

**USRU 5050 Hip Hop Street Literature Narratives**  
**Wed 4:45 - 7:15 Fall 2009**  
**Dr. Mark Naison and Kristina Graaff**

**Course Description**

During the last ten years, a new form of fiction writing emerged, in the nation's inner cities, in cultural spaces that the publishing industry, and book distribution networks, never imagined to be commercially viable. Self-published, sold largely by street vendors, usually written in vernacular language and dealing with the drug business, street violence and prison experiences, these books reached an audience of millions of people who rarely purchased commercial fiction at mainstream bookstores, and forced major publishers and book outlets to take notice, and ultimately began providing space and financing for the most successful authors.

The sheer size of this cultural movement – there are now thousands of titles that are in print – and the passion and energy these works inspire among its producers (authors, publishers, distributors) and consumers cries out for analysis. These works are consumed in enormous quantities in Black working class communities and in the nation's correctional centers, yet most whites don't know the books exist and most middle class blacks look upon their content with suspicion and contempt. What does it say about the levels of race and class segregation in the nation that an entire new form of fiction writing emerged “under the radar screen” not only of publishers and booksellers, but also of people who teach literature in schools and universities. Whatever you think of the literary quality of these works – and there are those who attack them for “dumbing down” African American fiction – Street Lit has given a voice, and a livelihood to thousands of people, who no one would have imagined becoming authors, publishers or booksellers.

The rise of Street Lit displays uncanny parallels to the rise of another subaltern cultural movement that against all odds, and considerable opposition, became commercially successful – Hip Hop. Hip Hop, a hyper-percussive music that features rhymes over beats, began in the mid 1970s in neighborhoods written off by government and private interests, and viewed by virtually the entire middle class as dangerous and stagnant. While disco and funk, the major focus of Black music radio during those years, flourished in clubs and theaters and concert halls that required paid admissions, hip hop arose in venues (parks and community centers) which were free or charged nominal fees. Yet it was Hip Hop, once it was finally recorded in the 1980's, which gradually took over the airwaves, not only on radio, but on television, using the medium of music videos. Young people in the inner cities, deprived of the many of the cultural and economic opportunities their parent's generation possessed, rebelled against invisibility and marginality by creating a music that alternately described and romanticized the discordant world that surrounded them and turned their survival skills into a marker of power and mastery. The sheer force of their expression, and the heroic conditions of its emergence, created a large and growing market for their musical output, first in people

like themselves, and then in young people everywhere looking for something new, compelling and powerful to add energy to their lives.

But commercial success, ironically, did not change the “ghettocentric” style of Hip Hop nor its identification with the lives of the most marginalized sections of the Urban Population. As race and class segregation in the US has intensified since the 80’s, “keeping it real” has remained part of Hip Hop’s moral compass (be it as stylistic device or as tool to refer to social conditions) and a central portion of its appeal. Somehow, despite its numerous compromises with corporate interests, and its recapitulation of the most retrograde aspects of consumer capitalism, including misogyny, homophobia and conspicuous consumption, Hip Hop continues to construct its narratives so you cannot forget there are millions of Americans who are still poor, still isolated, and still living in fear of violence, and the threat of prison. Many hip hop videos even today depict scenes which can only take place in the nation’s poor, minority neighborhoods. These narratives, both auditory and visual, created a powerful model for the new forms of fiction which started to emerge nearly 25 years after Hip Hop was born.

At a moment, where many claim Hip Hop to have arrived at a commercial dead-end, it is Street Literature that has picked up the characters, locations, topics and slang introduced by its musical predecessor, transforming the lyrics and musical performances into novels. Initiated by Omar Tyree, who published his novel *Flyy Girl* in 1993, Street Lit became more prominent with *The Coldest Winter Ever*, written by the activist and author Sister Souljah in 1999 as well as with Teri Woods’ *True to the Game*, published in the same year. Street Literature is not only influenced by Hip Hop music, but can also be traced back to the so-called ghetto realism novels of the 1950s, 60s and 70s with Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim being its most prominent representatives. Character figurations, language and topics can of course be traced back even further to the street toasts and badman ballades of the 1930s, in not earlier.

Comparable to the distinctions frequently made in regard to Hip Hop music, between conscious and gangsta rap, we could also categorize Street Lit stories either as cautionary or glorifying tales, depending on their endings, character development, explicitness and degree of didacticism. However, as with Hip Hop lyrics, Street Lit narratives often represent highly contradictory accounts. Inextricably linking conspicuous consumption with critical comments on social conditions, and sexism and homophobia with harsh attacks on America’s prison system, it is often difficult to provide a definite interpretation of novels as progressive or reactionary.

However, one thing is clear: In Street Literature, it is not only the hood but also prison that represents a major element both on the narrative level as well as on the experiential one. Many authors and readers have – like the novels’ protagonists – either spent time in prison or are currently incarcerated. The same parallel between writers/readers and novel characters may also hold true for the neglected urban environments depicted in the novels. However, though many authors – male and female – come from the urban backgrounds they describe in depth in their novels, it is important to consider that we are dealing with fiction. The novels should not be misread as memoirs or

autobiographies. Instead, Street Lit has to be thought of as an array of fictional accounts, that, despite integrating “real” conditions, are products of their author’s imaginations. As with any other type of fiction, we, in analyzing Street Lit, should therefore not simply measure the novels against an urban background as if they were works of urban sociology or anthropology. Rather we have to ask ourselves, when examining story lines, characterization, use of language, and sometimes exaggerated and stylized descriptions of sexual encounters and acts of violence – what kind of yearnings, intentions and functions they reveal.

### Course Structure

Because this is a new course that has never been taught anywhere before, we want to give students major responsibility for leading the discussion. Beginning the 6<sup>th</sup> week, students are going to be responsible for directing class discussion. Each week, one, and occasionally two students, will be responsible for leading the class and writing 5 – 10 pages analyses of the readings in question, pointing out the major issues they raise. Those papers will be written in advance, and distributed to the students on the class on the day of the session.

### Course Syllabus

- 9/2/2009      **Session 1**  
**Introduction: The Street Literature Movement and Its Connection to Hip Hop Music**  
 \*presentation Mark and Kristina on the emergence and development of both expressions  
 \*round of introduction  
 \*course structure, presentations, papers
- 9/9/2009      **Session 2**  
**African-American Vernacular Culture I**  
 Readings      \* Teri Woods: *True to the Game*. New York: Teri Woods Publishing 1999.  
                     \* Lawrence W. Levine: *Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977, chapter 4.
- 9/16/2009     **Session 3**  
**African-American Vernacular Culture II**  
 Readings      \*Lawrence W. Levine: *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. chapters 5 and 6.  
                     \*Joe Black: *Street Team*. Keasbey: Hampstead Publishing 2003.

- 9/23/2009 **Session 4**  
**Space, Place and Territory in Hip Hop Culture**  
 Readings \*extracts from B. Jones' *Loyalty* (E-RES) and Joe Black's *Street Team*.  
 \* Murray Forman: *Represent: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music*. In: *That's the Joint. The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* by Murray Forman, Mark Anthony Neal (eds.), (E-RES).  
 \*Murray Forman: *The Hood Comes First. Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. New York: Routledge 2005, excerpts (E-RES).  
 \* Sidney N. Brower: *Territory in Urban Settings*. In: *Human Behavior and Environment* (Volume 4), Environment and Culture by Altman, Rapaport, and Wohlwill (eds.). New York: Plenum Press 1980 (E-RES).
- 9/30/2009 **Session 5**  
**African-American Vernacular Culture III, Hip Hop Nation Language**  
 Readings \*Kermit E. Campbell: *Getting' Our Groove On. Rhetoric, Language, and Literacy for the Hip Hop Generation*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2005, chapters 1, 2 and 3.  
 \*Samy Alim: *Roc the Mic Right*. New York: Routledge 2006, chapters 1 + 4 (E-RES).
- 10/07/2009 **Session 6**  
**Ghetto Realist Fiction – Street Literature's Predecessors**  
 Readings \* Donald Goines: *Inner City Hoodlums*. Los Angeles: Holloway House 1992.  
 \*Kermit E. Campbell: *Getting' Our Groove On. Rhetoric, Language, and Literacy for the Hip Hop Generation*, Chapter 4.  
 [Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 10/14/09 **Session 7**  
**"Product of the Ghetto"? Hip Hop Street Lit Narratives and The Inner City**  
 Readings \* K'wan: *Street Dreams*. New York: St. Martin's Press 2004.  
 \*Douglas Massey/Nancy Denton: *American Apartheid. Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993, chapter 2 (E-RES).  
 [Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 10/21/09 **Session 8**  
**Gender Constructions & Black Stereotypes**  
 \*Wahida Clark: *Thugs and the Women who Love Them*. New York: Kensington 2005.  
 \*Patricia Hill Collins: *Black Sexual Politics. African Americans, Gender and the New Racism* by Patricia Hill Collins. New York: Routledge 2004, chapter 4 (E-RES).

\*Crispin Sartwell: *Act like you know* by Sartwell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994, chapter 5 (E-RES).  
[Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]

- 10/28/09      **Session 9**  
**Authenticity & Performances**  
 Readings      \* Robin D.G. Kelley: *Yo' Mama Disfunktional. Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* by Kelley. Boston: Beacon Press 1997, chapter 1 (E-RES).  
                   \* Esther Romeyn: *Street Scenes. Staging the Self in Immigrant New York 1880 – 1924*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008, introduction (E-RES).  
                   \* Eithne Quinn: ``Who's The Mack? ``: *The Performativity and Politics of the Pimp Figure in Gangsta Rap*. *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 34, Issue 01, April 2000 (E-RES).  
                   [Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 11/4/09      **Session 10**  
**Field Trip: The Production and Distribution of Hip Hop Street Lit Narratives**  
 Mark: Tour to the Bronx, roots of Hip Hop  
 Kristina: Street Lit Vendor Meeting on 125<sup>th</sup> Street (meeting point/time tba)  
 Preparatory      \*Keith Negus: *The Business of Rap. Between the Street and the Executive Suite*. In:  
 readings      *That's the Joint. The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* by Murray Forman, Mark Anthony Neal (eds.), (E-RES).  
                   \*further texts on current Street Lit distribution (to be posted on E-RES)
- 11/11/09      **Session 11**  
**Coming-of-age in the Hood in Fiction, Memories, Autobiographies**  
 Readings      \*Allen Jones: *The Rat that Got Away. A Bronx Memoir*. New York: Fordham University Press 2009.  
                   \*Claudine Raynaud: *Coming of Age in the African American Novel*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Novel*. Edited by Maryemma Graham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004 (E-RES).  
                   [Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 11/18/09      **Session 12**  
**US Prison System I**  
 Readings      \* Angela Davis: *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Canada: Open Media 2003.  
                   [Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 11/25/09      **Thanksgiving**

- 12/02/09      **Session 13 (with author Jihad as guest)**  
**US Prison System I**  
 Readings      \*Jihad: *Street Life*. Deer Park: Urban Books 2004.  
                   \* Loïc Wacquant: *Deadly Symbiosis. When Prison and Ghetto Meet and Mesh*. In:  
                   Punishment & Society, Vol. 3, Issue 1, 2001 (E-RES).  
                   [Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 12/09/09      **Session 14**  
**Hip Hop and Street Lit Narratives as Ghetto Tourism?**  
 Readings      \*Esther Romeyn: *Street Scenes. Staging the Self in Immigrant New York 1880 –*  
                   *1924*, chapter 3 (E-RES).  
                   \*Dorothea Löbbermann: *Productions of Ethnic Space: Tourism's Narrations*. In:  
                   *Postmodern New York City. Transfiguring Spaces – Raum-Transformationen*, by  
                   Günter H. Lenz and Utz Riese (eds.), (E-RES)  
                   \*John Urry: *The Tourist Gaze*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications 2002, chapter 1 (E-  
                   RES).  
                   [Presented by \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 12/16/09      **Session 15**  
**Discussion of research papers**

**The following titles are available at Fordham's bookstore (at McGinley Center):**

In order of reading assignments:

- \*Teri Woods: *True to the Game*. New York: Teri Woods Publishing 1999.
- \*Lawrence W. Levine: *Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977
- \*Joe Black: *Street Team*. Keasbey: Hampstead Publishing 2003.
- \*Donald Goines: *Inner City Hoodlums*. Los Angeles: Holloway House 1992.
- \*K'wan: *Street Dreams*. New York: St. Martin's Press 2004.
- \*Wahida Clark: *Thugs and the Women who Love Them*. New York: Kensington 2005.
- \*Allen Jones: *The Rat that Got Away. A Bronx Memoir*. New York: Fordham University Press 2009.
- \*Angela Davis: *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Canada: Open Media 2003
- \*Jihad: *Street Life*. Deer Park: Urban Books 2004.

### **Short Papers and Final Research Papers**

There will be no exams in the course. You will be writing and hand out a short paper (5 – 10 pages) to accompany your class presentations, but the core writing of this course will be a research paper (15 – 30 pages) due December 18, 2009 at 4 P.M.

There are two options for the research paper:

1. A paper based on ethnographic research, such as interviews and participant observation, conducted by the student with Street Lit authors, readers, publishers or book vendors. Students, who are interested in the novels' production strategies, conduct interviews with authors, examining for instance their reasons and intentions for the writing of Street Lit. Another option is to interview Street Lit readers, in order to learn about their motivations for reading the stories, their preferences and use of the novels. Those, who want to focus on the books' distribution, can approach (small or large) publishers or street vendors (like those on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem or Fulton Street in Brooklyn) or talk to bookstore owner to examine the various channels and venues of marketing and distribution.
2. A critical assessment of one or more Street Literature novels, analyzing the literary texts under a chosen thematic focus. The focus can either be along the lines of the syllabus, for instance the novels' gender relations, their depiction of the hood and the characters' prison experience, the reading of Street Literature as adolescent novels or the possible use of Street Lit for "ghetto tourism." Students can also choose a topic by themselves, which should be discussed beforehand with the instructors.

The paper should be between 15 and 30 pages in length, typed in Times New Roman 12 pt, and double spaced.