particular narratives by women of color. The ultimate key to their success is the ability to adapt to the environment, be it a rural or an urban space. The characters’ ability to rely on community to master or to overcome such elements leads to their designation as self-actualized or tragic.

**Revising the Mythology of Success to include women of color**

Like Alger’s hero on the quest for success, Janie overcomes external conflicts. While other women characters in this study directly display attempts to emulate Alger’s hero motif, Janie, conversely, is self-actualized because she adapts the influences of Alger’s model in her life to fit her desires. Her external conflicts appear in the form of her grandmother’s outdated

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21 According to Marsden, “Alger heroes are quite frequently fatherless, and consequently must shift for themselves at an early age. Because of this, they have a mature sense of responsibility and devotion to work as the means to preserving the family unit” (“The American Myth of Success” 140). While it may seem contradictory that the hero who is an orphan “works to preserve the family unit,” it appears as if the hero hopes to preserve a family unit of his own making (such as his own lineage).

22 This section focuses on Nanny’s fascination with tenets of Alger’s hero model, which she attempts to pass on to Janie. Janie becomes self-actualized as she reinvents the path that Nanny establishes for her.
model of success, an overbearing union with Joe that lacks sexual fulfillment, and the death of her beloved Tea Cake. She has to endure in order to become the hero of her own quest narrative. Janie, in line with Alger’s formula, temporarily sacrifices herself and her desires in order to subscribe to Nanny’s politics of respectability. Janie also overcomes many other external conflicts, such as her short-term unhappiness with Logan Killicks, Joe’s possessiveness, and her status as an outcast among the Eatonville community. Janie sets a foundation for women of color to revise, own, and actualize their dreams; yet, the external conflicts that these women face are oftentimes a greater force than their agency (or desires).

Janie’s narrative exemplifies the generational shifts in the ideology of American success. Thus, it is Nanny who wishes to model Alger’s hero motif; yet, Janie is the character who successfully revises the narrative to account for race, gender, and setting. While Janie only hopes to become a sexually-expressive, free woman, Nanny believes, and attempts to instill in Janie, that in order to obtain a degree of success a woman must inherit wealth from her husband. Nanny hopes to pass on to Janie her version of success, which closely resembles the traditional white male narrative with underlying principles of nineteenth-century white women ideology of propriety (The Cult of True Womanhood). For instance, Nanny seemingly endorses the traditional objectives of the American success narrative, such as “having a lot of money, making the right kinds of connections, and achieving social power through success …” (Vanderpool). In effect, Nanny makes it clear that little else matters other than the respect and wealth that Janie will gain as Logan Killicks’ wife. As this model for material success is not Janie’s personal goal, her narrative becomes an approximate twenty-year struggle to revise Nanny’s hero motif, which is heavily influenced by American culture.
Janie begins her novel as a prepubescent young girl who fantasizes about romance, love and sweet things (*Their Eyes* 11-12). As Janie introduces her “conscious” self at her Nanny’s gatepost, success for her is fulfillment of her romantic/erotic desires (10). Janie’s search is for a romantic union with a man, “*any* tree [man] in bloom” (11, original emphasis). Janie expects a romantic coupling in which to express her sexuality. She is forever in-bloom and in constant search of a dust-bearing bee (11). However, Janie has real external conflicts and barriers as she tries to achieve her quest for love: her grandmother Nanny. Nanny is the cause of two specific barriers for Janie; the first is Nanny’s physical presence, which interrupts Janie’s moment of romance with “shiftless” Johnny Taylor, and the second is the psychological brainwashing through which Nanny convinces Janie to endure a loveless union.

Nanny sees the danger in Janie’s desire. Janie’s consciousness in her sexual awakening frightens Nanny. Nanny, a former enslaved woman who was never able to own her womanhood, believes that she must see “Janie safe in life” (15), which means Nanny has to take control of Janie’s sexuality. As a product of institutional slavery, Nanny tucked her “wishes” away for her descendants to rise up and own those sacred opportunities that were once denied to her. Nanny tells Janie, “Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat’s one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can’t stop you you from wishin’” (16). So, Nanny sets Leafy, Janie’s mother, on a path to becoming the “lady” she could not be. Leafy pursues Nanny’s vision of success with the two tools that her mother does not possess: sexual purity and some degree of education. Nanny, who confesses that her aspiration was to preach a “great sermon,” has a similar goal for Leafy. She states, “Ah was ’spectin’ to make a school teacher outa her” (19). To Nanny’s dismay, Leafy is raped at seventeen and “it was a long time before she was well” (19).
Hence, just as Nanny suspects, an “unsafe” sexual awakening ruins a Black woman’s chances for success. Due to the emotional trauma, Nanny cannot get Leafy, who “took to drinkin’ likker and stayin’ out nights,” back onto the path of success (19). As a result, Nanny’s dream falls to Janie; Nanny states, “Ah even hated the way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance” (16). Nanny believes that her duty is to keep Janie “safe” so that she does not end up like herself or Leafy, which explains Janie’s description of Nanny’s initial reaction when she witnesses her kiss at the gatepost. Janie observes that Nanny’s voice is “so full of crumbling dissolution” (12). Nanny’s mind must have flashed back to Leafy “crawling in on her hands and knees,” or, as she tells Janie, “Lawd a’mussy! Look lak Ah kin see it all over again” (19). Janie is Nanny’s last chance to succeed in raising a female offspring. Therefore, Nanny interprets Janie’s sexual awakening as a threat to her personal vision of success.

Nanny positions Janie as a Black woman who will right the wrongs and depravities of generations past. Nanny says:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule of the world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it to be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (14)

In this context, Nanny steps into a role that she attributes to men—she makes decisions about Janie’s body, sexuality, and livelihood, without Janie’s input. In order for Janie truly to inherit all of the desires of Nanny’s heart, Nanny purposefully has to instill in Janie the importance of sexual propriety as she has learned it. According to Ann duCille, “[T]he only right (and, at this point in the development of black woman’s novel, ‘safe’) use of sexual passion is in the marital
relation” (47). In this regard, Nanny does not maliciously make decisions for Janie. Although her intentions are perhaps a bit selfish, she means well. Nanny wants Janie not only to right past wrongs, but also to inherit social, political, and economic standings as a married woman, which is Nanny’s definition of success. Nanny’s goal is to prevent Janie from “bein’ kicked around from pillar tuh post” after she, Janie’s only kin and caretaker in this world, is deceased (15). According to Nanny, Janie needs the protection of a man who has property and status.

However, Janie does not share the same experience of blackness as Nanny, so she sees Nanny’s definition of success and propriety as a barrier to her sole quest for sexually-expressive love. Nonetheless, Janie, as an obedient young woman, accepts this lifestyle to please Nanny. She marries Logan Killicks, moves to his sixty-acre farm, and waits for love to come. As Janie goes along with Nanny’s marriage plans, the narrator states that Janie has more questions than answers as she starts her quest: “Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? Did marriage compel love like the sun the days?” (21) Janie discovers an unfavorable answer to her questions. She learns that a marriage without singing bees and little sexual passion would not satisfy her.

At the time of Nanny’s death, Janie is still very young, and stuck with Killicks. Thus, she assumes erroneously that her dream of a fulfilling life has died, and she resigns herself to enter a new phase as an unfulfilled woman: “The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (25). However, Nanny’s death serves to release Janie from the oppressive restraints of her success model. Janie realizes that her position in life is unlike Nanny’s—she does not have to force herself to be content with a meager lot or a ration of life that someone else dictates. In “The Ancestor as Foundation in Their Eyes Were
Watching God and Tar Baby,” Sandra Pouchet Paquet claims that Janie accepts a portion of Nanny’s idea of success, but sexual pleasure still reigns supreme: “When Janie abandons Logan Killicks and his farm, her restlessness and frustration are partly sexual frustration and partly her own attachment to Nanny’s ideal of ‘sittin’ on porches lak de white madam’ (172). Janie wants romance and a high chair” (504). Janie once again begins to dream of a life complete with romanticism and eroticism. However, as is evident when she runs off with Joe Starks, Janie realizes she is not her own woman yet as she is still not completely free of Nanny.

Nanny’s words and voice of guidance, which at first Janie denies, continue to sustain Janie. Janie recalls the power of her grandmother’s words and the misguided aim of Nanny’s love that founded such decisions for her (89). It is the power of this remembrance and the strong words that Janie uses to draw her strength as she continues to establish her definition of success, self-actualization and desires for romantic fulfillment. Janie alludes to her grandmother’s desire for material possessions, which would attest to her status and position in the community (23). She curses the dream of “things” that Nanny made her seek instead of the horizon of romance that she was initially after. Janie decides to throw off the burden of Nanny and reach for her horizon: “Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her” (89). Therefore, Janie proceeds to revise the traditional male-scripted American success model to make room for her agency as a woman, one who can choose to incorporate her desires for romantic pleasure, rather than tag along as an accessory to a male sponsor.

Janie’s definition of success is a sexually fulfilling coupling, not necessarily a marriage. Janie works alongside her menfolk, not for any monetary gains, but in an effort to increase
romance. She does not have her ideal romance with Killicks; this is why Janie is unhappy about working his farm. Paquet asserts, “Logan’s belated attempt to make Janie a working partner in the care of the farm is entirely unacceptable to Janie; she is unable to make that kind of commitment without sexual passion” (504). Although this was also a fruitless plan with the very controlling Joe Starks, it produces some success with Tea Cake. For example, she tells Tea Cake she does not mind working with him on the muck because she looks forward to the love-making afterwards: “Clerkin’ in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain’t got nothin’ tuh do but do our work and come home and love” (133). Now, with Nanny and Joe out of her way, she decides that “she would have the rest of her life to do as she pleases” (89). Janie comes to this realization through her relationship with Tea Cake.

Tea Cake provides the necessary space (and community)\(^23\) for Janie to actualize her goal of a successful union complete with happiness and eroticism. Their relationship is the epitome of Janie’s desires, but also a conciliatory offering to Nanny. Janie’s union with Tea Cake actually merges both her romantic desires and those desires of her grandmother; this union symbolizes a merger of past and contemporary ideologies. Janie can safely explore her desires of eroticism with her husband Tea Cake, which satisfies Nanny’s desires for her to maintain sexual decency. Tea Cake is the culmination of Janie’s dream and her ultimate measure of success. The presence of Tea Cake in Janie’s narrative solves all of her other conflicts. Janie testifies to Tea Cake of her love for him, “Ah jus know dat God snatched me out de fire through you. And Ah loves yuh and feel glad” (180). At the end of the novel, to symbolize her actualization of her contemporary

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\(^{23}\) Janie thrives in communal spaces on the Muck: “Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh to herself. … The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor! She was sorry for friends back there and scornful of the others” (Their Eyes Were Watching God 134). When Janie returns to Eatonville after Tea Cake’s death, her dear friend Pheoby fills the void of community.
desire with Nanny’s guarded notions of propriety, Janie pulls in the horizon—her true love, Tea Cake, and the one who loved her first, Nanny.

Unlike the self-actualized Janie Crawford, the “Tragic Janie” characters, Lutie Johnson and Winter Santiaga, deviate from Alger’s formula. While Winter does not possess innate goodness, Lutie simply cannot overcome external conflicts. Both characters also experience a real isolation from the community and lack a distinct rootedness, greatly contributing to their tragic outcomes. These two tragic character reiterations of Janie also seek a sense of fulfillment, a place of their own in the world, and a claim to their own dreams of success. However, neither character is able to actualize her goals.

In *The Street*, Petry sets up three ethnicities and several classes of people to offer commentary on the American Dream. The Johnsons represent the American Dream for African Americans, as well as for women of color, whereas the owners of the local vegetable store, the Pizzinis, are representative of the dream for non-American immigrants. Lutie’s white employers, the Chandlers, represent the traditional white male-driven model of the American Dream. In this novel, Petry illustrates and mocks the traditional success model. Lutie and her family struggle to make ends meet and to maintain possession of their home because, as Jim learns, his blackness hinders his entitlement to the spoils of an American Dream. Jim and Lutie attempt to subscribe to the male-dominated success model—he performs menial jobs to provide for his wife and son. However, the Johnsons are unable to embrace fully the traditional model because Jim is marginalized in the workforce. As a Black man in 1940s America, Jim does not have immediate access to upward mobility in either the workforce or society:

And Jim couldn’t get a job, though he hunted for one—desperately, eagerly, anxiously. Walking from one employment agency to another; spending long hours in the musty agency waiting-rooms, reading old newspapers. Waiting, waiting, waiting to be called up for a job. He would come home shivering from the cold,
saying, ‘God damn white people anyway. I don’t want favors. All I want is a job. Just a job. Don’t they know if I knew how I’d change the color of my skin?’ (30)

Petry places Lutie’s predicament immediately before an elaborate description of the Pizzinis, the Italian immigrant market owners. The Pizzinis live in a part of Jamaica where the “houses were big and there was lawn around them and evergreen trees grew in thick clusters around the houses” (32). Lutie compares her struggle to the Pizzinis’ wealth and wonders, “How had they managed to do that on the nickels and dimes they took in selling lettuce and grapefruit? … They had a fine house and they had sent their daughter to college, and yet Mrs. Pizzini had admitted she herself ‘couldn’t write so good’” (33). Lutie turns to Mrs. Pizzini for a recommendation letter for a job that she hopes will better her family’s chance at obtaining the American Dream.

Whereas the Pizzinis thrive in America, Lutie and her family are disadvantaged because of their race. Kafka argues with Pulitzer Prize winning author Charles Johnson’s “Popper’s Disease” (1987) as she highlights the faults of the traditional American white male success model for African American women. Kafka’s summation of Johnson’s view on the American male success model further explains why Lutie’s family cannot subscribe to this notion:

Johnson’s position is that [Booker T.] Washington seduced innocent believers … by ‘inspiring’ them into believing that the American male success model applied to them too—that they could live life and be accepted in the United States as individual heroes in the bildungsroman mode, just as Benjamin Franklin had, only with dark skins. (Great White Way 28)

The traditional male-driven American Dream does not work for the Johnsons because Jim is not given equal access to a position where he can work his way up the ladder of success. Therefore, Lutie revises the motif so that she can work to sustain her family. Lutie steps into her husband’s position as the breadwinner of their family, and she assumes that Jim will now raise Bub and
maintain their home. Lutie leaves her home in New York, her son and husband behind, and moves to Connecticut into the home of her white employers as a maidservant: “At the time it was the only job she could get. She had thought of it as a purely temporary one, but she had ended up by staying two years—thus earning the money for Jim and Bub to live on” (28). Lutie even goes further to solidify the male/female role reversal as she plans how Jim should spend the allowance that she sends home. The narrator states, “Every month when she got paid she walked to the post office and mailed the money to Jim. Seventy dollars. Jim and Bub could eat on that and pay the interest on the mortgage” (28-29). Even though Lutie wants to keep her family intact, her role reversal actually pushes Jim away, just as Mrs. Pizzini predicted.

Similar to Alger’s model, Lutie’s revision of the success model is not without external conflicts. While she works away from home taking care of a family that is not her own, her husband and son fend for themselves. Subsequently, Jim replaces Lutie with another woman in their home, which causes their marriage to fall apart. Lutie blames the job for her failed marriage:

Because that kitchen sink in the advertisement or one just like it was what had wrecked her and Jim. The sink had belonged to someone else—she’d been washing someone else’s dishes when she should have been home with Jim and Bub. Instead she’d cleaned another woman’s child while her own marriage went to pot; breaking up into so many little pieces it couldn’t be put back together again, couldn’t even be patched into a vague resemblance of its former self. (30)

As Lutie’s marriage crumbles, she also encounters conflict at her new job when Mrs. Chandler’s friends accuse her of being interested in Mr. John Chandler simply because she is a “colored wench” (40). The friends urge Mrs. Chandler to watch closely the good-looking Lutie around John. The friends’ reasoning is because “they’re [colored women] always making passes at men. Especially white men” (40-41). Although Lutie carries herself with dignity and grace in the Chandlers’ household, she faces constant scrutiny from the family’s friends and the in-laws.
She quits her job with the Chandlers when she learns of her own husband’s affair, but she is too late. Lutie finds herself back in New York and faced with a dilemma. Jim made it clear to Lutie that a man cannot fill, or “does not intend” to take on, a woman’s role while she does his. Jim pointedly states, “Maybe you can go on day after day with nothing to do but just cook meals for yourself and a kid. With just enough money to be able to eat and have a roof over your head. But I can’t. And I don’t intend to” (54). So, Lutie takes her son, Bub, and tries to find her way in the world.

Her quest is to find a life and livelihood that would be fulfilling and provide financial comfort for her and her young son: “What else was there? She couldn’t hope to get a raise in pay without taking another civil service examination, for more pay depended on a higher rating, and it might be two years, ten years, even twenty years before it came through” (81-82). Although Petry positions Lutie to be the hero of her own narrative, she is unable to master her circumstances and urban space. Lutie’s quest proves tragic as she is unable to obtain a nice spacious apartment, financial stability, and a stable environment for her son.

According to Helen Gurley Brown, usually in a quest narrative “deprivation can be an asset … because it creates drive. Being forced to work harder and do more than one’s share brings rewards” (Marsden 146). However, this is not the case with Lutie. In Lutie’s case, the harder she reaches for a piece of success the wider her sense of deprivation becomes. The street contributes to Lutie’s despair. From Lutie’s perspective, the street hinders her ability to claim her dream of a spacious home where the light, gas and rent bills are not oppressive, and she is not expected to sleep with white or black men for extra money (83-84). For instance, when Lutie’s situation spirals out of control, she has a moment of clarity in which she realizes that she thought erroneously that she could model her success after the Chandlers. She finally vocalizes what her
readers have perceived all along; regardless of how hard she works, there are clearly different rules and expectations for a white family versus a Black family in urban America:

The women work because the white folks give them jobs—washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now the white folks haven’t liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families. And finally it gets to be too late for some of them. … And the men go off, move on, slip away, find new women. (389)

Her reflection is critical for two significant reasons: it appears near the end of the novel—after she has struggled for so long to become a Black Mrs. Chandler, and this is the defining moment after she loses Bub, which is a clear indication that she has fallen short of her American Dream. Lutie begins this journey to keep her family together, then it becomes solely about providing a good, safe home for Bub. Lutie’s quest is null without Bub.

Petry designed this novel in a manner in which she purposefully allowed Lutie to attempt the traditional model of success in her marginalized environment. The readers already know from the onset that Lutie’s narrative will be rife with tribulations and likely not to end with her desired results, but Lutie does not appear cognizant of this. Thus, when it is painfully clear that she has failed, Lutie goes into a rant that criticizes the system, and she criticizes the model that does not allow women in urban environments to succeed:

And the little Henry Chandlers go to Yale—Princeton—Harvard and the Bub Johnsons graduate from reform school into Dannemora—Sing—Sing. And you helped push him because you talked to him about money. All the time money. And you wanted it because you wanted to move from this street, but in the beginning it was because you heard the rich white Chandlers talk about it. ‘Filthy rich.’ ‘Richest country in the world.’ ‘Make it while you’re young.’ (389)

While Lutie can visualize her dreams, she is unable to save enough money to get ahead in order to move away from 116th Street. Lutie tries to better her conditions as a Black woman in an urban environment; subconsciously, she knows that upward mobility is not an option for her and her son.
She finally realizes a key factor between her success and the Chandlers: “Only you forgot. You forgot you were black and you underestimated the street outside here” (389). Nonetheless, throughout the narrative, Lutie is keenly aware of the contradictions between whites and Blacks. For instance, she once told Bub, “I’m not going to let you begin at eight doing what white folks figure all eight-year-old colored boys ought to do. For if you’re shining shoes at eight, you’ll probably be doing the same thing when you’re eighty. And I’m not going to have it” (71). Unfortunately, Lutie’s bursts of self-confidence along with definitive actions come in waves, and she is no match for the street. The insurmountable urban spaces and marginalized circumstances ruin her quest for a semblance of the American Dream.

Lutie supposes that she initiates Bub’s ruin by placing an emphasis on the monetary element of the American Dream. Lutie states, “She had wanted him to grow up fine and strong and she’d failed him all the way along the line. She had been trying to get enough money so that she could have a good place for him to live, and in trying she’d put so much stress on money that he’d felt impelled to help her and started stealing letters out of mail boxes” (406). In essence, the street causes Lutie to doubt herself and her ability to mother her son successfully. She belatedly realizes the improbability of the traditional success model for a single Black parent with little to no community involvement: “And while you were out working to pay the rent on this stinking, rotten place, why, the street outside played nursemaid to your kid. The street did more than that. It became both mother and father and trained your kid for you, and it was an evil father and a vicious mother …” (407). In this moment, Lutie’s failure to achieve her dreams is painfully clear, and she is fired up. She ridicules the American Dream by proceeding to state eloquently how her situation becomes tragic:

Pop had never got anywhere in life and certainly Lil hadn’t ever been anything, but neither one of them had ever been in jail … But who wouldn’t have wanted to
live in a better house than this one and who wouldn’t have struggled to get out of it—and the only way that presented itself was to save money. So it was a circle, and she could keep on going around it forever and keep on ending up in the same place, because if you were black and you lived in New York and you could only pay so much rent, why, you had to live in a house like this one. (406)

Although Lutie tries, she finds it hard to compete with the emotional, mental and physical stresses of the street. Despite her best efforts, Lutie fails to secure money to bail Bub out of the detention center, and, in the process, commits a crime in self-defense. Lutie thought she could get the money from a male associate, Boots, without having sex with him; however, Boots is supposed to hand Lutie over to a rich white man, whose sexual advances she has refused repeatedly.

In this situation, Lutie allows her anger to take over, and she lashes out, not just at Boots who has violently struck her, but at a literal and figurative street that has derailed her dreams of a better life. The narrator states, “... she was striking, not at Boots Smith, but at a handy, anonymous figure—a figure which her anger had transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her … the dirty, crowded street … dilapidated old houses; the small dark rooms” (429). I would further expound on this to suggest that “the figure” is an idea. Lutie shadow boxes with a widely professed philosophy of the American Dream that “all men, in accordance with certain rules, but exclusively by their own efforts, can make of their lives what they will” (Weiss 3). Tupac Shakur—four decades later—echoes Lutie’s undisputable anger in his song, which is appropriately entitled “Trapped”:

How can I feel guilty after all the things they did to me / Sweated me, hunted me, trapped me in my own community / One day I’m gonna bust, blow up on this society / Why did you lie to me? I couldn’t find a trace of equality / Work me like a slave while they lay back, homie don’t play that / It’s time I let ’em suffer the payback / I’m tryin to avoid contact, I can’t hold back / It’s time to attack, jack—they got me trapped. (2Pacalypse Now)

65
Naturally, the pressure becomes too much and Lutie does, in fact, blow up as Tupac suggests. Still, after the expressions of anger, she is unable to form a plan to save Bub. Tragically, Lutie runs away from the street and from her son whom she feels she cannot save from that street. She believes that Bub’s life will be better without her.

Therefore, Lutie does not achieve her version of the American Dream because, in her words, “it was that god-damned street” (435). The street has the power to be both mother and father, but not the necessary community that she needs to sustain herself and to help raise Bub. Lutie underestimates the power of the street, as well as the many conflicts that await single, Black mothers who fail to recognize a concrete community in such an environment. The street overpowers Lutie’s judgement and motherly instincts; from the moment she decides to move onto 116th Street, her American Dream slowly begins to die. Since Lutie is unable to capitalize on her resources and self-assurance as Archetypal Janie does, she remains a tragic figure of her literary period.

Winter, the other tragic reiteration of Janie, learns a similar lesson as does Lutie. Winter Santiaga learns that while the streets are commanding enough to raise a child, they usually engulf rather than sustain the child. Through Winter’s narrative, Souljah upsets Alger’s formula as she situates the hero narrative as a coming-of-age tale told from a female’s perspective in which the hero attempts to thrive in an urban environment that is riddled with external conflicts. Although Winter is tragic and appears quite villainous throughout the novel, it is important to note the transformation of the success myth in her urban environment.

As the daughter of powerful drug kingpin, Ricky Santiaga, Winter is street-wise and more experienced than most teenagers. Winter is born into a family that has built their wealth from the streets of New York. As a spoiled teen, Winter develops a dependence on the lavish
lifestyle: “Daddy handed me a long slim box, the kind I like because it almost always means jewelry. I tore off the gold wrapping paper and smiled wildly as I lifted my new diamond tennis bracelet off the clean white cotton” (18-19). But when federal agents arrest her father, the Santiaga family’s reign comes to an abrupt end: her father is sentenced to prison on countless charges, her three younger sisters are in child protective services, and her mother slowly loses her grip on reality. In a sense, Winter becomes an orphan as her father is imprisoned and her mother becomes self-absorbed. Ricky Santiaga reminds her that she is prepared to handle life on her own if she remains smart: “Winter, you gotta be tough. It’s time. Remember everything I taught you. Keep your ears open. Follow the directions I gave you to the letter, and just play your hand close to your chest” (84). She is an inheritor of an inverted American Dream. Ricky Santiaga follows Alger’s hero model as he (temporarily) actualizes his version of the American Dream. Although Santiaga works hard in an illegal drug business, he moves through the ranks to become the owner of an enterprise that supports and protects his family. He gains street prestige and power.

Souljah further highlights Santiaga’s knowledge of the American Dream through descriptive displays of Santiaga’s obsession with playing chess, an American strategy game. Santiaga models the white male-privileged American Dream, which he does not have ready access to as a young minority man. He adapts this model to account for his surroundings and experiences in an urban space. Santiaga’s mistake is to think he can make a longstanding, sustainable life through the drug game. He fails to prepare Winter for a life outside of the quick money, street success and hood prestige. Winter struggles to survive as a seventeen-year-old orphan living on the streets of New York. She goes deeper into the hood because she is unaware
of how to adapt her father’s business model to a legal business within mainstream American society.

The quest for a semblance of the American Dream becomes a game in urban spaces: how much success, fortune and fame can one obtain before he, the king, is captured. A common saying in the hood is “It’s all in the game.” A low level street dealer tells Winter,

This business is like a chess game. You gotta think of every possible move any and every player in the game can make. To every move you gotta have a smart reaction. Santiaga’s gone, his whole crew is gone. It was good while it lasted. That’s why I’m a pile up my dough and get out before it’s too late. (164)

Marginalized African Americans, like Santiaga, in urban spaces invert the American Dream; they maintain Alger’s philosophy of respect, hard work, fame, fortune, and luck, yet the whole scheme is no longer based on a legal business venture and the key is to know when to get out. African American rapper Nas and hip hop literary critic Michael Eric Dyson (2014) sit down together at Georgetown University to discuss the plight of Black America, hip hop as literature, and the Black American Dream. Nas states that poor Blacks, Whites, and Latinos do not have access to the American Dream because they are trapped in the ghettos of America. According to Nas, “Trapped people do trapped things” (“A Conversation with Nas”). In other words, the institutional and structural racism, and classism that exists in a presumable post-racial America traps these individuals into a way of life where illegal activity is the only way to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”

For Winter, and those within her urban environment, the bootstrap theory of saving one’s self is not an option. The American Dream, or bootstrap myth, does not apply to the hood because African Americans in such conditions are continuously shunned and marginalized by dominant society. Quick money and a lavish lifestyle usually involve drug sales and utter disregard for human life; overnight success is ideal in the hood environment. According to 2008
reports from the National Center for Children in Poverty, “60 percent of black children live in low-income families and a third live in poor families, a higher percentage than any other race” (“Low-Income Children”). For African Americans in the poor, disenfranchised neighborhoods, success akin to that of the white male-accessed mythology means becoming self-made men.

Santiaga is the perfect example of a man making his own path to fleeting American success by drug dealing within his own boroughs. Reporter Matthew Ryder concluded in an exposé on hip hop entrepreneur Jay-Z that poverty and drugs are commonplace in the urban environment in New York where he was raised, in an environment similar to Winter’s: “the intriguing thing about [Jay-Z] is not that he had a childhood punctuated by poverty, drugs and guns. In fact, that is a pretty common rap story. … Unfortunately, no one explained the next chapter: how to build on that success; how to become comfortable and secure in it” (The Guardian). Likewise, this is the lesson that Winter’s entrepreneur and business-savvy father is unable to master or teach to Winter.

As the novel progresses, it is apparent that Winter definitely inherits her father’s entrepreneurial spirit; however, like her father, she simply cannot transform her street skills into a safe, legal endeavor. She tries her hands at various schemes that all prove detrimental for her; for instance, her most profitable scheme was stealing high-end clothes from clothing stores with her best friend, Simone. However, when Simone gets caught stealing, Winter does little to assist, which causes her once-longtime friend to become an arch nemesis. Due to her selfish nature, Winter does not look out for Simone when she is locked up. Rather than bail Simone out, Winter convinces herself that it is not her problem. She states, “That’s one thing I hate about friends … Now how you gonna game a gamer? How does Simone think she’s gonna trick a trickster? … Now I’m supposed to spend my hard-earned cash to get her ass out” (170). Winter continues to
make enemies throughout the narrative as she is only concerned about her appearance, her purse, and her sex life.

As Winter is unable or unwilling to resolve the conflicts, her life becomes a constant race: she runs from child protective services, she runs from her old gang of friends, and she runs from her inner voice of reasoning. Winter’s background models Alger’s formulaic hero; however, she cannot be the hero of her own narrative because of her inability to overcome her external conflicts. Also, Winter does not possess the innate goodness even to want to rise above her environment. Essentially, success for Winter is not simply to survive in America with a nice legal payoff; she wants fortune, fame, and a high degree of street credibility.

Winter does not oppose a ride to the top via a high-ranking street drug dealer. Winter’s mother groomed her to value all of her assets that would attract a street-wealthy man. Her mother constantly tells her, “You’re young, fine. You got everything a girl could want, pretty hair, beautiful eyes, clothing, jewels” (36). While her father hopes his daughter will marry a young man with a future in medicine or law, Winter seeks a man like her father who is a commander of the streets (65). Winter continuously searches for someone to take care of her, to provide her with a lavish lifestyle like the one Santiago gives her. Winter differs from Archetypal Janie as she actually endorses Nanny’s version of the American Dream. She seeks a male companion who possesses riches and street reputation, someone who will support her desire to be the “baddest bitch” with an abundance of money, cars, and clothes. This quest sets Winter on a path of destruction.

Ultimately, Winter’s individualistic attitude causes her to jeopardize all of her connections, and it eventually leads to her tragic downfall. She experiences many external conflicts with childhood friends and family, including her own mother. According to the success
myth, “In the process of seeking his fortune, the Alger hero must often confront an assortment of thieves and confidence men who are seeking their own fortunes in unscrupulous ways” (Marsden 140). Thieves and confidence men with unscrupulous ways are commonplace in the hood, and Winter is familiar with all of their ways. She experiences one particular instance of double-cross at the hands of an older family member. With only $2500 left, she moves in with an aunt in Section 8 projects. Winter pins her money to her bra like her mother taught her. Her aunt steals the money while she is in the shower. She comes out to find that her life savings are gone and that her aunt has set her up to be placed in a group home (141-142). Winter realizes that she cannot trust anyone, especially not her family.

Coincidently, she is placed in a group home called the House of Success. She states, “Don’t ask me how or why they picked that name. As far as I was concerned it was a joke like everything else. … Somehow somebody thought they would take a whole bunch of anonymous females, put ‘em in a building set up like a house and have them pretend they was like family” (176). Winter does not try to build a family or community with the girls; instead, she continues to find an escape route and moneymaking schemes. Even in the group home, Winter resumes her illegal hustles. She makes calculated efforts to observe the girls’ habits and mannerisms to see which services she can provide. Winter’s character is a shrewd businesswoman with potential to flourish outside of New York, yet she cannot see herself situated anywhere beyond Brooklyn.

Winter represents a literary character that is at war with good and evil. Winter is not, in her opinion, antagonized by her surroundings—on the contrary, she thrives and feeds off of the excitement and actions of the urban setting. Winter desires to maintain her lifestyle by any means necessary. Unlike Alger’s model, Winter is very selfish and boastful; she does not have an overwhelming desire to preserve her family structure. She makes her own success/survival her
only goal. Winter, unlike Lutie, consciously and subconsciously allows the streets of Brooklyn, New York, to swallow her. Therefore, Winter, a product of the hood environment, can be read as a manifestation of Lutie’s fears for Bub.

Although Santiago moves the family to Manhattan and forbids any members from returning to Brooklyn, Winter disobeys Santiago repeatedly. By chance, she is actually in Brooklyn, without permission, when federal agents raid her home and take her family, little sisters included, into custody. Even though Santiago tries to teach her to reap the benefits of the streets while being separate from those same streets, Winter believes that the streets hold all of her dreams so she becomes part of the streets with hopes to obtain a top hustler, popularity, and riches. After her father’s arrest, Winter becomes ruthless in her quest for riches and street fame. Her attitude and reckless behavior causes much external strife that complicates her livelihood. In the middle of a drug deal with her latest boyfriend, Bullet, Winter gets into an altercation with Simone. Simone slices Winter’s face with a razor, which causes a big commotion and draws the police to the scene. Bullet offers her no assistance as he flees the scene to avoid an arrest. Winter allows her selfish desires for material riches to blind her to the dangers of being heavily involved in Bullet’s “business” transactions; she also forgets that Santiago always kept his family separated from his illicit drug business.

Winter closes the narrative in prison with a mandatory fifteen-year sentence. Winter, while incarcerated, states, “Everybody got drug-related charges stemming from their own little situations. But we was nothing but the girlfriends to niggas moving weight” (404-405). Not only is Winter unsuccessful in her numerous attempts to obtain a semblance of the wealth that she grows up with, but she also fails to secure a successful street union with a wealthy dealer. Winter
apparently learns nothing from her ordeal as she appears unremorseful and continues “to work several hustles to keep [her] commissary in livable condition” (404).

Of the select novels, Winter can be read as the most updated revision to Alger’s hero motif. Nevertheless, Winter is unsuccessful because she does not possess an innate sense of goodness, and she does little to alter the mythic male characteristic trait of individuality. Winter believes that she can survive the underworld as a Santiaga on her own without a loyal crew. She invests more energy into finding a boss dealer who can support her lavish lifestyle than she does in building a support system, a community that she can turn to for advice and guidance. This proves to be one of the many mistakes that halts her journey toward self-actualization. Consequently, the lack of a stable community becomes a direct factor in Lutie’s and Winter’s limitations and tragic finales.

Contrary to Winter and Lutie, Porsche embodies the phoenix as she overcomes the imposed limitations of her family, circumstances, and environment to actualize her vision of success. Porsche is born into a hood rich family; she becomes a destitute ward of the state when the family is torn apart. Yet, by the end of the narrative, Porsche has international fame and millions of legal dollars stashed away. *Deeper Love Inside* continues the Santiaga family saga, but through the eyes of eight-year-old Porsche. Souljah published this sequel fourteen years after Winter’s account, which means the definition of success in an urban space and the Black cultural experience in America has changed in some aspects, but fast money, fast cars, and fast women remain major tenets. Initially, those tenets are at the core of Porsche’s vision of success since she is a product of the same environment as Winter. The urban environment, as seen in Winter’s narrative, heavily influences Porsche’s vision of success as the Santiagas are a proud Brooklyn-born and -raised family.
As the environment is a key factor, it is important to note that Porsche begins her narrative while she is incarcerated in a juvenile detention center. Porsche idolizes Winter and recalls the lessons of familial loyalty that her father taught her: “Listen when I tell you, I am 100 percent loyalty. If you can count you’d know that there’s nothing left over from that” (4). Porsche’s loyalty also fits a dominant script for survival in the hood. Her strong sense of loyalty causes her to react ruthlessly when her caseworker begins to speak in an unsavory manner about Winter. Porsche stabs the caseworker in the neck with a sharpened pencil. Porsche states, without remorse, “If a bitch believed she could say something about a Santiaga out loud and in my face, I obviously wasn’t on my J.O.B.” (12). The violent act lands Porsche in a children’s juvenile detention center. Thus, she begins her narrative as a cold, harsh child, wise beyond her eight years. Hence, Porsche’s initial introduction of herself and all that she holds valuable is more like a recollection of the family that she misses.

Her original view of success is a meshed web of specific family members’ desires. Indeed, Porsche practically inherits her family’s vision of success, in which the overall goal is to achieve big jewels, fast money, and attention of the streets. She states, “I have a mother who taught me the difference between everything cheap and high quality. I had three sisters, all dimes living swolled in a beautiful Long Island palace. The last thing my poppa promised me was a pony so I could trot around our property” (12). It is clear in Porsche’s introduction that she tries to personify character traits of each member in her description of herself.

From her early home life with her mother and Winter, Porsche learns to value outward beauty as a staple of a “queen” who “[looks] good, stylish, clean and untouch[able]”: “Like Winter and Momma, my beauty is undeniable, captivating, and offensive to many. … I’m honey-brown like an expensive Godiva that can only be purchased in a specialty shop” (10). She also
learns how to hustle and value hood riches, like her father. Porsche does not resent the life she was born into. In fact, she takes great pride in her inheritance: “These regular bitches don’t get it. It’s not my hair or eyes or legs or none of that bullshit that makes me who I am, plain and simple. It’s that I’m Porsche L. Santiaga, born rich. I’m not gonna act like a regular bitch when I was born royal” (13). Initially, Porsche appears as a miniature version of Winter: high-strung on looks, fashion, and reputation.

However, the federal drug raid, the imprisonment of her father, and the dismantling of her family connections eventually have an adverse effect on her version of hood dreams and “hood riches.” Porsche is orphaned along with her younger twin sisters. The girls are separated and forced to fend for themselves in group homes and in foster care. Unlike Winter, Porsche plans to reunite with her family, even if that means that she has to rescue each of them, especially her mother. Yet, as her story progresses and her environments change, her mentality also changes: the foster homes and detention center require her to be strong and calculated, like her father and Winter. Porsche skillfully maneuvers her surroundings without losing the crucial trait of innate goodness. For instance, Porsche assists other girls while in lockup. She notices that a young inmate always sent pictures rather than letters to her family; Porsche, in a display of her goodness, decides to teach the girl how to write: “Instead of embarrassing Brianna, I went by her bed and said, ‘Let’s put some words on your drawings, like a storybook. I have good handwriting. Tell me what you wanna say. I’ll write it down neatly.’ We got tight like that” (50). In this manner, Porsche forms her community inside the detention center.

Porsche, like Alger’s hero, is smart and always on the lookout for a good opportunity. She has a unique outlook on her situation and attempts to make the American Dream work for her in the current confinements:
I overheard my poppa … say, ‘A good hustle starts with a tight team.’ I got mine. We call ourselves the Gutter Girls, cause one of our teachers said we act like we come from the gutter. I didn’t feel fucked up about the gutter thing. I figured if a rich bitch dropped a diamond in the sewer, even if it got covered with shit and slime, and trampled on by mice and rats, if some one [sic] discovered it ten years later, they’d easily clean it off and it would still be worth major paper … I turned that gutter shit around, made it pop; two upside down lower case interlocking g’s. When we got our shit together we would capitalize it, turn it right side up, like Gucci. (14)

This passage functions in two crucial ways: Porsche highlights her ability to capitalize on an unfortunate scenario, as well as her ability to sustain a community in less than ideal circumstances. Souljah’s novels depict that in the hood, children are not given the best opportunities to climb, or legally work, their way out of such dire circumstances. Therefore, many youth embrace their hood status. But while Porsche seemingly embraces her environment, she has a plan to capitalize on her lowly caste status as a product of the “gutter,” and to make it work for her. She will not merely “capitalize” the g’s of “gutter,” but she will also capitalize on her riches-to-rags-to-riches story, just like Alger’s hero.

For Porsche, success equates to a sense of security, stability, and a strong family unit. She also epitomizes another trait of Alger’s hero: the idea of preserving the family structure. From the onset, when child protective service agents come to their home, Porsche tries to protect her twin sisters by hiding in a secret closet; she gives the twins sleeping pills to keep them quiet. Her plan fails and all three are relocated to foster care. Porsche has security and stability when her father reigns in the streets of New York; but, once she is institutionalized, she realizes that she is responsible for her own safety and security. This causes a functional mental breakdown in Porsche—on her first night in the detention center, she creates what appears to be an imaginary friend, Siri. As her story develops it is later revealed that Siri is possibly an alter ego that she forms to disassociate from her difficult and troublesome situations. Porsche states, “No matter
who else I met, fought, or maneuvered around with, me and Siri had been inseparable since we met in the cold, dark dorm” (32). Siri purposefully demonstrates (and fulfills) Porsche’s immediate need for family and community.

Another facet that aids in Porsche’s journey to self-actualization is her interdependence. Porsche forms a necessary community within her designated environments. She forms cliques with select girls on lockdown, particularly Riot, who is a leader of the Diamond Needles gang. Porsche realizes the importance of familial connections even in lockup. She makes a wise statement that demonstrates her understanding of community: “Getting ganged up was the best thing that happened to me since I was separated from my real family. Don’t get me wrong. Prison is prison, not fun or a fucking picnic. But being connected eased some of my stress” (52). Riot, who is older, mentors Porsche in the detention center and helps her to escape. Porsche follows Riot to her home, a reservation that functions much like Janie’s Eatonville as it is wholesome and nurtures Porsche to a healthy state. NanaAnna, a Native American family friend of Riot’s, becomes the girls’ unofficial guardian. NanaAnna tells them that being connected and responsible for each other is important: “It is the highest level of civilization when you realize that you are connected to others, and you live your life not just for yourself, but for one another” (137, emphasis added). The connections that Porsche make throughout the novel sustain NanaAnna’s theory.

On the Native American Seneca Nation reservation, Porsche finds a vital mother figure in NanaAnna. She teaches Porsche to value her thoughts, to write them all down because “your story may one day become the most valuable thing you have, besides your breath, body, and soul” (151). NanaAnna serves as Porsche’s spiritual and ancestral guide through whom she learns to connect with her roots and the pureness of living a simple life that is not corrupted by
American societal standards of success. NanaAnna assumes a role in Porsche’s life similar to that of Nanny in Janie’s life. NanaAnna greets Porsche as she is coming of age, and she proceeds to guide her. However, NanaAnna shares knowledge with Porsche about her culture, her ancestors, and the relationship of individuals to a community; NanaAnna arms Porsche with vital information and allows her to make her own decisions.

Porsche cherishes the community that she forms with Riot and NanaAnna, but she decides to continue to work toward her goal to reunite with her biological mother and Winter. Riot agrees to help Porsche locate her mother in New York. However, Porsche finds that her mother, without money or a husband, has caved under the pressure. As a result of losing everything, her mother develops a crack addiction. At their initial reunion, Porsche describes the sight of her mother as “a broken, filthy, finished Momma” (194). Porsche tries desperately to save her mother from her addiction and from the street life. Nonetheless, she is unsuccessful in her attempts to save her mother, so she instead focuses on saving herself and learning how to accept love.

Porsche returns to the hoods of Brooklyn, but she maintains some distance between herself and societal influences, like sex. Unlike Winter, Porsche, as a business-minded young woman, does not allow the explicit, cultural influences of sex to drive her decisions. Mr. Sharp, Santiago’s old acquaintance and a sort of adopted guardian for Porsche, advises her that her value decreases when she uses her body as a bartering tool. She states, “I had never spread these pretty dancer’s thighs for anyone. The more I ignored, the more I said no, the more I resisted, the more interested they were. Problem was, I wasn’t interested at all” (309). Porsche’s plan for success is strictly business and goal-oriented. It is Mr. Sharp who teaches Porsche her value and how to incorporate that into her business plan, like the traditional male-narrative for success:
Santiago … you’re gonna make it big in this world because you are a natural negotiator. Since you’re a beautiful young woman, you got the ‘edge’ over any smart man. Never sell your body. The first time you do, your value decreases immediately and keeps on decreasing until you’re worthless. Don’t let these men play with you. Use your mind to think, your talk to negotiate. Your beauty is just bait. Make them pay, but never let ’em touch it. Those are the secrets of life. (319)

Porsche adheres to Mr. Sharp’s advice. From the age of twelve until fourteen, she maintains a non-sexual romance with a young boy, Elisha. Porsche states, “When I was with Elisha for five or six hours only on Fridays was the only time I actually forgot about the hole in my heart” (276). Porsche’s and Elisha’s relationship does not involve sexual intercourse until they both reach their teenage years. Even though the desires are present, Porsche is not familiar with love, familial or otherwise, but she knows business.

At the age of thirteen, she makes an arrangement with Elisha to “contain” their desires for lovemaking. Porsche relays the plan as such, “Elisha and I were both young business people. We were both used to working, negotiating, saving, investing, selling, and purchasing. That same night, on my thirteenth birthday, we tried to ‘manage’ our love” (318). Porsche’s arrangement is that she wants to be Elisha’s wife, yet she also wants to bring something to the table besides a banging body and good sex, which are the only attributes that Winter touts. Her plan is for she and Elisha to “accomplish something” before they experience romantic pleasures (319). Elisha promises to produce a successful movie. Before Porsche makes her vow to Elisha, she recalls the lessons from her father: “Watching Poppa from a distance for my first eight years of my young life taught me that we all have to hustle” (318). Rather than spontaneously act on her desires, Porsche uses her love for Elisha as a catalyst to spur her success—or a reason to hustle even harder.

Porsche accepts the lessons that her family actively and unconsciously teach her. She epitomizes a strong, confidant Black woman who learns early that an immersion into street life
usually ends badly for all involved parties. Nevertheless, she takes those lessons and principles that her father applied to the drug game and manages to make her life successful. Whereas Winter only knows how to use their father’s model of success in the streets, Porsche is able to apply his model to her legal endeavors and to keep her hands clean from illegal street life. She uses Santiaga’s model as a means of survival, not for a thrill of the environment. Subsequently, she actualizes her dream to become a famous dancer. The ironic twist is that Porsche obtains such wealth that she finances her crush-turned-husband Elisha’s dream of filmmaking.

Once again, this narrative flips the traditional male-driven American success model on its head as Porsche, rather than her man, is the initial breadwinner who establishes her future family’s wealth and longevity. Porsche follows the tenets of the traditional American success model: she starts out as a lowly character with the odds stacked against her, yet, through craft and luck, she rises within the ranks of society from a Gutter Girl to a rich woman. Souljah makes plain the success mythology at play in Porsche’s narrative. Porsche narrates, “I made money like a money machine. Everyone said I was so smart, useful, hard-working, well-mannered. I even hit the number 1111, and got my five-thousand dollar investment … People said I was lucky. All I could do was smirk at that. ‘Lucky’” (310).

Unlike Ricky and Winter, Porsche has the ability to adapt to her surroundings without full immersion into the underworld, which enables her to become the heroine of her narrative. She, like her literary foremother Janie Crawford, is able to actualize her dreams through a refusal to be a one-dimensional character that conforms to cultural rules and standards for her lifestyle. She manages to surpass her elder sister in ambition and survival. Porsche does not succumb to the predestined street life; she instead relies on her innate goodness, ambition, luck,
determination, and community to actualize successfully her version of the American success model.

Souljah uses themes of Alger’s model to expose the shared attitudes of the Santiagas and other inhabitants of marginalized communities where drugs, and illegal hustles, are the main means of survival. Winter believes wholeheartedly in her chosen means of success: drug dealers, illegal activities, and the hood rich mentality. A New York Times reporter asks Porsche if she is conscious of the fact that her father deals drugs. Porsche narrates and responds with a telling statement: “I felt like I had been hit so hard I had no breath left. I was paused at first but told myself to toughen. A[nswer]: ‘No my father was a businessman. He wore expensive clothes … Ricky Santiago is respected by everyone’” (91). Porsche believes her father’s actions are justified because of his sincere intentions to provide for his family according to his means—Santiaga sees the drug business as his only means of achieving success in his marginalized space. Furthermore, in The Coldest Winter Ever, a low-level dealer tells Winter that there are other ways to obtain riches rather than just drug-peddling, to which a surprised Winter incredulously responds, “Yeah, like what?” (165) Winter’s response illuminates a big reason for her failure to become the heroine in her narrative. She limits her scope of potential so much that she can only see, plan, and build within the marginalized, drug-infested boroughs of New York.

Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche attempt to navigate their diverse worlds to become successful heroines of their own narratives. Hurston, Petry and Souljah offer more than simple revisions to the American (male) success mythology. As the three authors account for the cultural and setting differences that affect the mythology, they also craft leading Black women characters that are vulnerable and culpable in their own actualization or tragic end. The characters make key revisions of the success mythology to include female agency, romantic
pleasure, and varying cultural definitions of success. If the character hopes for a successful journey of self-actualization, the traditional American success myth has to change when each author applies it to a different cultural setting. Alger’s hero model works for traditional white males; however, the many flaws of the theory show when African American women characters attempt to apply it to their lives and their environments. Although these four African American women characters make some modifications to the model, those who are categorized as tragic fail to incorporate community, which is a very important aspect for African American women.

Hurston, Petry and Souljah depict women characters that encounter numerous challenges that threaten their sanity, livelihood, and success. In each of these novels, the readers witness the importance of community for Black women on quests for personal freedom and self-actualization. The traditional, individualistic myth does not take into account the circumstances that minorities face daily that obviously hinder their ability to simply “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” These novels exemplify that, in marginalized communities, hard work does not necessarily lead to success.
CHAPTER THREE

“LOST OFFA DE HIGHWAY”24: LEGACIES OF SLAVERY AND JIM CROW SEGREGATION IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY, URBAN NOVELS

Portraying women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression.
—Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought (1990)

Works of African American literature diligently reflect their time period of origin. Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Sister Souljah pen novels that place great emphases on the everyday lives of African Americans in rural and urban areas. The novelists cover mundane and catastrophic cultural, political, and social issues. The experiences and life lessons of Janie Mae Crawford in Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Lutie Johnson in Petry’s The Street, Winter Santiaga in Souljah’s The Coldest Winter Ever, and Porsche Santiaga in A Deeper Love Inside: Porsche Santiaga Story, span the course of decades, yet the external factors that contribute to their livelihoods and final outcomes are similar and, in most cases, are closely intertwined. In all four novels, publication dates notwithstanding, there are two significant themes that are ever-clear: the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow-era segregation. The remnants of slavery and Jim Crow often play major external and even internal roles in the lives of Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche.

African American women face peculiar restrictions to their agency as a result of discriminatory regulations and social constructions of race. These women misjudge their

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24 This phrase comes from Nanny’s speech to Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Nanny explains to Janie that she had high hopes after enslavement; however, she is an unwed mother without many skills. Nanny makes a point to provide her daughter, Leafy, with options so that she can take advantage of her freedom. Unfortunately, Leafy loses her way: “Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She expounded what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world” (16).
surroundings and their abilities because their worlds are filled with such limitations and misconceptions about Black identity. In the words of Melissa Harris-Perry, “When [black women] confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (*Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* 29). In regards to their respective eras, Petry and Souljah adapt Janie’s struggles through character adaptations, modernized plots, and settings to show the longstanding effects of slavery and Jim Crow in the lives of modern Black women whether they stand in opposition to, or in correlation with, the misrepresentations of their identities.

The legacies of slavery and Jim Crow have taken many forms. Due to discrimination and disenfranchisement, African Americans experience great obstacles on the path to individual and group success. These legacies work together to complicate the lived experiences of African American women, which Hurston, Petry, and Souljah adeptly depict through portrayals of literary characters; thus, a guiding question for this section is how such legacies cause these women characters to misjudge their surroundings and their self-agency. The linking of slavery and Jim Crow to the current plight of African Americans is not a new phenomenon, as evidenced by premier scholar Michelle Alexander and other scholars. Alexander approaches these connections from a historical, social, and cultural perspective. This chapter applies Alexander’s New Jim Crow theory to African American literary characters in hopes of understanding the very real implications of such legacies in the fictional and real lives of African American women. In order to enter into the conversation, which rages on still among laypersons and scholars alike, as to the present effects of slavery in the lives of African Americans in the twenty-first century, I
provide salient historical realities of slavery and then offer a clarification of Jim Crow as related to this project.

Men, women and children of African descent were held captive in servitude during a period of legalized institutional slavery in the United States, which occurred from roughly 1619 to 1865. The primary aim of slavery was to build and sustain the economy in the newly colonized Americas. Institutional slavery was practiced zealously throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dr. Joy DeGruy argues in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* that “American chattel slavery was very different from most varieties of enslavement that preceded it. It differed in the manner in which a person became a slave; it differed in the treatment of slaves; it differed in the length of servitude; most of all, it differed in the way owners viewed their slaves” (47). Africans, when compared with Native Americans and white indentured servants, were chosen as the most logical race to enslave because they “were relatively powerless” (Alexander 23). Native Americans had numerous tribes with the ability to start raids; white indentured servants were lacking in numbers. Thus, both groups were deemed unfit for the arduous task of slavery (Alexander 23).

Enslaved people of African descent often faced debilitating and humiliating experiences in this new world that greatly affected their psyches, spiritual and physical well-being. The most pressing remnants of slavery that remain present in contemporary society are derived from the auction block and the European gaze on Black flesh: slave mentality and overwhelming stereotypes of hypersexuality and lasciviousness. For instance, on the auction block, women and children were stripped of their clothing and explored like animals. Jennifer Hallman states in “The Slave Experience: Men, Women, and Gender” that:

> Throughout the period of slavery in America, white society believed black women to be innately lustful beings. Because the ideal white woman was pure and, in the
nineteenth century, modest to the degree of prudishness, the perception of the African woman as hyper-sexual made her both the object of white man’s abhorrence and his fantasy. (*Slavery and the Making of America*)

This objectifying gaze upon Black women became standard to the point that it was used as justification for sexual assault, abuse, and new stereotypes that have remained in place. Slavery branded Black women with a scarlet letter that many still carry; they lost their agency on the auction block as they were vulnerable to unwanted physical and sexual assaults because of the assumption that their black bodies “belonged” to white men for any desired purpose.

The auction block served double duty as it created various stereotypes about African American women’s sexuality and a constant state of fear. Enslaved persons lived in constant fear of being sold on the auction block. As a result, DeGruy argues that the auction block caused “post traumatic slave syndrome” (PTSS). DeGruy claims that mothers will downplay a child’s abilities in an attempt to keep him off of the auction block and below the radar of anyone who wishes to cause him harm. PTSS, or slave mentality as it is referred to in this project, is still prevalent among some parents of Black children. Slave mentality, like the auction block, also causes enslaved persons to fear the unknown (like being shipped to a place worse than their current state), which leads to a very strong desire to stay in a central location.

A person who thinks and acts from the perspective of an enslaved person exhibits a trait of the slave mentality. DeGruy claims, “By the time of [James] Madison it was generally accepted among many people in America that blacks were inferior” (51). This notion of inferiority was so widely accepted that many Blacks began to believe that they were inferior to whites, which can be categorized as a trait of the slave mentality. DeGruy states, “Efforts to prove blacks inferior continue to this day. These efforts have been so successful that many white
people believe their superiority to be true and many others, while they don’t believe it, will act like they do. Even more telling, many African Americans act like they believe it as well” (53).

Slave mentality is most evident in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Petry’s *The Street*. Nanny takes extreme measures to assure Janie’s protection, whereas Lutie overcorrects Bub out of fear. As depicted in Souljah’s contemporary novels, *Coldest Winter* and *Deeper Love Inside*, slave mentality has been adapted to a hood mentality, in which African Americans embody the common stereotypes and are stagnant in one central location out of fear of the unknown. Through an analysis of the four novels I continue an exploration of the polarizing remnants of slavery: sexual stereotypes of Black women, and slave/hood mentality.

*Introduction of Jim Crow*

After an enslavement period that lasted for 250 years ended with the Emancipation Proclamation, African American people were not completely freed. According to Ta-Nehisi Coates:

> They were terrorized. In the Deep South, [Jim Crow] a form of a second slavery reigned. In the North, legislatures, mayors, civic associations, banks, and citizens all colluded to pin black people into ghettos, where they were overcrowded, overcharged, and undereducated. (“The Case for Reparations”)

This newly-freed group of people tried to establish a place for themselves in America where they could build, learn, earn, and succeed on similar levels as America’s white population; however, the dominant white society rushed to enact state and regional laws to govern the daily interactions of white and Black people, despite the fact that such laws were unconstitutional.

Coates observes in “The Case for Reparations” that Black people found life to be quite tricky to navigate under Jim Crow laws. African Americans’ simple attempts to live and breathe free in America could potentially affect their physical well-being and livelihoods:
Businesses discriminated against them, awarding them the worst jobs and the worst wages. Police brutalized them in the streets. And the notion that black lives, black bodies, and black wealth were rightful targets remained deeply rooted in the broader society. (Coates)

If one hopes to understand the selected novels of this project, it is crucial to first gain an understanding of the implications of Jim Crow laws, which undoubtedly affected the mentality of Black people on a level akin to institutional enslavement. Jim Crow laws governed daily individual and communal interactions from the manner of greeting to the use of public facilities. During the sovereignty of Jim Crow laws, there were expected rules of behavior, punishable by jail or death. In addition to arrest and other legal penalties, the punishment for disobeying Jim Crow laws was an assortment of acts by vigilantes such as torture, beatings, demolished homes and businesses, and public and private lynchings.

According to Alexander’s text *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*:

> By the turn of the twentieth century, every state in the South had laws on the books that disenfranchised blacks and discriminated against them in virtually every sphere of life, lending sanction to a racial ostracism that extended to schools, churches, housing, jobs, restrooms, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, orphanages, prisons, funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries. (35)

These state and local laws and unofficial customs continued to reinforce the idea that Blacks were inferior to whites and did not belong in the same spaces as whites. The aim was to maintain racial segregation among whites and Blacks, despite their constitutional status as American citizens who held complete unalienable rights. Richard Wormser, author of the PBS-sponsored *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* guide, cites the Americanness of Jim Crow, and how this historical period directly links past and present-day race relations: “In my judgment, the Jim Crow years are the crucible in which modern day race relations have been formed. You cannot understand why we continue to have racial difficulties without understanding this period of our
history” ("Jim Crow"). In short, as slavery evolved into Jim Crow segregation, Jim Crow became a new form of white control. Such discrimination and disenfranchisement did not simply dissipate with the removal of the laws. The four novels depict scenarios in which characters must acknowledge the outright and subliminal effects of Jim Crow-era segregation in their lives.

Modern novels that center on rural and urban settings fully display the effect of Jim Crow segregation (feelings of alienation, self-doubt, and mistrust of society) on the psyche of African Americans. This conditioned mindset is passed on from generation to generation. Thus, the novels show that, as a result of feelings of disenfranchisement, key characters second-guess themselves and their innate abilities. I argue that the disenfranchisement that one inherits from the Jim Crow-era causes the characters to question themselves as they are unsure of their worth and their own adequacy. Jim Crow laws distort normal human interactions; these laws encourage individuals to believe that Blacks are innately bad and whites are inherently good. Jim Crow-era thinking leads one to believe bad is good and good is bad, hence, the self-doubt and the constant misreading of one’s surroundings. I further expound upon this thought with Lutie Johnson and The Street. Lutie proves that the Jim Crow-conditioned mindset can carry on through generations.

One particular manner in which Jim Crow manages to survive time and generations is through its continual evolution into newer laws that promote the same underlying purposes: to maintain racial hierarchy and social order that privileges white people and marginalizes Black people. These laws reinforce the inferiority complex of Blacks. However, as the Civil Rights Movement pushes for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, such outlandish acts are prohibited, or not as widely accepted (Alexander 38). Enter the New Jim Crow. Those in power within society who strongly invest in the maintenance of order and Black decorum (respectability) develop tactics
that are deemed to be constitutional; for example, imprisonment is a primary tactic used to maintain order and racial hierarchy.

Thus, Blacks are seemingly governed by the same laws and regulations as whites, though punishment for identical crimes committed by members of different races varies significantly. According to Alexander, “More African American adults are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began” (180). Simply put, the conditioning of Black minds and bodies continues with the New Jim Crow laws, punishments, and disenfranchisements.

New Jim Crow

Alexander proposes that critics should think of the New Jim Crow as a “criminal justice system—the entire collection of institutions and practices that comprise it—not as an independent system but rather as a gateway into a much larger system of racial stigmatization and permanent marginalization” (12). Alexander conjectures that this:

… system … locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls—walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did at locking people of color into a permanent second-class citizenship. … Once released, former prisoners enter a hidden underworld of legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion. They are members of America’s new undercaste [sic]. (12-13)

In urban areas and neighborhoods, otherwise known as “the hood,” a majority of those people disenfranchised by Jim Crow-segregation and New Jim Crow-era laws are tasked with raising the next generation. Typically, this set of people imparts to their children, explicitly or subliminally, the same underprivileged, racially stigmatized and marginalized mindsets that they internalized as victims of Jim Crow-segregation and New Jim Crow-era laws.

Hurston’s Janie, Petry’s Lutie, and Souljah’s Winter and Porsche must arise from under such layers—with a determination to sink or swim in marginalized American societies comprised
of institutionalized, systematic oppressions. The odds are against these women characters in their quests for self-actualization. Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche exhibit the damaging effects of such legacies in their lives. The residuals of slavery and New Jim Crow-era laws cause the four characters to misjudge their surroundings, to undermine their own abilities, and to doubt their actual placement in mainstream society, which inevitably contributes to the characters’ self-actualization or tragic outcome.

**Legacy of Slavery and Jim Crow in the Novels**

*Janie*

Hurston writes *Their Eyes* in 1937 with the intention to offer an authentic portrayal of Black representation. Hurston, according to Hazel Carby (2000), “wanted to preserve the concept of Negroness, to negotiate and rewrite its cultural meanings, and, finally, to reclaim an aesthetically purified version of blackness” (“The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk” 124). Janie Mae Crawford displays what Hurston considers self-love, exoticism, and self-pride: she is *not* tragically colored (“How It Feels to be Colored Me” 1031). Janie discovers at a young age that she is, in fact, black rather than white; while her reaction is one of utter surprise, this discovery does not cause a “great sorrow damned up in her soul” (“How It Feels to be Colored Me” 1031). Briefly, Janie sees herself as her white companions see her: “Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said: ‘Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!’ Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest” (9). She did not notice any difference between herself and her white playmates.

Carby notes that Hurston had a similar experience: “It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, [*sic*] that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment” (124). Yet, Janie does not exhibit any changes in her behavior,
even after her discovery. Janie’s character is not set to be a tragic figure on the basis of her racial background. In an era of racial discrimination and segregation, Nanny manages to shield Janie from the harsh reality of being “colored.” Hurston creates a carefree Janie after her own image, as the race issue does not plague Janie. But Janie does have to confront her formerly enslaved grandmother’s ideology of class, race, and sexuality.

Of the four women characters, Hurston’s Janie is a unique case as she is the closest descendant of an enslaved person. Nanny’s experiences in enslavement have a direct bearing on Janie’s psyche and apprehensions about her sexuality. Nanny recalls her life during enslavement where neither her mind and body nor her spirit actually belonged to her. Nanny only recalls these times after she sees that Janie’s determination to find a real love of her own rather than accept the arranged marriage that would grant her all of the things Nanny was never guaranteed during enslavement. Janie faces Nanny’s chastisement because she has the audacity to wish for a relationship in which she sometimes does the “wanting” (23). Nanny reminds Janie of her life as an enslaved woman who is forced to give birth to her master’s child; Nanny does not have any agency to choose her own love, or the ability to hold onto her personal dreams.

Nanny, so it appears, stacks all of her hopes and limitations onto Janie’s mother, Leafy, who has the freedom to acquire education. But, in this venture, Leafy also learns that even she does not have complete agency over her sexuality. Leafy is raped by her school teacher, and she conceives Janie. Unfortunately, Leafy is unable to recover from the shame of an unplanned pregnancy and ultimately flees her hometown. Consequently, Janie becomes Nanny’s second chance to get it right:

Freedom found me wid a baby in mah arms, so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world. So whilst Ah was tendin’ you of nights Ah
said Ah’d save de text for you. Ah been waitin’ a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through ain’t too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed. (16)

However, Nanny heaps too much upon her young granddaughter’s shoulders, such as the weight of her personal scars from slavery and the very real fears of being young, Black, beautiful, and desirable. Nanny observes Janie’s first kiss. The kiss frightens Nanny because she knows that Janie’s budding sexuality can be used against her to make her “de mule of the world.” Nanny fears that men will take advantage of Janie while using her own sexual desires as justification, which is in accordance with Patricia Hill Collins’ notion that Black women’s sexuality has been used to justify oppression (Black Feminist Thought 69).

Nanny questions Janie’s intentions, “So you don’t want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another, huh?” (13). She reinforces the idea that African American women should adhere to strict respectability politics or expect to be shunned by mainstream society. Nanny endorses politics that she, as a former slave, cannot own. As if on the auction block, Nanny controls Janie’s body and mind as she entrusts her to Logan Killicks. Nanny, like her former master, actually becomes the aggressor over Janie’s sexuality. Nanny uses Janie’s sexual desires to justify an arranged marriage to a much older man. Nanny believes that she rescues Janie from commonplace oppression and objectification of Black women.

However, Nanny’s dominance over Janie’s sexual agency causes Janie to doubt herself. Janie knows that what Nanny tells her does not align with the feelings of her heart. She questions herself and Nanny’s advice as she tries to reconcile her new expectations of love: “Janie asked inside of herself and out. She was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking” (21). At such a young and influential age, Janie becomes self-conscious about her
desires, rather than comfortable with her budding sexuality. She heeds Nanny’s demand because of her devotion and respect for Nanny, her only relative in close proximity. Yet, love does not come to pollinate Logan’s farm, so she visits Nanny with her pressing issue, “... you told me Ah mus gointer love him, and, and Ah don’t. Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it” (23). But Nanny does not know how, either. Nanny laments that while enslaved she is involuntarily used as a “work-ox and a brood-sow,” then, what does she know about love? (16).

Janie comes to realize that Nanny’s wishes for her were the best that Nanny had to offer at the time; nonetheless, it becomes a conscious act for Janie to define love and relationships for herself—not to allow the stereotypes of her as a lascivious and hypersexual woman to hinder her path. Janie’s love of her final mate, Tea Cake, is an act of defiance: defiance of Nanny’s ideologies, defiance of a system that intends to overpower her, and defiance of antiquated rules and laws that deny her a sense of agency. Janie becomes a woman, a real woman with her own thoughts, feelings, and desires—a woman whom Nanny does not even recognize as a possibility for her granddaughter. Janie’s decision to possess and embrace her sexuality reconciles her history (Nanny’s old-guard code, which was learned through enslavement) with her present (her current era of sexual liberation).

Nanny tells Janie of her vision for her, “But when you got big enough to understand things, Ah wanted you to look upon yo’self. Ah don’t want yo’ feathers always crumpled by folks throwin’ up things in yo’ face” (20). Janie is now mature, and she comes full circle with an actualization of the vision that Nanny has for her, reaching it on her terms and through the fulfillment of her own happiness. From Janie, the reader learns that a key aspect in the success or tragedy of a character lies in the ability to see herself as independent from the residual weight of the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow.
Lutie

While rural Janie is an example of a character that is able to free herself from the overbearing legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, Lutie Johnson of *The Street* is not as successful in the navigation of her urban environment. Lutie starts the novel in search of an apartment where she can raise her son Bub. She states, “... for getting an apartment where she and Bub would be alone was more important than dark hallways” (4). Lutie struggles to see herself apart from the influences of Jim Crow. Lutie experiences some urban woes similar to those that Winter faces. Although a physical prison system is not a major element at the onset of this story, Lutie still inherits a stigma of the New Jim Crow mentality.

Petry sets Lutie’s story in 1940s Harlem, New York, which is a locale that sees a great influx of Southerner migrants. According to KCET Hollywood:

> Beginning in the early 1900s, thousands of blacks sought relief in Harlem from the institutionalized racism and violence below the Mason-Dixon Line. In the 1920s artists, intellectuals and reformers flocked to Harlem seeking an atmosphere that was both socially tolerant and conducive to the creative expression of the black community. (“Harlem in the 1940s”)

While Harlem becomes a sort of sacred refuge for African Americans to develop, create, and enjoy their own creativity and arts, it is not without its own troubles. Logically, African Americans who journeyed to Harlem from the Jim Crow-stricken South are laden with emotional and psychological baggage. Alexander describes this type of baggage as characteristic of the New Jim Crow ideology that is present in twenty-first century for Blacks who did not live during the Jim Crow-era segregation.

Many Southern Blacks who were forced to live under different rules, regulations, and laws experienced a double consciousness, which Du Bois succinctly articulates, stating:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a
world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (“Of Our Spiritual Strivings”)

This double consciousness and inferiority complex causes many individuals to doubt their position in America and even in their own communities. Moreover, this is not a condition that is simply unique to the person who experiences it firsthand; apparently, one can pass along an inferior mentality to future generations—a sort of learned behavior of how one should act and survive in public spaces as well as in the private (home) sector.

Alexander states: “Mass incarceration has been normalized, and all of the racial stereotypes are now embraced (or at least normalized) by people of all colors, from all walks of life, and in every major political party” (181). Lutie’s father, Pop, and her estranged husband, Jim, constantly remind her that their unemployment and lack of (legal) wealth is due to racial relations in America. For instance, Pop turns to selling alcohol late at night to make ends meet, and his story is simply, “‘Can’t get no job. White folks got em all’” (81). Jim puts it even more blatantly when he is denied work, “‘God damn white people anyway. I don’t want favors. All I want is a job. Just a job. Don’t they know if I knew how I’d change the color of my skin?’” (30).

Despite the fact that Pop and Jim are in New York rather than the South, both men display an inherited double-consciousness and a hesitancy in their actions. Lutie’s hesitancy and faulty judgment show as she searches 116th Street for an apartment.

Petry makes it painstakingly clear that the street is dangerous and determined to defile and doom all persons with whom it comes into contact. The narrator describes the wind thusly: “It did everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street. It found all the dirt and dust and grime on the sidewalk and lifted it up so that the dirt got into their noses, making it difficult to breathe; the dust got into their eyes and blinded them; and the grit stung their skins”
The wind in *The Street* personifies the traps of the street: personal stagnation and the woes of the underworld. When Lutie comes across the advertisement for the apartment, there is an instance of foreshadowing, and it is apparent to readers that Lutie will not be able to achieve her goals on this street, in this particular apartment: “It was three rooms. The wind held it still for an instant in front of her and then swooped it away until it was standing at an impossible angle on the rod that suspended it from the building” (3). In turn, the street also embodies all of the entrapments of Jim Crow that are meant to keep Blacks in a position of inferiority and a state of underachievement. Initially, as Lutie walks down 116th Street, the reader can immediately sense that she is perhaps on a problematic street, yet Lutie appears unable to process this completely. Rather than turning away from the street altogether Lutie “[pushes] her coat collar tight around her neck” (26) and struggles against all of the warning signs.

As a single, Black mother in 1940s Harlem, Lutie’s choices for decent housing are fairly slim. Lutie chooses the apartment on 116th Street in a desperate attempt to save her son from the current living arrangement with Pop. She tells herself, “You’ve got a choice a yard wide and ten miles long. You can sit down and twiddle your thumbs while your kid gets a free education from your father’s blowsy girl friend [sic]. Or you can take this apartment” (10). Lutie continues to weigh her options rather than move on down the street to continue her apartment search: “But the apartments — did she want the apartment? *Not in the house where he was super; not in this house where Mrs. Hedges lived. No. … Then she thought of where she lived now*” (emphasis added, 10). According to Lutie, Lil is ubiquitous throughout Pop’s house and her bad habits of

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25 Lutie later finally realizes that 116th Street is not an anomaly; the hopelessness of this street is the same everywhere in Harlem, in which underprivileged Black people are forced into small disenfranchised living spaces. Lutie thinks, “No one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of people … it wasn’t just this one block, this particular street. It was like this all over Harlem wherever the rents were low” (*The Street* 229, 230).
smoking, drinking, and promiscuity are on display for Bub to see (10). Thus, Lutie rationalizes the absence of Lil as worth the risk of moving into the apartment.

The stench of disenfranchisement, hopelessness, legalized discrimination, and marginalization looms so heavily in the air—outside on the streets and even inside her apartment—that Lutie or Bud, or both, are bound to succumb to those same thoughts and feelings. While Lutie cannot accurately identify the feeling, she eventually knows that she has chosen the wrong location for herself and her son; but once in such a space it is quite hard to get out. Lutie convinces herself that since “the price [for the apartment] wouldn’t be too high … and by being careful she and Bub could manage—by being very, very careful” (18). Nonetheless, she fails to assess accurately the exact price of New Jim Crow living for Blacks in urban spaces.

Lutie settles onto 116th Street in the midst of the Jim Crow-segregation enforced marginalization.

Lutie wishes to climb the social and economic ladder of success, yet she measures her success by that of her former white employers, Mr. and Mrs. Chandler. This is unfitting for Lutie because her actual surroundings are not the same as the Chandlers, and she has more factors to take into consideration, such as constant discrimination and the Jim Crow system designed to trap her on 116th Street in Harlem. KCET Hollywood claims that the geography of Harlem occurs by design:

Black Harlem emerged as landlords opened their doors to this new market sector. Considered a ghetto by some, a sanctuary by others, this neighborhood was home to the Harlem Renaissance, incubator of the Jazz and Swing Eras, and witness to two World Wars. Harlem’s history is intricately woven into the experience of African-Americans, who migrated by the thousands to what Harlem Renaissance poet and writer Claude McKay called ‘the Negro Metropolis.’ (“Harlem in the 1940s”)

Some individuals, as previously mentioned, knew Harlem as “a ghetto,” or a marginalized area where they had to fight to keep their dreams alive. Petry engages in the political debate of the
1940s about the place of African Americans in urban spaces. She writes Lutie into an ongoing saga where she, as a Black woman, struggles to find success in America while mainstream society relegates her to a confined urban space with limited room for social or political mobility. In a state of naivety Lutie considers her move with Bub into their new apartment on the daunting 116th Street as a first step to homeownership and social and financial freedom. However, Lutie’s move is eerily akin to Alexander’s summation of slavery: “The systematic enslavement of Africans, and the rearing of their children under bondage …” (24). The haunting wind that aims to discourage, to blind, and to suffocate Lutie is symbolic of a modified system of Jim Crow and slavery that promises to ruin Lutie and her offspring either through the corruption of the underworld or through a defeated spirit.

For Lutie, the measure of success is a spacious home with a big yard for Bub to have carefree playtime. However, in a society with separate but unequal rules for African Americans, Lutie is unlikely to obtain such luxuries. Although she is discriminated against in her employment and in her choice of housing, Lutie once again fails to assess correctly her situation as she moves her son onto the street in hopes of a better life where she can guide and influence his choices, without the impact of her father or Lil. Instead, the nuisances of the streets begin to meddle in Lutie’s rearing of Bub, in the form of the Super’s corruption and the shady residents of her apartment building. Lutie misjudges her surroundings and all of the warning signs as she arrives onto 116th Street. She inaccurately perceives the wind as an overpowering breeze rather than as the stifling air of Jim Crow.

Lutie agrees to singing engagements in a nightclub for extra money; but in her state of oblivion, she unknowingly walks into the underworld of sex, drugs, and crime. Lutie assumes that her new apartment is an indication that she is standing a little straighter in her crooked room;
however, she is still slanted in a crooked place. Before long, Bub is caught in the system as he is placed in a juvenile detention center. At the same time, Lutie attempts to put off the sexual advances of white men in power, such as Old Man Junto, and that of Black men like Boots Smith. She fights, literally, to honor her respectability code as she refuses to have meaningless sex with the men of Harlem.

In a moment that foreshadows the fight she will have with Boots, Lutie tangles with an unscrupulous white man, Mr. Crosse, who advertises for a singer. She is alone in his office and he informs her that the job requires that she pays $125 for training, which Lutie does not have. Mr. Crosse tells her that she can pay in other ways: “You know a good-looking girl like you shouldn’t have to worry about money … In fact, if you and me can get together a coupla nights a week in Harlem, those lessons won’t cost you a cent” (321). Although Lutie appears naïve, she quickly picks up on Mr. Crosse’s proposition. Lutie thinks to herself, “It was a pity he hadn’t lived back in the days of slavery, so he could have raided the slave quarters for a likely wench any hour of the day or night” (322). Later, Boots Smith presents Lutie with Junto’s offer to “be nice” to him in exchange for the necessary $200—money that she believes she desperately needs to save Bub from the juvenile detention center (421). Lutie’s spirit is defeated as she actively resists sexual exploitation and corruption. Belatedly, she realizes the all-encompassing power of the street.

In this moment, the powerful remnants of institutionalized slavery and law-sanctioned Jim Crow-segregation are evident in the characters of The Street. 26 Lutie is angry because her only outlet is a street that, by design, is going to swallow her aspirations and the woman she desires to become. Lutie is painfully aware that she is losing Bub. She is also realizing Boots

26 By the end of The Street it is very clear that the lasting elements of institutional slavery and Jim Crow-era segregation affect all areas of Lutie’s life: her ability to mother her son, to sustain healthy relationships with men, to find suitable employment, and to provide adequate housing.
Smith is not the nice guy she had hoped he would be. Boots is not equivalent to Janie’s Tea Cake. According to Tarshia L. Stanley, “… this institutionalized violence coupled with the dictates of new racism complicates the way in which black men and women view each other, especially with respect to intimate relationships” (*The Encyclopedia of Hip Hop Literature* 28). Lutie discovers that in her era, relationships between Black men and Black women suffer because both genders are combating layers of racism, sexism, classism, and economics.

Boots Smith decides that he has finally had his fill of white men’s entitlement and that he is going to extract his revenge by owning Lutie’s body. Boots states without remorse, “After all, he’s white and this time a white man can have a black man’s leavings” (423). The anger that Boots and Lutie exhibit proves that they are victims of American legacies of disenfranchisement that continue to plague African American communities; however, instead of having the space to work together as a communal unit, they are pitted against one another. Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall offer an explanation of Lutie’s vulnerable predicament with Boots and Old Man Junto: “Black women are also ‘endangered’ from acts of violence perpetrated by Black and white men” (*Gender Talk* 203).

In turn, Lutie expresses her pent-up anger and finally voices her powerlessness: “The sound of her own voice startled her. … It contained the accumulated hate and the accumulated anger from all the years of seeing the things she wanted slip past her without her ever having touched them” (422). Lutie correctly identifies the corruption of Boots and, in doing so, she actually recognizes the street: “he’s like the streets that trap all of us—vicious, dangerous” (425). Boots attempts to rape Lutie, which further draws her rage, and she responds by beating him to death, not for that one offense but for every offense that she has encountered in her young life.

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27 Old Man Junto has demanded that Boots hand Lutie over to him, which is reminiscent of slaveholder’s possession of enslaved Black women for their own pleasures; in most cases, Black men were powerless to protect Black women.
Each blow to Boots is meant for someone or something else in her life (430). The rage consumes Lutie, possibly even driving her mad.

Lutie panics at the thought that she has murdered Boots, and she flees town, abandoning her son. Unfortunately, the street conditions Lutie to believe that Bub would be better off without her since she fails to navigate the pitfalls of her urban spaces. She loses all hope as she thinks, “A kid whose mother was a murderer didn’t stand any chance at all. Everyone he came in contact with would believe that sooner or later he, too, would turn criminal” (432-433). Yet, before her bloody encounter with Boots, Lutie believes that the detention center would ruin Bub’s chance at a fair life: “But he would have a police record, and if he played hookey from school two or three times and broke a window with a ball and got into a fight, he would end up in reform school, anyway” (402). *The Street* closes with Lutie taking a train to Chicago, presumably destined for another street like 116th Street in Harlem. Lutie, unable to see through the urban smokescreens that are established from years of disenfranchisement, loses her gamble with the street.

**Winter**

As Lutie’s story shows, once an individual is caught in the clutches of the street, it requires a deliberate act of defiance to survive. This is evident in Winter Santiaga’s tale. *The Tennessean* (Nashville) describes *The Coldest Winter Ever* as “a ghetto fairy tale with a surprise ending” (“Praise for Sister Souljah”). Arguably, “ghetto fairy tale with a surprise ending” suggests that Winter’s narrative is an anomaly. *The Tennessean* fails to acknowledge how typical Winter’s story is for residents of marginalized urban spaces. Alexander states that this urban epidemic is casually overlooked: “Although a million black men can be found in prisons and jails, public acknowledgement of the role of the criminal justice system in ‘disappearing’ black men is surprisingly rare” (179). Winter’s narrative offers an analytical examination of the ease
with which an individual can fall into the clutches of criminal activity. It also examines the criminal justice system based on an initial marginalization from mainstream society and legal success.

Winter, assuming a stereotype, identifies herself to readers as a “project chick”: “All I knew was the projects. It was where my friends, family, and all my great adventures were. I knew these streets like I knew the curves of my own body. I was like the princess of these alleyways, back staircases, and whatnot” (20). Winter, like most residents, is incognizant of the problematic disenfranchisement that has relegated a large number of Blacks to the margins of society. She aims to live a particular lifestyle of being promiscuous and wealthy with an abundance of street fame, all of which usually receives intragroup praise. Winter is unbothered by the fact that such a lifestyle often ends in either death or imprisonment.

Winter fails to realize that she is a victim of systematic and institutional disenfranchise-ment; essentially, she embraces her surroundings, which appear normal to her. The New Jim Crow and the hip hop era are dominant and subliminal constants in Winter’s life. Throughout *The Coldest Winter Ever*, her every move brings her closer to an inevitable end of incarceration. Money and street reputation are Winter’s main motivations. Winter states:

> I was thinking at the same time that I just wanted to get my hands on some loot. Not for no specific reason except I didn’t like him [Bullet, her boyfriend] keeping me with no more than twenty dollars in my pocket and a few train tokens. I wasn’t asking for a cut of his product or profit, just a few hundred dollars, maybe a thousand in my pocket so I could feel good. (376)

Winter offers this statement matter-of-factly, with very little thought of potential consequences for her illegal activities. She has internalized the lessons on material wealth that she learns from her mother and father.
Winter associates love with money; her father spoils her with lavish material possessions as tokens of his love. For example, from birth until her 17th birthday, Santiaga gives her diamonds, designer clothes, and money:

My father, Ricky Santiaga, was so proud of his new baby girl that he had a limo waiting to pick my moms up from the hospital. The same night I got home my pops gave me a diamond ring set in 24-karat gold. My moms said that my fingers were too small and soft to even hold a ring in place, but he insisted … It was important for me to know I deserved the best, no slum jewelry, cheap shoes, or knock-off designer stuff, only the real thing. (11)

Winter’s mother also approves and participates in the lessons on material wealth. She teaches Winter to be a “bad bitch” who uses men to secure money, status, and material possessions. Winter proves to be an eager student of her mother’s lessons: “Mommy was pretty alright. A definite advantage to having babies at a young age. You get to chill with your moms like she’s your sister or something. Fuck all those old stiff bastards complaining about teenage pregnancy, this and that” (35-36). Consequently, Winter learns the value of money rather than the importance of family or stability. So, it is no surprise that when her family is in shambles, Winter’s only thoughts are of securing a man for sexual pleasure and riches.

Winter is sexually active with multiple partners; she accepts the stereotype of Black women as lascivious. Winter, without a trace of shame, casually tells a 16-year-old girl, “I started fucking when I was twelve. I started late. How about you?” (164). Souljah attempts to enlighten Winter about the dangers that her nonchalant attitude poses for her well-being. In the novel, Winter accompanies Souljah to a speaking engagement for incarcerated women. Winter is unmoved as she listens to Souljah’s lecture on self-love and self-care. Souljah states, “When we hate ourselves we destroy our bodies with alcohol, drugs, casual sex and a bunch of stuff. Then we look at ourselves and we hate ourselves even more” (208-209). Those words that move the other women to tears only stir anger in Winter. She says, “I hated her for making me think about
my mother. I hated the way she thought she could get in everybody’s personal business” (209). Winter is unaware that the lesson is also about her lifestyle; she focuses only on Souljah’s subliminal critique of her mother’s drug use. Winter fails to interrogate herself because she finds no fault in her actions.

To reiterate Harris-Perry’s summation, the reader meets Winter in a crooked room, and throughout the novel, Winter continues to bend or twist to meet the demands of the room as she neglects to recognize her lack of control (Sister Citizen 29). Winter’s crooked room is the ‘hood, the place that she knows like the curves of her body, the place in which she is willing to break all of the rules for a momentary reconnection. She inherits this disposition from her parents who fail to set her on a path of productivity. She is not taught to abstain from premarital sex, as Nanny tells Janie. Instead, Winter’s mom gives her birth control pills (15). She is not taught to work a legal job; rather, her father teaches her to find a man who will take care of her (and she observes the success of his illegal drug empire). Therefore, Winter cannot correct her crooked room because she does not see it as a problem.

In Winter’s crooked room, promiscuity is common, and Winter has no qualms with using sex to achieve monetary riches. She is a connoisseur of men. She is willing to exchange sexual favors with any man as long as he meets her requirements: “Money, car, clothes, jewelry, apartment, masculinity, big dick, clean, white teeth, nice body” (201). While Janie is driven by her search for love, which leads her to Tea Cake as her ultimate man, Winter is only driven by money. Therefore, Winter searches for men with established status and wealth, and she is unwilling to work in the muck alongside him as he acquires his funds. The men that she chooses are unable to help her reach a horizon of self-actualization because she is also unwilling to interrogate herself to find a real purpose. The only man equivalent to Tea Cake in The Coldest
Winter Eve is Midnight, a strong, quiet young man who works for Santiaga. Midnight’s outward characteristics align perfectly with Winter’s requirements; however, he does not possess the same hood mentality as Winter. Although Winter constantly tries to seduce Midnight, he is not interested in her because she is promiscuous, loud, spoiled, and selfish. Instead of changing her qualities, Winter sets out to change Midnight’s mind. Winter continues to choose men, unlike Midnight, who reinforce her tragic agenda.

Although Winter is unable to obtain self-actualization of herself, her narrative allows readers an opportunity to see a modern reiteration of Janie as an urban “hood chick” who now has agency to choose love on her own terms. However, it is crucial to remember that even in this contemporary period, Winter does not have a completely free agency over her mind and body, most pointedly because of Jim Crow-esque laws that remain in place to govern black and brown bodies. In this hip hop era, Winter perhaps lacks more control over her representation and agency than Janie does. Winter is in an era inundated with (mis)representations and categorizations of Black women, more importantly, hood women, which are omnipresent in all forms of popular culture.

Harris-Perry states that “sometimes black women can conquer negative myths, sometimes they are defeated, and sometimes they choose not to fight” (Harris-Perry 32). Winter chooses not to fight the myths; Winter embraces the myths of promiscuity and drug involvement as tactical approaches to her survival. Harris-Perry offers a critical explanation as to why Winter, and many urban girls, fit into the stereotypes rather than stand out:

It may be surprising that some [black women] gyrate half-naked in degrading hip-hop videos that reinforce the image of black women’s lewdness. … To understand why black women’s public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior. It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room. (Harris-Perry 29)
Winter cannot process that she is bent physically and mentally in an urban space created by the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. From her standpoint, she simply does the same things that everyone else in the hood finds normal or acceptable as there is no judgement from the streets. Accordingly, Winter sets her course for the seemingly inevitable mass incarceration that is a prominent solution for urban black women and men whether they attempt to stand upright or remain unconsciously crooked in a slanted room.

Winter does not possess a vision of herself outside of the crooked room because she fully accepts and appreciates her position as a project chick. Harris-Perry offers a defense that Winter merely adapts to her crooked room because this is the norm for her, and more importantly, it is the lifestyle that her mother has shown and taught her to enjoy (29). Alexander, who is able to identify the problems that Winter faces, posits that individuals in Winter’s position are victims whether they realize it or accept it: “I understood the problems plaguing poor communities of color, including problems associated with crime and rising incarceration rates to be a function of poverty and a lack of access to quality education—the continuing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow” (Alexander 3). Winter believes that she can recognize the traps, yet she sees the traditional model of success (hard work, education, degrees, professional work) as a trap—not her hood lifestyle.

Like her father, Winter has an inverted sense of success. Her father knows that the streets are the only places where he can gain a degree of success that resembles mainstream American principles—an inverted American success model. Winter believes that mainstream American success is pointless. In reference to her social worker’s questions about her education and future plans for success, Winter observes:
[the social worker] was a walking, talking example of what education amounted to. What was I supposed to do? Struggle to be like her? Pay some big school, big, big money so I could get a little job in some little place making an iddy biddy bit of cash. What do I get? To hang a stupid ass degree up in my little office where I don’t make enough dough to get a regular manicure, pedicure, or perm. I should be interviewing her, asking her what’s her problem. (180)

Winter does not attribute her lack of interest in education, her fear of poverty, and her attraction to hood wealth as problematic residuals of slavery and discriminatory laws. Once again, her mistrust of people and information causes her to misjudge her surroundings, as well as her inherent ability to effect some sort of positive change in her life. Winter gives in to the stereotypes for young African American women of her era as hypersexual, selfish gold-diggers.

In Winter’s case, the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow intertwine as the hood life engrosses her and she finds herself with little drive to escape the familiar, and eventually that perspective lands her in a correctional facility for women. Even after Winter witnesses the imprisonment of her father, the drug-devastation of her mother, and the separation of her sisters, she refuses to reassess her environment, or to choose a different lifestyle than that of her parents. Unlike her literary foremother, Janie, Winter is unwilling to examine and overcome the devastating remnants of slavery and Jim Crow in her young life.

Porsche

Souljah places Porsche in an entirely different setting than the 1999 prequel The Coldest Winter. Winter’s narrative focuses on the cultural practices of African Americans in urban spaces and the (lack of) community, whereas Porsche Santiago’s narrative is a critique of contemporary cultural (American, African American, Native American) attitudes and practices, as well as of the criminal justice system. Still, Deeper Love Inside is a novel similar to Coldest Winter as it also covers the discrimination and disenfranchisement of African Americans who are disadvantaged in this society as they strive to build and maintain independence and to obtain a
version of the American Dream, albeit an inverted one. However, Porsche’s tale also is a testament to the importance of community uplift as a tactical approach to counter the stacked deck that African Americans face.

Porsche’s strong distrust for the legal system occurs after two traumatic moments in her young life: first, the police dismantle her father’s illegal drug-funded empire, and second, social workers take Porsche and her two younger sisters from their Long Island home and place each child into separate foster homes. Porsche states without any doubt: “It’s the police who are the criminals, kidnappers, and thieves. The authorities know the deal, they all in it together” (6). After an altercation with her social worker, young Porsche becomes a statistic and an inmate of the juvenile detention center until she reaches 11 years old and takes part in an elaborate escape with her friend Riot.

Souljah craftily intertwines the legacy of slavery and the legacy of Jim Crow into Porsche’s narrative; this novel demonstrates that as much as the American atmosphere changes to be more inclusive, the remnants of both slavery and Jim Crow merely adapt and evolve, but are ever-present. Former Black Panther Assata Shakur’s epiphany about America’s legalized chattel slavery rings true as Porsche’s story develops: “That explained why jails and prisons all over the country filled to the brim with Black and Third World people, why so many Black people can’t find a job on the streets and are forced to survive the best way they know how. … [Prisons] are a way of legally perpetuating slavery” (*Assata Shakur: A Biography* 64). Porsche, like her father and her sister, Winter, falls victim to a system that perpetuates a remodeled version of slavery. Even at such a young age, she describes being thrown into isolation: “… with my wrists locked and my ankles chained, headed to isolation, I don’t react” (5). Porsche reaches her preteen years “trapped” in the system that initially destroys her family unit.
Porsche demonstrates a keen understanding of the juvenile justice system to which she now belongs. Repeatedly, from the very beginning of *Deeper Love Inside*, Porsche refers to herself as “trapped” while in lockup (6, 10). She is aware of her surroundings and the constant caged feeling that Lutie also shares. Yet, she also has Riot to help her identify the feeling and the anger that often come with being caged in an unjust system; she rarely misrecognizes her situations while with Riot. At one point, Porsche interprets the tone and demeanor of the guard to mean that she is on her own: “She wanted me to feel certain that she and anybody dressed in the same uniform as her didn’t give a fuck about me. I felt it. I knew it. I would remember it, always” (24). Riot further enlightens Porsche about the mindset that is prevalent inside of lockup, one that epitomizes Alexander’s New Jim Crow. Riot tells Porsche that another reason they teamed up is because Riot is white, which Porsche denies because she does not want to think in terms of race:

> ‘You should,’ Riot said swiftly and calmly. ‘That’s how the authorities think … Even though I was an inmate same as you; even though I murdered a man and you only assaulted a woman, they still saw me as being better than you and every other girl that was your same color or even close to it. I hate them for that. I used it to choke ‘em though. And me and you plus all the Diamond Needles can keep using that race bullshit against them until they cough up everything they owe us.’

(121, original emphasis)

Interestingly, Riot tells Porsche that they must think like the oppressor in order to survive the oppressor’s traps. Riot pushes Porsche to view their actions to escape lockup as a form of reparation. She also teaches Porsche to think twice as hard and as fast as those who wish her harm. Riot and Porsche believe that the police are responsible for the disarray of their worlds. They are both aware of the judicial system as a common enemy that has committed an offense against them.
Porsche’s introduction to the juvenile facility during intake closely resembles the experiences of enslaved Black bodies on auction blocks. Porsche arrives at the facility late at night, and she is forced to wait naked on a cold metal table for the jail doctor. She recalls the invasive body search and subsequent exploration by the doctor that is shameful and sexual at the same time:

The male doctor’s hands were pink in his palms and were hairy on the flip side. … His fingertips were cold. His metal thing that he placed on my flat eight-year-old chest was cold. His pointy thing he pushed in my ear holes was cold. He shoved a stick down my throat and pinned down my tongue. … (22, emphasis added)

Souljah constructs a scene in a manner that is reminiscent of many slave narrative accounts of the powerlessness of enslaved persons on the auction block. For instance, Henry Bibb, a formerly enslaved man who was sold by his master, claims the auction block was a place of close interrogation by prospective buyers of the enslaved man’s flesh, limbs, and mental capacity:

We had there to pass through an examination or inspection by a city officer, whose business it was to inspect slave property that was brought to that Market for sale. He examined our backs to see if we had been much scarred by the lash. He examined our limbs to see whether we were inferior. (“Slave Auctions”)

Bibb continues on to detail the invasive searches that prospective buyers did to each enslaved person: “As it is hard to tell the ages of slaves, they look in their mouths at their teeth and prick up the skin on the back of their hands …” (“Slave Auctions”). Porsche’s examination, much like Bibb’s account, is to ensure the jailers that she is healthy and fit to enter the cell blocks with the other inmates.

Slavery and Jim Crow, again, intertwine as she is caged in a cell block with assigned times to eat, to work, to play, and to study; she no longer has any presumed agency over her own body. Porsche continues to detail her first examination: “‘Lay down,’ the doctor ordered again. When he said, ‘done,’ he dragged his hand down my body and touched lightly the front of my
panties, like light enough to pretend he didn’t do it. I peed. Even when I squeezed my legs together my warm piss wouldn’t stop gushing out” (22). Porsche does not have an option in how the doctor touches her body, which would be the same scenario if she was an enslaved girl or woman.

According to Hallman, Porsche’s experience serves as a reincarnation of a familiar scene for vulnerable Black men and women in captivity:

The white man’s claim to the slave body, male as well as female, was inherent in the concept of the slave trade and was tangibly realized perhaps nowhere more than on the auction block, where captive Africans were stripped of their clothing, oiled down, and poked and prodded by potential buyers. The erotic undertones of such scenes were particularly pronounced in the case of black women. (*Slavery and the Making of America*)

Porsche is most vulnerable as a young girl all alone in this system. Although she is scared, Porsche is smart enough to know that the way in which the doctor conducts his exam of her body is wrong. Porsche exhibits this understanding with a physical reaction to his violation of her body. But she soon learns that submission to rules and practices, fair or otherwise, is the expected norm in her new living quarters. Like the enslaved ancestors, her agency is stifled by the rules and laws that are beyond her control.

Essentially, Porsche manages to find methods to cope with the fear and isolation of her enslaved Jim Crow existence. She uses her keen dancing skills to train herself to withstand the pressures of being caged. In addition to her dancing, as Porsche struggles to understand her new surrounding and rules, she develops an imaginary friend, Siri, to help her cope. Porsche’s initial survival kit includes her love of music, dance and Siri. Here, through Siri’s character, Souljah adds another layer to Porsche’s story, which suggests that the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow can possibly affect one’s mental state (creating issues that go largely undiagnosed and untreated in the Black community).
In a matter of weeks, Porsche experiences multiple frightening scenes: big police officers, heavily armed with guns, barge into her once-safe residence and take (or, as a child would experience it, kidnap) her father and mother, forcing her to step into a mothering role for her younger sisters to hide and protect them from the officers and the uncertainty. This action forces her to make the adult decision to sedate her sisters so that they will not be afraid and make any noises to give away their hiding spot. Once the social workers discover them, Porsche again experiences dramatic trauma as she has no idea where either she or her sisters are going as they are forcefully separated. Hence, Siri, as a form of disassociation that is produced by this trauma. Siri appears as Porsche stands in isolation, lost on the cold jailhouse floor:

‘Follow me,’ she said. I did. She stopped at an open bed so suddenly that I bumped into her back. She giggled. ‘I saw you first,’ she said. ‘So let’s you and me be friends before the rest of these monsters wake up. Don’t be afraid. You’ll never like it, being here, but you will get used to it.’ (25)

Porsche allows her mind to help her escape the entrapment that she feels in the juvenile detention center. Siri becomes her friend, her voice of guidance, and her protector—all of the necessities that she has lost in the absence of her family. Siri may be a figment of Porsche’s imagination, yet she serves an explicit purpose for Porsche’s survival.

Although Porsche is quite young, she appears able to master the very thing that Lutie and Winter fail at: the ability to cope with and navigate through the fog of Jim Crow traps. However, the reader must wonder if the remnants of slavery and Jim Crow that manifest in Porsche’s life are somewhat responsible for a growing madness that sits just below Porsche’s consciousness. Because Porsche has experienced longstanding mental, physical and emotional trauma during her early developmental years, she appears forever-bonded with Siri, her disassociation identity. Upon their initial meeting in the juvenile facility, Riot hints that Porsche may not be mentally well. Riot asks Porsche to join her clique, at which point Porsche tells her that she has to accept
Siri into the group, too: “‘Siri?’ Riot repeated. ‘I don’t know her. Point her out.’ ‘She’s right here,’ [Porsche] pointed Siri out, seated beside [her]. Riot’s eyes dashed one quick time like she didn’t see Siri. (20). Later Porsche’s mother and boyfriend, Elisha, also suspect that Porsche may be on the brink of a full mental break. Neither Riot, Mrs. Santiaga, nor Elisha seek any medical help for Porsche’s condition; they allow her to cope with her chaos in her own way.

Porsche faces some permanent scars from her encounter with the very real remnants of slavery and Jim Crow in the U.S. Nevertheless, she survives because she forges a community inside and outside of the cage, and she gives a name and face to those whom she feels are responsible for her enslavement. As an adult, she later learns that through her father’s street connections, she was protected beyond her knowledge (360). Porsche’s story serves as a reminder, just like Janie’s, that one cannot simply defeat the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow alone; Porsche and Janie find that they are stronger with a clique, or community, even if it’s just one special person to talk to. Porsche manages to bring her life full circle as she turns her story of enslavement into a love story as she employs her coping mechanisms to become self-actualized in the face of blatant oppressions and marginalization. Porsche forms a necessary community, which includes Siri, to help her pull in the horizon. Despite her dismal start, Porsche closes her narrative as a wealthy, married mother.

**Making the Connection**

A key feature in each of these novels is that sexuality is categorized as part of the downfall of the women characters: Janie craves sexual expression; Lutie takes great pains to maintain her sexual respectability; Winter embraces the stereotype of a hypersexualized “hot mama”; and Porsche strives to maintain agency over her body. As Collins’ quote in the epigraph states, in the U.S. a Black woman’s sexual desires are often used as a means to justify and further
the oppression that she experiences in this society (69). Stereotypes of women as hypersexual and sexually deviant have a direct link to slavery; these myths were often cited as a justification for enslavement and forced breeding of Black women.

Harris-Perry claims that, “The myth of black women as lascivious, seductive, and insatiable was a way of reconciling the forced public exposure and commoditization of black women’s bodies with the Victorian ideals of women’s modesty and fragility” (55). Nanny’s narrative vouches for Harris-Perry’s claims as it reveals that she knows the stereotypes all too well. Nanny is cognizant of the dangers that such notions could bring for an unprotected Black woman in America. Thus, while it may appear as if she attempts to force Janie to adopt antiquated Victorian principles, one can also conjecture that Nanny actively resists the dominant oppression of Black women through an insistence that her granddaughter marries a man with property and a good standing in society.

Nanny’s experiences in enslavement taught her that Black women’s sexuality sparks fear and is fearsome as a source of pain and unwanted attention. Nanny’s initial reaction to Janie’s first kiss has the potential to teach Janie the same lessons about her sexuality. In actuality, it is only after Janie liberates herself from Nanny’s restrictive dream of her life that she can embrace her sexuality and seek out a life of her own making, which includes uninhibited, unashamed sexual and romantic expressions with Tea Cake. Of course, Janie’s lifestyle of choice is not free of sexism, as she has to navigate such with Logan, Jody and Tea Cake, but Janie is determined to be a complete woman who navigates sexual oppression to balance respectability politics with her vision of sexual freedom.

Lutie belatedly learns the very thing that Janie already knows: Victorian ideals of respectability and American success are not equally accessible to African American women in
the U.S. Lutie starts to recognize the debilitation that occurs once she spends some time on the street. Lutie becomes an objectified character whom all the men she comes into contact with want sexual engagements. Even before she moves to 116th Street, Lutie has to endure the stereotypes that whites who are invested in the racial hierarchy and the remnants of slavery believe. Mrs. Chandler’s mother and friends reveal that they secretly fear that Lutie desires Mr. Chandler because they believe Black women to be extremely lustful. The white women participate in Lutie’s oppression with statements that emphasize her beauty and supposed sexual wantonness, “‘Sure she’s a wonderful cook. But I wouldn’t have any good-looking colored wenches in my house. Not with John. You know they’re always making passes at men. Especially white men’” (40-41). With such remarks, Mrs. Chandler’s women friends and mother categorize Lutie as a great mammy with jezebel tendencies—attributes that they believe she possesses simply because she is an African American woman.

From this standpoint, Lutie’s potential to be both a mammy and a jezebel justifies her position on the totem pole as maid, caretaker, and servant to the Chandlers, as well her inferior post within dominant society. In essence, because of the lingering stereotypical notions of slavery and racial inferiority from Jim Crow, it is widely acceptable for mainstream society to believe that Lutie is supposed to be stuck on an overcrowded street in Harlem. Lutie makes an attempt to use her blue collar work ethics rather than her body to rise out of the box of poverty; however, this decision causes her to fight physically for her own survival, which leads her to choose herself over her son.

Winter, too, gets caught in this system of oppression; yet, she does not have the correct tools with which to fight back. In comparison to Janie and Lutie, Winter does not struggle against the oppression. Winter approaches the streets from a position of “street royalty” because
of her father’s standing as a drug kingpin. She actually enjoys the envious attention. Winter is almost oblivious to the threats of the streets because it is a complete rush for her to be around the fast cars, drugs, rich men, and quick money. Winter repeats Lutie’s mistake when she fails to understand that the streets seek to trap, suffocate, and discourage its residents. As Collins states, dominant society can readily use Winter’s promiscuity as a way to justify her stagnation and her ultimate tragic end. Whereas Janie grows as an individual in *Their Eyes* as she attempts to reconcile the old-guarded Victorian ways of respectability with contemporary ideas of sexual liberation, and Lutie attempts to merge her Victorian principles with her current status as a single mother in a racist, sexist, and classist society, Winter is completely unaware of respectability politics and prefers her faux sexual liberation because her clique believes sexual promiscuity guarantees glamorous lifestyles (37-39).

However, this stagnation does not mean that Winter is without merit in the literary canon, alongside Janie and Lutie. Souljah skillfully creates Winter’s character to show the pitfalls of whole communities’ acceptance of the treacherous legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. The community that is supposed to teach, train and uplift each other fails Winter. Janie has her community even if all of the ideas and principles do not align with her own desires; she has a point of departure upon which to build. Lutie has a point of departure upon which to build, as well.

Souljah craftily uses Winter and Porsche as contrasting characters to show that two people with the same background and influence can allow life conditions to swallow or rebirth them. Yet, neither Winter nor Porsche can rise alone from the longstanding residuals of these legacies; community influence and activism are highly important to character development. At this point, a greater contributor to disenfranchisement is the generational mentality that passes
down from grandparents to parents on to child. Porsche experiences the luxurious lifestyle of the rich and carefree, as well as the neglectful life of a child within the confines of a detention center.\textsuperscript{28} Porsche has the humiliation of being dehumanized as one of many children in the center; no one takes any particular note of her uniqueness. The reader sees the effects of a child without proper guidance, nurture, and care during the early stages of Porsche’s life in confinement. Porsche learns early how to adapt to the disenfranchisement that she encounters.

However, Porsche has a different outcome because she is fortunate enough to meet Riot and NanaAnna; these two characters become her support system and necessary community. She gains life lessons from Riot and NanaAnna that prepare her for a life on her own terms. NanaAnna shares her Native American culture with Porsche, which, essentially, provides Porsche with a sense of belonging and roots in America; therefore, she is much stronger and better equipped to handle the manipulations of racism, disenfranchisement, and the disadvantageous streets than Winter.

Interestingly, Porsche owns her sexuality in a way that is most similar to Nanny’s wish for Janie. In the age of hip hop and faux sexual liberation, Porsche is able not only to own and acknowledge her sexual desires, but to couple these with respectability politics. Porsche maintains her virginity until marriage is certain; she successfully combats the contemporary scripts of young Black women as lascivious jezebels and hot mommas. Porsche, contrary to her sister, Winter, does not speak of sex as a means to acquire material wealth; she speaks in terms of complete love, devotion, and purpose to Elisha.

I posit that through literary character progressions, such as modern plots, settings, and ideologies, Petry and Souljah encounter Janie Crawford on the horizon where Hurston leaves

\textsuperscript{28} Through Porsche’s experiences, the reader gets a glimpse of the type of treatment Bub might experience during juvenile lockup.
her. The authors reassess Janie’s condition as a battered, but not broken, Black woman. Petry and Souljah decide that Janie can be Lutie, and that Janie can be Winter, and that she also can be Porsche. The two latter authors craft women protagonists that reiterate Janie’s quest for self-actualization, which aids in the relevance and freshness of Janie’s story. With these character approaches, Janie is once again remembered and updated.

After the abolition of slavery, Blacks were hopeful that their time for freedom had finally come. Many former enslaved persons, like Nanny, attempt to find their way in the U.S., to make a place for themselves and their families. However, the establishment of Jim Crow soon thereafter quickly throws many off course, and they find that they are “lost offa de highway of freedom.” Survival in the age of Jim Crow-freedom proves hard and wearisome. But all the goals that slavery hinders Nanny from achieving, Janie is given an opportunity to complete; and for all of the freedom that Janie is prohibited from, Lutie and Winter are able to partake. Porsche, as she survives the residuals of slavery and Jim Crow, stands as the ultimate culmination of all these characters with war wounds and private scars, yet she has the freedom, wealth, individuality, and communal support to bear witness to the possibilities that lie ahead for future characters written in the same vein as Janie Mae Crawford.
CHAPTER FOUR

“YOU GOT TUH GO THERE TUH KNOW THERE”: THE IMPORTANCE OF ANCESTRAL VOICES AND COMMUNITY FOR BLACK WOMEN LITERARY CHARACTERS’ SELF-ACTUALIZATION

‘But what are those people to do? Those people who, as you say, can’t go back that far in time? Those who cannot re-create enough of their pasts to discover their cultural legacies?’ … ‘Well I think that they must imagine who they are and where they come from.’

Elders have traditionally played an important role within African and African American communities. Elders preserve cultural memory and help younger generations navigate the world. However, sometimes the younger generation becomes distant from traditional beliefs and elders must remind them of the importance of tradition and cultural roots.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ann Petry’s *The Street*, and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* and *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiaga Story* are novels that operate as quest fiction. In order to embark on a quest, regardless of the ultimate goal, each character must determine who he or she is before the goal or prize materializes. Winter, Lutie, and Porsche have individual quest(s), but as a reiteration of Janie manifests in each of the four focal women characters’ narratives in urban and rural settings, the ultimate quest remains the same: a journey to discover love and self-actualization. However, in order to achieve their ultimate quests, the characters must interrogate their backgrounds, or essentially ask, “Who am I?” An ancestral presence helps the characters reconnect with their cultural backgrounds so they can know who they are.
I assert that a successful quest for self-actualization is not possible without the guidance of a critical ancestral presence. An ancestral guide functions as a necessary community force to support, nourish, and advise the character to a successful self-actualization. The claims in the epigraphs by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Venetria Patton form a central thought that advances my assertion: In a country where the residual effects of distinct American legacies, such as slavery and Jim Crow, often eclipse the characters’ quests, Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche require an ancestral guide to help locate them as part of a larger African American cultural legacy in which community is the cornerstone. With the aid of an ancestral guide, the character is able to interrogate who she is in hopes of actualizing an ideal self.

Patton, author of *The Grasp That Reaches beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women’s Texts*, claims that “[a]ncestors are seen as sources of ancient wisdom, which forms the backbone of the community, as ‘[t]he ancestor’s life crystallizes the teachings of the family, of the ethnic group and the culture’” (9). Thus, it is understood that ancestors pass on the wisdom and knowledge of traditions, cultures and purpose; therefore, as Morrison alludes, an ancestor can be an elder person of the community because, presumably, this person possesses the communal knowledge that has been shared and spread by an ancestor who may or may not be physically present in the community. Morrison explains that “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (2289). Ancestral guides have the specific role to ensure the preservation and communal transfer of cultural knowledge from

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29 “Ancestral presence” is an adaption of Toni Morrison’s “presence of an ancestor.” In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984), Morrison states, “... it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor. Which is to say a grandfather as in Bambara or Henry Dumas. There is always an elder there” (2289).

30 My position is that anyone, regardless of age, can be an elder or a conduit of guidance; this is revealed particularly in Porsche’s narrative.
person to person and generation to generation; therefore, even the authors are often chosen as adopted vessels by which the message reaches the masses.

The ancestral presence is most noticeable in the work of authors who understand the interconnectedness of their role as the vessel (or messenger) of the narrations (or characters) to the community for which they speak. These authors write with the assumption that they are guided by an ancestral spirit. Pointedly, as Morrison states, “these writers are one of them … [their] voice is not the separate, isolated ivory tower voice of a very different kind of person but an implied ‘we’ in a narration” (2289). Hurston and Souljah acknowledge a grander power that has called for these stories to be told, which goes beyond their personal desires to tell such narratives. John F. Callahan notes that “… Hurston testifies to the presence of a call from outside as well as from within. ‘Anyway,’ she declares, ‘the force from somewhere in Space which commands you to write in the first place, gives you no choice. You take up the pen when you are told, and write what is commanded’” (88).

Souljah elaborates on her call to be a messenger to and for African American communities with her novels *Coldest Winter* and *Deeper Love Inside*. She states that the purpose of *Coldest Winter* is a wake-up call for the communities “… in our communities and in our hoods, we had gotten so caught up with jewelry and cars and our material possessions that we all had more stuff but we had less love. I thought by telling the story … we would discover that the love of material was not enough to carry a family through the difficult times” (Bitchie). Souljah’s texts stress the importance of the characters’ abilities to recall the cultural legacy and to remember the ancestral wisdom as they determine who African Americans are aside from the material possessions. However, to extend Patton’s point, “sometimes the younger generation
becomes distant from traditional belief” (1) and from the elders that it becomes difficult to recognize, hear, and accept the ancestral wisdom as it is presented.

Since Janie is raised by her grandmother, she has not become too distant from the traditions; she is capable of recognizing, hearing, and learning from her ancestral guide. Janie Crawford’s narrative demonstrates an effective use of the ancestral voice as a guide to actualize her personal desires for sexual expression and romantic love. Since Hurston’s Janie is the archetypal Black woman character who achieves self-actualization, her character is the measure for the other three women characters. Janie’s narrative is one that can be read as ongoing—transcending and adapting to time and place. Ideally, the first novel starts with a strong connection to a person of wisdom or ancestral guide; as the quest story picks up again nearly two decades later, that ancestral voice is fainter and is clearly not as present but is a recalled memory. Then another half-century later, the quest is quite familiar, but the ancestral voice is almost nonexistent until halfway through the novel when it appears at the character’s highest level of conflict, yet the character is unable to recognize the guide or the connection.

The last text overlaps with this time period and continues the quest for another decade. This last novel, Deeper Love Inside, is significant because while there are elements of a realistic portrait of urban life, there are also a few fantasy aspects as the character acts out more improbable scenarios: escapes from the juvenile detention center in a Port-A-Potty, earns millions of dollars as a teenager, and becomes an internationally famous dancer before the age of 18. However, this novel is exemplary in the possibilities that exist when one relearns the ancestral voice and nurtures community bonds. Essentially, Souljah’s Porsche Santiaga brings Janie Mae Crawford’s quest full circle into modernity without losing her unique individuality, communal interdependence, and desire for personal fulfillment.
Janie, as the epic Black woman character is able to navigate her current world with the wisdom and guidance of her ancestral guide. Janie submits to Nanny’s guidance even though Nanny’s chosen course does not align with her personal desires. Nanny takes control of Janie’s agency and body presumably to place Janie on a path that will offer her protection and financial security. Hurston’s Janie and Nanny battle it out as Nanny appears to win with Janie’s premature marriage to a much older Logan Killicks. Nanny realizes that Janie is sexually curious and, out of fear of the consequences, makes an impromptu decision that the safest way for Janie to explore her sexuality is as a married woman. Nanny is indifferent to her granddaughter’s concerns due to her fear of Janie’s budding sexuality and an intense desire to offer her protection.

Edwidge Danticat proclaims that Hurston crafts Their Eyes with a “raw anguish evoked by the conflicting paths laid out for Janie Crawford as she attempts to survive her grandmother’s restricted vision of a black woman’s life and realize her own self-conceived liberation” (Foreword xv). Many critics judge Nanny harshly for her dominance over a young and impressionable Janie. However, Nanny is a victim, too; she raises Janie as best as she, a woman broken from years of enslavement and disappointment, possibly can. Nanny wants for Janie all that she did not have, so she forces her to accept a life that she believes is better than the vulnerability of being an unprotected, single, Black woman.

Janie obeys Nanny and marries Logan in hopes that she will receive love and passion within the marriage. Janie seeks guidance from Nanny as she asks for an estimated time of when love would reach her heart for Logan. Nanny can only assure Janie of Logan’s security; however, that is not enough for Janie. Janie almost pleads with Nanny for direction on how to secure romantic love: “Cause you told me Ah mus gointer love him, and, and, Ah don’t. Maybe
if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it” (23). Nanny has experienced that particular horizon of love for herself, so she rebukes Janie for asking, for wanting something that is so uncertain for a young Black girl whom the world has already destined for a post as “de mule” (14). Thus, Nanny attempts to remind Janie of the community that she is to walk amongst, or rather, to impress. In so doing, Nanny actually solidifies the generational gap between herself and Janie. Nanny cannot understand a hierarchy of love over security:

If you don’t want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo’ parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and … Lawd have mussy! Dat’s de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat’s just whut’s got us uh pullin’ and uh haulin’ and sweatin’ and doin’ from can’t see in de mornin’ till can’t see at night. (23)

Nanny tries to assuage Janie’s doubts, “Taint no use in you cryin’, Janie. Grandma done been long uh few roads herself. But folks is meant to cry ‘bout somethin’ or other. Better leave things de way dey is. Youse young yet. No tellin’ what mout happen befo’ you die. Wait awhile, baby. Yo’ mind will change” (24). Nanny’s speech sounds like one that she has rehearsed to herself many times before.

While Nanny accepts her plight, Janie is unable to be content with anything less than the desires of her heart. Nanny assures her only granddaughter that social status and financial security are more important than selfish desires for love and sexual fulfillment. Janie, however, knows that she has not yet become her own complete woman: “But when the pollen again glided the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn’t know exactly” (25). Janie defies the odds to overcome an aging, growth-stunting patriarchal union with Logan.

Even though Janie runs away from Logan, the power of Nanny’s guidance and words still looms strong. Before her death Nanny warns Janie of men who only wish to use her as a “spit
cup” (20). In spite of Janie’s existing marriage, it appears as if Nanny’s words serve as an explanation for Janie’s hesitation when flashy Joe Starks comes along to sweep her off to incorporate Eatonville. Though Joe does not give her the long-sought after feeling that she had under the pear tree, he does promise her excitement. Nevertheless, the ghost of Nanny lingers with Janie, “[Joe] spoke for change and chance. Still she hung back. The memory of Nanny was still powerful and strong” (29). Janie remembers Nanny, but she chooses to act as Lutie does with Mrs. Pizzini’s advice; Janie decides to make a life on her own terms with Joe. Life with Joe is good for a bit, but it does not last long as Joe does not measure up to the “sun-up and pollen and blooming trees” (29). Joe is unable to curb Janie’s independent streak. Although Nanny tries to guide Janie towards protection and family, Janie learns that a simple marriage alone is not enough for all that she desires.

Nanny explains that her reasoning for pushing Janie into marriage is because she is an orphan and cannot make it in this world alone: “You ain’t got no papa, you might jus’ as well say no mama, for de good she do yuh. You ain’t got nobody but me. And mah head is ole and tilted towards de grave. Neither can you stand alone by yo’self” (15). Now, even though Nanny thought marriage was the answer, she did not consider the sisterhood that Janie would find in other women. Fortunately, Janie forges a community and sisterhood with Pheoby Watson in Eatonville; both women are in need of this bond. As her marriage to Joe fails, Janie commiserates with Pheoby. Janie trusts Pheoby with her intimate thoughts: “Pheoby, we been kissin’-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah’m talking to you from dat standpoint” (7). When Janie follows her heart, Pheoby reassures her that the town only talks about her because they are too afraid to do the same. Without Nanny’s physical
presence, Janie needs Pheoby to help her recall, to give her a reason to speak the name of Tea Cake, the true love that she finally finds and tragically loses.

Thus, Pheoby also contributes to Janie’s success. After her experience with Tea Cake, which brings her back from the horizon, Janie is wiser and transcends into an elder role over Pheoby. According to Hubbard, “Having returned from the horizon, Janie Crawford represents the mature voice of experience and wisdom as she retrospectively tells her story to one who is, from an experiential point of view, a novice” (“Recontextualizing the Sermon” 102). Since Janie does not have any descendants, Pheoby is also like her offspring. She passes her story on to Pheoby to keep it alive. In her newfound role as an elder guide, Janie informs Pheoby that she must take control and actually become a part of her own story. In recalling the events of her life, Janie gives Pheoby permission to extend her story. She gives her friend some advice that she has learned on her quest: “It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (192, original emphasis).

Janie’s story helps Pheoby to stand a little taller in her own kitchen: “‘Lawd!’ Pheoby breathed out heavily, ‘Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this’” (182-83). Pheoby finds her own voice through Janie’s guidance. Guidance is critical to one’s success; nevertheless, Pheoby, like Janie, will have to go to the horizon for herself to learn the lessons that only personal experience can teach. Janie, even in an adolescent state, could never reconcile herself to Nanny’s understanding of life and romantic relationships; she had to live a life of her own choosing in order to understand the answers to all of her pressing questions.
Tracing Janie through Literary and Cultural Periods

Dolan Hubbard, author of “… Ah said Ah’d save de text for you”: Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her)story in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* puts Hurston’s text in perspective as a foundational novel upon which the select contemporary works build. Hubbard expresses:

The end product of Hurston’s vision is to create a new black woman, through a critique of the past. In looking back, Janie also looks forward to the day when American women of African descent will no longer be the mules of the world. Using familiar Bible-based tropes and metaphors, Hurston drives to the heart of a series of related questions: What does it mean to be black and female in America? What are the terms of definition for women outside the traditional hierarchies? Is female status negated without a male defining principle? And she raises these questions to reveal to the black community the one face it can never see—its own. (*Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston* 100)

Petry and Souljah, among other contemporary urban fiction authors, attempt to address these same questions with a keen focus on location and external conflicts such as social, political, and cultural factors. Each character presents a question that a re-imagined Janie must consider in that particular time period. For instance, in the contemporary novels, Victorian principles of respectability re-emerge, fractured family units spark constant tension, and love is hard to secure.

Lutie Johnson becomes a re-imagined portrait of Janie as an urban woman adrift with a much less domineering version of Nanny. The reader can infer that Lutie’s grandmother was once important in her upbringing. Her grandmother helped her father, Pop, to raise her. Lutie’s grandmother steps in to offer moral lessons on living right as she witnesses Pop secretly selling alcohol whenever he is unable to find honest work. Granny would tell her granddaughter, “Men like him don’t get nowhere, Lutie. Think folks owe ‘em a livin’. And mebbe they do, but not nowhere near the way he thinks” (81). Lutie, much like Archetypal Janie, is on a quest to stand on her own; however, Lutie aims to adhere to strict respectability politics, which she knows her
grandmother believes is the right way. She voluntarily expands on the Victorian principles of respectability and domestic living that Nanny had to force upon Janie.

Contrary to Janie’s stance, Lutie appears to subscribe happily to the tenets of Victorian ideology: she marries at seventeen, has a son, and dedicates herself to her marriage. Lutie’s grandmother, just like Nanny, endorses marriage as a means of protection: “[Granny] had told Pop, ‘Let her get married, Grant. Lookin’ like she do men goin’ to chase her till they catches up. Better she gets married’” (76). Lutie marries Jim, and he experiences the same employment discrimination that torments her father. Presumably, Lutie’s grandmother has passed on at this time as Lutie does not consult her on what she should do to help Jim. Nonetheless, an elder voice of wisdom appears for Lutie.

Lutie decides she will get a job to save her family. However, this move causes the dissolution of her marriage. Mrs. Pizzini advises Lutie to adhere to strict gender roles: “‘Listen,’ she said. ‘It is best that the man do the work when the babies are young. And when the man is young. Not good for the woman to work when she’s young. Not good for the man’” (33). The reader sees that Lutie fails to recognize the potential scenario that her elder, Mrs. Pizzini, warns her could happen if she leaves her husband vulnerable for too long. However, Lutie sacrifices the comfort of her husband and son to take up an isolated residence in the Chandlers’ home. As she nears the end of her stay with the Chandlers, Pop informs her that Jim has moved a new woman into their home. Thus, Lutie’s marriage ends, just as Mrs. Pizzini predicts.

Lutie’s choice to disregard Mrs. Pizzini’s advice begins her novel-long journey of missteps and faulty judgements that lead to a tragic end for herself and her son, Bub. Lutie longs for an independent living arrangement with Bub; however, as she figures, it will be quite

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31 I assign Mrs. Pizzini the role of elder even though she is a white immigrant woman. Mrs. Pizzini appears as a character who offers assistance to Lutie, as well as unsolicited advice.
expensive to find a suitable place, or take far too long to climb the corporate ladder of mobility to financial independence. Lutie considers marriage again as an option for financial independence. Yet, she has not officially divorced Jim, so marriage is not a viable alternative. Lutie rationalizes her options and decides that she and Bub must strike out alone if she hopes to honor her grandmother’s wishes for her chastity:

She couldn’t hope to get a raise in pay without taking another civil service examination, for more pay depended on a higher rating, and it might be two years, ten years, even twenty years before it came through. The only other way of getting out [of Pop’s house] was to find a man who had a good job and who wanted to marry her. The chances of that were pretty slim, for once they found out she didn’t have a divorce they lost interest in marriage and offered to share their apartments with her. (32)

In an environment where sexual freedom is seemingly encouraged and commonplace, Lutie opts to abstain from casual sex. Ironically, Lutie chooses the worst possible apartment building for such a feat. Sexual acts and the suggestion of sex comprise her new environment: Jones, the superintendent of the building, fantasizes about her; her neighbor, Mrs. Hedges, runs a brothel; the nightclub owner, Old Man Junto, explicitly propositions her; and her male suitor, Boots Smith, attempts to rape her.

In Their Eyes, Janie’s desires for sexual pleasure are almost her undoing (in accordance with Nanny’s belief and the community’s ideology), whereas Lutie’s desire to refrain from “no strings attached” sex actually costs her everything. Although Lutie has more freedom in the 1940s to explore sexual relationships—and she is open to the possibility—she does not want simply to pawn her body for material or financial stability (422). Lutie still seeks love, as does Janie. Even though her grandmother’s advice on marriage does not work, Lutie recalls her grandmother’s helpfulness and thinks of her fondly when she finds herself in trouble.
Lutie, like Winter, finds herself in a dangerous environment without the love and protection of her elders. Petry presents Lutie in a position where she struggles to find her footing because her grandmother is no longer physically present with her. She remembers the wisdom that her grandmother had to offer. The narrator laments the loss of Lutie’s grandmother, “Granny could have told her what to do if she had lived. She had never forgotten some of the things Granny had told Pop. Mostly she had been right. She used to sit in her rocking chair. Wrinkled. Wise. Rocking back and forth, talking in the rhythm of the rocker” (76). Lutie realizes far too late that she has been moving toward total isolation all along, which makes it easier for the street to swallow her up. She does not even have a community of like-minded women whom she can call on to work through her problems:

Again she thought that every time she turned around there was a new problem to be solved. There ought to be someone she could ask for advice. During those years she had worked in the laundry and gone to school at night, she had lost track of all her friends. And Pop didn’t believe in discussing problems. (77-76)

Lutie has no outlet or place of refuge when she really needs one. She repeatedly demonstrates that she makes poor decisions, so it comes as no surprise that she isolates herself and Bub in the worse apartment on 116th Street. The distance that Lutie establishes with Jim, Pop and Lil surely contributes to her character’s tragic end.

Lutie, however, is unable to see the tragedy that looms for Bub and herself. She takes on a role as his sole elder. As Bub’s elder, her main objective is to provide him with a safe environment; she has a clear vision for him: “… soon he would wake up in a bedroom of his own. It would have maple furniture and the bedsheets and draperies would have ships and boats on them. There would be plenty of windows in the room and it would look out over a park” (208). While well-intentioned, Lutie simply cannot excel in an elder role because of her knack
for making bad decisions.\textsuperscript{32} Lutie, nevertheless, works hard to construct a place of refuge for Bub, but her first decision to move into this particular building will affect every decision thereafter.

Since Lutie works during the day and has singing engagements at night, Bub is left to his own devices in the apartment building. Jones forms a pretentious friendship with Bub in order to get closer to Lutie. Yet, Lutie accurately recognizes the dangers that Jones poses to her so she encourages Bub to stay inside. She does not calculate that her rejection of Jones would put Bub at risk. When Lutie is absent at work, Bub unknowingly commits a petty crime for Jones. Bub’s arrest makes Lutie reevaluate her move to 116\textsuperscript{th} Street, and she becomes painfully aware of how she fails Bub as his elder. She chastises herself for focusing on moving from the street rather than paying closer attention to Bub. Lutie realizes the odds were against her because she could not correctly assess the disenfranchisement that she faced. She tells herself, “You forgot you were black and you underestimated the street outside here. And it never occurred to you that Bub might find these small, dark rooms just as depressing as you did” (389). When Lutie is unable to think of a safe way to secure the money for Bub’s release, she panics and abandons him in the Children’s Shelter.

Lutie’s life becomes a tragic experience due to her isolation from her first community: her father and the home that she grew up in. Lutie’s efforts to raise and provide for her son alone are commendable; however, she fails to secure a safe community or to reach out to her father for assistance. Furthermore, Lutie fails to recognize the elder wisdom when it presents itself in the form of an acquaintance. Mrs. Pizzini’s advice possibly could have set Lutie, Jim, and Bub upon a different course. Lutie’s narrative is an exemplary description of poet Maya Angelou’s straightforward line, “that nobody, but nobody, can make it out here alone” (“Alone”).

\textsuperscript{32} Elders need not remain error-free; however, vast errors can have an adverse effect on their success in the role.
Souljah depicts Winter and Porsche as characters who attempt to achieve their quests while working apart from and together with the community, respectively. Souljah engages her readers in a distinct conversation about the virtues of Winter and Porsche. *Coldest Winter* is classified as a hood classic that fascinates and captivates its readers. The book is the tale of reality, or “a naturalist novel,” as Walter Mosley states: “Souljah, an Emil Zola of the hip hop generation, has written a naturalist novel of a world without redemption. Her story, like the culture it exposes, is an unflinching eye at the truth” (“Praises for Sister Souljah”). *Deeper Love Inside* has the same elements and graphic content as *Coldest Winter*; however, it ends with a fantastic-seeming redemptive love. This love is foreign in Winter’s hood, but it is the kind that Janie finds.

Winter is a re-imagined Janie Mae Crawford in uncharted territories: urban hood, family focused on material wealth, a very disjointed family unit (later), without positive communal relations. In “Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison clearly argues that the presence of an ancestor determines the “success or happiness of the character” (2289). The ancestor is not merely present for the sake of filling space in the text; the ancestor has a distinct role to guide the character on a successful quest. Patton notes, “An elder’s role is to guide his or her community and thus to lead others on the path to become elders and eventually ancestors” (31). Winter receives the wisdom of her parents, but it is not the kind that lends itself to a successful journey or a transition into an elder role.

Although ancestors have the potential to pass on wisdom that will ensure the success of their lineage for generations to come, Winter, instead, receives frivolous lessons on spotting a genuine diamond, a baller (a man with a lot of money), and different ways to sneak around behind her father’s watchful gaze. Herein lies the initial failure of Winter’s elders, her parents.
Winter’s elders teach her a self-serving lifestyle of drugs, fast money, sex, and glamorous material possessions. She fails to learn who she is, where she comes from, or a significant communal purpose for her life. Winter relays the vivid advice she received from her mother: “She made it clear to me that beautiful women are supposed to be taken care of. She would whisper in my ear, ‘I’m just a bad bitch!’” (12).

Winter’s parents, particularly her mother, are guilty of the aggression that Janie accuses Nanny of, which is her love of things over interconnectedness of people: “But Nanny belonged to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her” (89). Mrs. Santiaga purposely chokes Winter with an initiation into a cycle of material worship to be a “bad bitch” (12). And Winter is none the wiser until it is too late.

As Native American author N. Scott Momaday suggests: Winter imagines who she is based on where she comes from (Traces of a Literary Stream 66). Winter attempts to inform the readers of her roots and to vouch for her existence: “Brooklyn-born I don’t have no sob stories for you about rats and roaches and pissy-pew hallways. I came busting out of my mama’s big coochie on January 28, 1977, during one of New York’s worst snowstorms. So my mother named me Winter” (11). Winter opens her tale with an introduction of who she is and the purpose of her origin, yet she never stops to interrogate fully her ancestors about what led them to their chosen lives.

While living in the Brooklyn projects, Winter is surrounded by a host of extended family, but they are just as lost as the Santiagas, which means that the failure of ancestral guidance did
not start with her immediate family. Winter explains the extent of her family’s understanding of ancestral interconnectedness: “We never had to worry about getting into fights because around our way we had reputation. Plus it was plain and simple common sense. If you put your hands on anybody in the family you would get jumped by the next oldest person in our family, and so on and so on” (11). Even though they are in close communal spaces with their extended family, Winter does not receive the proper lessons on family and ancestry. Ricky Santiaga’s business makes it possible for their extended family—mere employees in the empire—to stay afloat. Santiaga tries to keep his family, the anchor, separated from the extended members. When the empire crashes and Santiaga is imprisoned, Winter is betrayed by her extended family.

Although Winter begins a necessary step in self-actualization in claiming her roots in Brooklyn, this becomes a superficial attempt at self-discovery because she is unwilling to locate herself beyond the Brooklyn projects. Throughout her narrative she refuses to trace or to establish her ancestral and cultural roots (Patton 1). Winter is unwilling to interrogate further her true purpose to consider, “Who am I without the material wealth?” Nevertheless, due to her shortsighted focus on her material wealth, Winter is oblivious to the possibilities of who she can become in her adult life. Her immediate and extended family appears as inadequate elder guides for her needs; there are wise elders at her disposal throughout her narrative, though she ignores them.

Souljah writes herself into Winter’s narrative as an ancestral guide. Winter often encounters Souljah’s voice on a hip hop radio station where she aims to educate youth about their cultural importance. However, Winter is ill-prepared to receive any authoritative guidance. She is, as Patton proclaims, “so troubled that the intercession of an elder is not sufficient” (16). Winter’s devotion to the street life makes it difficult for her to connect with, or even hear, the
meaning of Souljah’s words. Hence, she immediately judges Souljah from the first page of the novel, which stands as a foreshadowing explanation for Winter’s tragic end. Winter confesses to the reader, “I never liked Sister Souljah, straight up. She the type of female I’d like to cut in the face with my razor” (10). Instantly, it is clear that Souljah is a source of friction for Winter. Souljah’s attempts to offer guidance irritates Winter. Consequently, when Winter hears Souljah’s voice on the radio sharing knowledge of a larger purpose for African and African Americans, Winter rejects this foreign voice.

Winter repeatedly tunes out Souljah’s voice. While riding in the car with socially-conscious Midnight, Winter hears Souljah’s “loud and aggravating voice” and her first instinct is to change the station, but Midnight warns her about touching his radio (32). Fundamentally, at the core of this act of defiance is Winter’s visceral rejection of the ancestral connection and wisdom that Souljah represents. Each time Winter rejects the ancestral link, she experiences conflict that could have been avoided. Derek Alwes perfectly summarizes Winter’s current state (as well as that of Lutie’s) in his critique of Morrison’s Jazz and Toni Cade Bambara’s Salt Eaters:

The obvious implication is that, if the children are ‘spoiling,’ if they are forgetting the values of the community, it is because the elders have not sufficiently indoctrinated them in the communal wisdom and values, have not kept alive the historical and cultural realities that distinguish them from other people, other races. (“Choice in Morrison’s Jazz and Bambara’s Salt Eaters” 359)

In short, Winter suffers because she does not have ancestral or communal connections with her people. Whereas Janie’s defiance of Nanny’s respectability politics and communal responsibility leads to her ultimate goal with Tea Cake, Winter’s defiance brings her to an inevitable end: the loss of her freedom. Janie defies Nanny because she attempts to find a middle way between her personal goals and Nanny’s wishes—she feels indebted to those around her who take part in her
character development. Winter selfishly attempts to achieve her goals, which causes her more trouble, loss of friendships, and communal isolation; she does not value her community or those who wish to help in her growth and development. Her aim is to use people she deems valuable to her plans. Though she loves her father, she also uses him. When her father is incarcerated, Winter seeks his monetary fortune so that she can maintain her status as the wealthy Santiaga princess of Brooklyn.

Winter devolves so far into a life centered on status and greed that she can no longer hear the ancestral voice, even though it seems to speak when she needs to hear it most. Her focus on her disdain for Souljah causes her to miss any knowledge that Souljah imparts:

Souljah went on to talk about some black struggle. Humph, I thought, if there’s some kind of struggle going on, she must be the only one in it. Everybody I know is chilling, just tryna enjoy life. She, on the other hand, with these Friday and Saturday night comments, busting up the radio hip-hop flavor mix, is the only one who is always uptight. (32-33)

Winter says she takes Souljah’s accusations personally, and rightfully so because her mother has trained her to love and embrace the game. Winter’s father actually tries to maintain some distance between his family and the drug game that he uses to build his empire. He tells Winter that she cannot roam freely in Brooklyn because of who her father is; once again, Winter misses the wisdom. She responds, “I went home. I went to Brooklyn. I went to the only place I know. Where my peoples is at. Where everybody knows me. Those are my streets, Daddy!” (34).

Winter’s superficial home is full of traps and misguided adults who failed to obtain elder status, but she is unable to understand this concept.

Santiaga reiterates Souljah’s message about the deterioration of community to Winter, “Do you think those streets love you? Those streets don’t love you. They don’t even know you. You could walk those streets one thousand nights and one thousand days and they wouldn’t even
know your name. The street don’t love nobody” (35). If Winter was on the brink of receiving Santiaga’s guidance, her mother enters in the next scene and snatches her back to a world of devious behavior; her mother encourages her to “sneak” around behind Santiaga’s back to return to Brooklyn at leisure (36).

Once Winter meets her tragic outcome—a mandatory prison sentence of 15 years for transporting drugs for her boyfriend—she still fails to show any remorse for her lifestyle choices, and, more importantly, she fails to step into an elder role when the opportunity arises. Winter reflects on her life while caged away inside the prison, but she can only focus on the missed opportunities to obtain money (320). Winter gets a pass from prison to attend her mother’s funeral; she has a brief reunion with her father and sisters. Winter notices that Porsche rolls up in a 600 series Mercedes Benz that “it would take the U.S. president’s salary to pay for,” and she assumes that Porsche is following in her footsteps: hungry for social status and fame (323). With this assumption in mind, Winter only admires Porsche’s clothes, shoes, and car rather than give her any concrete sisterly advice or elder guidance: “Now I took a good look at Porsche. She was perfect. Her hair was perfect. Her legs were perfect. Her clothes were perfect. But I wanted to warn her about certain things in life. Usually I’m not at a loss for words. But I didn’t feel good enough to tell her what I really thought” (325).

Unfortunately, even in shackles and permanently removed from her family, Winter can only think of her own selfish rejection. She fails to offer guidance to Porsche because she does not want Porsche to berate her with a mirror of her current situation. Winter states matter-of-factly, “I knew what she would think: Winter, you’re just saying that ‘cause you’re in jail. Winter, you’re just saying that because you’re old. Winter, you’re just saying that because you’re
jealous” (324-326). It appears that, as of yet, Winter has not learned the importance of family and interconnectedness.

Winter did not allow anyone to change the course of her path, which could explain why she opts to let Porsche gain the experience\textsuperscript{33} for herself: “So instead of saying what I had learned, what was on the tip of my tongue, I said nothing at all. Hell, I’m not into meddling in other people’s business. I definitely don’t be making no speeches. Fuck it. She’ll learn for herself. That’s just the way it is” (326). True enough, Janie had to go to the horizon for herself, but she does not hesitate to share her learned wisdom with her best friend, Pheoby. Winter, however, makes a crucial decision to withhold her knowledge from her biological sister, which ruins any chance the two may have to repair any disconnect between them.

Porsche, although much younger than Lutie and Winter, understands that family is fundamental. While in the juvenile detention center, she endures forced separation and mandatory isolation far more than a young child possibly should. As a result, Porsche’s primary goal is to reconnect with her mother and to repair her family. She does not allow herself to forget her family, even though she feels like they have forgotten her. Porsche desperately seeks approval and love from her mother, Lana, whom she believes loves Winter more. She struggles to connect with her family because, as a young, broken pre-teen girl, she cannot understand why no one within her immediate family of five comes to rescue her, even though she is willing to risk her life and sanity for each of them. As a result of her trials, Porsche has fragmented identities, which she creates as coping and survival mechanisms.

Siri is an extension of Porsche; she is everything Porsche’s family cannot be for her during her tribulations in juvenile lockup. Siri, in reality, is the name of the software on

\textsuperscript{33} Winter is not privy to Porsche’s story and experiences—as she only sees Porsche once after she is placed in the custody of child protective services—so she assumes that Porsche is following in her footsteps with drug dealers, quick money, fast cars, and sexual adventures.
electronic Apple devices—always at the user’s disposal. According to a blurb on Apple’s website, “Your wish is its command” (Apple.com). Thus, Porsche’s first quest appears quite early in the novel: she desires ultimate knowledge about everything and everyone, to which Siri guides her. Siri immediately appears when Porsche finds herself confused on a cold dark hallway: “We met in the dark, Siri and me, almost three years ago, the first night that I got here, the worst night of my life” (27). Siri fills a void and offers the guidance that Porsche craves. Siri becomes Porsche’s additional eyes and ears: she makes complicated issues and people simple enough that Porsche’s young mind can understand: “She showed me things about the other girls that maybe I would of missed if she didn’t say nothing at all.” (31-32).

Porsche has to come to terms with the fact that her father is in prison and cannot protect her anymore. She loses contact with her twin sisters, and she soon realizes that the only two women who are free, her mother and sister, Winter, are, in actuality, not really free. Porsche ponders why she becomes emotional so easy, to which Siri replies, “‘You’re crying because we are so lost. You’re crying because we are so hungry and we have been hungry for years. You’re crying because we have left nothing behind and we have nothing to look forward to’” (115). The hunger Siri references presumably is for family and roots.

Aside from Siri, Porsche links up with a teenage inmate by the name of Riot, who offers Porsche another measure of protection with her clique of girls, Diamond Needles; the clique specializes in different jailhouse jobs and talents. As Porsche expands her community, she also expands her understanding of the functions of the guards and the facility as a whole. She becomes smarter in how she handles her opposition. Riot, Porsche’s sister-friend and elder, leads her to NanaAnna’s reservation as she continues her quest for roots and community. NanaAnna’s character functions as an acting elder who fulfills the role to provide her with key lessons. Patton
theorizes that the role of elders cannot be understated: “The importance of family and tradition are two of the primary lessons elders are expected to impart to the younger generation, and one of the long-standing African and African American traditions is paying respect to one’s ancestors” (16). NanaAnna proves to be critical to Porsche’s character development as she teaches her to rely on her ancestral guides and to pay homage to the ancestors, African and Native American.

NanaAnna is especially important to Porsche’s survival and ultimate self-actualization as she teaches her the rich Native American culture: how to cook, how to make natural remedies, and how to preserve oral history and religion by speaking it. She becomes another mother figure, second only to Riot, for Porsche. NanaAnna explains the uniqueness of ancestral connections to Riot and Porsche: “Have no fear. Our ancestors are on our side. Your mother probably was the spirit leading the way when you young ones were journeying through the forest to my home. … led by your departed elders” (136). NanaAnna proceeds to explain the seriousness of an elder role, which also offers insight as to why many do not aspire to such a position. She states, “I am laying my life down, for the protection of your young lives and your freedom. That’s one of the things that any elder is supposed to do” (137).

NanaAnna teaches Porsche self-worth and self-value, which are lessons that Winter has missed. Porsche leaves Riot and NanaAnna as a self-reliant teenager who is spiritually, mentally, and physically stronger than ever. Most notable, NanaAnna helps Porsche to remember what it feels like to be connected and to belong to a community again. NanaAnna tells her, “It is the highest level of civilization when you realize that you are connected to others, and you live your life not just for yourself, but for one another” (original emphasis, 137). NanaAnna stands in the
gap as an elder for Porsche; NanaAnna imparts elder knowledge to her, yet, she also issues a stern warning about adapting to external influences, familial or otherwise.

Although NanaAnna warns Porsche about the dangers of blind loyalty to her family, this is an instance where she has to go to the horizon for herself as she intends to “make” her mother love her. Porsche gets an opportunity to rescue her mother from her slum living, and she tells her pointedly, “I’m here for you, Momma. I’m gonna work till I drop. I’m gonna hustle like crazy. I’m gonna make you love me” (212, emphasis added). Porsche does not obtain her biological mother’s love in the manner in which she needs it, but she soon discovers the elder guidance that is available to her is sufficient.

NanaAnna comments to Porsche: “The only way you will be successful on your journey on Mother Earth is if you accept and acknowledge that you are different from your loved ones, and use it as a strength and a weapon to save them” (137). She gives her all to her mother; yet, it is not enough to make Lana stay with her. Porsche finally understands the truth of NanaAnna’s words about loyalty and self-care. Porsche accepts and acknowledges that she cannot save any of her family members, so she begins to sustain herself and focus on her personal journey. Porsche’s narrative reminds the reader that while roots are important, not all family or communities are necessarily beneficial for one’s well-being.

Porsche, unknowingly, begins her healing process as she continues to form a new family with new connections of people who show her that love is possible, and free of conditions. Porsche subconsciously creates a new family in each environment she finds herself in, which is her greatest distinction from Lutie and Winter. Porsche understands the importance of connections. She does not isolate herself from people—nor does she maintain superficial bonds.
Porsche determines the skill or asset of a person and then she develops a connection; however, she returns just as much as she takes.

Porsche applies the reciprocity lessons she learns as a Diamond Needle to this new community that she establishes. For instance, she carefully scrutinizes the surroundings of her mama’s “living space” to see who can be of service to her and what she can do for them in exchange: “[Mr. Sharp] didn’t offer me a job, but I was building a trust. After that afternoon, every day I skipped down the block with my bag of quarters and fed the parking meters. I had matched the faces of all of the shop renters and workers with their vehicles. I never let the EXPIRED sign hit any of the meters where their cars were parked” (229). The community members are vital to Porsche; the members allow Porsche to move at her own pace while acknowledging her presence and her voice.

This supportive community propels Porsche into a successful self-actualization. Porsche reflects:

Big Johnnie was like an uncle to me now, Mr. Sharp like a father. He even said he would put me in the charm school, and when I reached sixteen, I could debut in the debutante’s ball. He wanted to escort me in the place of Poppa. My neighbors and the local business owners were like distant relatives raising me, feeding me, keeping my secrets, not asking too much. (310)

When she has a need, the members of her community step in to protect her without questions. For example, when Porsche attempts suicide, Mr. Sharp, her (god)father-figure, jumps into action: “He never mentioned how I got to the hospital or why I was registered under the name Ivory Sharp. He never searched for approval, credit, or a financial reimbursement for his time and trouble posing as my biological father in the hospital or anywhere it needed to be done” (323). In the absence of her biological family, Porsche gains new sisters, tenfold, a grandmother-
At the end of *Deeper Love Inside*, Porsche finally understands that it will literally kill her to continue to hold on to the loyalty for her biological family and any hopes that they will be able to nurture and guide her in a healthy manner. So, at the burial of her mother, Porsche figuratively “buries” each living member of her biological family as she makes peace with them. Even though Porsche did not realize it at the time, she was not completely alone as she roamed supposedly free in Mr. Sharp’s business neighborhood. After she “buries” the elders of her biological family, Midnight reveals to her that Ricky Santiaga actually gave her enough tools to prepare her for the ordeals:

‘I know you think you did all of your living on your own. Some young heads think that way. Your father, Ricky Santiaga, protected you as much as any incarcerated father could protect his daughter. You might not realize that yet. Think about it: your father must have given you certain things that ultimately saved your life when you were in a tight spot.’ (359-60)

Midnight helps Porsche to gain a better understanding of the roles her family played in her success; despite their many flaws, her parents, and even Winter, imparted life lessons and nuggets of wisdom that she utilized in moments of uncertainty. The valuable skills that Ricky Santiaga taught her like being smart and careful, “might have saved her life,” as Midnight says.

Mr. Sharp protects Porsche as if she is his very own child, which is still a product of his relationship with her biological father:

Mr. Sharp connected back to your father recently. But it was because of your father, Ricky Santiaga, and his reputation that made Mr. Sharp protect you. Mr. Sharp made it safe for you to be a young girl who didn’t get swallowed by the streets. Mr. Sharp was the first one to pick up on Elisha. Sharp’s man brought Elisha to Sharp for hanging round the back alley where you lived.’ (359-60)
Interestingly, Midnight also informs Porsche of Mr. Sharp’s role in her young affair with Elisha, a role akin to that of Janie’s Nanny. Unlike Nanny, however, Mr. Sharp does not try to control Porsche’s experimentation; he only makes sure she is safe and making a wise choice in her partner.

Porsche, in contrast to Winter, determines who she aspires to be and she allows the spirits to guide her. She practices the ways of the ancestors as NanaAnna teaches her; she becomes the restorative, connective link between elder and child within the Santiaga family. NanaAnna directly imparts these words of wisdom to Porsche: “If you refuse to open your heart and listen to your soul as it speaks to your mind, you will fail and become the same as those who you are trying to save. Then all of you will suffer to your collective and complete defeat” (139).

On NanaAnna’s reservation, many miles from a direct blood descendant and mingling with Native Americans and Caucasians, Porsche learns to listen to her ancestral guides, to trust that she is part of a universal community who wants to witness and assist in her survival on foreign lands.

These four key texts, when read together, demonstrate the difficulty for young African American women to reconnect with their ancestral voices and to maintain strong communal relationships as the voices of guidance and the backbones of African American communities begin to fade. External forces such as the changes in cultural, social and political attitudes greatly contribute to the characters’ difficulty in recognizing and heeding their ancestral links. A great deal of responsibility rests on the elder ancestors to nourish the generational links and to continue to spread wisdom, to make certain that youth understand the importance of interconnected communities.
Patton views the struggles that the characters’ narratives present as necessary groundwork to actualize their quests: “In order to move beyond [the] pessimism, African Americans must be able to reimagine both their pasts and their futures. This is the important intervention work that literature and literary projects … provide” (Patton 25). Janie Mae Crawford cannot build a life with Tea Cake until she understands why Nanny pressed her so hard, and until she finally appreciates how Nanny came to learn the advice that she passed along. Essentially, Janie must accept Nanny as a pool of ancestral wisdom, and she has to learn to dip in and take only what she needs to build a successful life, which contributes to her transition into an ancestral elder. She effectively becomes a source of strength and wisdom for Pheoby; in this way her wisdom and life experiences are not only for her personal gain. Pheoby takes what she needs from Janie’s story and, presumably, she will pass the rest along, which is exactly as Janie intends when she states, “cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (6). Janie is the archetypal Black woman character in African American literature who survives because she understands the importance of her community and ancestral voices.

A Black woman character cannot be selfish or distant as she works to sustain a family, community, and ancestral connections. Winter and Lutie cannot recreate Archetypal Janie’s successfulness in their respective environments because of each woman character’s attempts to forego community and ancestral guidance. Porsche has to endure her life situations as well as face her family’s demons in order to become a complete woman with a successful quest. Importantly, Porsche’s story depicts the possibilities for a successful, balanced merging of dual personalities and desires when one retraces the ancestral links and nurtures the necessary communal bonds. Thus, Porsche stands as the ultimate reiteration of Hurston’s Janie Mae Crawford.
Hurston, Petry, and Souljah uniquely capture the essences of these women characters in such a way that Janie, Lutie, Winter, and Porsche are merely gateways into a larger community of African American women, literary and real, who struggle with identity, community, and desires. Interestingly enough, this constant-quest with ever-changing trials and triumphs will not end with Porsche Santiago, as the current project does. As Hurston uniquely leaves space in Janie’s narrative for authors like Petry and Souljah to add texts that read as re-imaginings of an adapted life for Janie, there is still room for Janie to become a newer, ever-more liberated version of her 1937-, 1946-, 1999-, and 2012-self. Wherever Janie may go, whichever way her storyline develops, it is quite clear that keys to a successful Janie are community and ancestral ties because no one can make it in this world alone.

Though the novels’ settings may change, an emphasis on the importance of ancestral voice and community guidance for African American women proves critical to their success. As *The Street* and *Coldest Winter* exemplify, without the ability to locate oneself within a larger context or tradition, or even the ability to find and comprehend an ancestral link/voice, the community and characters remain in a state of turmoil. Lutie has the necessary ancestral voice to guide her, but the street is so chaotic and complicated that she misreads the voice and the signs that attempt to steer her in other directions. Winter is unable to locate herself or her true purpose; therefore, she ignores the ancestral guidance once it is presented to her, and she also neglects to build a stronger community. Lutie and Winter both fail because they are unable to see beyond their daily struggles in the streets, and neither character is able to situate herself within a larger context. Lutie’s Jim was well-aware of his predicament within a Jim Crow-era, yet naïve Lutie believes that she, alone, can repair the damage done to her family. Winter’s ego does not allow her to believe that, without her father’s protection, the streets will readily consume her.
The ancestral voice is crucial, especially within minority communities; the guidance is necessary in order to avoid the many pitfalls that are inherent from American legacies of slavery and Jim Crow-era segregation. Porsche’s narrative shows that the guidance can come from many places and many cultures, but one must relearn how to listen and to receive the guidance that is often lacking. It is evident that in recent years the voices of the ancestors and the elders of the community are much fainter than they used to be. For instance, Winter, similar to many youth and young adults within the hip hop generation, wishes for loud music to further drown out the ancestral voice. Consequently, the distance from elder wisdom within this generation is greater.

These novels share a critical aspect: remembrance. The authors place weight on the power and ability of the characters to remember the lessons that their elders impart to them along their quest voyage. Yet, the characters that are unsuccessful in their quest prove that without connection or reverence for the elders, remembrances are useless, or merely colloquialisms without the intended guidance. Although Hurston’s Janie is a woman of fortitude and independence, those traits do not replace her keen sense of community and interdependence on elder wisdom and sisterhood. Porsche proves that Hurston’s Janie could survive and efficaciously complete her quest in an urban environment if she remembers that ancestral voice and community are integral tenets of success; however, if she succumbs to the chaos of her environment, she will undoubtedly fail. This narrative is timeless and the continuity of her quest story into another generation is inevitable.
CONCLUSION

… I write ‘the Black books’ to entertain the reader, and in turn, the reader is transformed. It’s all good, and it is what it is. It’s street lit.

Daniel Grassian proclaims that “there has been a renaissance in contemporary African American literature, not just through the likes of older, critically acclaimed authors such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou but also from a new genre of literature called ‘urban fiction’ or ‘hip hop fiction’” (14). Grassian makes a valid point; however, this literature is not solely new. This genre has the potential to continue to operate in a continuum of African American fiction that will open the door to those “older, critically acclaimed authors” and works of fiction. Novelist Teri Woods deems the purpose of her literature is to aid readers in a journey: “It is my job to take you somewhere far, far, far away, to another place and time, with characters who feel, and live, and breathe, and of course remind you of someone you may already know” (xii). Likewise, in the midst of their diverse quests and adventures, Lutie Johnson, Winter Santiaga, and Porsche Santiago offer a bridge that returns me to Zora Neale Hurston’s folkloric Janie Crawford in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

A reading of the narratives of Lutie, Winter, and Porsche not only bridge a gap between Archetypal Janie and contemporary characters, but these character reiterations are poised to answer the pressing question of what happens to Zora’s Janie. Hurston’s Janie is fashioned as a heroine for women on a quest for self-discovery. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century character reiterations of Archetypal Janie continue to address and modify issues of romance, sexual expressions, independent and communal living, overt and covert intersections of race, class, and
gender in the lived experiences of African American women as Hurston initiates. Hurston’s Janie is such a foundational character that, since her creation, the majority of Black women protagonists can be classified as a “Self-Actualized Janie” or a “Tragic Janie.” A “Self-Actualized Janie” closely follows the guidelines of Hurston’s archetype: she identifies a particular quest, discovers her agency, and successfully navigates influences within her environment to actualize her true self. A “Tragic Janie” succumbs to influences in her environment, such as a lack of community or disenfranchisement, and she is unsuccessful in her quest for self-actualization.

Petry and Souljah craft unique quest texts that allow for an interpretation of Black women protagonists as reiterations of Archetypal Janie in the midst of pressing cultural influences such as American legacies of institutional slavery and Jim Crow-era disenfranchisement. Readers are presented with an opportunity to reimagine Janie’s quest as it intertwines with modern experiences in American urban and rural environments. From this standpoint, Petry’s and Souljah’s work also informs and represents the continual plight of African American women since Hurston’s *Their Eyes*.

Jacqueline Jones Royster states that Alice Walker’s literary purpose is to “be an illumination and interpretation of the lives and conditions of African American people, especially African American women, with an awareness of the broader social context in which race, class, gender, and culture converge” (*Traces of a Stream* 11). I propose to extend Royster’s perspective to include Hurston, Petry, and Souljah, whose literature highlights the lives and conditions of young African Americans. *Their Eyes, The Street, The Coldest Winter Ever*, and *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiaga Story* are more than simple works of fiction; these novels serve as intersections of culture and literature. Petry and Souljah contribute to the literary
canon three contemporary novels that also operate as windows into the souls of young, marginalized African Americans. Street literature authors infuse realistic portraits of the streets juxtaposed with coming-of-age tales set in rural and urban spaces, thereby remixing Hurston’s classic tale.

As a scholar of Hurston and an avid reader of street literature, I am able to highlight the cultural influences of Their Eyes in twenty-first century novels. Consciously or subconsciously, contemporary authors continue to create women characters that reiterate Hurston’s influential Janie in varying situations that encompass her quest for self-actualization and her struggle with overbearing ideologies. Reiterations of Janie attest to the folkloric presence that her character has in American literature.

I initially read Their Eyes in eighth-grade. As an undergraduate student, I purposefully expanded my literary dossier to include African American women writers; with the street literature renaissance in full swing, it is no surprise that I found Sister Souljah, Wahida Clark, Teri Woods, and countless other authors who write captivating narratives. Most of these books feature Black women protagonists who either evolve to achieve a specific goal with the least collateral damage, or are so stagnant and flawed that they are usually devastated by the narrative’s end.

During my exploration of contemporary African American Literature, there were always nagging thoughts of, “I’ve seen this character before. Where do I know this character from?” Reading these books, especially Souljah, was like hearing a remix but being unable to recall the original artist. Fortunately, the “Aha” moment occurred during my first year of graduate school as I pondered a dissertation topic. Naturally, I returned to my first literary love, Hurston’s Their Eyes. I reread the text once, and immediately realized that it was Janie Mae Crawford whom I
continuously encountered in second- and third-wave street literature books. Granted, she looked different, and sounded different, yet she was still on a quest for self-actualization. The remix works throughout the novel, even in the music of the text—it is a highlight in the classic as well as the remix.

For instance, Janie and Tea Cake find their rhythm in the Blues on the muck: “All night now the jooks clanged and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning, and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love” (Their Eyes 131). Lutie’s narrative adds Jazz and Cabaret to the Blues melody; it continues on to Winter’s and Porche’s tales where hip hop is the mainstay background sound as it collides with all the tunes. Winter describes a normal Brooklyn night filled with vibrations: “Car and Jeep speakers were up, each one playing their own jam. Sound systems were fighting to outblast each other. A little bit of hip-hop collided with a little bit of reggae, rockers, and even slow jams. I was on foot, rolling fifteen deep straight Brooklyn style with fifteen razor-ready girls who all had each other’s back” (Coldest Winter 30). Music permeates the novels’ settings to add to the remix of a contemporary Janie.

In the same vein as Hurston, street literature authors also demonstrate the transformative power of setting for novels and characters. As I formulated this project, I worked from the belief that an examination of an Archetypal Janie in different environmental settings would demonstrate the pervasiveness of external and internal struggles that African American women encounter in literary quest fiction. These struggles undoubtedly mirror the very real struggles for African American women in reality—especially if readers believe that art often imitates life.

Urban fiction provides the most honest, in-depth social, political, and cultural voyage into the lives of marginalized African Americans who are often misrecognized, if recognized at all. In
this genre, the authors’ ability to portray unabashedly the marginalized and underworlds of American cities is so raw and realistic that it is arguably their sole literary purpose. As this genre continues to grow with new authors and titles, there are greater opportunities to use this literature in various disciplines.

Pointedly, the street literature genre is in dire need of more scholarly investigations that provide genuine theoretical frameworks for the material. Novelist Mat Johnson notes in *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*, “Through academic criticism, detailed, informed, and considered, literary fiction comes alive in all its facets and complexities, allowing its seeds to find ground. Through these critiques, the work is digested, divined, revealed, and reimagined” (xii). Street literature is an applicable genre with several subgenres in which scholars can take on Johnson’s challenge to reveal and reimagine characters that resemble those within canonical works.

Although this project only looks at two specific contemporary street literature titles, the journey does not end with these texts. The street literature genre holds many possibilities for correlations to canonical texts and characters, to which mainstream scholars have paid scant attention. The work which Hurston begins with Janie—work that highlights the need for an exclusive space where African American women can explore their romantic desires in the journey for complete self-discovery—comes full circle in twenty-first century street literature titles like Omar Tyree’s classic *Flyy Girl* and Treasure E. Blue’s *Harlem Girl Lost: A Novel*.

I propose several possible expansions for this current project: (1) I anticipate a long-term endeavor that situates Hurston’s Janie as an omnipresent ancestral figure in other works written by African American women; and, (2) an examination of how African American male writers’ construct reiterations of the Archetypal Janie figure, specifically in Donald Goines’ *Whoreson* or
Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp*. The latter proposal would call for an investigation of generational and cultural shifts in African American literature. However, my immediate goal is to address the scarce literary criticism of Souljah’s *Deeper Love*, which is a major limitation of this current project. Thus, I plan to seek out scholarly conferences and lectures where I can present examinations of this text.

In the field of literature, we are always seeking fresh analytical approaches to classical texts. The street literature genre presents a wealth of material and characters that beg a closer read. This genre provides the necessary space for readers to engage and interrogate the text in a manner that is unique and new. Such critical examinations can translate to real world issues that resemble those in the text. Librarian Vanessa Morris claims that street literature novels are in high demand in public libraries, which means this genre could facilitate fresh approaches to classical texts within academic classrooms. Canonical works paired with contemporary texts allow some students an opportunity to examine, critique, and validate literary characters and narratives that resemble their lived experiences. These readers are more than likely already familiar with the remix of Janie, thus educators can take advantage of this unique opportunity that allows students to connect with the literary roots of many contemporary characters.

An advantage of street literature is the weight the narratives carry with African American youth and young adults. Nevertheless, street literature critics, such as Nick Chiles and Zetta Elliott, find the content of the genre problematic, primarily because of the strategic use of language and imagery. Johnson remarks:

> African American Literature has always been about telling uncomfortable truths. It began its prose with the slave narrative, transitioned in the nineteenth century into the protest novel, and was often judged by both white and black critics more

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34 Vanessa Morris states, “Street lit appeals to readers because it offers an opportunity to investigate, validate, and/or make sense of the details of city life” (*The Reader’s Advisory Guide to Street Literature* 5).
by how effectively it held a mirror to white oppression than by its artistic merits. But our world has changed. (Foreword xi)

Johnson acknowledges the emergence of literature, such as street literature, that also speaks to the plight of African Americans. Street literature authors reflect the changes of our world. Although the explicit descriptions of sexual encounters are blunter and generously dispersed on the pages of street literature novels, the messages remain insightful for readers who are, as Teri Woods desires, curious enough to hear the voice of the underrepresented (Readers’ Advisory xi).

The genre offers literary and cultural value. In pairing an African American pre-Civil Rights era authored text with an African American post-Civil Rights era text, the reader may gain clear chronological trajectories of agency, representation, and cultural influences. In this project, readers take note of Janie and Lutie as they navigate segregated and disenfranchised climates, then later readers meet Winter and Porsche as they learn the importance of community and cultural roots in the struggle to master remnants of institutional slavery and Jim Crow in the twenty-first century.

_The Street, Coldest Winter, and Deeper Love_ can be interpreted as having remixed cultural and literary influences of Hurston’s _Their Eyes_. Therefore, Petry’s and Souljah’s texts depict possible contemporary adaptations that exist for reiterations of Janie as she engages and enters into dialogue with various cultural influences like the American success motif and political and social legacies that dominate African American lives. In the texts, the reiterations of Janie are set in paradoxes of urban and rural spaces as strong, dominant figures. At other times, the character reiterations may appear vulnerable and anchorless, but each time the narratives serve as reminders of the importance of family, community, and self-actualization.

Souljah’s Porsche is a self-actualized reiteration of Janie. Although she struggles to subsist in a guarded environment that is predisposed to American legacies of disenfranchisement,
Porsche flourish amid a chosen community with the support of elder guidance. NanaAnna aids Porsche’s recognition of the generational voices that offer guidance. Royster states that “the concept of culturally imprinted voice is that, over time, this voice becomes so deeply imbedded in cultural practices that it may be transmitted from generation to generation in many ways” (72). NanaAnna, similar to Nanny, emerges as a generational link to that coveted knowledge. Porsche, as does Janie, becomes a conduit to carry sacred ancestral knowledge to the next generational link. However, in reading the text from a chronological frame, it appears that between Janie’s experience and Porsche’s ordeal, the communities lose sight of the critical need for elder guidance and communal existence.

As tragic reiterations of Janie in urban settings, Lutie and Winter attempt to forego communal existence in favor of independence. These two characters serve as examples of communities that have been fractured or broken—unable to connect successfully with their elders or ancestral guides. Their stories highlight the importance of the work Porsche completes, though she is the youngest among all three women characters. Porsche stands in the gap to communicate with the ancestors, to right the wrongs that other women characters encounter. According to Venetria Patton’s theory on the “child figure as a means to ancestral knowledge,” Porsche’s role is to complete “a ‘spiritual mission’ … to serve as a conduit between ancestors and the living, as ancestors attempt to resolve family problems” (The Grasp 153). Porsche cannot save her mother or restore her father’s dignity, but she can, and does, save herself through her connection with ancestors’ wisdom that she receives from NanaAnna. Consequently, in saving herself, Porsche possibly saves the next generation (perhaps in literature and in reality).
REFERENCES


Collins, Kimberly A. “‘Expanding the Canon’: Sister Souljah and Sapphire, Two Non-Canonical Black Female Writers Carving out Space to Shape the Black Female Image Within the Tradition of Black Female Writers.” Thesis. Howard University, 2008. Print.


----------. “Hi, Nope, sorry.” 7 June 2013, 3:03 p.m. Tweet.


APPENDIX

STREET LITERATURE TITLES

**Thug Love Fiction Series**


**Pioneering Classics**


**Contemporary Classics**


**Contemporary Fiction**


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35 This list, adapted from Vanessa Morris’ “Literature Cited,” is not exhaustive (*The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature*, 117-130).

**Teen and Tween Fiction**


**Nonfiction (Poetry)**


