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## Articulating Situated Knowledge and Standpoints in our Responses to Contemporary Street Fiction: A Book Club Case Study with African American Women

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ARTICULATING SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AND STANDPOINTS  
IN OUR RESPONSES TO CONTEMPORARY STREET FICTION:  
A BOOK CLUB CASE STUDY WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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in

The School of Education

by

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary street fiction is a form of literature that has been growing in popularity since the 1990s. Such novels are set in contemporary urban contexts and present the experiences of historically oppressed groups. Sold in venues such as independent bookstores, the Internet, barbershops, beauty salons, flea markets, street vendors, and churches (Hill, Pérez, & Irby, 2008; McClellan, 2011), this genre is especially popular among African American females. Because much of the scholarship concerning engagement with contemporary street fiction focuses on improving school literacy skills, the purpose of this study was to investigate readers' responses in a book club held at a public library in Rivertown, a small southern community in the southeast region of the United States. Using a case study approach and drawing from reader response and feminist standpoint theories, this study investigated the ways in which social position and situated knowledge shaped African American women's understandings of contemporary street fiction and how such engagement and discussion led to the articulation of standpoints. Data was collected through transcribing book club discussions and individual interviews. From the data, I found that participants used a variety of communicative strategies to interact with texts and each other. In addition, contemporary street fiction served as a catalyst for articulating the concept of a single mother's mentality. The novels also presented opportunities for participants to revise concepts such as the American Dream and learn about social issues impacting the lives of women and children.

## Chapter One: Introduction

It is July, and as my family's summer rituals go, the womenfolk are sitting around the table in my grandparents' dining room chatting. One of my aunts, my mother's sister, enters the room with a duffel bag and begins pulling from its contents books she has read during the past year. Immediately, at the sight of novels covered with scantily clad African American women and men and titles like *Thug Matrimony* (Clark, 2010), *Bitch* (King, 2006), and *True to the Game* (Woods, 1999), the chatting stops and hands begin flipping through the texts as my aunt spreads them across the table.

"*You* read this stuff?" my daughter who has just completed her first year of college asks.

"This one looks good. Can I read it?" requests my younger sister, the mother of three rambunctious boys, after viewing the back cover of one of the novels.

"What's this one about?" I inquire as I look over a text which displays the lower half of a woman's face, the central focus of which are full lips covered in bright red lipstick. Before long, such questions and my aunt's responses result in a near empty table and women excited about new reading material.

This exchange resembles those I have experienced in other settings—among students in urban public high schools; in conversations with students at a rural high school book bash; between parents, teachers and students during literacy night at my son's middle school; in discussions with my daughters about their reading interests; and most recently among employees at a coffee shop. Typically, what I witnessed in these instances were conversations between African American adolescent girls or African American women punctuated by exclamations such as, "Girl, this book is good!" or "Chile, you gotta read this!" The repetition of these



exchanges signaled to me contemporary street fiction's popularity, particularly among African American female readers.

I initially became interested in conducting this study while teaching ninth grade English at an inner-city public high school that served primarily African American female students. From discussions with students about their reading interests, I became aware of contemporary street fiction's appeal among African American adolescent girls and women. In addition to hearing students' thoughts about contemporary street fiction they had read, I learned that many of their female relatives—sisters, aunts, cousins, mothers and even grandmothers—were avid readers of these texts, and I began to wonder how social positioning as it related to relations of power and the intersections of race, class, and gender influenced their engagement. I was familiar with the novels' depictions of African American young adult females living in inner-city communities, but wondered how readers' "socially situated knowledge"—that is, the ways in which their social positioning shaped their understandings of their lives and the world—factored into their reading experiences (Hirsch & Olson, 1995, p. 205). How might the social positioning of African American female readers shape their interest and engagement in contemporary street fiction? And what standpoints, or critical insight, relative to social positioning and situated knowledge might surface as central to their understandings of these texts? With these questions in mind, I found the chance to organize a contemporary street fiction book club at a small-town public library an interesting opportunity.

### Significance of the Issue

With the resurgence of street fiction in the late 1990s, contemporary novels (also referred to as *contemporary street fiction* and *street literature* in this dissertation) garnered interest in a variety of areas during the early 2000s and have continued to gain momentum. According to

Graaff (2013), “bestseller lists of the *African American Literature Book Club* (AALBC), *Essence* Magazine and the African American book announcement website, *Books of Soul*, indicate Street Literature is currently one of the most widely read subgenres of African American fiction” (p. 113). Initially limited primarily to self-publishing, the success of these texts has inspired the creation of independent publishing companies, imprints, and book deals with mainstream presses (Gifford, 2013b; Graaff, 2013). Articles focusing on the novels have been published in scholarly journals like *The ALAN Review* (Brooks & Savage, 2009), *English Education* (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013), *English Journal* (Hill, Pérez, & Irby, 2008; Van Orman & Lyiscott, 2013), *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (Gibson, 2010; Guerra, 2012; Marshall, Staples & Gibson, 2008), *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (Sweeney, 2008), and *Young Adult Library Services* (Morris et al., 2006). Stories have also been featured in popular/trade magazines such as *Black Issues Book Review* (Stovall, 2005; Venable, McQuillar, & Mingo, 2004; Young, 2006), *Library Journal* (Welch, 2011; Wright, 2006), *Library Media Connection* (Meloni, 2007), *Publishers Weekly* (Patrick, 2013; Reid, 2006; Rosen, 2004), and *Voice of Youth Advocates* (Honig, 2011) and newspapers like *Christian Science Monitor* (Campbell, 2004), *New York Times* (Barnard, 2008; Chiles, 2006; Kilgannon, 2006; Lee, 2013), and *Washington Post* (Valdes, 2008; Weeks, 2004). Likewise, shelves dedicated exclusively to the genre can now be found in bookstores such as Barnes & Noble, discount stores like Walmart, and public libraries. As attention in all of these areas suggests, contemporary street fiction and its readers have attracted a great deal of mainstream interest.

Contemporary novels depict the experiences of characters living in real-life inner-city communities. Stories frequently focus on young adult female protagonists who capitalize on what they perceive are the only resources available to negotiate the harsh realities of life in the

hood. Feeling trapped by their impoverished circumstances, these characters resort to crime, sex and violence to survive the streets and attain financial and material wealth (Castillo-Garsow, 2012; Marshall, Staples & Gibson, 2009; Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto & Cottman, 2006; Pough, 2004). Similar to Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946/1974), the first novel to depict a black mother's struggle to survive the inner-city (Henderson, 2002), the realities of "the street," or real-life, tough inner-city locations in which contemporary street fiction is set, are central to plot development. Texts often incorporate the language, dance, music, fashion and attitudes of commercialized hip-hop culture (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Hill, Pérez, & Irby, 2008; Marshall et al., 2009; Newhouse, 2010; Rosen, 2004). Plots typically involve romantic relationships and address topics such as death, premarital sex, pregnancy, teen parenthood, abortion, drugs, and incarceration (Morris et al., 2006). Because contemporary street fiction presents characters who engage in dangerous lifestyles, many narratives serve as cautionary tales that warn of the consequences which result from doing so (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Gibson, 2010; Marshall et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2006; Pough, 2004; Rosen, 2004; Wright, 2006).

In an often-cited *New York Times* op-ed piece, Chiles (2006) refers to contemporary street fiction as "the sexualization and degradation of black fiction" (para. 4), "stories that glorify and glamorize black criminals" (para. 6), and "pornography for black women" (para. 9). A central focus of Chiles's criticism is contemporary street fiction's overrepresentation in the literary market and, particularly, in the sections of bookstores where African American fiction is shelved. Chiles (2006) blames such overrepresentation on the publishing industry and accuses its profit-driven tactics of displacing the works of more serious black writers. What is interesting about Chiles's (2006) comments is that he offhandedly acknowledges contemporary street

fiction's possible appeal among young black women as he blasts the texts, and such paradoxical treatment obscures the ways in which African American female readers engage with the novels.

In this study, I hypothesize that African American female readers use socially situated knowledge to understand and interpret contemporary street fiction and find their engagement with such texts difficult to ignore. As Rosen (2004) contends, "trade paperback street lit editions sell most to black women and girls between the ages of 13 and 30" (p. 32). Contemporary street fiction draws on popular and stereotypical representations of African American urban culture. It is a medium through which African American identity is constructed and thus highly relevant to how many African American adolescent girls and women see themselves and the world (Marshall, 2009). For example, a study conducted by Sutherland revealed that young African American women recognized contemporary street fiction as a site in which they are visible and as "more representative than *Bluest Eye* of their literacy learning and identities" (as cited in Moje, 2002, p. 219). As Moje (2002) explains, during a reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970/1994) in a high school English literature course, African American female students recommended Sutherland read the contemporary street fiction novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999) "so she could understand their experiences" and how they "saw it as a tool for understanding, questioning, and positioning themselves in the world" (p. 219). This scholarship suggests consumption of contemporary street fiction for African American female readers presents the opportunity to better understand the roles social position and situated knowledge play in their engagement.

In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the problem this study addresses as it relates to social position and situated knowledge. I then state the purpose and research questions and provide an overview of the theoretical framework and methodology that were used to organize

this project. Finally, I end the chapter with a summary which presents the contribution this study makes to the field and an overview of remaining chapters.

### Statement of the Problem

Scholarship concerning why readers, particularly those who are African American adolescent girls, engage with contemporary street fiction reveals an array of motives. I have divided these motives into four subcategories: escape, participation in the reading culture, opportunities to gain or affirm experience, and resistance to school sanctioned texts. As Brooks and Savage (2009), Gibson (2010), and Morris et al. (2006) explain, readers engage with contemporary street fiction to escape the pressures of everyday life and to experience lives different from their own. This often allows them to have conversations with the texts in ways school texts do not permit and to experience lifestyles others have hidden from them (Gibson, 2010). Readers also engage with contemporary street fiction in order to participate in the reading culture. From my conversations with African American adolescent girls about their engagement, I found them eager to make recommendations and to share synopses and personal copies of texts, which, as Brooks and Savage (2009) and Gibson (2009) assert, gives readers the opportunity to take ownership of their reading habits. When it comes to gaining and affirming experience, readers are able to gain vicarious experience through characters (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Gibson, 2009; Morris et al., 2006) and to learn about mature topics and lessons pertinent to their lives and social realities (Gibson, 2009; Marshall et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2006). In addition, contemporary street fiction enables readers to make personal connections with character's struggle for subjectivity (Brooks, Brown & Hampton, 2008; Brooks & Savage, 2009; Gibson, 2009; Morris et al., 2006) and to experience shared beliefs concerning how life is structured in inner-city areas (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Morris et al., 2006; Newhouse, 2010). Lastly, as

Newhouse (2010) argues, reading contemporary street fiction may also be a way for readers to resist dominant cultural norms concerning age-appropriate literature and invisibility in texts taught in schools. Such scholarship, based primarily on studies involving afterschool book clubs held on school campuses and in public libraries, presents a list of benefits scholars see as useful in educational settings and is also an area in which I am interested for the purposes of this project.

The resurgence of street fiction has also led to scholarship concerning the possibilities texts present for teaching and learning. Scholarship has advocated the use of such novels to help students make connections between their in-school and out-of-school literacy experiences and to enable teachers to identify students' literacy strengths (Gibson, 2010; Newhouse, 2010; Nyberg, 2012). It has also supported the need for critical literacy skills. Along these lines, Morris et al. (2006) have explored engagement among African American teens and the use of critical analysis to help them "navigate through the genre with more wisdom and understanding" (p. 20). Likewise, Brown (2011) has investigated the use of Freirean cultural circles and contemporary street fiction to engage critical consciousness. Other projects have examined reader response theories to better understand readers' approaches to contemporary street fiction (Brooks & Savage, 2009) and the use of such texts to develop culturally responsive pedagogy (Gibson, 2010; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). This research has been especially interested in using reader engagement as a way to improve school literacy skills (Gibson, 2010; Hill, Pérez, & Irby, 2008; Marshall et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2006). Gibson (2010) has also discussed the achievement gap as it relates African American adolescent girls and presented their engagement as a window to reading achievement (Gibson, 2010). Such scholarship explores contemporary street fiction in the context of literacy but has yet to examine engagement based on social position and situated

knowledge. I seek to better understand this relationship as it relates to the African American women who participated in my study.

Recent literary analysis has taken a more in-depth look at these texts. Such work has presented frameworks for interpretation, many of which deal with gender politics. Focusing on the prevalence of female protagonists in contemporary texts, Gifford (2013) has concluded that contemporary street fiction revises the black experience novel to include the perspective of the inner-city female as it relates to issues such as agency, racial and sexual oppression, exploitation, community, and social consciousness. Bragg and Ikard (2012) have recognized contemporary street fiction as a site in which the politics of gender are unsuccessfully negotiated through “transactional sexuality,” that is, the trading of black female sexuality for control and power in relationships (p. 240). Dunlap (2013), however, has argued that such novels present the opportunity to imagine alternative models of resistance and agency within a masculinist form that has traditionally re-inscribed oppressive gender politics (p. 108). Likewise, Dunn (2012) has contended that themes which emphasize the interrogation of gender politics and the need for an aesthetic that features love, self-recovery and transformation situate contemporary street fiction within the African American women’s literary tradition. Accordingly, the attention to women’s experience and gender politics in recent scholarship presents conflicting analyses in some cases and indicates social position and situated knowledge are sites of critical inquiry.

Although literary critics have interpreted women’s experience and gender politics in contemporary street fiction, Radway (1983) has argued that they cannot assume their readings are representative of contemporary street fiction readers. As Radway (1983) has explained, when such assumptions are made, “[critics] have severed the form [in this case, romance fiction] from the women who actually construct its meaning within a particular context and on the basis of a

specific constellation of attitudes and beliefs” (p. 55). This is where social position and situated knowledge come into play in my study as I explore the understandings that readers bring to their engagement with contemporary street fiction. Concerning social position and situated knowledge, Wylie states:

What individuals experience and understand is shaped by their location in a hierarchically structured system of power relations: by the material conditions of their lives, by the relations of production and reproduction that structure their social interactions, and by the conceptual resources they have to represent and interpret these relations. (p. 343)

Thus, knowledge is grounded in the concrete experiences surrounding the power relations which position us socially and shape our realities and the conceptual resources we have to interpret our experiences. Similar to Radway (1983), I hypothesize that reading contemporary street fiction is an integral part of the lives of African American women in my study alongside work, school, and caring for families. I use social position and situated knowledge as entry points, or strategies, for understanding the consumption of contemporary street fiction among research participants. In the next section of this chapter, I present the purpose of my study and research questions.

### Purpose and Research Questions

To investigate the ways in which social position and situated knowledge inform the meaning-making processes of African American women as they engage with contemporary street fiction, I organized a contemporary street fiction book club at a public library located in Rivertown, a small southeastern community. From discussions with a colleague who frequently visited the library, I learned that contemporary street fiction was popular among African American female patrons and contacted Rivertown’s librarian to discuss my research interests and to inquire about forming a book club. With the support of library staff, I posted flyers and book marks throughout the facility, directing those interested in joining to sign-up at the



circulation desk or to contact me personally for more information. I also attended a book signing for a local author to discuss the book club and extend invitations to join and posted information about subsequent meetings to social media such as Facebook. Over the course of eight months, a total of eight participants, all African American women, joined the group and agreed to participate in the study. Although all participants did not attend every meeting, each participated in at least one book club discussion. The following research questions regarding African American women's engagement with contemporary street fiction guided this inquiry:

1. Who are the readers of contemporary street fiction in this setting?
2. How are the characters in contemporary street fiction to which readers respond positioned with regard to the intersections of race, class, and gender?
3. How do readers of contemporary street fiction situate themselves in their discussions of such texts?
4. How do readers of contemporary street fiction use social position and situated knowledge as resources in relating to characters?
5. In what ways do standpoints emerge from readers' social positions and situated knowledge as they discuss contemporary street fiction?

### Theoretical Framework

While scholarship in this area has relied on reader response theories, I draw from both reader response and feminist standpoint theories to better understand the roles that social position and situated knowledge play in African American women's engagement with contemporary street fiction. Radway's (1984) study concerning the function of reading romance fiction in the lives of middle-class white women presents important findings regarding socially situated knowledge. However, Bender-Slack (2009) and Flynn (1991) point out that reader response theorists, in general, do not give enough attention to the role social position plays in understanding such engagement. Reader response theories assert that reading is a transactional

process where meaning is found in the interaction between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1994). Early theorists presented models, pointing to a range of resources from which hypothetical readers might draw, some of which include readers' primary responses to texts (Rosenblatt, 1994), imagination (Iser, 1974), descriptions and analyses of reactions to texts (Fish, 1970), desires and fears (Holland, 1975), and subjective experience (Bleich, 1978). More recently, in his discussion of reading as embodied action, Sumara (1996) has argued that what we know is based on how we have come to understand our history of interactions in the world. However, while it can be implied that he is referring to our interactions as raced, classed, and gendered subjects, Sumara (1996) does not foreground material conditions or social positions.

Because I hypothesize that social position and situated knowledge are essential to engagement among the participants of my study, I also incorporated feminist standpoint theories into my theoretical framework. Feminist standpoint theories assert that knowledge is always socially situated and assumes agency, or the ability of marginalized or oppressed groups to interpret their own experiences (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2004; O'Brien Hallstein, 2000). The social positioning of such groups makes available a double vision, like the double consciousness described by DuBois (1903). This double vision/consciousness is based on their understandings of their positions within the social hierarchy and that of the dominant culture (O'Brien Hallstein, 2000). Standpoint projects begin with the experiences of marginalized individuals and give attention to the situated knowledge they articulate in their understandings of their lived experiences and social realities (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983). Theorists also focus on the ways in which oppressed groups use such knowledge to struggle against dominant ideologies and to express critical insight, or standpoints, concerning the hierarchical systems which structure their lives (Harding, 2004). According to Harding (2003), "standpoints must be struggled for

against the apparent realities made ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ by dominant institutions, and against the ongoing political disempowerment of oppressed groups” (p. 297). Rather than overlook the socially situated knowledge participants bring to their engagements with contemporary street fiction, I have used feminist standpoint theories to reclaim their voices and give attention to the standpoints that emerge as they discuss texts.

Also, because this study took place within a book club setting, I relied on O’Brien Hallstein’s (2000) ideas concerning how standpoints are developed. Given that standpoints are achieved through struggle, O’Brien Hallstein (2000) makes a distinction between individual knowledge/perspectives and standpoints and contends that standpoints “are not simply achieved by individuals acting alone” but through “collective interaction and dialogue” (Where is Feminist Standpoint Theory Now? section, para. 8). Although experience shapes knowledge and can result in common group experience, O’Brien Hallstein (2000) argues that this does not automatically lead to shared standpoints. As Hartsock (1983) states, “A feminist standpoint may be present on the basis of the common threads of female experience, but it is neither self-evident nor obvious” (p. 303). Hence, standpoints do not come naturally and require active resistance to dominant ideologies through social mediation and group interaction (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). The women who participated in my study were all African American but presented differences in terms of age, level of education, occupation/industry, marital status, number of children, and area of residence. Therefore, I was interested in the ways in which their individual knowledge/perspectives resulted in the articulation of common experience and standpoints during book club discussions.

## Methodology

Book club meetings were held from March through October 2014 at the Rivertown Public Library. Located on the east side of the Mississippi River, the library is one of two facilities in the area, with the other facility on the west side of the river. Rivertown Public Library serves approximately 8,690 patrons and provides services such as interlibrary loan, copier and computer use, summer reading programs for area youth, book clubs, and ACT prep. Staff also frequently host book signings, and during one of my visits, I observed the librarian train a patron to use a laptop.

Using a single case study approach, I explored the ways in which social position, situated knowledge, and standpoints emerged in the responses of eight African American women as they discussed contemporary street fiction novels during book club meetings held at the library. Case studies involve in-depth investigation of an event or phenomenon in a real world context using multiple data collection techniques (Yin, 2014). Data collected during this study involved audio recordings of book club discussions and interviews, field notes and a final evaluation. In addition to book club discussions which make up the bulk of the transcribed data for this project, interviews were conducted at the end of the study to gather additional information about participants' lives and reading experiences and to ask questions about comments and issues raised during group discussions. I also took notes during visits to the library and during book club meetings and interviews. Lastly, I administered a final evaluation at the close of the study by email to gain feedback about the overall structure of the project. Book club discussions and interviews were transcribed, and I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants.

## Summary

Since contemporary street fiction's resurgence in the 1990s, it has received attention on bestseller lists and in independent and mainstream publishing, scholarly/academic journals,

popular/trade magazines, newspapers, bookstores, discount stores, and public libraries.

Scholarship concerning such texts has largely focused on reader engagement, particularly among adolescent African American girls, and the possibilities it presents for teaching and learning school literacy skills. Using contemporary street fiction as a bridge to school literacy acquisition presents the opportunity to explore how African American female readers understand and interpret these texts from their social and aesthetic positions in society. Recent scholarship explores themes surrounding the prevalence of black female protagonists in contemporary street fiction and suggests that social position and situated knowledge are sites of critical inquiry. In drawing from reader response and feminist standpoint theories, my study foregrounds social position and situated knowledge and contributes to research concerning contemporary street fiction and its African American female readers.

In the following chapters, I present details of the study I conducted with eight African American women in my effort to explore the roles of social position and situated knowledge in our discussions of contemporary street fiction. In the second chapter, I provide examples of contemporary street fiction's early influences and elaborate on the ways in which it draws from these precursors. I also present reader response and feminist standpoint theories as my theoretical framework as well as relevant studies. Chapter Three presents case study as my methodology and my rationale for using a case study approach. I then discuss selection of the research site and participants, methods of data collection and analysis, my role and background as the researcher followed by limitations, ethical considerations, a timeline of the book club, profiles of participants and synopses of texts. Chapter Four provides a detailed description of the three major findings that emerged from the data. Finally, the last chapter provides a summary of the findings, implications and recommendations for educators and feminist standpoint theorists,

suggestions for future research, and reflections surrounding my experiences as a reader, researcher, and future academic.

## Chapter Two: Review of Literature

I became interested in studying reader engagement with contemporary street fiction while teaching ninth grade English at an inner-city public high school that served African American female students from primarily working-class backgrounds. Through discussions with students about their literacy interests, a colleague in the English Department discovered widespread student engagement with such texts. Like many of us who were frustrated by the number of students not completing out-of-class reading assignments, the teacher longed to somehow encourage what she assumed were non-readers to enjoy the experience of reading. She shared those discussions in our department meetings, and I too began to have conversations with my students about their engagement with the novels. What I learned from those conversations was that many of my students, like my colleague's, *were* readers, not of texts taught in high schools, but of contemporary street fiction. Such conversations revealed there was an underground reading culture within the school, and when asked what they liked most about the novels, many students described them as "keeping it real."

Although this experience led me to consider it as a topic of research, I have always been surrounded by contemporary street fiction. Like my students and those in their female kinship and friendship circles, my mother, sisters, daughters and many of my aunts and friends are avid readers of these texts. However, even though my family and friends read them, the English teacher in me did not think of contemporary street fiction as significant until my students and my colleague's students declared otherwise. Students' comments helped me to realize I had marginalized the lived experiences and social realities which speak through the narratives. In essence, I had devalued something important to my students.

I consider myself a feminist. I define “my feminism” as the quest to understand how the forces which situate women within patriarchy and devalue my experiences as a forty-something-year-old African American woman who has raised three college-educated daughters have come to be. My questions are now more urgent than ever as I face the world as a single mother raising a black male child and consider the dominant discourses he and I will have to struggle against in order to define ourselves. As I contemplated this space and reviewed literature surrounding contemporary street fiction, I thought a great deal about the consumers of these texts, the African American females I have observed reading them, and how the novels have helped them to understand themselves and their lives in an age where diverse representations of African American women in literature and popular culture are limited. In addition, I have wondered what the novels have told them about their relationships with others, whomever “the others” might be, and what about this genre has kept them coming back. I have wondered what about the images in the texts is so “real” to them.

As a form of black popular culture, contemporary street fiction draws from and speaks through popular and stereotypical images (Marshall et al., 2009). But, as Hall (1993) explains, such images and forms, although troublesome, present far more than what appears on the surface. Hall (1993) states:

However deformed, incorporated, and unauthentic are the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see, in the figures and repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them. (para. 15)

Because blacks were excluded from mainstream society, Hall (1993) points out that these figures and repertoires were the only performative spaces available. Realizing that a discussion of contemporary street fiction’s many influences is beyond the scope of this study, I focus on attributes from selected genres which parallel key aspects of contemporary texts. Through its



unconventional production and distribution techniques, its depictions of deterministic environments and morally ambiguous characters, and the systemic inequalities and values it addresses, contemporary street fiction exhibits the underpinnings of broadsides and chapbooks, literary naturalism, slave narratives, Newgate novels, black pulp fiction (an umbrella term used in this dissertation to refer to ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation), and hip-hop.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I provide an overview of the various origins as identified in the scholarship and then elaborate on the ways in which key aspects of contemporary street fiction are found in selected influences. In the second section, I focus on my theoretical framework. I situate my work within reader response and feminist standpoint theories and highlight relevant studies. Finally, I conclude by discussing how the scholarship informs my study.

### Overview of Origins

The origins of contemporary street fiction are highly contested due to multiple roots and various literary and cultural movements. Because of contemporary street fiction's overlapping characteristics and relationships with other genres, I will briefly overview the literary and cultural movements that have been connected to its development. For example, Morris (2012) identifies "the overall qualifying characteristic" as "stories that depict realistic, naturalistic tales about the daily lives of people living in lower-income city neighborhoods" (p. 4). Based on this broad definition, she situates contemporary street fiction within literary naturalism, a movement in which "characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings" (Campbell, 2013, para. 1), and further asserts that such texts fall within a tradition of street literature that "spans historical timelines, as well as cultural identifications, linguistic associations, and formats" (Morris, 2012, p. 16). Tracing the genre as far back as the sixteenth century with the

publication of broadsides and chapbooks, Morris (2012) presents a historical timeline which also locates such stories in British literature and European immigrant stories from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as works from the Harlem Renaissance, civil rights era, and hip-hop movement. As Morris (2012) claims, street survival stories have an extensive past which reflects the “historicity of inner-city living” (p. 16). Although contemporary stories focus primarily on African American and Latino inner-city characters, such narratives are not exclusive in this respect (Morris, 2012).

Similarly, Marcou (2012) argues that contemporary street fiction has a “rich, deep history” (para. 1) and provides a list of early literary influences. These include British and American novels (1722-1969) such as *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (Defoe, 1722), *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (Crane, 1893), *The Jungle* (Sinclair, 1906), *Native Son* (Wright, 1940), *Blood on the Forge* (Attaway, 1944), *Manchild in the Promised Land* (Brown, 1965), *Howard Street* (Heard, 1969), and *The Godfather* (Puzo, 1969). Also, like Morris (2012), Marcou (2012) cites black pulp fiction and hip-hop as important influences which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Other genres he identifies as noteworthy are street toasts (1930s), which are described as “narrative pre-rap poems told on corners and in prisons” (para. 3); Stagger Lee ballads (1800s); pulp magazines (1882); and pulp paperbacks (1950s). Hence, just as Morris (2012) argues that contemporary street fiction has a lengthy history, Marcou (2012) contends the origins are expansive and should be further explored.

While Marcou (2012) and Morris (2012) take a broad genealogical approach, much scholarship draws attention to contemporary street fiction’s largely African American authorship and audience and its focus on the harsh realities of lower-income African American urban life in characterizing the genre (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Foxworth, 2005; Hill et al., 2008; Morris et

al., 2006; Newhouse, 2010; Nishikawa, 2010; Rosen, 2010). Prefaced by race and class, this narrower focus presents black pulp fiction and hip-hop culture as significant in the development of the genre. The ghetto realistic fiction novels of Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim) and Donald Goines and Blaxploitation films emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as responses to the Civil Rights Movement's failure to address the problems afflicting America's inner-city communities (Nishikawa, 2010). These genres popularized the concepts of African American culture and vice in U.S. commodified culture as seen in contemporary street fiction (Ongiri, 2010). Also, various scholars such as Bragg and Ikard (2014), Dunbar (2013), Dunn (2012), Graaff (2013), Hill et al. (2008), Marshall et al. (2009), Morris (2006, 2012) have recognized the ways in which contemporary street fiction capitalizes on the language, dance, music, fashion and attitudes of commercialized hip-hop culture as well as the systemic inequalities and values it presents. As a result, the connections between black pulp fiction, hip-hop culture and contemporary street fiction are difficult to ignore. In the remainder of this section, I discuss key aspects of contemporary street fiction as they relate to broadsides and chapbooks, literary naturalism, black pulp fiction and hip-hop. In addition, given the ways in which slave narratives raised awareness about the atrocities of slavery and Newgate novels gave attention to the contradictions surrounding the justice system, I also include them in my discussion of key aspects of contemporary street fiction and selected influences.

### Key Aspects of Contemporary Street Fiction

As discussed in the overview of contemporary street fiction's origins, such texts have drawn from a plethora of influences. In this section, I focus on those influences which parallel the publishing, determinism and moral ambiguity, and systemic inequalities and values of contemporary street fiction. I begin by discussing the unconventional techniques used by

publishers of broadsides and chapbooks and writers of contemporary street fiction who are unable to garner mainstream book deals. Next, I explain the concepts of determinism and moral ambiguity, the former of which has been associated with the literary naturalism that emerged in the United States in the 1890s. However, because determinism is presented in popular forms that come before and after literary naturalism, I define determinism and discuss literary naturalism before moving to earlier (i.e., slave narratives and Newgate novels) and later popular culture forms (i.e., black pulp fiction) and contemporary street fiction. Finally, I discuss the ways in which contemporary street fiction incorporates the systemic inequalities and values hip-hop culture embraces.

### **Unconventional Publishing Techniques**

Contemporary street fiction draws from the strategies used to publish broadsides and chapbooks and the ways in which publishers distributed such material in order to reach their audiences. Published from the sixteenth until the nineteenth centuries, broadsides and chapbooks captured England's street culture with news and stories about the everyday lives and interests of common folk (Collison, 1973; Morris, 2012; Shepard, 1973). Broadsides were single sheets of uncut paper with text printed on one side that buyers would post on the walls of alehouses, farms, cottages, and city streets (Collison, 1973; Shepard, 1973). Similar to posters, these sheets included material such as proclamations, ballads or woodcut drawings and, as Shepard (1973) points out, sometimes all three. Chapbooks also consisted of single sheets of uncut paper, but in this case the paper was folded into small 24-page pamphlets (Collison, 1973; Shepard, 1973). Akin to "do-it-yourself" books (Shepard, 1973, p. 26), such pamphlets typically focused on a central narrative and showcased a variety of literary forms such as "poetry, songs, fiction, history, folklore, ghosts, and marvels" (p. 28). Accessible in terms of affordability and increasing

literacy rates among the lower classes in sixteenth century England, these publications served the common folk well by appealing to their reading tastes and sensibilities (Shepard, 1973).

Publishers of broadsides and chapbooks were intimately familiar with such preferences and utilized unconventional strategies similar to those used by contemporary street fiction writers to reach their audiences.

For example, Collison (1973) explains that buyers of broadsides and chapbooks were uncritical of the literature's phonetic spelling, simple layouts and crude illustrations and more concerned with content. Accordingly, prior to expiration of the British Licensing Act in 1695 which ended censorship of the press, many broadsides and chapbooks were published by illegal presses. However, after expiration of the act, competition in the broadside and chapbook trade increased (Shepard, 1973). Such publications were sold by chapmen and patterers (Collison, 1973). Chapmen sold chapbooks and a variety of other cheap items along the countryside or on street corners (Collison, 1973). According to Shepard (1973), the term *chap* was a phonetic spelling for the word *cheap*. Thus, chapmen sold a variety of inexpensive items on the countryside. Broadsides, however, were sold by patterers, who would "come bawling through the streets, clutching a sheaf of broadsides...hot from the press, just like the newspaper sellers of modern times" (Shepard, 1973, p. 21). For consumers of broadsides and chapbooks, "the street" characterized content as well as production and distribution. In fact, Cottenet (2013) contends that broadsides and chapbooks have been referred to as "street literature" for "the *locus* where it was sold by peddlars [*sic*] and rogues, in quite a similar manner to the ways in which contemporary American street lit' is sold" (para. 3).

Similarly, although a lack of literary quality has been noted in many novels, contemporary street fiction continues to thrive (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Graaff, 2013; Hill et al.,

2008). Scholars seem to accept a non-literary coding when it comes to these texts. According to Marshall et al. (2009), contemporary street fiction “is less a literary than a social phenomenon” (p. 30). “Unlike most successful book movements, including mainstream urban fiction,” as Hill et al. (2008) assert, “the street fiction genre has thrived without the support of mainstream publishing houses” (p. 77). Contemporary street fiction writers are often limited to self-publishing or the use of independent publishers such as Triple Crown and Teri Woods (Hill et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2009). Both of these companies, which focus on the genre exclusively, were started by contemporary street fiction writers after repeated rejections of their work by mainstream publishers (“About Teri Wood Publishing,” 2013; Stringer & McPherson, 2005). Despite limited access to mainstream publishing opportunities, Hill et al. (2008) and McClellan (2011) note that writers have been extremely successful in selling their narratives through venues such as independent bookstores, the Internet, barbershops, beauty salons, flea markets, street vendors, and churches. Even though writers have begun to secure mainstream book deals, the success of the genre has emerged from the ingenuity of writers and discussions among consumers.

### **Deterministic Environments and Morally Ambiguous Characters**

In addition to drawing from the strategies used by publishers of broadsides and chapbooks, contemporary street fiction embraces the concepts of determinism and morally ambiguous characters. Determinism, as defined by Walcutt (1956), is “the idea that natural law and socioeconomic influences are more powerful than the human will” (p. 20). Determinism speaks to the extent to which characters can (or cannot) act on their own behalf. From this philosophical position, individuals in deterministic environments exist in worlds that permit a limited range of possible identities (Mitchell, 1989). Because the limited options afforded these

individuals or characters often involve behaviors that blur the lines between good and evil or criminal and hero, characters are also often considered to be morally ambiguous or contradictory (Christian, 2011; Grossman, 2002). In the sub-sections that follow, I present literary naturalism, slave narratives, Newgate novels, and black pulp fiction as influences of contemporary street fiction which exhibit determinism and moral ambiguity.

**Literary naturalism.** Contemporary street fiction draws from literary naturalism which deals with the ways in which the forces of heredity and environment afflict the lives of “lower-class, marginal characters” within “urban, industrialized America” (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013, p. 567). A response to technological advances and the rise of urban culture, literary naturalism emerged with the arrival of new European immigrants in northern American cities such as New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and lasted until the 1940s (Giles, 1995; Lehan, 1984). These new immigrants, who “had little history with democratic government,” were from southern and eastern Europe “where people had grown accustomed to cringing before despotism and where opportunities for advancement were few” (Kennedy & Cohen, 2013, p. 543). American naturalist writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and James Farrell characterized inner-city areas wherein large numbers of immigrants became concentrated as “dangerous and exotic ‘internal colonies’” which threatened the stability and order of the middle-class (Giles, 1995, p. 3). As Kennedy and Cohen (2013) assert, these writers were interested in depicting the impact of harsh inner-city conditions on human behavior and addressing middle class anxieties concerning inner-city slums and ghettos as America transitioned from an agricultural to an urban economy.

Naturalist writers positioned characters in environments that were deterministic and extremely limited when it comes choice and agency. According to Kennedy and Cohen (2013),

such writers positioned characters in environments “where they were subject to the cruel operations of brute instinct, degenerate heredity, and pessimistic determinism” (p. 567). Pessimistic determinism, as Walcutt (1956) explains, “expresses resignation or even despair” towards one’s ability to control his or her environment” (p. 24). Thus, Mitchell (1989) argues that naturalists “depicted the ways in which ‘agency’ itself is constructed only after the fact” (p. xi). For example, in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893/2012), the white female protagonist “does choose the bartender Pete, but only because he *is* the closest thing to a knight to be found in the degraded environment in which she is trapped” (Giles, 1995, p. 11). Maggie fears the other men in her Rum Alley environment. Consequently, characters in naturalist novels are both agents and victims to the extent that human will is limited to the options defined by the harsh inner-city contexts in which they live.

In the 1940s, at the close of the Harlem Renaissance, African American authors such as Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Chester Himes extended naturalism to the African American literary tradition (Morris, 2012). These writers used their works to address discourses regarding American blacks’ acculturation and negotiation of city life during the Great Northern Migration (Morris, 2012). As Christian explains, for many blacks, the inner-city became “the concrete plantations of the North...an extension of the slave/plantation/master system wherein the master changes faces and ‘space’” (as cited in Henderson, 2002, p. 114). To this statement, Henderson (2002) adds, these areas became “the new neo-slavery condition...the vehicle by which millions of urban dwellers are made cognizant of their black skin, and subsequently their disenfranchisement” (p. 114). Choice, Giles (1995) argues, is often severely limited or not possible at all in the African American naturalist novels which emerged during this period. Such pessimistic determinism can be observed in the characterizations of Bigger Thomas in Richard



Wright's *Native Son* (1940/2005) and Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946/2004).

Heredity and environment are forces which lead these characters to disastrous fates.

It is important to note that determinism, as the central philosophy of naturalism, has also been the focus of debate. At the center of this debate is the degree of determinism a novel must show in order to be considered naturalistic. The rationale behind this frame of thought is that those works which present the most pessimism when it comes to characters' ability to control their environments fall within the tradition of literary naturalism. For this reason, Clark (1992) argues that Petry's *The Street* (1946/2004) is not a naturalist novel because the peripheral characters Mrs. Hedges and Min challenge the concept of determinism by reconfiguring the American Dream to meet their socioeconomic and emotional needs and thus carve out existences for themselves despite limited opportunities. However, Walcutt (1956) reconciles this debate with his conceptualization of optimistic determinism which deals with the "affirmation of progress—of man's ability through science to control his environment" (p. 23). Optimism comes with a novel's ability to move readers to action or reform efforts, a notion which raises questions about the possibilities naturalist novels present in terms of reading as an experience of pleasure and affirmation of issues afflicting the lived experiences and social realities of marginalized characters (Walcutt, 1956).

In drawing on the tradition of literary naturalism, contemporary street fiction employs the concept of determinism through the ways in which characters, environment and dominant discourses become forces in the battle to control human will. As with early twentieth century texts, the inner-city in contemporary street-based narratives is both an alluring and dangerous place "where containment as a crisis founded in the inability to sustain the traditional authority of European-based value systems" (Forman, 2002, p. 50) becomes significant. While Howard

notes that European immigrants were transformed into personifications of the foreign, exotic Other by middle class Americans and naturalist writers (as cited in Giles, 1995, p. 3), contemporary street fiction writers have appropriated the naturalist text and exploited otherness (Castillo-Garsow, 2012). The socio-economic disparities within inner-city communities draw attention to the affluence of the larger society to which contemporary street fiction characters have limited or no access and the lack of resources within inner-city neighborhoods (Castillo-Garsow, 2012, Urban Marginalization section, para. 2). Rather than passively accept the boundaries forced upon them, characters embrace marginality and rely on an “alternative value system in terms of employment, relationships, and life outlook” (Castillo-Garsow, 2012, Urban Marginalization section, para. 6). Even as texts employ “popular and stereotypical representations” of African American culture (Marshall et al., 2009), they also challenge such images and present a value system which affords the attainment of economic success and opportunities (Castillo-Garsow, 2012). Such notions of determinism are central to its success.

**Slave narratives.** Although slave narratives predate literary naturalism, these stories are deterministic in that social circumstances severely limit human will. As Townsend (2010) explains, “Many antebellum slave narratives present a prose portrait of a happy childhood until the slaves come to a realization early on that they are slaves for life” (p. 1422). Told by those who had escaped slavery or ghost writers, slave narratives are autobiographical texts which recount such realizations and the atrocities suffered under this brutal institution (Nelson, 2015). Similar to the ways in which contemporary street fiction raises awareness of the circumstances which determine the lives of its characters, slave narratives informed readers of the disenfranchisement and atrocities suffered under slavery.

In particular, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Brent, 1861) raises awareness of the sexual politics of slavery which often determined the lives of female slaves. In this narrative, Jacobs recounts how her master, Dr. Flint, until his death pressured her to become his mistress. However, rather than consent to Flint's pressure voluntarily or through force, Jacobs refuses and, in order to protect herself, enters into a relationship with Mr. Sands, a neighboring slave owner with whom she later has two children, Benny and Ellen. Angered by Jacobs's relationship with Sands, Flint sends Jacobs to his plantation to work in the fields and threatens to do the same to her children. As a result, Jacobs hides in the attic floor of her grandmother's home for seven years in hopes that Flint will think she has run away and sell her children. Eventually, Flint unknowingly sells Benny and Ellen to a slave trader representing Sands, and Jacobs is able to escape.

Jacobs directly addresses her desire to raise awareness and the concept of moral ambiguity in the narrative. Specifically, she explains that she wishes to "arouse the women of the north."

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the north to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. (Brent, 1861, Preface, para. 3)

Later in the text, she addresses moral ambiguity when she describes the conflict she experiences from entering into a relationship with Mr. Sands.

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated

tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others. (Brent, 1861, Chapter 10, para. 6).

Jacobs's attempt to inform women of the north about the lives of female slaves and her description of the ways in which slavery has shaped her life and led to behavior which blurred the lines between moral and immoral situate *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a text which illustrates determinism and moral ambiguity.

Similarly, contemporary street fiction gives attention to social issues in contemporary society and moral ambiguity. Contemporary street fiction novels present vivid accounts of scenes that involve human trafficking, sexual abuse in the foster care system, prostitution, rape and other violent acts towards women and children. In addition, passages similar to those presented by Jacobs are found in contemporary texts. In Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), comments made by Winter Santiago, the female protagonist, blur the lines between criminal and hero as it relates to drug dealers when she states:

...the drug dealers helped America to be rich. If it wasn't for us, who would buy the fly cars, butter leathers, and the jewelry? We put so much money into circulation. More than them little nickel-and-dime paying taxpayers. We employed half the men in the ghettos. Nobody else gave them jobs. (p. 118)

Through Winter's character, Pough (2004) argues, "Sister Souljah...forces us to acknowledge at least part of the contradictory relationship between the United States and drugs" which "brings to light the very real implications of the joblessness that plagues America's inner cities and a reason why some feel the need to lead a life of crime" (pp. 146-147).

Both slave narratives and contemporary street fiction bring awareness to social issues. Slave narratives raise awareness about the atrocities of slavery, and contemporary street fiction

raises awareness about a range of issues in contemporary society, many of which impact the lives of women and children. Both genres complicate dominant discourses surrounding traditional ideas related to womanhood and those who live in low-income urban communities. The complexities presented in these narratives which lead characters to make decisions challenge dichotomies such as moral/immoral. Each provides voice and agency to historically marginalized groups who use their narratives to insert their experience in larger societal discourses across intersections of race, gender and class.

**Newgate novels.** Newgate fiction is a form of British popular literature that also illustrates determinism and moral ambiguity. Newgate novels were a type of popular crime fiction that emerged in the 1830s and 1840s. Identified as *Newgate* because of references to famous criminals and trials reported in Newgate anthologies, these novels romanticized criminality and were critical of capital punishment and institutions such as the State, the Church and the press that supported it (Christian, 2011; Grossman, 2002). Told by third-person omniscient narrators and written by authors such as Edward Bulwer, W. H. Ainsworth, and Charles Dickens, Newgate novels were labeled by critics as controversial for, like contemporary street fiction, blurring the lines between good/evil and criminal/hero (Christian, 2011; Grossman, 2002). Such novels were also deterministic because they showed how criminality was produced by heredity and environment rather than innate character flaws.

In Edward Bulwer's *Paul Clifford* (1830/2011), various circumstances force Paul, the protagonist, into a life of crime. When he is three, his mother dies and he is taken in by Margery Lobkins, who runs a house frequented by a range of questionable characters. When Paul becomes a young man, he is falsely accused of stealing a watch and sentenced to prison where he begins his path to becoming a criminal. Paul escapes prison and meets Lucy—the niece of the

prominent lawyer who has accused Paul of stealing his watch—eventually marries her, and for a time tries to become respectable. However, in his attempt to do so, he is caught robbing carriages as he tries to raise money to go to the military and is found guilty. Surprisingly, before he is sentenced to death, he discovers that Lucy’s uncle, who also presides over his trial, is his father, and instead of receiving a death sentence, he is transported to Australia.

In *Paul Clifford*, Bulwer (1830/2011) depicts Paul as a character whose circumstances determine his fate. Clifton points to contradictions surrounding the penal system:

First, to draw attention to two errors in our penal institutions; namely, a vicious prison-discipline, and a sanguinary criminal code,—the habit of corrupting the boy by the very punishment that ought to redeem him, and then hanging the man at the first occasion, as the easiest way of getting rid of our own blunders. (as cited in Bulwar, 1830/2011, Preface, para. 2)

Clifton is referring to Paul’s first prison experience which encourages, rather than deters, him to become a criminal (Bulwer, 1830/2011). As Grossman (2002) explains, Bulwer’s use of a third-person omniscient narrator who “inadequately” condemns Paul’s criminality and the contradictions which emerge create sympathy for Paul (p. 138). The forces within his environment prove to overpower his desire to be an upstanding citizen.

Similarly, the contemporary street fiction novel *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2011) is told by a third-person omniscient narrator who recounts the story of ten-year-old Liberty and twelve-year-old A’shai, who are captured and transported by the cargo ship *Murderville* from Sierra Leone, West Africa, to Mexico. Once the two reach Mexico, Liberty is sold into prostitution, but A’shai is adopted by Baron, a drug kingpin from Detroit, Michigan, and his wife after he rescues Willow from an attempted rape. Baron and Willow provide A’shai with a stable home and a college education. However, the narrator points out that peace and

serenity remain foreign to him. The biological son of a rebel leader and later the adopted son a drug kingpin, violence and destruction are all he knows. As the narrator states:

Peace was foreign to him. In his twenty-five years he had never known serenity. His childhood had been filled with mass murders and brutality. Make money, not friends: it was the mentality that had been drilled into his head. He had learned how to shoot a pistol long before he had learned to shoot a jump shot. Growing up in Sierra Leone he had no childhood; all he knew was money and destruction. It was the same thought pattern that had allowed him to survive and make a name for himself in the States. He was the epitome of the American dream. If he was white, he would have been a businessman, but with skin as dark as mahogany he felt his rightful place was on the throne as the king of the streets. (p. 7)

Like Paul, A'shai is lured into a life of crime by his circumstances.

Newgate novels focus on real crimes and trace events which lead to an individual's incarceration, whereas contemporary street fiction provides fictionalized accounts of criminal activities situated in actual urban areas and alternative examinations for certain characters' choices to embrace the illegal economy. While Newgate novels seek to explain the actions of its characters, contemporary street fiction explores discourses surrounding the characters' choices by providing readers with multidimensional narratives told from various points of view. Although Newgate novels and contemporary street fiction have been criticized for romanticizing crime, they both illustrate that criminality is complex.

**Black pulp fiction.** In general, the term pulp fiction refers to a form of popular literature which employed the use of cheap pulpwood paper. This literary form emerged in the 1860s with the publication of penny dreadfuls and dime novels and continued from the 1930s to the 1950s with the publication of pulp fiction novels (Radtke & Fisher, 2012; Server, 2009). Pulp fiction offered to U.S. mass culture popular literature that was affordable (Radtke & Fisher, 2012; Server, 2009). Early forms provided escape and presented sensational material which focused on stories about the historical frontier, sea stories and war (Server, 2009; Wisneski, 2004). Later

works were also “rife with the usual low brow, sensational material” and included “street crime, brutal violence, graphic sex, drug abuse, and vulgar language” (Campbell, 2005, p. 92).

However, as a subgenre of standard pulp, *black* pulp fiction explores “the subculture of the black urban poor” and expressions of “black ghetto hustling culture” (Campbell, 2005, p. 92). It is with black pulp that ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation films are often associated and identified by various scholars as precursors to contemporary street fiction (Campbell, 2005; Dietzel, 2004; Marcou, 2012; Morris, 2012; Nishikawa, 2010; Norris & Tyree, 2014).

In order to understand the significance of ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation to contemporary street fiction, it is important to examine the historical context within which these art forms emerged. Ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation surfaced around the time Black Power ideology took center stage in the larger society. A response to the ineffectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement to address issues afflicting inner-city communities, Black Power was a notion first uttered in 1966 by Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (Ongiri, 2010). During participation in “The March Against Fear,” the two declared the need for “black power” through economic independence and cultural self-determination (Ongiri, 2010). Accompanied by media attention given to inner-city riots and Black Power ideology, which also designated poor urban communities as sites for social revolution, this call sparked interest in African American culture within the larger society (Ongiri, 2010). The Black Panther Party, as Ongiri (2010) explains, capitalized on this attention and garnered its own with calls for black men to recover black masculinity and protect the black community. Along these same lines, the Black Arts Movement’s “search to define the contours of a discrete Black aesthetic” called for separate cultural spaces where black people could construct images of themselves and their experiences in art (Ongiri, 2010, p. 7). These



movements aimed to define African American culture as the larger society worked to capitalize on those representations and ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation operated within the parameters of both. Hence, Ongiri (2010) points out that ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation emerged as African American culture became popular in the larger society and helped to prove that such images were commercially viable.

Ghetto realistic fiction. Published from the 1930s until the 1970s, ghetto realistic fiction as a subgenre of black pulp gained considerable popularity during the late 1960s with the narratives of Robert Beck (Iceberg Slim) and Donald Goines. These writers focused primarily on the lives of African American males struggling to overcome the structural inequalities of urban life (Dietzel, 2004; Nishikawa, 2010). As a response to urban deindustrialization and American's ghettos becoming sites of concentrated poverty, unemployment, and violence, their work featured the stories of black characters as pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers, gangsters, thieves, and conmen (Campbell, 2005; Nishikawa, 2010). Beck and Goines, who had both experienced incarceration and street culture as pimps and drug addicts, responded to the tumultuous climate of the 1960s with narratives that chronicled the social issues and harsh circumstances within the inner-city that led its inhabitants to choose lives of crime. As a result, Ongiri (2010) asserts Beck and Goines helped to characterize African American vice as an authentic representation of African American urban lower-class culture.

An aspect of ghetto realistic fiction that contemporary street fiction embraces is the notion of the "double-bind effect" (Campbell, 2005). Similar to literary naturalism's determinism, the double-bind effect deals with the limited choices faced by those living in the inner-city. Goode provides an explanation of the concept that is based on his analysis of Goines's novels:

The overall theme of the Goines corpus, however, seems to be that the ghetto life of the underprivileged black produces a frustrating, dangerous double bind effect. One has two choices, neither wholly desirable. One may settle for membership in the ghetto's depressed, poverty-stricken silent majority, or opt for dangerous ghetto stardom. Goines' characters do the latter; they become pimps, prostitutes, pushers, numbers operators, thieves, gangsters, and contract hit men. (as cited in Campbell, 2005, p. 94)

The frustration that characters of ghetto realistic fiction face is the inability to escape the ghetto. Like characters in contemporary street fiction, those in ghetto realistic fiction face limited choices when it comes to social mobility. Goode (as cited in Campbell, 2005) identifies these choices as poverty or crime, and as Quinn (2000) explains, images like that of the pimp come to represent "an icon of upward mobility for black working-class males" (p. 124).

In the semi-autobiographical ghetto realistic fiction novel *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (Beck, 1967), living in poverty leads Iceberg Slim to see the ghetto as a space he cannot escape through the limited opportunities afforded black men. As a result, he makes repeated references to the ghetto as a "black barbed-wire stockade" and "black concentration camp" and declares, "I'm going to pimp or die" (Beck, 1967, p. 78). According to Nishikawa (2010), Iceberg Slim's narrative presents "a vision of the potent manhood that was the precise counterpoint to the lack of control urban blacks felt in determining the course of their lives" (p. 5). For Slim, marginalization and poverty are the catalysts which lure him to become a pimp, an identity which he believes will give him control over his life. In addition to the financial benefits, becoming a pimp allows him to appropriate a representation of black masculinity and interpretation of the American Dream that permit some level of success. Through the pimp image, Slim is able to gain access to white society and earnestly believes that without such an identity moving beyond the ghetto is impossible.

In the novels written by Robert Beck and Donald Goines, ghetto realistic fiction presents narratives concerning the containment and limited opportunities experienced by inner-city blacks. With limited choices and agency, characters choose lives of crime. Such a lifestyle, although dangerous and usually short-lived, is preferable to abject poverty. Rather than be restricted by social boundaries and denied access to the American dream, characters believe criminality will amass a kind of financial freedom made impossible by the menial jobs typically offered to black men. While the pimp image has become commercialized by popular culture, ghetto realistic fiction, like contemporary street fiction, depicts the socioeconomic conditions which lead to such distorted lifestyles.

Blaxploitation. Blaxploitation is an early cinematic precursor to contemporary street fiction which appealed to African American audiences who were interested in seeing more empowering representations of African American culture in mainstream society (Campbell, 2005; Ongiri, 2010; Nishikawa, 2010). According to Demers (2003), “the term ‘blaxploitation’ is an elision of ‘black exploitation,’ referring to some two dozen B-rated films catering to African-American urban audiences between 1970 and 1979” (p. 42). Spawned by the film adaptation of Chester Himes’s *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Davis, 1970), the films presented images and symbols of Black culture to which Black audiences could relate (Demers, 2003; Hartmann, 1994; Ongiri, 2010). Set in the ghetto, these crime and suspense films featured action, comedy, drama, romance, and documentary (Walker, 2009). Creating a link between African American urban and visual culture, these films also glamorized crime as a means to escape the confinement and disparity of the inner-city (Demers, 2003).

Blaxploitation provided relief from the brutality blacks had experienced during the Civil Rights Movement, and according to Walker (2009), filmmakers capitalized on the anger and

frustration felt by the inner-city black community. Wlodarz (2004) argues that Blaxploitation depicts a reversal of the racial hierarchy wherein images of blackness become central. With the emergence of Blaxploitation, portrayals of African American characters changed from “shiftless, shameless, and embarrassing” to “proud, defiant heroes and antiheroes” (Hartmann, 1994, p. 104). Black audiences welcomed these “morally ambiguous anti-heroes,” who were often drug dealers, pimps, and hardened criminals (Walker, 2009, p. ix). Along with shifts in characterization, physical characteristics also changed. Complexions became darker with characters like John Shaft in Gordon Park’s film *Shaft* (1971), and audiences found the poise, confidence, speech and style of dress of these characters alluring (Walker, 2009). Such heroes exemplified “larger-than-life characters” who did not fear challenging the social order (Walker, 2009, p. ix), and the popularity of the films among African Americans rescued Hollywood studios by bringing black audiences to city theaters suffering from white flight (Walker, 2009).

Blaxploitation addressed many of the same socioeconomic issues depicted in contemporary street fiction through the backdrops which accompanied storylines. For example, in the film *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Davis, 1970), unemployed black males, drug use, and the desire for blacks in inner-city Harlem to achieve the American dream serve as the backdrop to a spectacle involving the chase to recover \$87,000 in stolen deposits paid by blacks hoping to relocate to Africa in order to escape poverty and disenfranchisement in the U.S. As novels such as Ashley and JaQuavis’s *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* (2011) and *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999) illustrate, unemployment, drug culture, and the desire to attain financial and material wealth are themes which also permeate contemporary street fiction narratives. In addition to spectacular representations of African American culture, these issues persist across ghetto realistic fiction, Blaxploitation and contemporary street fiction.

While the images in ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation were a capitalist re-inscription of stereotypes that came to be seen as authentic expressions of African American culture and affected how the larger society viewed the African American community, such depictions affirm the social realities of those living in lower-class urban environments during the post-civil rights era (Nishikawa, 2010; Ongiri, 2010). As such, understandings of authenticity go beyond the stereotypical and negative images for which ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation have been criticized. As Nishikawa (2010) states, racial authenticity “emerged as a critical mediator between notions of potent manhood and the material realities of life on the street” (p. 18). This definition brings attention to understandings of authenticity as it relates to discourses concerning African American urban identity, street sociality, and alternative systems of cultural values and economic rewards which affirmed the lack of control inner-city African Americans felt in determining their lives (Nishikawa, 2010; Ongiri, 2010).

Similar to the characters depicted in ghetto realistic fiction and Blaxploitation, contemporary street fiction’s characters view the use of crime to underwrite financial gain as their only real choice at power and prestige. Despite possibilities of incarceration, violence, and death, characters are enticed by the status and financial rewards the illegal economy of the street affords. Such lifestyles, although dangerous, intensely competitive, and usually short-lived, are preferable to containment and abject poverty. In ghetto realistic fiction, Blaxploitation, *and* contemporary street fiction, choosing a life of crime becomes the means to escape these circumstances.

### **Systemic Inequalities and Values**

**Hip-hop culture.** Analysis of contemporary street fiction reveals thematic and aesthetic connections which suggest a symbiotic relationship with hip-hop culture. While Hill et al.

(2008) report the inclusion of contemporary street fiction as a hip-hop cultural product has been contested, the strong ties between such texts and hip-hop have been widely recognized (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Dyson, 2004; Foxworth, 2005; Gibson, 2010; Horton-Stallings, 2003; Marshall et al., 2009; Meloni, 2007; Morris, 2006; Morris et al., 2006; Newhouse, 2010; Nishikawa, 2010; Rosen, 2004; Stovall, 2005; Wright, 2006). Morris (2006) punctuates this connection when she insists that contemporary street fiction is the fifth element of African American popular culture—that is, in addition to graffiti, break dancing, DJing and rap—through which hip-hop’s narrative is transmitted. According to Gibson (2009), such novels “capitalize on and pay homage to the stereotypic and popularized aspects of hip-hop culture” (p. 7). In effect, contemporary street fiction makes use of the fashion, dance, music, style, attitude, and aesthetics of hip-hop culture.

According to Morris (2006), hip-hop culture “exists in a world of poverty, crime, drugs, domestic violence, and low level public services in the manifestation of poor housing, lackluster municipal support and response, and inadequate public education” (p. 4). A phenomenon which also emerged from the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power culture, hip-hop began underground on the streets of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem, New York, to become, like Blaxploitation (Walker, 2009) and Motown (Early, 2004), a worldwide phenomenon (Price, 2006; Kitwana, 2002). Hip-hop culture sprang from the values and attitudes of African Americans born between 1965 and 1985, a generation “obsessed with careers and getting rich quick” and “the materialistic and consumer trappings of financial success” (Kitwana, 2002, p. 6). Thus, contemporary street fiction also incorporates the systemic inequalities and themes that have influenced hip-hop culture.

According to Kitwana (2002) systemic inequalities have shaped the hip-hop narrative and fueled hip-hop generationers' obsessions with materialism. As the author notes, the values and identities of black youth, once shaped by families, churches, and schools, are now transmitted through popular culture. Globalization, corporations, and the American Dream have ironically resulted in increased unemployment, reliance on the illegal drug trade, and incarceration (Kitwana, 2000). The effects of continued segregation have also produced limited employment, wage, and housing opportunities, while recent legislation has intensified sentencing inequalities and police brutality (Kitwana, 2002). Such inequalities, Kitwana (2002) explains, are further exacerbated by negative images of black culture in the media and the rates of poverty and unemployment among black youth. Because contemporary street fiction presents this hip-hop world view, Morris et al. (2006) argue that hip-hop is "the cultural progenitor of street lit" (p. 16).

At the same time that both contemporary street fiction and hip-hop culture affirm the systemic inequalities faced by inner-city youth, they also convey similar values. Contemporary street fiction and hip-hop culture glamorize the lifestyles of hip-hop celebrities (Morris, 2006). Male and female characters, like hip-hop celebrities, are greatly concerned with acquiring prestige and material wealth (Kitwana, 2002; Morris et al., 2006; Pough, 2004). Such materialism has become a way to check their authenticity and dedication to "keeping it real" (Pough, 2004). Like those of the hip-hop generation, contemporary street fiction's characters rely "on physical appearance and material things for an image, without which they feel less than worthy" (Pough, 2004, p. 147). In addition, both hip-hop culture and contemporary street fiction convey values of nihilism, misogyny, homophobia, physical abuse towards women and violence (Brooks & Savage, 2009). However, Dunbar (2013) argues that hip-hop and contemporary street

fiction as they relate to these values are spaces “in which women are neither absent or completely destroyed” (p. 92). Both are sites where contradictions are negotiated and renegotiated (Dunbar, 2013).

According to Beavers (2009), depictions of African American female characters in black popular culture challenge negative representations of black womanhood along with the belief that popular fiction lacks aspects of resistance. Black female rappers like Queen Latifah have rejected terms like “bitch” and “ho” (Collins, 2005). For example, in the lyrics to Queen Latifah’s rap song “U.N.I.T.Y.,” she threatens to bring wrath to men who use such terms to refer to women and asks, “Who you calling a bitch?”

Everytime I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho  
Trying to make a sister feel low  
You know all of that gots to go  
Now everybody knows there's exceptions to this rule  
Now don't be getting mad, when we playing, it's cool  
But don't you be calling out my name  
I bring wrath to those who disrespect me like a dame  
That's why I'm talking, one day I was walking down the block  
I had my cutoff shorts on right cause it was crazy hot  
I walked past these dudes when they passed me  
One of 'em felt my booty, he was nasty  
I turned around red, somebody was catching the wrath  
Then the little one said (Yeah me bitch) and laughed  
Since he was with his boys he tried to break fly  
Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said "Who you calling a bitch?"  
("U.N.I.T.Y. Lyrics," 2015)

Similarly, while Marshall et al. (2009) point out that street fiction, as a form of Black popular culture, draws on popular and stereotypical representations of Black culture, they also note how the main character in Styles’s *Black and Ugly* (2006) “make[s] visible and seek[s] to rework stereotypes about Blackness and beauty” (p. 32). According to Marshall et al. (2009), throughout *Black and Ugly* (Styles, 2006), the reader follows Parade Knight’s progression from self-loathing



to racial pride, from thinking that she is ‘black and ugly’ to knowing that she is ‘black and beautiful’” (Styles, as cited in Marshall et al., 2009, p. 32). In this manner, both hip-hop culture and contemporary street fiction utilize and reconstruct those aspects of popular culture that are oppressive to women.

As I consider the relationship between the selected influences discussed in this section and contemporary street fiction, various concepts come to mind: conflict, stereotypes, contradictions, limited choices, blurred distinctions, inequality, negotiation, resistance, agency, commercialization, and profit to name a few. As I review these concepts, I think that popular culture is varied, vibrant and fluid, addressing larger societal issues in local contexts and simultaneously exploiting and complicating what is familiar. I conclude that what contemporary street fiction has drawn from these origins in its use of unconventional publishing techniques, determinism and moral ambiguity, and systemic inequalities and values is rooted in the relations which shape social position and situated knowledge. In the next section, I discuss my theoretical framework as it relates to the concepts of social position and situated knowledge followed by a review of studies that are relevant to this project.

### Theoretical Framework

In my effort to investigate the ways in which social position and situated knowledge informed the meaning-making processes of African American women as they engaged with contemporary street fiction, I drew from reader response and feminist standpoint theories. Reader response theories deal with how readers engage with texts and interpret meaning for themselves. However, Bender-Slack (2009) and Flynn (1991) argue that such theories do not give enough attention to the relationship between social position (e.g., race, class, and gender) and reader engagement. Because I argue that social position and situated knowledge are essential to

engagement of contemporary street fiction among the African American women who participated in this study, I also drew from feminist standpoint theories, which assert that knowledge is always socially situated and that the achievement of standpoints requires the articulation of situated knowledge through collective interaction and dialogue (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2004; O'Brien Hallstein, 2000). Specifically, I used reader response and feminist standpoint theories to explore how African American women participating in a book club incorporate understandings of their social positions into their responses to contemporary street fiction.

### **Reader Response Theories**

Reader response theories assert that reading is an active process, a transaction between text and reader, which gives rise to an aesthetic experience (Rosenblatt, 1994). As Rosenblatt (1994) explains, an aesthetic experience occurs when “the reader of any text must actively draw upon past experience and call forth the ‘meaning’ from the coded symbols” (p. 22). Rosenblatt’s (1994) conceptualization of the reader-text transaction is the foundational tenet upon which theorists have proposed theories concerning readers’ responses to texts. Early theorists such as Iser (1974) have given attention to the use of imagination to fill gaps in reading. Fish (1970) has focused on the informed reader who is skilled in describing and analyzing what happens during the reader-text transaction. Holland (1975) has dealt with the ways in which our interpretations align with our personalities. In order to explain Rosenblatt’s (1994) conceptualization of the reader-text transaction, these theorists have pointed to resources from which hypothetical readers might draw.

Although reader response theories, in general, do not give enough attention to how actual readers encounter texts, Bleich (1980) and Sumara (1996) have presented understandings of the

transactional process that I find useful. In his concern for the patterns and motives which emerge as readers engage with texts, Bleich (1980) recognizes the significance of subjective experience. Readers articulate responses and through “communally motivated negotiative comparison” identify similarities (p. 135). For this reason, Bleich (1980) argues that the purposes, motives, and feelings of the reader are the starting points for the study of aesthetic experience and a space from which knowledge “can be synthesized on behalf of oneself and one’s community rather than something to be acquired” (p. 136). Furthermore, Bleich argues:

...response cannot be one particular object or thing that each person produces as just another learning activity; rather, it is an expression of, and declaration of, self in a local context reflecting a set of local choices, motives, and interests in knowledge. (p.158)

I find this useful because Bleich assumes that readers can articulate purposes, motives, and feelings and be heard. Agency and interaction, as described in Bleich’s (1980) model of reader response, are useful for my study and speak to my third research question: How do readers of contemporary street fiction situate themselves in their discussions of such texts?

I also find Sumara’s (1996) ideas concerning reading as embodied action useful. Central to his discussion is the notion that what we know develops from our interactions with others. According to Sumara (1996), “our experience collects in a physiological body, which has a prior history of learning” (p. 103). Because we cannot escape our history of interactions, he explains that “to know something is to know through a body that exists historically, temporally, and relationally in a world” (Sumara, 1995, p. 100). In addition, he focuses on the ways in which shared reading can lead to insight and understandings of self and others, for if we change the organizational structure of reading, we can alter the identities of readers and texts and the reading experience. Although I find Sumara’s use of the term “embodied” to describe the ways in which readers engage with texts useful, I extend his conceptualization of embodiment to include the

roles of race, gender, and class in readers' engagement with texts and use feminist standpoint theories to help me understand how understandings of these social positions shape readers' responses to contemporary street fiction.

Reader response criticism is closely tied to reading experiences in classrooms. For this reason, researchers interested in contemporary street fiction have tied engagement to classroom practice. Gibson (2009, 2010), Brooks and Savage (2009) and Sutherland (2002), scholars who have studied African American adolescent girls' and young adult women's engagement with contemporary street fiction, have drawn from reader response theories in organizing their research. Gibson (2009, 2010) utilized reader response theories to investigate contemporary street fiction's appeal to adolescent African American girls and the ways in which they processed controversial images and issues and found that students demonstrated literary strengths when given the opportunity to express themselves freely. Using Beach's (1993) five theoretical perspectives, Brooks and Savage (2009) investigated the nuances of readers' responses to contemporary street fiction based on reviews posted to *Amazon.com* and identified analyzing the variety of forms in which readers' interpretations occur and discussing novels in out-of-school contexts where fewer restrictions guide solicitation of interpretations as areas for future research. Sutherland (2002) used a reader-text-context model as part of her theoretical framework and concluded that meaning-making in school contexts was limited by teacher control, possibly imposed by curricular demands and school discourses in ways that leisure reading was not.

Based on the theories of Bleich (1980) and Sumara (1980) and the studies conducted by Gibson (2009), Brooks and Savage (2009), and Sutherland (2002), I found agency and interaction as characteristics that were useful to my study. Both agency and interaction are central to feminist standpoint theory. In the discussion that follows, I focus on the development

of feminist standpoint theories as an epistemological and methodological approach along with relevant research which highlights the use of such theories as a theoretical framework.

### **Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory has origins in Hegel's description of the master-slave dialectic, wherein the slave is "cognitively advantaged" (as cited in Cameron, 2005, p. 21). Although the master and slave operate within the same social realm, their understandings of reality differ due to their different positions within the social hierarchy (Smith, 1987; Zaytseva, 2010). According to Hegel (1977), the bondsman (slave), who occupies a subordinate position of power, produces through labor objects desired by the lord (master). The slave's independent self-consciousness depends upon understanding his relationship to the object the master desires (Hegel, 1977). As Hegel explains (1977), "Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to only have an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own" (pp. 118-119). However, such understanding is not reciprocated by the master in that he organizes and benefits from the objects he desires and needs the slave to produce (Hartsock, 1983). For this reason, the slave's "double consciousness"—or "heightened awareness not only of their own lives but of the lives of the dominant group" (Brooks, 2006, p. 63) and potential for the "realization of self-consciousness through struggle against the master" (Bowell, 2014, Historical Roots section, para. 1)—gives him an epistemic advantage.

Marx, Engels, and Lukács build upon Hegel's work with their focus on class relations between the ruling class and proletariat (Ellis & Fopp, 2001; Harding, 1993; Smith, 1987). According to Cameron (2005), Marx used Hegel's work as the foundation for his discussions concerning the standpoint of the working class. Based on the ruling class-proletariat relationship

as it pertains to class division and exploitation, Marx and Engels (1975c) argue that the labor of the proletariat sustains the power structure, resulting in the working class's subordinate position and alienation (p. 36). For this reason, Marx and Engels make a distinction between labor and work (as cited in Ellis & Fopp, 2001). Labor is a means to maintain physical existence (Marx and Engels, 1975b, p. 276), while work is purposeful, free activity which is reduced under capitalism to labor (Marx & Engels, 1975a, p. 988). Like Marx and Engels, Lukács also focuses on the standpoint of the proletariat but sees the potential for empowerment in the worker becoming conscious of his position as crucial to the economic process (Lukács, 1971, p. 187), a notion which is key to my analysis of African American women's engagement with contemporary street fiction.

In particular, feminist standpoint theory builds on Marx's criticism of class relations by focusing on the "epistemological consequences" which emerge from the claim that men's and women's realities are structurally different (Harding, 2004, p. 36). Hartsock attempted to "make women present" in Marx's theory by focusing on women's common experience of oppression in patriarchal culture (as cited in O'Brien Hallstein, 2000, *Where is Feminist Standpoint Theory Now?* section, para. 2). In her 1983 article, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," Hartsock coins the term "feminist standpoint theory" and argues that, as the labor of the proletariat sustains the superiority of the ruling class, the activities of women sustain the supremacy of men. In addition, Hartsock (1983) presents five "epistemological and political claims" which characterize a standpoint:

- (1) Material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations.
- (2) If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse.
- (3) The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations

in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false. (4) In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations. (5) As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role. (p. 285)

Based on Hartsock's (1983) characterization, understanding the social relations which structure material life (i.e., social position) is central to the potentially liberatory visions—that is, standpoints—available to oppressed groups. Hartsock (1983) also assumes agency, the ability of oppressed individuals “to see beneath the surface of social relations,” and activism, “the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations.” Agency and activism co-joined with understanding are also key to my study.

Similarly, O'Brien Hallstein (2000) argues that standpoints develop through active, political resistance and collective interaction and dialogue. Feminist standpoint theory asserts that the distinct position of women allows a “double vision” of their own knowledge and that of the dominant culture with regard to what it means to be female (O'Brien Hallstein, 2000, *Where is Feminist Standpoint Theory Now?* section, para. 5). It is this vision which presents the opportunity to engage with situated knowledge, which is knowledge that arises from the social positions we occupy in society (O'Brien Hallstein, 2000). The concept of a double vision permits women to retain interpretive agency, wherein they deconstruct and give meaning to their own experiences (O'Brien Hallstein, 2000). This process of deconstructing and interpreting one's experiences is central to the development of standpoints. According to Harding (2003), “a standpoint is an achievement [that]...must be struggled for against the apparent realities made

‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ by dominant institutions, and against the ongoing political disempowerment of oppressed groups” (p. 297).

In addition, although feminist standpoints emerge from subordinate positions of power, they are not obvious and must be struggled for by oppressed groups through collective interaction and dialogue (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). As O’Brien Hallstein (2000) notes, “material experience shapes epistemology and, as a consequence, provides groups with common experience ...[which] is different among groups to the degree that material experience differs” (Where is Feminist Standpoint Theory Now? section, para. 9). Thus, feminist standpoint theory does not essentialize experience. Through collective interaction and dialogue, shared interests and cultural competencies become the basis for developing group consciousness, engaging in political struggle, and ultimately achieving feminist standpoints, wherein women collectively take part in “defining themselves, their lives, their needs and desires” (Harding, 2003, p. 298).

### **Relevant Studies**

According to O’Brien Hallstein (2000), little research has used feminist standpoint theory as a methodological approach even though scholars continually encourage its use. This is because “feminist standpoint theory--with all its theoretical complexity and potential for obscurity--is grappling with the controversies that will define the heart and soul of feminist scholarship in the next century” (para. 3). In this section, I review five studies in which feminist standpoint theory is presented as a theoretical framework. In the first three studies, scholars give attention to social position and use feminist standpoint theory as a framework for interpreting participants’ responses to various texts. The remaining studies explore the use of feminist standpoint theory to interpret Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* (1990) and the influence of women in the rap industry. Specifically, these studies illustrate how feminist standpoint theory can be used as a



theoretical framework for interpreting responses to texts and women's experiences across intersecting social positions/locations.

Based on her ethnographic study which focused on the reading of romance fiction among middle class white women in Smithton, a Midwestern suburban community, Radway (1984) identified social location as central to their reading of such texts. As Radway (1984) explains, "there are patterns and regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies of their particular social location" (p. 8). Social location in this study involved how race, class, and gender as systems of domination worked to control women's lives in patriarchal culture. Through reading romance novels, participants were able to negotiate dissatisfaction with their subordinate positions of power as it related to patriarchy. Although participants encountered reification of femininity in the novels, they also experienced resistance to such ideals and opportunities to attend to their emotional needs as they contended with the demands of patriarchal marriage in their own lives. Although Radway (1984) does not refer to feminist standpoint theory in this study, aspects surface in discussion surrounding social location as it relates to patriarchal culture and participants' engagement and show that reading romance was a complex act that reflected situated knowledge, agency, resistance, and negotiation.

Using a multiple-case study approach, Kinefuchi and Orbe (2008) explored how social location impacted understandings of self and others among 136 students in nine undergraduate communication classes across three different universities. Specifically, the study focused on racial location as it related to students' written responses to the film *Crash* (Haggis, 2005) a movie the researchers described as "socially charged in terms of race relations" (para. 4). Researchers concentrated on how participants situated themselves racially in their responses and

how racial location informed their situatedness, understandings of experience, perceptions of the world, and racial standpoints. In addition, analysis concentrated on the emergence of positionality and contextual focus across responses. Positionality refers to whether responses were attached or detached in terms of how participants imagined the racial realities depicted in the film and engaged with those realities. Contextual focus refers to the scope of social interaction, or whether participants related to personal, racial, or societal issues in their responses. Based on these concepts, the researchers organized responses into six frames: personal/detached (Unnamed Privileged Sense of “Them”), personal/ attached (Color-Blind Individualized “I”), racial/detached (Innocent “I”/Responsible “Them”), racial/attached (Racialized “I”/“Us”), societal/detached (Social “They”), and societal/attached (Social “We”).

To the degree that students had come from neighborhoods and schools that were primarily white, the researchers revealed that responses presented “no noticeable differences across the regions and universities” (Key Organizing Principles section, para.1). While a majority of students’ responses showed signs of reflexivity, the researchers reported that detached perspectives were expressed by European Americans and demonstrated their dominant racial location despite diversity among the group. With regard to attached perspectives, the personal/attached position was also expressed primarily by European Americans while the racial/attached position was largely represented by people of color who discussed in their responses experiences similar to those portrayed in the film. However, Kinefuchi and Orbe (2008) also reported that responses revealed few students had cultivated a racial standpoint—i.e., “the political consciousness necessary for challenging inequal power relations” (Complementing Standpoint Theories section, para. 4)—and thus had not reached the societal level. Kinefuchi and

Orbe's (2008) frames are useful, particularly as they relate to the concept of positionality, for the researchers concluded that attached perspectives are necessary for standpoints to emerge.

In another case study, Bender-Slack (2009) used feminist standpoint theory to investigate how 27 students enrolled in an English elective participated in discussions focused on gender. The students were eleventh and twelfth graders, 22 females and 5 males, attending a large Midwestern suburban high school and from primarily white middle and upper class backgrounds. Arguing that reader response theory "does not explicitly tend to gender" (p. 18), Bender-Slack (2009) examined the ways in which students addressed gender in classroom discussions, interviews, journal writing and final papers. Based on students' responses to three short stories, Bender-Slack found that students relied on the interpretive strategies learned in schools. Of the 22 female students enrolled in the course, only five habitually spoke during discussions; of the five male students, three often participated with the other two attending the class infrequently. In addition, Bender-Slack (2009) reported that students, for the most part, did not see or recognize the role of gender in discussions and texts, but noted that when they did, they modified their understandings of texts. Finally, students resisted challenging cultural norms. For example, although a male student shared that his father had left him to be raised by a single mother, female students were critical of mothers who did the same thing.

Because students used the interpretive strategies learned in schools, Bender-Slack (2009) concluded that the context of the classroom had shaped discussion and the ways students were able to understand the short stories. For this reason, for a course of this type, she suggested teachers focus on how bodies are inscribed by gender, race and class and use feminist pedagogy to help students interrogate and disrupt power relations. Bender-Slack (2009) also suggested teachers have students focus on their own language in initial responses to texts to see their role in

classroom conversations and the interpretive strategies available to them. Finally, she encouraged educators to teach multiple ways of reading using different critical perspectives. Bender-Slack's (2009) findings and suggestions support the claims of feminist standpoint theorists such as Harding (2003), Hartsock (1983), and O'Brien Hallstein (2000) who insist that standpoints are not automatically achieved. Creating opportunities for political struggle is an essential element in the development of standpoints.

Lenz (2004) identified this kind of struggle in her analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990). Lenz's (2004) used feminist standpoint theory as a literary practice useful for deconstructing dominant ideologies and investigating marginalized points of view, relationships between dominant and marginalized individuals, and the social positions from which scholars conduct critical practice. Specifically, Lenz (2004) focused on how standpoints were communicated in the novel. Central to her analysis was the multiple social locations of the main character Lucy, positions which complicated her sense of belonging to a particular social group. According to Lenz (2004), Lucy's unstable identity allowed for multiple and changing standpoints that informed one another and offered more powerful and complex understandings of her postcolonial position. Lucy resisted the identities imposed upon her by questioning categories such as black, female and islander. As a result, Lenz (2004) points out Lucy recognized that those in positions of power lack this kind of intellectual reflection. Through criticizing those in positions of power, Lucy was able to negotiate her own lived experiences and social reality, and Lenz's (2004) analysis provides a model for how feminist standpoint theory can be used as an interpretative framework for examining the development of standpoints in literature.

Lastly, Forman (1994) used feminist standpoint theory as a framework for exploring the influence of women in the rap industry and asserted that female rappers present a “unique and culturally specific standpoint” (p. 43). As described by Forman (1994), rap is a social location within the public domain that is accessible to women and in which female rappers are able to “voice their joys and passions as well as their outrage against prevailing hierarchical structures of domination” (p. 41). Artists such as Salt-n-Pepa and Queen Latifah have challenged perceptions of rap as a male-dominated industry and defined and given voice to issues such as employment/unemployment, sexual harassment, physical violence, motherhood, and women’s sexual desires and fantasies (Forman, 1994). According to Forman (1994), these issues are typically ignored by male writers in the industry who frequently characterize women as objects subject to men’s sexual desires and reflect the oppression experienced by women within the larger society. By voicing their social realities in public spaces, Forman (1994) pointed out that female rappers have challenged those social divisions of labor which situate women within private spaces and label female artists as unauthentic in their efforts to resist prescribed social locations. As a result, many have become role models for their female fans and presented through their work opportunities for identifying commonalities among diverse groups of women and developing group consciousness. Given contemporary street fiction’s ties to hip-hop culture, it, like rap, presents another social location through which to explore women’s experiences.

All of the studies discussed in this section present examples of how feminist standpoint theories can be used as a framework for understanding systems of domination from the perspectives of marginalized groups and account for “the situated, local, and communal constitution of knowledge” (Hekman, 1997, p. 356). This study hypothesizes that readers use the realities depicted in contemporary street fiction texts to make sense of their lives. Contemporary

street fiction presents a public space wherein conflicting aspects of marginalized experiences emerge. Through dialogue and interaction about these experiences and the situated knowledge of readers, commonalities can potentially emerge and lead to the articulation of standpoints. Standpoints exist whether they are articulated or not; feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the need for articulation. In conducting this study, I hope to present findings which illustrate how such constructs operate within African American women's engagement with contemporary street fiction.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

Case study methodology focuses on an event or situation within a real-world context (Gromm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2002; Yin, 2012; Yin, 2014) that exhibits an interesting phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Gromm et al., 2002; O'Reilly, 2009; Yin, 2014). As a form of qualitative inquiry, case studies involve in-depth investigation through the use of multiple data collection techniques such as documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participation-observation, and physical artifacts (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; O'Reilly, 2009; Yin, 2014). Such research designs can also involve single or multiple cases and utilize a holistic or embedded approach (Yin, 2014). As defined by Miles and Huberman (1994), a single-case research design investigates “some phenomenon [within] a single social setting” (p. 27). In contrast, multiple case studies focus on an issue as it relates to several individual cases or contexts (Yin, 2014). Within these approaches, researchers can employ a holistic approach, which examines the overall dynamics of a case, or an embedded approach if they wish to investigate subunits of analyses. Regardless of research design, however, case studies result in descriptive reports of a phenomenon which highlights significant themes or patterns that emerge during data collection and analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gromm et al., 2002; O'Reilly, 2009; Yin, 2014).

In this study, I utilized a holistic single-case study research design to describe the ways in which social position and situated knowledge shaped African American women's responses to contemporary street fiction in a small-town public library book club. In this chapter, I present my rationale for selecting case study as a research design, particularly regarding its suitability for studying women's engagement with contemporary street fiction. I then discuss the selection of the research site and participants, describe the methods of data collection and analysis, discuss

my role and background as researcher, and consider limitations and ethical issues. Lastly, I present profiles of the research participants and synopses of the texts read by book club members.

### Rationale for Case Study Approach

According to Creswell (2007), researchers conduct qualitative studies to develop a complex detailed understanding of an issue. This aspect of qualitative research can be established by talking directly to people, going into their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell their stories (Creswell, 2007). For this reason, Creswell (2007) asserts qualitative studies can empower individuals to voice their experiences and minimize the power relations that can potentially emerge between participants and researcher. Qualitative studies are also useful for exploring research contexts and helping researchers understand the belief systems which support participants' responses.

As a qualitative approach, case studies present a variety of possibilities when it comes to context. For example, Yin and Davis (2007) argue that "one strength of the case study method is its ability to tolerate the real-life blurring between phenomenon and context" (p. 4). This can be seen in my study, for context encompassed the social, political, and economic conditions in which contemporary street fiction novels are set and the social locations from which characters act. It also involved the environment in which engagement with such novels occurred and the culturally specific positions (i.e., in terms of race, class, and gender) and situated knowledge from which readers engaged (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Likewise, Flyvbjerg (2006) identifies the significance of context as a strength of case studies due to the researcher's closeness to real-life situations, the abundance of detail, and the prevalence of "concrete, context-dependent experiences" which often lead to "concrete, context-dependent knowledge"



(p. 5). Moreover, with regard to audience, Stakes (1978) asserts case studies are “epistemologically in harmony with readers’ experiences,” which contributes to understanding by “approximating through the words and illustrations of our reports, the natural experience acquired in ordinary personal involvement” (p. 5). Thus, through the intersections of multiple contexts, case studies present rich opportunities for epistemological growth.

Case study methodology has been criticized for being ungeneralizable, lacking rigor, reflecting researchers’ preconceived notions, and being hard to summarize (Eisenhardt, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, scholars have addressed these concerns in ways I have found beneficial. With regard to making generalizations, Stakes (1978) and Yin (2014) have argued that case studies can lead to recognition of similarities and differences with other issues studied in different contexts. In addition, Flyvbjerg (2006) has contended that case study has its own rigor, for researchers “can ‘close in’ on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 19). Flyvbjerg (2006) has also asserted that case studies are not biased toward researchers’ preconceived notions in that bias depends upon how cases are chosen (i.e., whether cases are chosen to represent critical cases designed to support falsification or verification). Furthermore, although difficult to summarize, case studies can present contradictory evidence, which Eisenhardt (1989) and Flyvbjerg (2006) have asserted can lead to new and innovative theories and ideas.

As a result, case study methodology complemented my use of reader response and feminist standpoint theories. Focusing on reader engagement with contemporary street fiction as a contemporary phenomenon within real world contexts created a space for designing a research project which started with the experiences of women, which is a foundational tenet of feminist standpoint theory. In addition, the close proximity to real-life issues and the openness to new and

innovative theories as characteristics of case studies presented the opportunity to identify themes and patterns concerning participants' lived experiences and social realities as they related to engagement. The case study approach provided a framework for exploring how eight African American women used situated knowledge in their engagement with contemporary street fiction.

### The Context

I became interested in Rivertown Public Library as the research site for this study through discussion with a fellow doctoral student about my desire to understand contemporary street fiction's appeal among African American female readers. A resident of Rivertown, my colleague revealed that she had observed patrons come to the library in search of the novels as she tutored students. As a result, I contacted the site librarian and arranged a meeting to discuss both my interest in the genre and possibilities for hosting a book club at the site. Excited about the opportunity, the librarian introduced me to library staff, one of whom she considered an in-house expert on the novels. Shortly thereafter, I began visits to the library and observed patrons consulting staff about contemporary street fiction.

Situated on the east bank of the Mississippi River, Rivertown Public Library is one of two facilities, with a sister facility located on the west bank in a neighboring town. The library occupies 15,124 square feet of indoor space, offers patrons the use of Internet service computers, and houses over 105,000 books and periodicals. A recently renovated facility, the library hosts a variety of community events, some of which include summer reading programs, book clubs, and holiday activities. When compared to the closest major city which has a population of 440,171 residents and a public library system which serves more than 325,000 patrons, Rivertown is a small community with a population of 3,559 residents that serves approximately 8,690 patrons from Rivertown and surrounding areas (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Based on data from

the United States Census Bureau (2010), the ethnic composition of Rivertown in 2010 was approximated as follows: Caucasian, 46.2%; African American, 52.3%; Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Asian, less than 1%. Gender breakdown was estimated to be 48.1% male and 51.9% female.

While I was unable to retrieve specific data from library staff concerning circulation of contemporary street fiction at Rivertown Public Library due to the library's policy regarding patrons' rights to privacy, I was able to gather general information about these books from the library's online catalog. Because contemporary street fiction is a subgenre of urban fiction (Morris, 2012), I used this term to search the online system and discovered that there were 339 books tagged as urban fiction in the library's collection. I then reviewed the summaries of these texts and found that 40 of the 339 items had no item information and that 196 of the remaining 299 were actually contemporary street fiction. Also, of the 196 contemporary street fiction texts in the library's collection, 24 were checked out to patrons on the day that I searched the online catalog.

### Case Selection

This study entailed organizing the Rivertown Public Library Contemporary Street Fiction Book Club and recruiting members to participate in my case study. Patrons were extended invitations to join the book club during book signings hosted at the library; through posters, flyers, and bookmarks displayed within the library and posted to social media; and through the researcher's interactions with patrons during library visits. In addition, potential book club members were invited to become friends with the researcher through Facebook and tagged as meetings were publicized through the social network. Those wishing to join the group signed up to participate during book signing events or at the library's circulation desk and by contacting the

researcher via cell phone or text message. The general format of the book club involved meetings wherein members met at least once monthly (except for the months of July and September) from March to October 2014 to participate in group discussions which focused on their readings/understandings of various contemporary street fiction texts selected by the group. Book club members were able to check out novels through the library or purchase their own copies. Additionally, for the purposes of this project, members were given the choice to participate in the case study but were encouraged to attend meetings even if they chose not to do so. As the project progressed, ten African American women, the majority of whom were not from the Rivertown area, showed interest in participating in the book club and eight agreed to participate in the study.

#### Data Collection Methods

During the data collection phase of this study, I used multiple sources to investigate readers' responses to contemporary street fiction texts. As Yin (2104) explains, case studies which employ multiple sources of data are useful for triangulation, a process which involves using such information (i.e., documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts) to support research findings. In this study, I used participant observation as the overall technique for gathering data and included transcribed audiotaped group discussions and interviews and field notes as my data sources. In addition, I administered an evaluation at the end of the study in order to gather feedback from participants concerning the study in general. The specific ways in which data was collected are explained below.

#### **Participant Observation**

Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999) define participant observation as “a data collection technique that requires the researcher to be present at, involved in, and recording the

routine daily activities with people in the field setting” (p. 91). It assumes the researcher’s involvement in the situation and activities being investigated (Yin, 2014). In this study, I assumed the role of participant observer. During the initial recruitment phase of the study, I visited the library twice weekly in order to interact with staff and patrons and to distribute and replenish flyers and bookmarks highlighting the details of the first meeting. With the help of library staff, I planned the first gathering, an organizational meeting, which was held in the large meeting room of the library and served as an opportunity for book club members to become acquainted. In this and later meetings, I worked with participants to select reading material and to coordinate meeting dates, times, and refreshments. In addition, I participated in book club discussions.

### **Field Notes**

According to O’Reilly (2009), “field notes are the written record of the observations, jottings, full notes, intellectual ideas, and emotional reflections that are created during the fieldwork process” (p. 70). I recorded field notes based on the initial recruitment phase; observations made before, during, and after book club meetings; and in response to questions which emerged during the study. I also recorded field notes during interactions with staff and patrons during visits to the library. Specifically, field notes included scratch notes that were later developed into full notes, detailed descriptions of events, analysis of what was learned, and personal reflections.

### **Group Discussions**

Book club meetings were scheduled at least once monthly and planned around members’ schedules. Meetings were held from March to October 2014 and ranged from sixty to ninety minutes. During initial meetings, I used a book club approach to generate discussion and

encourage participation and interaction among members. According to Beach and Yussen (2011), book clubs can present opportunities for participants to draw on their knowledge and experience during discussions. During initial meetings, which focused on discussion between one participant (Belle, a married 45-year-old woman with three sons) and me, the following prompt and questions and questions were used to jumpstart discussion:

Discussion Prompt:

Share a question or point out something you found interesting in the novel.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think about the book?
2. To what characters or parts of the novel do you relate and why?
3. What do you think about the location(s) in which the story is set?
4. What do you think about how the characters relate to each other?
5. What do you think about the ending of the story?
6. What lesson(s) do you think the story tries to communicate?

Belle and I would begin book club meetings using these strategies and quickly move to discussing those aspects of the narratives we enjoyed or disliked, adding insight or asking each other to share thoughts about the authenticity of characters and events. During our discussions of novels written by Kia Dupree, Belle suggested we use the Reading Group Guide Discussion Questions provided in the novels. As a result, we substituted the prompt and questions I devised with these questions. As more participants joined the book club, we relied less on these methods to spark discussion. Participants jumped right into discussing topics that were of interest to them, many of which focused on the experiences of female characters. During early and later meetings, when prolonged moments of silence ensued or conversations wandered too far off topic, I posed

questions from my notes or reverted to the prompt and discussion questions I had formulated for the study to refocus conversations. All group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed, and data was used to structure questions during interviews, future group discussions, and conversations with library staff.

## **Interviews**

Another data collection method I used involved semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to take part in an interview at the end of the study so that I could gain a sense of why and how they engaged with contemporary street fiction and identify the issues within the texts to which they related and how situated knowledge and standpoints emerged during discussions of texts. Participants were asked about interpretations and opinions shared during the meetings. In addition to these inquiries, samples of items to which participants were asked to respond included:

1. How do you decide what to read? How do you find titles?
2. Describe a typical book you might read.
3. A lot of people describe contemporary street fiction books as “keeping it real” or representing real life. If you agree, what are some examples of novels you have read that you think keep it real?
4. Tell me about a character or situation in a contemporary street fiction novel to which you can really relate.
5. Who should read urban street fiction and why?
6. How long have you been reading contemporary street fiction?
7. How many books do you read in a month?
8. How do you find your books if they are not in the library?

## **Final Evaluation**

A concluding data collection method that was used in this study was a final evaluation. I administered this instrument to all book club members in the effort to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the research design. The evaluation was emailed to participants after the final book club meeting and consisted of the following questions:

1. Why did you join the book club?
2. What did you learn from this experience?
3. What suggestions do you have for improving this study?

## **Data Analysis**

Before analyzing data, I transcribed all group discussions, interviews and field notes. In addition, I created a case study database (Yin, 2014). All data was saved as documents in Microsoft Word. Documents that did not align with the Microsoft Word format such as handwritten documents were saved as PDF documents. Documents were then organized into folders which reflected the various types of data and merged into a general case study folder. In order to ensure the confidentiality of participants, the general folder was password protected and saved in my laptop. Backup copies of the database were also maintained in Dropbox, a secure, online system which supports file storage.

During data analysis, I considered the ways in which themes relating to situated knowledge emerged across participants' responses. I searched transcripts of group discussions, interviews and field notes for words, phrases and statements which presented evidence of situated knowledge. I then labeled this information using codes and organized coded information into categories. As Table 3 in the next chapter illustrates, I reviewed categories and identified major findings and propositions in order to answer my research questions.



## My Role and Background as Researcher

As previously noted, contemporary fiction had always been a part of my life. This put me in an interesting position as a scholar, secondary English teacher, and someone who now reads such texts. Discussing my engagement with contemporary street fiction moves a private matter into the public realm. As a result, even as I voice the ways in which I and others who are close to the genre find it appealing, I expose the reading culture to criticism. I face accusations that I am engaging with texts that perpetuate negative representations of African American women and the African American community. I face questions about my participation in and/or endorsement of the lifestyles presented in the novels. In addition, I face accusations that I am exploiting the reading culture for my own selfish purposes. Per my introduction to this dissertation, I am betraying high culture by embracing popular/mass culture.

I state these challenges because they reflect my own thoughts as I engage with contemporary street fiction texts for pleasure and for representations of African American women to which I can relate. As I question some images and characterizations, I personally relate to others. I know people like those portrayed in the texts. I am from a working-class background and have experienced the socioeconomic realities with which contemporary street characters are often confronted, and as I developed this project, I recognized that my contradictory positions encompassed at least some negotiation of my lived experiences and social reality. I also recognized that my social position required me to communicate those areas in which my views and those of participants might align or come into conflict.

My choice of case study as a research methodology allowed me to consider the ways readers situate themselves in their engagement. It also forced me to consider my own social position and situated knowledge as a consumer of contemporary street fiction and academic and

how location and knowledge influence the ways in which I conduct this research project. My own philosophical assumptions concerning this study were based on the desire for more representations of African American females to which I can relate in literature. While I recognized that contemporary street fiction often did not get it right, there was at the same time something about the characters that was “real” for me. For example, portrayals of African American females in these texts who deal with issues of skin color resonated with my experiences as a dark-skinned African American woman. Such characterizations were significant in that skin color and the perceived power (or lack of power) it conjures are topics that are lived but rarely discussed within the African American community or larger society. As a researcher, I stand at the margins, attempting to give voice in the academic community to issues that had been silenced but are relevant to many.

#### Limitations

There were a few limitations that impacted data collection. For example, in that participation was voluntary, it took some time for the book club to grow. With the inclusion of feminist standpoint theories in my theoretical framework, I knew that situated knowledge, collective interaction and dialogue were critical to the development of standpoints (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). For the first half of the study, because discussions focused on me and one other participant, I was concerned that this limitation would affect the emergence of standpoints in group discussion. Fortunately, as the size of the book club increased, evidence of situated knowledge and standpoints emerged and I was able to go back and review previous group discussions for traces of similar evidence.

Another limitation of the study involved the availability of texts book club members chose to read. To remedy this situation, participants made requests through an interlibrary loan

system, which typically took two to three days for books to arrive. In addition, when ordering my own copies of texts, I purchased extra copies and loaned them to participants. Likewise, several participants preferred to read the novels using Kindle applications on their cell phones and purchased electronic copies for that purpose.

### Ethical Considerations

Due to the possibility that participants would share personal and private experiences during the study, I ensured that their responses were valued and interpreted with integrity. With approval of my study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I reviewed the consent form with participants prior to obtaining signatures, and pseudonyms have been used in the case study narrative to maintain confidentiality. In addition, I utilized member checking throughout the study as a validity strategy. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), member checking shifts validity from the researcher to the participant and involves “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they could confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (p. 127). As Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest, I asked participants whether the themes that emerged, supporting evidence and the overall account were accurate and included participants’ comments in this dissertation.

### Timeline

My first meeting with book club participants was an hour-long organizational meeting attended by Belle, one participant. During this meeting, Belle and I discussed the book club, my case study, and selected a text for the next meeting. The meetings that followed focused on book discussions ranging from sixty to ninety minutes. At the end of each discussion, participants selected a text and gave possible dates and times they could attend the next meeting. With this information, I would contact library staff to see when the large meeting room was available and

send text messages to participants to confirm meeting dates and times based on their availability and the availability of the room. This method of planning was used to schedule all eight meetings. Over the course of eight months, eight African American women participated in book club although as Table 1 on the next page shows, all did not attend every meeting.

Table 1: Book Club Meetings

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Books</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Organizational Meeting	Library	2/14/2015 Introductions, consent forms, books selections	Belle, Yvette
Meeting One	Library	March 24, 2014 <i>Murderville: First of a Trilogy</i>	Belle, Yvette
Meeting Two	Library	April 21, 2014 <i>Murderville 2: The Epidemic</i>	Belle, Yvette
Meeting Three	McDonald's	May 8, 2014 <i>Murderville 3: The Black Dahlia</i>	Belle, Yvette
Meeting Four	Library	May 27, 2014 <i>Damaged</i>	Belle, Yvette
Meeting Five	Library	June 16, 2014 <i>Shattered</i>	Belle, Yvette
Meeting Six	Library	August 2, 2014 <i>Silenced</i>	Belle, Davie, Kiersten, Yvette
Meeting Seven	Library	August 23, 2014 <i>The Coldest Winter Ever</i> and <i>Shattered</i>	Carmen, Davie, Kiersten, McKenzie, Paula, Yvette
Meeting Eight	Subway	October 25, 2014 <i>A Project Chick</i> and <i>Casting the First Stone</i>	Belle, Davie, Katrina, Kiersten, McKenzie, Paula, Yvette

All of the meetings except two were held in the library's large meeting room. The use of the room allowed us to meet after library hours. Meetings attended by Belle and me during the first half of the study were held during the week in the afternoons. As the number of participants increased, it became necessary to meet on Saturdays as it was more convenient for everyone. Our meetings usually began before the library closed and I was given a key and instructions by

library staff so that we could lock the building once meetings ended. Book club discussions were usually very informal and participants were eager to talk about the novels. We sat around tables organized so that we could face each other. I provided snacks, and participants were free to move to a table for refreshments as we discussed the books. Because we were unable to use the library's meeting room for Meeting Three (May 2, 2014) and Meeting Eight (October 25, 2014), we met at local restaurants. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I introduce the participants of this study and provide synopses of texts.

### Participants

As previously mentioned, for the first five meetings, Belle and I met to discuss contemporary street fiction (see Table 1). However, after posting information on social media such as Facebook and discussing my project with family members, participation in the group increased. For Meeting Six (August 2, 2014), the book club increased from two to four participants, and those who attended that meeting invited family and friends to attend the next meeting. As shown in Table 1, four participants during Meeting Six increased to seven during Meeting Eight (October 25, 2014). Belle resided in the Rivertown area, but new members who attended Meeting Six (August 2) and afterwards were from other areas, with some traveling as far as 75 miles to participate in the book club.

It is also important to note that the women who joined the second half of my study were either relatives of mine or friends of relatives, and I am sure that these relationships impacted the ways in which we interacted and discussed the novels. I had talked to relatives about my study, and through Facebook they were able to track meeting dates, times, locations and text selections. Kiersten and Davie, aunt and niece and also my relatives, attended Meeting Six (August 2, 2014) and invited others to attend. McKenzie, also Kiersten's niece; Paula, a close friend of Kiersten;

and Carmen, a close friend of Davie, attended Meeting Seven (August 23, 2014). Katrina, also a close friend of Kiersten, attended Meeting Eight (October 25). Belle was the only participant who did not know any of the other participants prior to the study. Table 2 below provides a list of participants, and in the section that follows, I provide profiles of each.

Table 2: Participants

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Children	Education	Occupation/Industry
<b>Belle</b>	45	Married	3 sons (25, 19, 14)	Bachelor's degree	Healthcare
<b>Carmen</b>	26	Married	1 daughter (10)	Master's degree	Counseling
<b>Davie</b>	26	Single	No children	Master's degree	Science
<b>Katrina</b>	30	Single	1 daughter (13)	Some college	Healthcare
<b>Kiersten</b>	35	Married	3 sons (18, 14, 10)	Master's degree	Social services
<b>McKenzie</b>	29	Single	1 son (5)	Bachelor's degree	Education
<b>Paula</b>	37	Married	2 sons (17, 2), 1 daughter (11)	Bachelor's degree	Healthcare
<b>Yvette (Researcher)</b>	46	Separated	3 daughters (29, 28, 26), 1 son (12)	Master's degree	Education

## Belle

In her final evaluation, Belle, a 45-year-old mother of three and grandmother of two who has a bachelor's degree and works in the healthcare industry, shared that she joined the book club because she loves reading and meeting new people. Belle and I met at a book signing for a local contemporary street fiction writer held at the library. I invited her to join the book club, and she signed up to participate and attended all of the book club meetings except one. During an interview conducted at the close of the study, she explained that she reads all kinds of books but really likes African American romance and horror. Reading allows her to travel and go where the books take her. She also revealed that she likes to check out books from the library. When she

was a child, she looked forward to the book mobile that would come to her neighborhood every two weeks and admitted that she has library cards at Rivertown and two other public libraries. Because she reads so much, Belle shared that she began recording what she reads in a notebook and has logged over 800 books since 2003. In fact, it was from her suggestions that the first six texts read by the book club were chosen.

When asked how she chooses the books she reads, Belle explained:

I mean, I've always read books, uhm, but to choose, a lot of times, I read the back of the book. If it catches my attention, I will read it. That's my number one, how I decide what book. It doesn't matter what genre it is. If I read it, if I just happen to pass by a book, uhm, stop, pull it out, read the back, sound interesting, I'm gonna read it.

Even though Belle admits she reads different kinds of books, she shared that her favorite authors are Rochelle Allers (African American romance fiction), Ernest Hill (a Louisiana author whose work has been compared to Richard Wright and Chester Himes), Debra LeBlanc (a Louisiana author who writes horror fiction) and Ashley and JaQuavis (contemporary street fiction writers). She also enjoys reading African American faith-based books and books where the scenes are so vivid she feels as though she is in the action. Belle recalled reading Ernest Hill's *A Life for a Life* (2005) and explained that the prison scenes were so graphic she felt she was standing right there.

Belle also explained that she often tells her husband and sons about the books she reads.

[I] capture the whole audience in my house. Even my oldest son who's 25, he'll stop. He like, *You read that in a book?* He like, *What book that was in?* I'm like, *See, you never know where you gon' go if you pick up a book and read it.* Normally when I start talking about a book that was good I have all my sons there and husband and they like, *Really, and what happened next?*

For Belle, reading is both a personal and a family affair. She enjoys sharing her reading experiences with others. In her final evaluation, she described her experience in the book club as

a positive one in which she learned that “there are a lot of people out there like me, very excited about reading.”

### **Carmen**

After hearing about the book club from Davie, another book club member, Carmen joined. Carmen recently earned a master’s degree, is married, and has a ten-year-old daughter. Like Belle, Carmen shared that she reads different kinds of books but really likes books about African American people and books from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series.

A typical book I might read consists of African Americans, dealing with some heavy issues with very intense characters. Also, I like to read history books that are related to the struggles African Americans endured in order to get to the place that we are today. I read books that may be considered raunchy or vulgar. On the other hand, I love reading Harry Potter.

In addition, she likes to read books written or endorsed by her favorite authors but often chooses the books she reads from those she hears about through word-of-mouth. When asked about books she has enjoyed, Carmen listed:

*Disappearing Acts* and *Mama* by Terry McMillan, *Pecking Order* by Omar Tyree, any book by Kia Dupree, any book written by ZANE, works by Zora Neale Hurston, any book by J. K. Rowling and basically any author that is endorsed by the authors that I previously stated.

When asked who should read contemporary street fiction, Carmen explained that anybody can enjoy these books. She shared that African Americans and other minorities will be able to understand and relate to the stories and believed that white Americans “who are open to the “realness”” might also be able to make connection. According to Carmen, even people who cannot relate to the stories might find them entertaining.

### **Davie**

Davie joined the book club in August. She is a single, 26-year-old African American woman with no children who recently graduated with a master’s degree in biology. She



explained that she heard about the book club from a family member and joined because she needed something to do and the books seemed interesting. She also revealed that she began reading contemporary street fiction in college but usually reads “magical books” like those from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* collection. When asked about suggestions for improving the study, Davie suggested I do more series books, which for her are “books by the same author, about the same story, and the stories just continued.” She liked the books by Kia Dupree that were discussed in the book club and how Dupree wrote new books about characters who were marginal in other books.

To find the contemporary street fiction books she reads, Davie shared that she searches for African American fiction on *Amazon.com* and reads excerpts. Many of the books, she admits, are free, but if she likes a book she will buy it. Davie downloads the books she reads to the Kindle application on her cell phone and reads whenever she has free time. She reads about one book a month and likes contemporary street fiction books that have a happy ending. As she explained, “It can be like all ratchet in the middle of the book as long as it ends good.” Davie defined a good ending as “The girl get off the street. She get her life together. She get married. Have kids.”

Although Davie shared that she joined the book club because she liked the books, she also shared that she didn’t see the novels as “keeping it real” and explained, “I just, I mean, I believe that a lot of the things that happen, it could happen in real life, but then sometimes the storyline just goes way overboard.” Davie reads the books because they are entertaining but felt as though “if rich, upper class, white people were to ever read it they’d be like, *What!*” According to Davie, the people who read the books “look like the people in the book. Even if

you're not black, you can kinda relate to the community a little bit or you at least know that some place in this world stuff like that do happen."

When asked what she learned from the experience of being in the book club, Davie explained, "We have so many opinions. Everybody can kinda interpret different things a different way. Different life experiences caused different people to interpret differently."

### **Katrina**

Katrina, a 31-year-old single woman raising a 13-year-old daughter, attended the last book club meeting. During the interview, Katrina admitted that she was not really a reader before joining the book club. As a new reader, Katrina revealed that she chooses reading material based on recommendations. When asked what she gained from reading contemporary street fiction, Katrina explained:

Uhm, they're basically, they're based on the same form of life, I'm a say, you know, whether fiction, whether fact, it's still based on reality. Uhm, when I can get an understanding out of what I'm reading and basically I'm learning things in life as well out of reading these books. I'm reading them. I'm understanding them and I used to hate reading back in the days, but, you know, now that I'm understanding, you know, the comprehension, and getting, the, picking out the main details, and, you know, stuff like that, it's helping me a whole lot.

Katrina likes books that are "street" but teach life lessons and showed me a copy of *Left for Dead* (Canion, 2013), a book that has a contemporary street fiction feel but is based on the life of Ebony Canion, the author. She stated:

I read it and it actually touched every topic within the book, but even the topics without the book, it touched on children, how they can be molested, and, you know, how they can seem to grow too fast and become, uhm, want to become an adult at an early age and learn, you know, either learn from it or go downhill from that point if they don't have, uhm, you know, the right guidance. Uhm, it's also been, it teaches you points on how to deal with anger. Uhm, like if somebody has done you something so wrong, and you happen to, you have to face 'em at least one point in time whether it's through court or you may live in the same area, or

however it is, and it helps you face that, within that entire book. It's basically life lessons. That's how, that's how you can put it. It's basically life lessons.

In addition, Katrina explained that she prefers to order books rather than read from the Kindle application on her cell phone. She likes to mark pages and have the opportunity to turn back if she has questions. She has become a fan of books by Kimberla Lawson Roby whose novels focus on greed and blur the line between the church and the street.

According to Katrina, joining the book club and the book club discussions have encouraged her to read. About this she stated, “You can’t be the one in the discussion that’s blank like the bottom of this paper. (points to a blank sheet of paper on table) You have to know what’s going on.” She also admitted that participating in the book club caused her to realize that there are not many books for adolescent black girls. She expressed that these kinds of books would have made a difference when she was younger. Reading and participating in the book club has led her to pass on books to other people and encourage others to read.

### **Kiersten**

Kiersten, a 35-year-old married woman who has three sons and a master’s degree and works in social services, joined the book club in August after seeing an announcement on Facebook and contacting me in July 2014 to gain information. She explained that she joined because she enjoys reading and thought it would be fun to get together and share ideas with others. In the interview conducted at the end of the study, Kiersten revealed that she reads about three books a month and that if she finds a contemporary street fiction author she likes she will read all of the books by that author. Kiersten likes books that reflect real life and is especially fond of novels by Kimberla Lawson and Ashley Antoinette, the wife of the contemporary street fiction husband and wife writing team Ashley and JaQuavis. Kiersten admits that she prefers contemporary street fiction that focuses on female characters, stating “I like the ones where it’s a

female and she's just tryna get to the next level and then she experience her hardship but she overcomes it. I like those kind of, I like those kind of books." When asked why, Kiersten explained:

Because I can relate to it and I know where they comin' from and I know where they tryin' to and I can relate, like, for instance, *Prada Plan* [by Ashley Antoinette]. She's just tryin', she's just tryna make it and then she gets hooked up with a drug dealer and whatever and she go on a rollercoaster dealing with all these women and this and that and whatever and she end up getting caught up into the game and stuff. So, I can relate to how you can get drawn up into that world.

When asked what she gains from the books, Kiersten explained:

It seems like they all want that fast lavish lifestyle. That's what they want and then once they have it, it's so many problems that come with it and then they're finally like I don't want it. I'd rather just go back to school, go get a job the normal way. But it's like they have to go through that first before they realize it, it's not all it's cracked up to be. Just about all the books, if you, it may have a different twist to it. For the most part, it's that same format, same storyline.

While Kiersten recognized that the books she reads follow the same format, she realized from the experience of being in the book club that participants interpreted the books in different ways. In the final evaluation, she explained, "Although we all read the same books not everyone will have the same feelings towards the books. We (each) tended to compare the books to our own life experiences and made a relation."

### **McKenzie**

McKenzie, a 29-year-old single mother of a five-year-old son who has a bachelor's degree and works in the field of education, also joined the book club in August, and when asked her reasons for joining, she explained, "I heard about how enlightening the first meeting was [from Kiersten, her aunt] and how you all discussed topics that sort of helped us all cope with our own struggles, so I decided to give it a chance." In addition, she shared that she began reading contemporary street fiction when she was in the tenth grade, recounting that she was

punished with nothing to do and picked up the ghetto realistic fiction novel *Black Girl Lost* (Goines, 1973) from her family's book shelf. *Black Girl Lost* (Goines, 1973) tells the story of Sandra, a black female child abandoned by her mother and left to survive in a tough Los Angeles inner-city neighborhood. According to McKenzie, after reading this novel she became a fan of these kinds of books.

McKenzie finds the contemporary street fiction books she reads by searching *Amazon.com*. She searches for books using the search term *free urban street fiction* and chooses books by looking at the covers and reading the backs of the books. McKenzie emphasized that she searches for books that are either "free or 99 cents" and those she can download to the Kindle application on her iPhone. She reads about four books a month and usually reads at work and at night.

When asked about a typical book she might read, McKenzie shared that she likes books that focus on girls in the hood. At the time of the interview, she was reading a book titled *If I Was Your Man* (Demettrea & Cassie, 2015) and provided a summary of the plot.

She's with a guy. He has a lot of money. He cheats on her. He ends up getting her pregnant, the other side girl, and she finds out, so she like goes to this hotel room and stays for a couple of days but secretly she's been seeing somebody else and she's pregnant too. So they both cheated on each other and got pregnant by different people.

In addition, she admitted that she likes books where the women (female protagonists) overcome obstacles.

Uhm, it'll be about a girl who might be, uh, poor, and then she might hook up with a drug dealer, and then he gives her all these things, but he cheats on her. She ends up having a baby for him and she'll end up...he'll end up going to jail. She'll end up getting on her feet and doing better.

McKenzie explained that she finds these stories—"Women getting with drug dealers that have a lot of money and thinking that the life is better on that side"—very realistic. However, although

these were experiences with which she could identify, she shared that there were aspects of these stories, such as “mothers leaving their children and just walking away,” to which she could not relate.

### **Paula**

Like most of the other participants, Paula, a 37-year old mother of three who is married, has a bachelor’s degree and is currently enrolled in college, joined the book club because she also likes to read. Her favorite genres are fiction and horror, but she began reading contemporary street fiction about five years ago when a friend told her about the books. In addition, she admitted that this was her first time participating in a book club and she liked being able to discuss the books with the other participants. She found it interesting that we had read the same books but shared different views based on our different experiences. She explained:

Same books but different views on actions in the books because you have different life experiences. You look at it different ways. It’s not necessarily negative. It just depends on your experience and how you relate to a situation in the book. Somebody else may have a different opinion. It’s not right or wrong. It’s just because you have different life experiences.

Paula chooses the books she reads based on authors she likes and, as with her introduction to contemporary street fiction, recommendations. If one of her favorite authors publishes a new book, she will read it. She also reads books recommended by friends, and sometimes finds new material from excerpts of new books provided at the end of novels she is reading. Paula typically buys e-Books, but if she finds one she like in a store, she will buy and read it. On average, she reads about two or three books a month. When it comes to contemporary street fiction, she likes books that focus on mafia-type characters or drug king-pins and identified Ashley and JaQuavis’s *Cartel* series as some of her favorites.

When asked who should read contemporary street fiction books, Paula explained that anybody can read them.

Anybody. It's really, I mean, just because it's urban and African American, it can relate to everybody, 'cause everybody have the same circumstances. It's just that when you put a color on it sometimes you feel you can have a more direct relationship or you can understand it better. But if someone write a book and they didn't put no color at all, it would apply to all. So what would you say if there were not black or white and it was just male or female. That would be an interesting study to see how many people and at the end of it, they tell what color they were and their age, or but, had they not put that there would you have read it?

According to Paula, anyone can relate to contemporary street fiction and her comments suggest that identifying the characters as black is what makes them attractive to African American readers.

While the profiles of participants indicate a range of similarities, their comments about different views and the book club experience were also revealing. In addition to having race and gender in common, all participants had some college experience and worked either full- or part-time. Most were parents, and about half of the group read contemporary street fiction as well as books from other genres. Many revealed that they could relate to the characters and enjoyed those who prevailed despite struggle, and a few preferred books in a series. Several participants expressed during interviews that they were surprised we had read the same books but shared different views and contributed the differences to diverse experience. The book club was a first-time experience for Paula and Katrina, and Katrina admitted she read to prepare for the book club because she wanted to contribute to the discussion. As the number of participants increased, participants showed engaged, attached perspectives and possibilities for articulating standpoints.

## Synopses of Text Selections

In this section, I offer synopses of the nine contemporary street fiction novels selected by book club participants as the focus for discussion. I begin with *Murderville*, a contemporary street fiction trilogy which comprised the first three novels read by participants: *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2011), *Murderville 2: The Epidemic* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2012), and *Murderville 3: The Black Dahlia* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2013). Book club participants also read and discussed three novels written by author Kia Dupree: *Damaged* (Dupree, 2010), *Shattered* (Dupree, 2012), and *Silenced* (Dupree, 2011). The final selections discussed by the book club focused on *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Sister Souljah, 1999), *A Project Chick* (Turner, 2004), and *Casting the First Stone* (Roby, 2000). In the discussion that follows, I describe, in the order read by the book club, how books were chosen, what the books are about, and literary style.

### ***Murderville: The First of a Trilogy***

*Murderville: First of a Trilogy* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2011) was the first selection read by the book club. During the organizational meeting while discussing possible texts for our first book club discussion, Belle suggested we find a text by Ashley and JaQuavis, a contemporary street fiction husband and wife writing team she liked. I looked up the writers on my cell phone and saw that *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* was one of their books. After reading aloud the back cover, Belle and I were both intrigued and chose it as our first selection.

As the title indicates, this narrative is the first in a series of three contemporary street fiction novels which focus on the criminal underworld with Sierra Leone, West Africa, and the cities of Detroit, Michigan, and Los Angeles, California, as its backdrop. *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* follows the romantic relationship of Liberty and A'shai who meet during a rebel attack in the Sierra Leone village where ten-year-old Liberty lives. After Liberty's village is destroyed



and her parents are killed, A'shai, the twelve-year-old son of Ezekiel, leader of the rebellion, saves her from the sexual advances of rebel soldiers and later from his father's desire to make her his sex slave. A'shai and Liberty run away from the rebel compound and unknowingly seek refuge on *Murderville*, a cargo ship used to capture and transport underage youth to Mexico and the United States. *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* chronicles the very different paths Liberty's and A'shai's lives take once *Murderville* reaches Mexico. Liberty and A'shai are separated, and Liberty is forced into prostitution. A'shai is made to work in coca fields, but is adopted by Baron, a drug kingpin, and his wife Willow, who provide A'shai a college education as well as the opportunity to take over the family business. Liberty graduates from the streets to a brothel to the sadistic intentions of Samad, Baron's drug connection, a path which affects her health and causes her to need a heart transplant.

Told in third-person, this narrative is written as a flashback wherein A'shai recounts their journey to Liberty. Certain that Liberty is going to die before she receives a heart, he sips poisonous Black Tea as he tells the story and dies just as Liberty is awakened by an alarm that signals a heart is available. This fast-paced narrative provides a glimpse into the brutal ways in which the criminal underworld exploits women and children.

### ***Murderville 2: The Epidemic***

Reading the first novel, which ends with an attempt on Liberty's life as she leaves the hospital after a follow-up visit, left Belle and I anxious to read the next novel in the trilogy.

*Murderville 2: The Epidemic* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2012) focuses on Liberty's relationships with Po, the drug dealer who saves her from Samad, and her cousin Dahlia. Similar to how a television show might recap scenes from the last episode, the opening chapter of *Murderville 2* recaps the events surrounding the rescue along with details concerning the murder of Po's

girlfriend, Scarlett, the woman whose heart Liberty has received. However, rescuing Liberty puts Po at odds with Samad, who robs Po and holds as ransom Po's drug supply and money along with a finder's fee in exchange for Liberty. Although Po tricks Liberty into going to Los Angeles in order to return her to Samad, the time they spend together during the long trip from Detroit makes it hard for him to leave her. He delivers Liberty to Samad, but he and his best friend Rocko return, determined to rescue her again when they realize Samad is a monster. After killing Samad, Liberty shows Po and Rocko where Samad keeps his money and "the epidemic," Samad's large supply of cocaine. Po and Rocko use the supply to take over the West Coast cocaine market and to enter the global underworld. The journey takes readers back to Sierra Leone where Liberty is reacquainted with her cousin Dahlia whose husband Omega has connections to the Africa Mafia. Their stay in Sierra Leone establishes for Po the protection and support of the African Mafia and for Liberty Dahlia's envy of her freedom and desire for Po. By juxtaposing Liberty's innocence, fair skin and beauty with Dahlia's seduction, dark complexion and greed in the context of the underworld, the authors complicate controlling images of black womanhood.

### ***Murderville 3: The Black Dahlia***

After reading the first two novels of the trilogy, Belle and I thought it was only right that we read the last book. *Murderville 3: The Black Dahlia* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2013), the last novel in the trilogy, focuses on the conflict between Dahlia and Liberty and a romantic relationship between Liberty and Rocko. Dahlia is possessed with greed and determined to be in a position of power. Because she initially desires to be the woman making the decisions behind the powerful man, she pursues an affair with Po and uses sex to control him. However, as the story progresses, greed consumes her and she longs to get rid of Po and establish power for

herself. She is determined to eliminate Po and leaves a trail of murder victims as she plots to take over the African Mafia. Po's affair with Dahlia puts a strain on his relationship with Liberty, and although she vows to help him see Dahlia for who she really is, she begins to have feelings for Rocko. Complicated further by Rocko's loyalty to Po, *Murderville 3* documents the development of Liberty's definitions of love, family and power.

### ***Damaged***

After reading the *Murderville* trilogy, Belle and I were eager to read a book with a slower pace. As we wrapped-up our discussion of *Murderville* and thought about our next novel, Belle told me about another trilogy she was interested in reading that was set in Washington, D. C. *Damaged* (Dupree, 2010) is a coming-of-age first-person narrative which focuses on the life of Camille, a ten-year-old black girl who has been put in foster care, when the novel begins. After her grandmother dies, Camille is placed in the home of the Brinkleys, who have three sons and Danica, another foster daughter. Initially, the Brinkleys look like a happy middle-class family, but Camille soon learns that their home is not a safe place. Mr. Brinkley molests both Camille and Danica while Mrs. Brinkley, a seemingly religious woman, ignores what is happening. When Camille meets Chu, a drug dealer and high school drop-out, she feels secure. However, Chu lives with Rob, his best friend, and Rob's older cousin Nut whom she later discovers is a pimp. After a confrontation with the Brinkleys, Camille runs away, first to her foster brother Jayson and then to Chu. Shortly thereafter, Chu is murdered and Camille is lured into prostitution by Nut, who rapes her and then manipulates her into becoming a part of his stable, which Iceberg Slim (Beck, 1967) defines as "a group of whores belonging to one pimp" (p. 276). Although the situation is certainly not ideal, Camille develops close relationships with Peaches, Shakira, Trina Boo and Wynica, who all work as prostitutes for Nut. In addition to focusing on the atrocities Camille

endures in the foster care system, *Damaged* (2010) depicts the lives of women who find family in an unlikely situation and eventually recognize Nut for the monster that he is.

### ***Shattered***

After reading *Damaged*, Belle and I read *Shattered* (2012), another novel by Kia Dupree. In this novel, readers learn about the sexualization of young girls, the foster care system and the use of women to transport drugs. At beginning of the story, Shakira, who is also a character in Dupree's *Damaged* (2010), runs into Nausy, an old friend who now works with young girls who are disadvantaged. Nausy invites Shakira to speak to her girls and the idea sends Shakira back to the past. Set in Washington, D.C., the narrative, which is a flashback written in first-person, recounts Shakira's experiences growing up in a single parent home with her mother, who is deaf, and her two sisters and brother. When Shakira is ten, the daycare center finds drugs in her baby sister's diaper bag. The drugs belong to her mother's boyfriend, but her mother is arrested and the children are put in foster care. In foster care, Shakira meets Nausy and the two run away together after school officials catch them touching inappropriately at school. Shakira and Nausy meet Drizzle who takes them to a trailer park and forces them to have sex with male clients. Shakira and her siblings are eventually returned to their mother, but she and her brother Ryan are psychologically shattered. Raped soon after by her brother, Shakira goes through a series of unhealthy relationships until she meets Rashard, whom she thinks is a drug dealer but is really an undercover cop trying to take down Smurf, a drug kingpin. On a trip to Costa Rica with Rashard, Shakira and Jacylyn, Nakeeda, and Yenee, the girlfriends of Rashard's friends, are kidnapped by Smurf and made to smuggle drugs back into the United States. In the process of preparing the girls to transport the drugs, Nakeeda and Yenee die. As Shakira and Jacylyn are escorted back into the country by Smurf through customs, Shakira uses sign language to warn customs officials

but Smurf escapes. Rashard returns to the States from Costa Rico distraught that he cannot find Shakira. When Shakira tells him what has happened, he promises to protect her and to take Smurf down. Rashard fulfills this promise and the story ends where it started, with Shakira sharing her story to Nausy's girls.

### ***Silenced***

After reading *Damaged* and *Shattered*, Belle and I agreed to read what we thought was the last in a trilogy but discovered that *Silenced* (Dupree, 2011) does not include characters from the first two novels. Told from the alternating perspectives of mother and daughter, *Silenced* (Dupree, 2011) focuses on Nicola Hampton's struggles to survive with her three children in harsh Sursum Corda, a housing project in Washington, D.C. Nicola, her daughter Tinka and her sons Marquan and Taevon are forced to move to the projects after she loses her job and the family is evicted from their apartment. Unable to find steady work, Nicola fears her temporary situation is becoming permanent and that her sons are spending far too much time in the streets. Desiring a sense of relief, she becomes reacquainted with Teddy, a cheating ex-boyfriend and Taevon's father. The relationship, however, leads to tension between Nicola and her daughter and pushes Tinka, an aspiring student, into the arms of Nine, a dangerous thief.

In addition to the problems between Nicola and Tinka, things seem to go from bad to worse when Taevon shoots Teddy, his father, and kills him. Taevon disappears, Nicola becomes ill and is admitted into a mental health facility, and Marquan is in prison. However, Tinka, who is living with Nine and expecting a baby, receives a plane ticket from her Aunt Renee who wants Tinka to visit her in Italy but has no idea what has happened or that Tinka is now pregnant. Initially, Nine tells Tinka she cannot go, and when she refuses to submit to his wishes, he holds her hostage and threatens to kill them both. Fearing that he will be killed by men he has double-

crossed, he eventually lets her go and commits suicide. When the novel ends, Tinka is boarding a plane. Nicola's and Tinka's different viewpoints on the events which impact their family keep the story moving and interesting as they both try to make sense of their lives in relation to the despair which consumes the Sursum Cora community.

### ***The Coldest Winter Ever***

After discussing *Silenced*, Belle, Kiersten, Davie, and I discussed possible books for our next meeting. During our discussion of *Silenced*, Belle and I referred to the other books by Kia Dupree we had read. Based on our comments, Kiersten and Davie shared that they wanted to read *Shattered*, and since Belle and I had recommended *Shattered* to them, they recommended that we read *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999). As a result, we agreed to focus on both books during the next meeting.

Sister Souljah's best-selling debut novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, has been credited with sparking the resurgence of street-based narratives in the 1990s (Brooks & Savage, 2009; Gibson, 2010; Hill et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2006; Newhouse, 2010; Rice, 1009; Rosen, 2004). Narrated by 16-year-old black female Winter Santiago, the novel is set primarily within a housing project in Brooklyn, New York. In the opening chapters, Winter, who has lived the life of a ghetto princess, experiences the fall of her father's drug empire. Realizing that the growth of his business has put his family's safety in jeopardy, Ricky Santiago moves his family from their apartment in the projects to a mansion in Long Island, a move which quickly leads to their demise. Frustrated by the isolation of her new home and oblivious to the danger back in Brooklyn, Mrs. Santiago, a self-identified "bad bitch," demands her husband take her to buy the Mercedes Benz he has promised her so that she can visit family and friends in the old neighborhood. However, when Mrs. Santiago is shot in the face by a rival drug lord during the

trip and Winter's father incarcerated for his drug-dealing activities; all family possessions are seized by law enforcement agencies, Winter's younger sisters are put in foster care, and her mother, disfigured by the wound, becomes addicted to drugs. Alone and desperate to enter the illegal drug game for herself, Winter unsuccessfully relies on men and seduction to reestablish the materialistic lifestyle to which she is accustomed. In addition, Sister Souljah, who is also a character in the novel, serves as an antagonist who tries to convince Winter to think critically about her lifestyle choices.

### ***A Project Chick***

The last book club meeting was coordinated through text messages. Trying to schedule a meeting that was convenient for eight participants was challenging. After a series of texts in which I asked about possible dates and times and books for the next meeting, we settled on two books: *A Project Chick* (Turner, 2004) and *Casting the First Stone* (Roby, 2000). *A Project Chick* (Turner, 2004) is a contemporary street fiction novel written in first-person which focuses on the life of Tressa, a young mother. When the novel begins, Tressa is desperate to escape an abusive relationship with Lucky, the father of her 18-month-old twin sons. In a jealous rage, Lucky kills a man who gives Tressa a ride after she encounters a flat tire and becomes stranded with the twins on the side of the road. Lucky shoots into the truck as the man, Tressa and the toddlers are riding in the car. He then shoots the woman who has been riding with him in his car, a woman with whom he has been having an affair, because he does not want to leave witnesses. After this incident, Lucky locks Tressa in their home with the twins and she realizes that the violence is quickly becoming worse. Fearing for her life and the lives of her sons, Tressa decides to escape. Her only options are an apartment in a housing project and public assistance.

However, from this experience, Tressa learns to become more self-reliant. She finds a job and learns to take care of herself and her boys and when Lucky find her she is able to fight back.

### ***Casting the First Stone***

Discussed in the book club along with *A Project Chick*, *Casting the First Stone* (Roby, 2000) is classified as Christian Fiction, but book club participants explained that Roby brings the street to the church in this eleven-book series. In the prologue to the novel, Curtis Black confesses to Tanya, his girlfriend, that God has called him to be a minister. He hopes to someday become pastor of his own church and asks Tanya to marry him. The first chapter begins eight years after Curtis and Tanya have married, and things are clearly very different for Tanya. Curtis is now pastor of Faith Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, and Tanya, a counselor, wants a divorce because of Curtis's greed and infidelity. Tanya is disgusted by the pressure he puts on his congregation to give more money and rumors that he is having an affair with the wife of one of the deacons. For a while Tanya focuses on saving her marriage because she loves Curtis and because of her their eight-year-old daughter Alicia. In addition, Tanya knows that the church by-laws require the pastor of Faith Missionary to be married. She demands that Curtis spend more time with her and Alicia and end his affair. But after she meets James and Curtis becomes more mentally and then physically abuse, she decides to end the marriage. With her mind made up, she does so just as Curtis's career crumbles and he begs her to stay.

The contemporary street fiction novels described above depict the harsh realities of life in high-poverty areas which span West Africa, Mexico and a variety of U.S. cities. More importantly, the novels selected by participants and discussed in book club meetings focused on women's experiences and presented their perspectives. Such characters faced a variety of oppressive situations involving issues such as colorism, foster care, domestic violence, drugs,



teen pregnancy, human trafficking, slavery, prostitution, and rape. In Chapter Four, I will discuss themes which emerged across participants' responses to these texts.

## Chapter Four: Findings

In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, Radway (1984) discusses her investigation of the role reading romance novels played in the lives of middle class, white women residing in a midwestern suburban community. Arguing that romance novels resist and reify femininity as constructed by patriarchy, Radway (1984) found that reading romance fiction presented opportunities for the women in her study to attend to unmet emotional needs in heterosexual relationships. In addition, Radway (1984) cautioned that reading such novels would have different meanings for women from different backgrounds, an assertion which signaled the significance of readers' social locations to their situated knowledge and engagement with romance fiction. Given Radway's (1984) findings, I set out to better understand contemporary street fiction's popularity among African American women. In this study, I explored the ways in which situated knowledge emerged in their discussions of novels during book club meetings held at a public library in Rivertown, a small southeastern community. I focused on the emergence of themes surrounding such knowledge to guide data analysis and to address the following research questions:

1. Who are the readers of contemporary street fiction in this setting?
2. How are the characters in contemporary street fiction to which readers respond positioned with regard to the intersections of race, class, and gender?
3. How do readers of contemporary street fiction situate themselves in their discussions of such texts?
4. How do readers of contemporary street fiction use social position and situated knowledge as resources in relating to characters?
5. In what ways do standpoints emerge from readers' social positions and situated knowledge as they discuss contemporary street fiction?

While my research questions emphasize the importance of situated knowledge, data collection during the first half of this study suggested otherwise and was a rather difficult time for me as a researcher. Since that time I have reflected and identified my inexperience and the nature of book club discussions as reasons for this period of frustration. Data during this phase of the study focused primarily on conversations between Belle and me. While two additional patrons of Rivertown Public Library, both African American women, joined us at different times and expressed interest in attending future book club meetings, they did not return. During a book signing for a local writer held at the library, I extended to Belle an invitation to join the book club and she signed up to participate. Belle attended the organizational meeting (February 14, 2014), and for the first five book club meetings, we met to discuss the following contemporary street fiction novels: *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2011), *Murderville 2: The Epidemic* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2012), *Murderville 3: The Black Dahlia* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2013), *Damaged* (Dupree, 2010), and *Shattered*, (Dupree, 2012).

To spark discussion, Belle and I focused on the strategies formulated for the study (see Chapter Three, p. 61) or, when available, the Reading Group Guide Discussion Questions provided in novels. Our comments would then quickly move to talk about female characters and other aspects we enjoyed or disliked. During analysis of these meetings, I looked for ways in which we identified with characters and events and how we positioned ourselves within our responses. An assumption I made as I analyzed these conversations was that situated knowledge would emerge as Belle and I made personal connections with characters' lives. However, the "us versus them" approach that dominated our responses proved problematic. We talked about characters in ways that presented distance between us and them. Although we responded to characters and events that we enjoyed or disliked, we made few connections to personal

experience and rarely interrogated our comments. Thus, data collection and preliminary data analysis during this period proved challenging as I struggled to understand situated knowledge and how it emerged and functioned in our responses.

However, during Meeting Seven (8/23/2014), Carmen, Davie, Kiersten, McKenzie, Paula and I met to discuss Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) and Kia Dupree's *Shattered* (2012). It was during this conversation that participants were critical of the mother-daughter relationships in *The Coldest Winter Ever* based on their understandings of motherhood and femininity. While I am uncertain whether the emergence of situated knowledge in the discussion can be attributed to an increase in book club members or kinships and friendships among participants, what surfaced in the discussion were communicative patterns which signaled complex ways of interacting with texts and each other, some of which involved pronoun shifts and resembled the call and response I have observed in African American churches. Participants also articulated the concept of a single mother's mentality, which presented both empowering and contradictory aspects. From this meeting, I found similar patterns and themes in previous discussions and recognized -that contemporary street fiction served as a site through which participants struggled with dominant understandings of the American Dream and learned about inequalities affecting women and children in contemporary society.

Although data collection for this study involved a variety of techniques, I found group discussion most fruitful for "seeing" situated knowledge. I present the findings described in the previous paragraph with participants' comments and exchanges involving multiple speakers. Specifically, I examine points in group discussion where participants' understandings of their lived experiences and social realities emerge in discussions. This chapter is organized according to three major findings (see Table 3 on next page): 1) research participants used various

communicative patterns which included highly interactive modes; 2) participants presented detached and attached responses to contemporary street fiction depending upon the dynamics of book club meetings. While responses in the first half of the study indicated detachment, later responses focused on mother-daughter relationships and the book club became a site for articulating a collective standpoint. Participants shared aspects of what they referred to as “a single mother’s mentality” and identified a range of benefits and limitations; and 3) participants used contemporary street fiction to interrogate dominant discourses and to learn about and negotiate inequalities affecting women and children in local, national and global contexts.

Table 3: Findings, Categories, and Propositions

<b>Findings</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Propositions</b>
<b>Using Communicative Patterns</b>	Interacting with Texts	Participants talked back to characters and government systems and put themselves in the positions of characters to situate themselves and others within discussions.
	Interacting with Book Club Members	Participants used call and response to encourage book club members to speak.
<b>Articulating a Collective Standpoint</b>	Detached Responses	Participants did not identify with the texts using situated knowledge.
	Conceptualizing a Single Mother’s Mentality	Participants shared understandings of contemporary street fiction using situated knowledge and articulated the concept of a single mother’s mentality standpoint.
<b>Understanding Societal Issues through Contemporary Street Fiction</b>	Interrogating Understandings of Concepts	Participants discussed depictions of the American dream and attempted to revise it in ways that were more meaningful and productive.
	Learning About and Negotiating Inequalities	Participants used the stories to learn about the foster care system and violence against women and children in local, national and global contexts.

## Using Communicative Strategies

The women in this study used a variety of communicative patterns which emerged across book club discussions. These patterns appeared during the first half of the study which focused on conversations between Belle and me and in later meetings attended by more book club participants. In this section, I discuss the various ways in which participants interacted with texts and each other. Participants engaged with texts by talking back to characters and government systems and putting themselves in characters' situations. In addition, they used call and response, a type of backchannel cue and another form of talking back, to interact with other book club members. The following sub-sections address these communicative patterns and speak to my third research question: How do readers of contemporary street fiction situate themselves in their discussions of contemporary street fiction texts?

### **Interacting with Texts**

Responses were, for the most part, limited to the behavior of female characters. As Davie shared in an interview at the conclusion of the book club, "We really only focused on the women." When participants disagreed with characters' actions, they addressed their concerns, often speaking directly to characters about issues they found troubling. This pattern of responding was illustrated by the ways in which participants interchanged pronouns as they questioned and criticized characters' motives. In addition, they interchanged pronouns in order to foster camaraderie or empathy. Participants replaced third-person pronouns such as *she*, *her*, *it* and *they* with the fourth-person pronoun *you*, which sometimes made it difficult to determine to whom a speaker was referring.

Scholars such as Fairclough (1989), Sacks and Jefferson (1995), and Yates and Hiles (2010) refer to this use of *you* as the indefinite, generalized form because of its ambiguous nature. As Sacks and Jefferson (1995) explain, it can be singular or plural. The singular form can

refer to those to whom the speaker is talking and those who are present. The plural form, however, can include everybody—that is, “the one you’re speaking to, and on their option or on your intention, insofar as those coincide, it can refer to anybody else, or to some category which includes everybody” (Sacks & Jefferson, 1995, p. 166). Stirling and Manderson (2011) and Yates and Hiles (2010) have explored shifts in pronoun use and the ways in which individuals position themselves and others in particular discursive contexts. In particular, the scholars found that the indefinite *you* can serve as a “distancing device” in terms of how individuals align themselves and others with the ideas being discussed. For this reason, Thomas-Ruzic (1998) argues that it is important to consider the particular contexts within which the indefinite form of *you* is used. The contextual framing for my study was the book club, and it was within this context that I was able to understand pronominal shifts.

An example of how participants used the indefinite form of *you* emerged during Meeting Six (August 2, 2014) as Belle, Davie, Kiersten and I discussed the novel *Silenced* (Dupree, 2011). Participants were critical of Nicola, the mother of Tinka, the novel’s protagonist. They disapproved of Nicola’s mothering skills and her ability to be an appropriate role model for Tinka. Although they expressed that Nicola had high expectations for Tinka, they did not think she had set a good example for her daughter. As the group considered Nicola’s shortcomings, Kiersten addressed her directly. In the exchange below, the pronoun *you* has been italicized to show Kiersten’s replacement of *she* and *her*.

Yvette: Uhm, I think her momma just wanted more for her.

Kiersten: But she didn’t like show her. She was just telling her.

Yvette: Wanted her...

Kiersten: Wanted her to do it but *you* weren’t doing it in *your* own life so what did *you* expect her to do. But *you* would've thought by her wanting more for

Tinka, if *you* are working at night, then why *you* didn't send Tinka over to Sheila house, while *you* work at night, to make sure that she's not all in the streets or whatever.

In this example, Kiersten initially used the third-person pronouns *she* and *her* to refer to Nicola as we talked about her relationship with her daughter. However, when Kiersten questions Nicola's reasons for allowing Tinka to go unsupervised, she shifts to the indefinite *you* and goes from talking about Nicola to speaking directly to her. This "change in footing," which Goffman (1981) defines as "a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance" (p. 128), serves as a distancing device (Goffman, 1981). Kiersten criticizes Nicola directly as though she is present and able to receive her criticism. Talking directly to Nicola presents a way of interacting with the text and situates both characters and participants in the discussion. It also shows Kiersten's disagreement with the example Nicola has set for her daughter.

Another pronominal shift in this exchange involves the dependent clause, "But *you* would've thought by her wanting more for Tinka." This clause signals a change from the singular use of the indefinite *you* which refers to Nicola to the plural form which can be taken to include Kiersten, Nicola, book club members, or anyone raising a daughter. As explained by Yates and Hiles (2010), this form of *you* presents the statements and situations addressed "as being generally true for anybody in the same situation" (p. 550). As a result, this use of *you* serves to depersonalize Kiersten's comment and suggest that Nicola's behavior is problematic because all mothers should take the necessary steps to ensure that their daughters are not left to roam the streets unsupervised.

Talking back to government systems such as foster care presented another example of participants interacting with texts using the indefinite *you*. Discussion during Meeting Five



(6/16/2014) focused on two contemporary street fiction novels by Kia Dupree: *Damaged* (Dupree, 2010) and *Shattered* (Dupree, 2012). Although *Damaged* was the focus of Meeting Four (5/27/2014), both novels addressed the sexual abuse of children while in foster care and, as a result, discussion overlapped. *Damaged* is a novel about Camille, a ten-year-old African American girl who is molested by her foster father when placed in foster care after her grandmother dies. *Shattered* is about Shakira, another African American ten-year-old girl, who runs away and into the clutches of a pimp when she is placed in the foster care system after a daycare worker finds drugs in her younger sister's diaper bag. Given the prevalence of sexual abuse in the novels, Belle and I expressed concern for the safety of children in foster care. In response to a question concerning who is at fault for the abuse suffered by Shakira and her siblings, we used the pronouns *it*, *they*, and *you* interchangeably in our references to the foster care system.

Belle: (reads from the discussion questions in the back of the book) What role did she [Shakira's mother] have in her children being split up across the city?

Yvette: I don't know.

Belle: And then she got them all back.

Yvette: So why even take them away to begin with? And then *you're* gonna, you know, and then by the time they came back they were really...

Belle: Gone.

Yvette: Yeah, really out there.

Belle: That's just like the education system. Yeah, the ball was definitely dropped.

Yvette: It's supposed to be a system that protects these children.

Belle: If *you're* going to take them out of their home, *you* should guarantee at least their protection somewhere else.

Yvette: I guess my, if *you're* taking them, and it's supposed to be a better situation, what they did to them, what the system does to them, is far worse than what that their momma could have ever done.

As Belle and I talked about the foster care system's failure to ensure the safety of children put in its care, we anthropomorphized it. In an analysis of how the inner-city is represented in contemporary street fiction, Castillo-Garsow (2012) similarly argues the streets are "a powerful space that is actually anthropomorphized – no longer a place, but almost a sentient being" (A Theoretical Basis section, para. 7). Like Kiersten, Belle and I addressed the system directly as though it was a being capable of hearing our concerns. Making a connection between foster care and education, we questioned both and were critical of the contradictions these systems present. Belle's use of the singular form of the indefinite *you* in the statement, "If *you're* going to take them out of their home, *you* should guarantee at least their protection somewhere else," functions as a distancing device and is used to highlight criticism. However, my use of the clause, "if *you're* taking them," seems more inclusive. This use of *you* can be taken to mean me, book club members, the foster care system, or anyone, extending the responsibility of children in foster care to everyone.

Talking back to texts in ways that blurred distinctions between participants and characters and served to foster camaraderie and empathy presented one final way participants interacted with texts. As we discussed the frequency with which the foster care system is addressed in contemporary street fiction, we used the pronoun *you* in ways that made it difficult to determine whether we were referring to ourselves, children in foster care, or mothers whose children have been placed in the system itself.

Yvette: So it's kinda interesting that all of these authors are talking about...

Kiersten: The foster system.

Yvette: Foster care.

Kiersten: And these kids getting molested.

Davie: So why don't nobody say nothing? 'Cause don't they just take *you* out the home?

Paula: And then they go to another home that's probably worse.

Kiersten: Then they go to another home.

Davie: 'Cause once they take *you*, *you* gotta follow all the protocol.

Kiersten: Go to classes and...

Davie: Yeah

Kiersten: Be on *your* own two feet before they will even consider giving them back to *you*.

Davie: That's like in Sister Souljah, when she [Winter's mother] was trying to get all her kids back and they was like "You don't have no job, you don't have no place to stay, you can't be in that room with this many people."

Kiersten: *You* have to have all that in place.

Yvette: But what kind of system...

McKenzie: They was living in a room like that before *you* came and got them. Why they can't...

Yvette: No, but what kind of system, if I don't have a place to stay, give me a place to stay, so I can have my kids. If I don't have...

Davie: They try to but *you* gotta get on the waiting list.

Group: (laughs)

Stirling and Manderson (2011) argue that the indefinite form of *you* can be used to elicit empathy and identification with the issues being addressed. In this extended exchange, although pronoun use shifts as the conversation progresses and speakers change, the use of *you* is primarily inclusive. In Davie's question—"Cause don't they just take *you* out the home?"—*you* takes the

plural form and can be taken to include Davie, book club members, and children in foster care. Similarly, when she states, “‘Cause once they take *you*, *you* gotta follow all the protocol,” the first use of *you*, which is also plural, involves the same references as in her previous statement. The second, however, differs slightly in that it includes Davie, those who are present and mothers (or anyone) whose children have been placed in the foster care system. In the pronominal shift that follows, Kiersten use of *you* in the statement, “Be on *your* own two feet before they will even consider giving them back to *you*,” also includes multiple references. In these examples, the use of *you* implies that the speaker and hearer share the same perspective or belong to the same group referenced by the speaker. It also serves to foster camaraderie or empathy by suggesting that speaker and hearer (or anyone) might find themselves in the same situation as mothers whose children are in the foster care (Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990). In the next section, I describe the ways in which book club members interacted with each other.

### **Interacting with Book Club Members**

While the communicative patterns used by book club participants illustrate how they interacted with texts, their use of call and response shows how they interacted with each other. Pawelczyk (2003) defines call and response as a form of backchanneling where the listener uses cues to show interest in what the speaker is saying. Smitherman (1977) defines call and response as “spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements (‘calls’) are punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener” (p. 104). Focusing on the role of response in the communicative process, Smitherman (1977) identifies five functions—co-signing, encouraging, repetition, completer, or “on T” (p. 107)—that are useful for understanding how participants interacted with each other during book club meetings. Participants co-signed by affirming statements made during group discussions with

retorts such as “Exactly” or “Right.” They also encouraged each other to continue talking by doing what I refer to as “putting words in each other’s mouths.” Statements that were relatable were often repeated by others or the entire group. In addition, participants completed each other’s statements in a way that resembled bantering and used “on T” responses, or exclamations such as “Exactly!” and “Right!” to signal strong agreement with speakers’ statements.

Although Pawelczyk (2003) and Smitherman (1977) present similar definitions of call and response, they focus on different areas within communities of practice. While Pawelczyk (2003) acknowledges that the use of call is often linked to men and response to women, she argues that the use of call and response as it relates to power relations might depend more on the roles assumed within a community of practice than gender. Smitherman (1977), however, argues that the use of call and response within African American culture supports an African world view which recognizes interaction, interdependence and balance. Call and response, as Smitherman (1977) explains, “seeks to synthesize speakers and listeners in a unified movement” (p. 108). In this sub-section, I consider these different views and provide examples of the ways in which participants interacted as they discussed contemporary street fiction novels using Smitherman’s (1977) five functions of response.

Before I discuss the ways participants interacted with each other using call and response, it is important to point out the challenges I encountered. Call and response is a communicative strategy that also involves talking back. In the previous discussion of the ways in which participants talked back to texts in the book club, boundaries between speaker and receiver were, in some instances, blurred. Similarly, with the use of call and response, boundaries were again blurred in that the roles of speaker and listener changed frequently. Smitherman (1977) warns of this when she asserts, “In this kind of communicative system, ‘there is no sharp line between

performers or communications and the audience, for virtually everyone is performing and everyone is listening” (p. 108). For this reason, in the examples that follow, I focus more on, as Smitherman (1977) suggests, the ways in which participants actively acknowledged each other rather than sharp distinctions between speakers and listeners. In addition, because the different types of response often overlap, I attempt to focus on response types separately even when others are present in the examples.

According to Smitherman (1977), co-signing is a form of response which signals affirmation or agreement. To understand co-signing, one might think of it as a verbal or non-verbal way of saying to the speaker, “I hear you.” In the following example, my responses to Belle’s comments signaled my attention and agreement.

Belle: You see these little girls in schools. You don’t know why so and so is acting out. Why she’s doing this and doing that? I don’t know. I told them I said, “My grandmother lived to be 104 years old. That twerking bone in your body, I don’t have that.”

Yvette: (laughs)

Belle: I said, “I couldn’t do that to save my life.” I said, “Cause we were not allowed to (inaudible).” And I’m 44 years old.

Yvette: Exactly.

Belle: And I still can’t dance like that.

Yvette: And you know, I get embarrassed. They’re twerking and I’m like, “Oh, man.” Like I’m embarrassed. I’m literally embarrassed.

Belle: I’m 43 years old. I can’t do that.

Yvette: Right.

Belle: I’m like. I’m like, uh-uh (no). You acted like a little girl.

Yvette: Right.

Belle: You acted like, I don't care what was going on in your life you acted like a little girl.

Yvette: Exactly.

In this exchange, my laughter signaled to Belle that I recognized her humor as she talked about her inability to twerk, a popular dance defined by BossSwagga in *Urban Dictionary* (2015) as “a person making their booty bounce up and down by-way of shaking their hips in an up and down motion and casually adding gyrations and dropping to the floor.” For Belle, even longevity was not enough to make her believe that she had or wanted “that twerking bone in her body.” In addition, as Belle continued, I showed agreement with the verbal cues “Exactly” and “Right.” As a result, co-signing in this example signaled to Belle I was listening.

Encouraging, another type of call and response used by participants during the study, involved urging participants to continue talking about a topic (Smitherman, 1977). In the next example, Belle urged Kiersten to continue as she talked about people who were content with living on public assistance.

Kiersten: But that's what I'm saying, a lot of people are like they quit high school and then they're content. They don't have no I'm gonna go to school. They're okay with getting assistance from the government to pay for this, that and the other, and I'm good, and I can buy me an outfit and I'm good. (laughs) That's how they are and it's like...

Belle: Section 8 house.

Kiersten: Right, Section 8 house and this and that and food stamps and I'm good.

Belle: I'm comfortable.

Kiersten: And they don't have no type of nothing, but then somebody else in that same situation may be like, “Okay, I'm gon' go to school.” They go to school. They may move out that neighborhood.

Belle: And the next time they see 'em, they like “Oh”

Kiersten: “Oh, she think she all that 'cause she...”

Belle: Why people do that? Why people do that?

Kiersten: No, she want a little more. She took one little notch higher, but probably still struggling. But they on the outside looking in.

Belle encouraged Kiersten to continue by doing what I refer to as “putting words in her mouth.”

When Belle responded with the phrase “Section 8 house,” Kiersten continued with “Right, Section 8 house and this and that and food stamps and I’m good.” A similar example followed when Belle stated, “And the next time they see ‘em, they like ‘Oh,’” and Kiersten continued with “Oh, she think she all that ‘cause she...” Repetition of the question “Why people do that?” was also an example of encouraging, for it presented the opportunity for Kiersten to continue by answering. Thus, encouraging in this example involved urging a speaker to continue by interjecting phrases, statements and questions that were related to the topic the speaker was addressing.

A third type of call and response used by participants which involved repeating words to which listeners could relate was repetition (Smitherman, 1977). In the next exchange, participants interacted with each other using call and response by repeating the words or statements made by a previous speaker, once as a single responder and again as a group.

Carmen: But everybody don’t have that. They may not be able to see. Both sides of their family might be. But I just have to, and I’m just so thankful for that, but I just had a very positive. And I’m not saying my grandma not positive. She’s just...

Paula: It’s different.

Carmen: Different

Paula: Perspective

Group: Perspective



This example combined both the repetition and completer response types, the latter of which I will discuss in the next example. Paula finished Carmen's statement with "It's different," and Carmen responded by repeating the word "different." Likewise, when Paula responded with "Perspective," the group followed by repeating what she had said.

As shown in the previous example, completer responses used by participants encompassed finishing each other's statements (Smitherman, 1977). In the next example, participants also interjected "completers" as they talked about escaping abusive relationships.

Paula: Regardless of any situation, I mean, I may not want to do it by myself, but if push come to shove...

Kiersten: I can.

Paula: Me and my three will roll, you know, but...

McKenzie: You'll be penny-pinching, but you could do it.

Paula: We'll do it. It may not be nice, but we'll do it. I just don't want. You know, some people in a situation where they can't even do that, you know, so I...

McKenzie: I don't wanna depend on nobody for nothing.

The way in which participants interjected completers as they talked back to each other had a synthesizing effect. In the effort to better understand the impact of completer responses in the book club discussions, I removed the speaker tags and merged participants' comments as shown below.

Regardless of any situation, I mean, I may not want to do it by myself, but if push come to shove...I can. Me and my three will roll, you know, but... You'll be penny-pinching, but you could do it. We'll do it. It may not be nice, but we'll do it. I just don't want... You know, some people in a situation where they can't even do that, you know, so I...I don't wanna depend on nobody for nothing.

When merged together, the different voices of research participants can easily be taken as that of one speaker, illustrating the interactive and interdependent nature of call and response in this setting.

Finally, research participants used the “on T” response to show that they strongly agreed with a statement (Smitherman, 1977). I think of this type of response as a way of telling a speaker that his or her comment is “right on time,” as in “You’re absolute right!” The next example followed a heated exchange between Kiersten and McKenzie as they reminded one another “not to depend on nobody” and to “do it all yourself.”

McKenzie: But I can remember that time I was thinking about getting a second job. I was like “Man, I don’t know.” So I came to you [Kiersten], and me and you was talking about it. And you was like, “Well, I might go back to the hospital [as a second job],” and I was like, “Well, she got three kids. If she can do it, I can do it.”

Kiersten: Exactly!

McKenzie: But at the same time, me not understanding like, you shouldn’t have to do it.

Kim: No, you shouldn’t have to do it, but if you have to do it, you do what you gotta do for your children or family or whatever it is.

McKenzie: Exactly!

As McKenzie and Kiersten talked about getting second jobs and “do[ing] what you gotta do for your children or family,” they used the exclamation “Exactly!” and signaled strong agreement with what the other had said.

## **Summary**

In this section, I presented the different ways in which participants used communicative patterns to interact with texts and each other. To interact with the texts, participants “talked back” to characters and government systems, shifting from the use of third-person pronouns to

the fourth-person, indefinite pronoun *you* as they discussed novels. This change enabled participants to speak directly to characters as though they were present and able to receive participants' criticism. Similarly, through such pronoun shifts, participants anthropomorphized the foster care system, speaking directly to it as they criticized its failure to protect the children in its custody as depicted in contemporary street fiction novels. In some instances, when participants used the indefinite form of *you*, they blurred distinctions between the speaker, those present, and characters, resulting in a stance that was empathetic rather than critical. In addition to talking back to texts, participants also used call and response as a way to interact and talk back to each other. They interjected responses and affirmed each other as they shared personal experiences and discussed novels. Likewise, they finished the statements of other participants and encouraged lines of thinking that resulted in a synthesis of voices where distinctions between speaker and listener at times proved difficult to determine. These ways of interacting with texts and each other encouraged collective interaction and dialogue as participants discussed both contemporary street fiction and their lives.

### Articulating a Collective Standpoint

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, opportunities to see situated knowledge increased during Meeting Seven (8/23/2015) when participants began to refer to the concept of a single mother's mentality. Prior to that meeting, responses to novels seemed detached, especially during the book club discussions that made up the first half of the study and during which Belle and I were the only participants. During Meeting Seven which involved more participants, discussion focused on mother-daughter relationships in the texts, relationships which, on the one hand, enabled them to be critical of representations of motherhood and femininity in the novels. On the other hand, these images also permitted participants to articulate the concept of a single

mother's mentality standpoint using their situated knowledge. Through their criticism of the characters in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), participants presented aspects that I believe guided their reactions to this and other texts. In addition, they addressed the ways in which a single mother's mentality could lead to stress and conflict in their lives. In this section, I discuss what I thought were detached responses in the first half of the study and reveal how participants articulated their understandings of a single mother's mentality as they responded to *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999) and other contemporary street fiction novels.

### **Detached Responses**

As previously stated, during the first half of the study, book club discussions focused on conversations between Belle and me. Although I felt we did not need to reach the level of black feminist critics, a review of discussions conducted during this period indicated the novels elicited detached responses when it came to how we engaged with texts. I describe our responses to *Murderville 2: The Epidemic* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2012) in the list below as "detached," using Kinefuchi and Orbe's (2009) concept of positionality, which refers to "proximity" and how we "viewed, interacted with, and ultimately processed" the texts (Key Organizing Principles for Themes, para. 2). Kinefuchi and Orbe (2009) studied college students' written responses to the film *Crash* (Haggis, 2005), a movie the researchers described as "socially charged in terms of race relations" (para. 4) and concentrated on how participants situated themselves in terms of personal, racial, and societal issues in their responses and how racial location informed their situatedness, understandings of experience, perceptions of the world, and racial standpoints.

Based on our discussion of *Murderville 2* during Meeting Two (4/21/2014), I listed in my field notes the topics Bell and I addressed:

- asked questions/clarified details/events in book
- summarized events

- noted descriptions/details make characters and places seem real
- learned about Sierra Leone and human trafficking; writing allowed us to see these things up close and personal
- wondered how authors gained knowledge about Sierra Leone
- made a connection to recent kidnapping of girls in Nigeria to human trafficking and movie *Twelve Years a Slave*
- wondered about significance of Vatican as a setting in the underworld
- talked about Liberty's beauty (perfect accessory for Po)
- talked about Rocko's loyalty to Po (makes him a good guy)
- saw Dahlia as ruthless (uses sex to get what she wants)
- recognized book as having too many characters, but liked that authors take minor characters and make them major characters in other stories
- when asked about drugs and violence in novels, said it exists in real life

During preliminary data analysis, I applied Kinefuchi and Orbe's (2008) understandings of positionality to our responses. Accordingly, when comments remained at the surface level in terms of situated knowledge, I coded them as detached.

For example, in conversation surrounding Dahlia and Liberty, characters in *Murderville* 2, discussion did not lead to an interrogation of each other's responses although Belle and I expressed admiration and frustration, respectively, for these characters. The *Murderville* trilogy chronicles Liberty's experiences from age ten as she survives rebel attacks in her village in Sierra Leone; human trafficking aboard the ship *Murderville*; being owned by Samad, an international drug dealer; rape; forced prostitution; and a heart transplant. In the opening pages, Liberty leaves the hospital after a follow-up visit with her doctor when Po, a local drug dealer, saves her from being gunned down by Samad's hitmen, an event which sparks a romantic attraction between the two. In response to Liberty and Po's budding relationship, I expressed frustration with Liberty's character. In the exchange between Belle and me which follows, I referred to Liberty's recognition of her own victimization and expressed my frustration that she might again find herself a victim if her relationship with Po becomes more serious.

Yvette: And then on the other hand, I got like frustrated with Liberty too, for like wanting somebody to come. Because remember she had been given a second chance, Liberty, like in the very beginning when she says, uhm, (searches for page). What page is it on? She actually says, you know, “I don’t want to be in the...”

Belle: “In that lifestyle.”

Yvette: Yeah, she says, uhm, like at the bottom of page 29.

Belle: She didn’t want to live that life again.

Yvette: Yeah, I don’t, she says.

Belle: Drug life.

Yvette: (reads) “She was tired of wallowing in her own weaknesses. For as long as she could remember, she had been the victim, victim to the rebels, victim to Ezekiel, to the drug cartels, to Abia, then Samad. It was time to say enough. She would not be a victim anymore. *If I give up, Shai...*”

Belle: (reads) “*Shai died for nothing...*”

Yvette: (reads) “*all of this is for nothing. I have to live for him*, she thought.” So, I mean, she was a fighter. She was a fighter, but she still wanted somebody to take. She wanted that knight in shining armor to come and rescue her. Yeah, ‘cause she just, after she says that, then she goes right back to looking for somebody else.

What is interesting about this exchange is that Belle and I did not interrogate the reasons behind this response. Beyond the possibility that Liberty might find herself dependent upon Po, our responses remain at the surface level. By this, I mean that we did not examine the understandings or experiences which were leading me to see her dependence as problematic.

This detached perspective can be seen in another exchange between Belle and me concerning Dahlia, Liberty’s cousin, who is also a character in *Murderville 2*. When Liberty and Po visit Sierra Leone, Liberty reunites with Dahlia, but as the novel progresses, their relationship becomes antagonistic. With the help of Omega, Dahlia’s husband, Po becomes a distributor for the African Mafia, and Omega sends Dahlia to Los Angeles to watch over his business interests

with Po. Dahlia grows jealous of Liberty's relationship with Po and the freedom Po grants her.

Belle and I recognized that Liberty does not understand the business the way that Dahlia does.

Belle: She [Dahlia] fell in love when she got off the plane and her foot hit the ground. She was in love with freedom. Baby, she went wild.

Yvette: Exactly. At the bottom of page 51, like when she talks about, uhm, "Dahlia stopped and shook her head. No, Omega doesn't grant me that type of power. He likes to keep it all for himself, she admitted with a bit of contempt in her voice. She quickly perked back up and continued, but Po is different. He would let his queen rule over her court. Po trusts you and if you play your hand right you can have it all. Money, power, respect. Po will need you in his life in order to keep his position secure. His business is in L.A. so he won't be here enough to make sure that his will is considered. You are his eyes and his ears. Know the connects. Make them know you. You hold..." Like she, it's kinda like, like she's tryna school Liberty. Like in order to be...

Belle: But Liberty don't understand.

For this reason, Dahlia desires to have Po for herself so that she can exploit the freedom he grants Liberty, and although Belle saw Dahlia's betrayal as problematic, she admired her ambition as she commented further on a diamond deal Dahlia negotiates with Po.

I think, I mean, I hated that Po brought in Dahlia. But, then she had, uhm, when they made the deal, when Trixie was gonna get 10 percent. Then, she was like, huh, my price is 20 percent. She may be satisfied with 10, but my price is 20. "What's it gon' be Po? You know I'm worth it." Oh, uh-hum, yeah, she was, yeah. Look, look what Rocko said when she told him that about the deal, she said, he said, uhm, "You better be careful with that one. She'll be the 'b' to break up a happy home." And what, oh my God, what did she? Oh!

While Belle admired Dahlia's negotiating skills, we did not interrogate the source of that admiration, or the social relations or personal experiences which may have fostered this opinion.

Our detached views persisted even as we discussed issues such as skin color as it related to the ways Liberty and Dahlia were portrayed in the text.

Yvette: I was thinking, like, why isn't she [Dahlia] more like Liberty? Like if they grew up in the same, like why aren't they more...

Belle: Because they was the black one, the light skinned one. Everybody like, "Ooh, look how pretty the light skinned girl is with the pretty hair. The lil' black one got nappy hair. We ain't concerned about her. This pretty little light skinned girl."

Yvette: Right, I mean Dahlia was pretty too. They do describe her as pretty, but they kinda look at her like physically, like her body...

Belle: The way she was just. She would walk with her heels on and she had just a little see through. They say her hips was swaying and her butt bouncing. The men just had to look, and that's why Ayo [one of Omega's men] told her, "You're getting too comfortable here. Does Omega know that you walking around here..."

Yvette: Half-naked.

I think this exchange presented an opportunity to delve deeper into a discussion of skin color and how European beauty ideals are valued. One of my first experiences in reading contemporary street fiction was T. Style's *Black and Ugly* (2006), in which the main character Parade Knight believes she is black and ugly and allows men to abuse her body. As an African American woman with dark skin, the experience of reading this novel was liberating for me. It was the first time I had experienced a character or anyone for that matter discuss the valuation or devaluation of a person or oneself based on skin color. Parade Knight basically expresses a belief system within the larger society that is often present but at the margins of discussion. Although this topic emerged several times, Belle and I did not discuss it in-depth. We summarized and approached it from a detached perspective.

In this sub-section, I illustrated the presence of detached responses during the first half of the study. During this time, Belle and I did not interrogate each other's responses to understand the knowledge guiding our comments. However, while our responses were primarily at the surface level, these meetings were productive in that our discussions brought attention to a variety of topics concerning the lives of women, including (but not limited to) the dependency of female characters, women and drug culture, standards of beauty, and black femininity. In the



next section, I focus on the ways in which discussions led to attached perspectives and opportunities to examine the situated knowledge participants used as a resource in their engagement with contemporary street fiction.

### **Conceptualizing a Single Mother's Mentality**

During Meeting Seven (8/23/2015), the concept of a single mother's mentality emerged in conversation, and I began to suspect that there was a connection between our understandings of this concept and the ways we were responding to characters in contemporary street fiction novels. It was also during this meeting that I realized this way of thinking had been passed on to participants by women in their families – grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. In this section, I present participants' use of contemporary street fiction to articulate their understandings of this concept. As we discussed *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), participants were critical of Winter's mother for teaching her to rely on her beauty and sexuality. After this meeting, I returned to data from Meeting Six (August 2, 2014) and realized that participants had also presented aspects of this mentality in their discussions of Kia Dupree's *Silenced* (2011) and previous texts. Moreover, as participants talked about these issues, they also revealed areas in which they experienced stress and conflict. "Conceptualizing a Single Mother's Mentality" addresses my fourth and fifth research questions:

4. How do readers of contemporary street fiction use socially situated knowledge to relate to characters across the intersections of race, class, and gender?
5. In what ways do standpoints emerge from readers' situated knowledge and engagements with contemporary street fiction?

In discussion surrounding a Black women's standpoint on Black motherhood, Collins (2000) presents five themes that have endured through "slavery, Southern rural life, and class-stratified, racially segregated neighborhoods of earlier periods of urban Black migration" (p.

191). “Bloodmothers, othermothers, and women-centered networks” is a theme which involves Black women working together to take care of the children in their communities (Collins, 2000, p. 192). “Mothers, daughters, and socialization for survival” focuses on Black mother’s teaching their daughters the significance of self-reliance (p. 198). “Community othermothers and political activism” deals with Black women advocating for children in their communities (p. 205). “Motherhood as a symbol of power” relates to Black mothers garnering respect through community involvement (p. 207)). Lastly, “the personal meaning of motherhood” concerns Black women defining motherhood for themselves (p. 211). Of these themes, “mothers, daughters, and socialization for survival” emerged as relevant to participants’ discussion of *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999). According to Collins (2000), “Black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities” (p. 198). Interestingly, as participants understood Winter’s character, they pointed out that she lacked these skills, which, as Collins (2000) notes, are essential to Black women’s survival.

**Responses to mother-daughter relationships in *The Coldest Winter Ever*.** Overall, as a comment made by McKenzie suggests, participants admired Winter’s confidence:

I liked her confidence. She didn't feel like she couldn't do any, I mean, she felt like she could do anything. You know. I just liked her confidence. She never said, “Oh, I can't do this or I can't,” you know. *Can't* wasn’t even a part of it. She was just like, I'm gonna do it and this is how I'm gonna get it done whether it was the way we, you know, say that it was okay. She just got it done.

Despite the demise of her family, Winter did not give up. She relentlessly pursued the opportunity to restore her lavish lifestyle, but this desire also frustrated participants’ readings of the novel and led to discussions surrounding the failure of Winter’s mother, Mrs. Santiago, to teach her to be self-reliant. What Mrs. Santiago taught her were the dynamics of being a “bad

bitch,” a “female hustler, a materialistic woman who is willing to sell, rent, or use her sexuality to get whatever she wants” (Collins, 2005, p. 128). Similarly, Bragg and Ikard (2012) refer to “the trading of black female sexuality for control and power in relationships” as “transactional sexuality” (p. 240), and participants expressed that this kind of thinking is what led to Winter’s eventual downfall.

When asked what they thought about the novel, Davie stated she thought Winter was “ratchet.” In an interview at the conclusion of the book club, Davie defined the word *ratchet* as “something that is extremely out of the ordinary, crazy, ridiculous; something that really doesn’t make sense in a normal person’s mind.” When asked to elaborate, Davie explained that the novel was “too much” and added, “Like I stopped reading after the daddy [Ricky Santiago] went to jail, and they went to see him, and then he had like another baby momma. I just couldn’t take it no more.” Carmen suggested that perhaps Davie viewed Winter’s behavior as ratchet because of her extreme selfishness.

Maybe she [Davie] felt that way because the girl in *The Coldest Winter Ever* seemed more selfish than the girl in *Shattered* [a book by Kia Dupree that the group had discussed previously]. Like the girl in *Shattered* seemed selfish in some ways but the girl in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, she just was all about herself.

Although participants saw Winter’s confidence as admirable, they believed it was incredibly misdirected and blamed her mother.

McKenzie: I think that in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, she [Winter] was always told about how pretty she was and that’s what she relied on. I think she didn’t know no better.

Paula: And I blame a lot on her mom...

McKenzie: I just don’t think that she knew anything differently than, you know, how pretty she was.

Paula: I think her mom has a lot to do with it because look at the mentality. Her mom was telling her at a young age, “You do what you got to do. Forget that. Use what you.” That's not really the speeches you give your daughter that young.

McKenzie: That you're supposed to give your daughter.

Paula: Exactly!

Carmen: That I don't think you ever give them.

Group: (laughs)

In the exchange that follows, participants pointed out the limitations of women relying on their beauty as a resource when they recognize that once Mrs. Santiago is shot in the face and disfigured even Winter looks at her differently.

Paula: But her mom was up. But her mom attitude was like...

Carmen: She was just like. What she referred to her mom as? Bad b? So she idolized her. “I want to be just like her, like my momma.” Have a man that gives her everything. She has the lavish lifestyle.

Paula: Until her face got tore up. Then what? She couldn't rely on that anymore and then even Winter looked at her like, you know. So, it's like their standards are.

McKenzie: Didn't her mom end up on drugs?

Paula: Yeah, tore up, yeah, baldheaded and everything. Just out on the streets with a catsuit on.

Group: (laughs)

Participants were frustrated that Mrs. Santiago taught Winter to rely on her beauty and sexuality. They saw this kind of thinking as limiting and were critical of Winter's mother for teaching her such views.

During our discussion, McKenzie and Kiersten talked about parents being role models. According to McKenzie, children look to their parents to model the behaviors they teach their children. That is, children learn how to be based on what they see their parents do. McKenzie

recalled that she saw her mother doing homework and was inclined to do hers and related this to Winter's mother teaching her to be a bad bitch.

And a lot of things you teach your children, your children look for it in you. So, if you say, like, oh, you know, uhm, just anything, like "I like to go running." You can say it, but if the kids don't see you running, then they not gone, you know, like my momma used to be like, "Do your homework! Do your homework!" But then I would look over and see my momma doing her homework, so I would be like, "Well, I guess I'm gonna do my homework since my momma doin' her homework." So, a lot of people. Like, if you tell your children something, they gon' still look for it in you and that's a lot of things. Like whether it's positive or negative, like even in Winter's case, like her momma was saying, "Ooh, you're so cute." Her momma was doing this. She saw her momma doing it, so...

Kiersten responded to McKenzie's comments by providing a personal example of how she has followed an example modeled by her mother.

They expect you. You can't tell them to do something you're not doin'. That's just like me. People be like, "Oh, how you do this, and you do that? But then, when I sit back and look at it, momma did that. Momma loaded her car up and took all the kids in the neighborhood to church, to choir practice, to Sunday school, to games, to the skating rink. So, it's like, I got it, that momma did it. So that's where I got it from.

In this excerpt, Kiersten recognized that watching her mother taught her the value of hard work and to be responsible for ensuring that the children in her neighborhood participated in enrichment activities.

**Aspects of a single mother's mentality standpoint.** In the discussion that follows, I present self-reliance, the value of education, and knowledge of multiple perspectives as aspects of a single mother's mentality that emerged as participants related contemporary street fiction to their lived experiences. As situated knowledge, these aspects appeared to be a way for participants to ensure survival and to avoid oppressive circumstances even though they also recognized limitations and most were involved in heterosexual relationships.

Self-reliance. In addition to seeing the women in their families as role models, participants pointed out that their mothers and grandmothers had passed on to them the value of self-reliance, which they saw as an important characteristic related to the concept of a single mother's mentality. As the exchange which follows shows, McKenzie and Kiersten, niece and aunt, discussed being taught not to depend on anyone, referring to this way of thinking as a mentality, although it was one that McKenzie saw as somewhat problematic.

McKenzie: But with her [McKenzie's grandmother] doing all of that, Kiersten, it also taught us like how not to depend on nobody.

Kiersten: That's right, you can...

McKenzie: Which is...

Kiersten: You can do it all yourself, so when we have that mentality...

McKenzie: Exactly, but we all burnt out.

Group: (laughs)

Kiersten: But that's okay.

McKenzie: We saw her do it all by herself.

Kiersten: But that just gave...

McKenzie: And then I watched my momma do it by herself.

Kiersten: But that just...

McKenzie: I watched you do it all by yourself.

Kiersten: But that's just the mentality of I can do it.

McKenzie: But I can...

Kiersten: I don't have to rely on whoever.

McKenzie: But I can remember that time I was thinking about getting a second job. I was like “Man, I don't know.” So I came to you, and me and you was talking about it. And you was like, “Well, I might go back to the hospital [as a second job],” and I was like, “Well, she got three kids. If she can do it, I can do it.”

Kiersten: Exactly!

McKenzie: But at the same time, me not understanding like, “You shouldn't have to do it.”

Kiersten: No you shouldn't have to do it, but if you have to do it, you do what you gotta do for your children, or family or whatever it is.

McKenzie: Exactly!

Kiersten: Because you can do it.

McKenzie: (laughs) And now we're all burned out.

In this exchange, McKenzie explained that self-reliance was a value passed on to her by grandmother, mother, and Kiersten, her aunt. In addition, knowing that she should not have to do things all by herself is also telling, for Kiersten acknowledged that self-reliance could also be stressful.

Paula also added that she had learned the value of self-reliance from her mother. Along with Kiersten and McKenzie, she admitted she would appreciate help even though she knows she can survive without it, and in response to their exchange, McKenzie acknowledged that Paula had a single mother's mentality.

Paula: I can agree to that too because like I said, my momma when she left, she was up here by herself, well not by herself, by her parents, but she had to work two jobs and I was like if she could do, I can do it too.

Kiersten: I can do it. Right!

Paula: She couldn't depend on my dad at the time, because he, but if it wasn't for her, nothing would get done.

Kiersten: Exactly, so you have to step up and do it.

Paula: So, growing up, it's like...

McKenzie: But it teach you like...

Paula: I want you to help me, but I don't need you to help me, but it would be nice if you help me.

Kiersten: It's nice if you help me, but if you don't, I can still press on.

McKenzie: You have a single mother's mentality. I don't try to have it, and that's a problem that I have in my relationship now. Like I don't know how to say, let me lean on you for this. I'm not even going to you. I'm going to work it out myself, whatever I got, I'll miss this bill to pay this bill.

As described by McKenzie, the habit of self-reliance is important to the concept of a single mother's mentality.

However, McKenzie also pointed out that self-reliance and a single mother's mentality could present problems in relationships, a realization with which Carmen agreed and responded:

But it do, it does pose problems in your relationship. I'm a newlywed and that's me and husband's biggest argument. Like he's always like, like he, I hate when he says. It kills me. He's like, "Oh you wanna be the man, you wanna be the man." When he met me I had, you know, all my stuff. It's hard to... That's something we have to work with. I guess you gotta learn how to balance it, and once you get in a relationship... If you, I guess you, if you're in the relationship with the right person, too.

McKenzie and Carmen both admitted that resisting the need to be self-reliant was difficult for them and that it challenged gender roles and often offended their partners.

The value of education. In addition to self-reliance, participants identified education as another important value Winter had not learned from her family. In an analysis of Winter's character, Pough (2004) argues that Winter's upbringing "warped her understanding of survival" (p. 145). For Winter, it was not about physiological needs like food and shelter or alternatives to a life of crime such as finding a job or completing her education. As Pough (2004) explains, for Winter, a lavish lifestyle supported by crime was all that she knew and the only way she had



been taught to survive. In the following excerpt, Paula asked about Winter's decision not to go to school.

Regardless of the stuff she could have been doing with her money or whatever, she just doesn't get it. So, it's kind of like, it really doesn't matter how much money you have, you still can be ratchet with money or whatever. You know what I'm saying, and it's not because you stay here and you have to be. You can have means to, but some people still choose to live that lifestyle. Why would you do that? You spend, you want diamonds, but you don't want to go to school.

Carmen responded to Paula's question by explaining that the value of education is something that is learned.

Carmen: That's, you know, at the end of the day, it's an instinct of survival. You're gonna do what you have to do and if they don't have an education, there's probably nothing they can do. And that can be a generational curse. Their mommas didn't have an education. Their grandmother's didn't have an education. It goes so much deeper than that.

Paula: They don't know any better.

Carmen: Than just their family. So it's like who are you to judge, you know, them just because they may not have been raised the same way as other people were raised who were encouraged to go to school.

For Carmen, the ways in which education was devalued in Winter's family equated to a generational curse, where survival skills were extremely limited. She argued that education was not important to Winter because it was not a resource she had been taught to see as important.

Likewise, McKenzie revealed she had witnessed a similar pattern among Mexican girls at the school where she works.

McKenzie: I see girls like Winter every day.

Group: (agrees)

McKenzie: No matter what you do, or how hard you try, it's just, like one girl, she went to high school where I work, and her way out was to have a baby. That was going to solve all her problems financially. That was going to be her family. Like that just, like coming from like a, uhm, Mexican culture, I guess, the women don't really value education, like the men do. So growing up, that was her role, have

babies, go home, take care of the family. Everybody live together, and no matter what I told her about how she make straight A's, how she can be anything she wanna be, she still ended up having a baby, dropping out of school, moving in with her boyfriend and his three other kids for other people and that's where she at.

Paula: It's so deeply ingrained.

Yvette: So you think culture is stronger than...

McKenzie: ...we start off with like big, big, big numbers when it comes to like Mexican girls and Mexican boys, and by the end of the year, all of those girls are pregnant, and they don't return the next year.

McKenzie considered how devaluing education impacted the lives of female students at her school who were Mexican immigrants. She, Paula and Carmen saw education as another essential survival skill for girls.

Nevertheless, although participants saw higher education as valuable, they realized that achieving this goal did not guarantee a life without struggle and that it could be a source of conflict in families. Even with college degrees, both McKenzie and Carmen admitted they continued to struggle financially.

McKenzie: Like I was telling my momma the other day, these kids [students at the school where McKenzie works] really think I made it. They think I'm living like...

Kiersten: 'Cause they're on the outside looking in.

McKenzie: But they really be like, "Oh Ms. McKenzie went to college. She made it," and I'm like, "No!"

Carmen: I'm still broke.

Group: (laughs)

McKenzie: Exactly!

Likewise, participants seemed conflicted in fulfilling the expectation that earning a college degree meant returning home and providing financially for their families and communities. As a

first generation college graduate, Carmen explained that after completing her undergraduate degree she felt pressure to return home to take care of her family and recalled the tension she felt in making the decision to move out.

I actually had to take the initiative and just leave. I had to remove myself, and there was tension between me and my family, like they were upset with me and I didn't, at the time when I moved, I didn't even have a job, but I was just like, I have to, because just being there and I only, I went to college, graduated and I only stayed there one summer and that summer it was just like draining me, so I just had to leave from the situation, and it might have took a year or two years for my family to come back around.

In addition, Paula also explained how resisting this expectation can create conflict.

And unfortunately they have parents that give them the guilt trip. You should, you gon' take care of me, you ain't moving. That doesn't help either because you don't want to disappoint your parents. You want to take care of them. Then you're trying to do better for yourself. So you're in the middle of what should I do. I want peace but I want to do better but then I don't want to leave my family.

Knowledge of multiple perspectives. *Silenced* (Dupree, 2011) was another contemporary street fiction novel read by the group in which a mother-daughter relationship was portrayed. Participants criticized the relationship between Nicola and Tinka, her daughter, but noted that the novel is hopeful because it ends with Tinka having the opportunity to gain a different perspective. While Nicola had high expectations for Tinka, she did not, as participants pointed out, lead by example.

Belle: I can understand that the mother didn't want her to get, but she didn't have no other choice. That's the life they lived.

Yvette: Right, like her mom wanted her, like how hard, she was harder on her than she, it was like the boys [Taevon and Marquan] could do whatever. But on her, like it was a completely different set of rules and expectations, like I...

Kiersten: She was hard on her, but she wasn't leading by example.

Yvette: Uhm, I think her momma just wanted more for her.

Kiersten: But she didn't like show her. She was just telling her.

Yvette: Wanted her...

Kiersten: Wanted her to do it but you weren't doing it in your own life so what did you expect her to do.

Participants pointed out that Nicola wanted more for Tinka but became content with living in Sursum Corda, a housing project, and dependent upon Teddy, Taevon's father, after losing her job.

Still, because the novel ends with Tinka boarding a plane to visit her aunt in Italy, participants saw it as hopeful. Although Davie expressed disappointment in the way the novel ends, other participants suggested that the ending was optimistic due to the influence Tinka's Aunt Renee, Nicola's sister, might have in helping her break the cycle of poverty.

Davie: It wasn't a happy ending. Like she just got on a plane.

Kiersten: Well, she had a second chance at life.

Yvette: We don't know what the...

Kiersten: We're hoping that she's gon' get on the plane and go back to school and carry on. That's what we, that's how she kind of left it. But then, you might pick up the second book and she might be in the projects somewhere with three kids.

Davie: She might've got kidnapped off the plane.

Kiersten: Right, or she might get off the plane and the auntie might tell her, "Oh, no!" and then she just stranded.

The reason Kiersten thought Tinka might find herself stranded is because Aunt Renee has no idea she is pregnant. But by the time Tinka boards the plane, she has suffered great loss. The father of her child has committed suicide; Taevon has killed Teddy, his father; Marquan is in prison; and Nicola is in a mental health facility. For these reasons, Belle, Kiersten, and I saw the ending as hopeful even though Tinka's future is uncertain. We hoped Tinka's relationship with

her aunt might expose her to better opportunities and wanted to know whether the author was writing a sequel that would answer our questions.

Belle: But she gotta good aunt.

Yvette: Yeah.

Belle: See that's a plus. I would love to hear her story.

Kiersten: We hope. That's why I say. I want, I want another book.

Belle and Kiersten: We gon' have to email her.

Belle: Kia, and tell her we wanna see what's gonna happen to, uhm, Tinka. 'Cause I wanna know. I wanna know what kinda life, I mean, 'cause she goin' into a totally different life now.

Yvette: Right.

Belle: I mean, with her aunt.

Davie: She ain't got nobody.

Yvette: Well, no, I mean, but her aunt is from a completely different place. So I mean that's gonna open up, just a, just thinking differently from the way, what she's used to can open up doors for her.

Belle: That's right.

Kiersten: And break that pattern. 'Cause she's having a daughter, so that pattern can be broken.

Yvette: Uh-hum.

Belle: Definitely.

Kiersten: At this point, so...

Belle: I would like to know.

Kiersten: Me too.

In this exchange, participants expressed that time with her aunt would offer Tinka a different perspective. Per their request, I emailed the author Kia Dupree and asked about a sequel. She

responded, “I wish I could, but the publishing industry is losing faith in ‘urban’ books. There has been a huge decrease in the demand for this genre. I’m working on more commercial women’s fiction...which, ironically, was my first goal (personal communication, August 7, 2014).

During discussion of *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), Carmen and Paula also discussed the importance of being exposed to different perspectives in their own lives. Carmen revealed the impact spending the summers with her maternal grandmother had on her life and was grateful her grandmother had exposed her to a different lifestyle.

But everybody doesn’t, you know, ‘cause, uhm, I was raised by my [paternal] grandmother, but my other grandmother lives in [another state]. It’s kind of like they dual raised me. Like I would spend the summer with one, and the other one, she’s like the total opposite. She, higher education, master’s degree, own business, a husband. You know, they’re retired now, very nice house, so during the summer time, that’s what I was exposed to. So, but I still had a different outlook. Yeah, I was able to see different things. But everybody don’t have that. They may not be able to see, both sides of their family might be, but I just have to, and I’m just so thankful for that, but I just had a very positive. And I’m not saying my grandma not positive. She’s just different.

Paula also talked about living with an aunt for a year and being able to see a different perspective which encouraged her to go to college.

So when I came back, I was like, “You know, I’m not going to be doing this for the rest of my life. I’m gonna get situated, ‘cause I don’t have to stay on this street. I don’t have to stay [here] forever. I can get a nice house.” She had a pool. I thought only white people had pools. You know, it was just different, you know, and she was a business person. She worked her way up from the bottom, and she was like the head regional [director]. So she would go back and forth too. And she drove a nice car. Her closet was big. She had shoes, and I felt like the Fresh Prince of Belaire. I was like man, “Imma do this,” and so ever since, when I came back, and they had all went to school. She got an education, and when I came back, that was my mentality, I was like, “Imma get out of here.” Not like, “Imma get out of here and leave [home].” It was more like, “There’s so much more out there than what’s there.” Because at the time only thing you do, I mean, we used to get dressed and look forward to going on the playground on Sundays. What is there after that? There’s nothing else to do. You eat your little food and the day was just another day. It wasn’t nothing beyond the next day. So when you, it’s

like, “I gotta work hard, I gotta do this, I'm going to school. I'm gonna do this,” you know. I mean, I'm still broke, but I'm still aware it was just more to that.

The *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (Borowitz & Borowitz, 1990) was a television show based on a fictionalized version of actor Will Smith, who moves from inner-city Philadelphia to live with his aunt and uncle in affluent Bel Aire, California. Like Smith's character, being exposed to different perspectives created options for Carmen and Paula. Thus, in addition to self-reliance and education, knowledge of multiple perspectives (i.e., choices) is an additional benefit associated with the concept of a single mother's mentality.

Fear of being dependent and trapped. Lastly, participants articulated situated knowledge which revealed their reasons for adopting a single mother's mentality as they discussed *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999). Such reasons included fear of being dependent or feeling trapped. Carmen shared her fear of becoming complacent and dependent upon someone.

‘Cause you don't wanna get too complacent. Right now, I'm in my internship, and so I had to go on a leave of absence from my job. So, this is the first time I've not had money. So, I really have to depend on my husband for everything, and it's just like, you know, it's crazy. I'm just worried. Like I'm always kind of like, “I don't have a job! Oh my gosh!” And it's only for one semester, but it's driving me crazy to not have a source of income coming in. And he's like, it's almost hurting his feelings because he can tell that I'm worried, and he's like, “We prepared for this. We got this. Don't worry about it.” But he's almost looking at it like, “You don't trust me. You don't believe I can do...”

Similarly, Paula shared her fear of being in a situation she could not escape.

‘Cause I feel like I never wanna feel trapped, and I have to be somewhere where I can't get out. Regardless of any situation, I mean, I may not want to do it by myself, but if push come to shove me and my three will roll, you know, but we'll do it. It may not be nice, but we'll do it. I just don't want, you know, some people in a situation where they can't even do that, you know, so I...

Such fears also emerged during discussion of the novels *A Project Chick* (Turner, 2004) and *Casting the First Stone* (Roby, 2002). As Katrina and Belle discussed the abusive relationship experienced by Tressa, the main character in *A Project Chick*, they realized that she

had never taken care of herself, which complicated the concept of transactional sexuality (Bragg & Ikard, 2012).

Katrina: That kinda showed too how money is the ruler of all evil. I mean you just let this money just take you somewhere where you couldn't even stand.

Belle: Well, because she never had to work. You know, Taj [Tressa's brother] took care of her first, so she never had to work and then she gets with Lucky who lavishes like this, but then she realize for my two children I have to do something. So she ends up getting a job.

According to Bragg and Ikard (2012), transactional sexuality as portrayed in contemporary street fiction embodies the notions of both “female independence” and “ideal masculinity” but challenges possibilities for “legitimate power” as it relates to women (pp. 247-248). Participants were happy that Tressa finds the courage to leave the relationship. As they pointed out, once Tressa leaves, she moves to a housing project, and although Lucky continues to make life hard for her, she finds an office job, works hard, and becomes self-reliant.

Paula: ...and it was messed up, because she had kids for 'em, but he was just hateful and spiteful. He just didn't want to see her get ahead, but she learned a lot from that lesson too, that had she not learned I don't think she would've end up being the person she end up being.

Belle: 'Cause she went from rags back to riches.

Paula: Basically, on her own. Exactly, so...

Yvette: Riches to rags, 'cause she had to scrape from the bottom.

Participants made similar comments about *Casting the First Stone* (Roby, 2002), a novel Kiersten described as “street in the church.” They liked that Tanya, the novel's protagonist, had a degree in psychology and financial resources.

Yvette: I like that she had something of her own that kept her from being like...

Belle: Dependable.

Paula: 'Cause she had a job too and she was...



McKenzie: And she was saving money.

Paula: And she was saving money. That's the difference.

McKenzie: Smart.

Katrina: With a bachelor's in, uhm, what was it? Psychology.

When asked what they learned from the story, Katrina reiterated Carmen's and Paula's fears and stated, "Between the two books, I can say that you should never basically let your guards down and feel like you have to have a man to have the higher things whatever you do." Paula and Belle, like Katrina, also expressed the importance of being able to take care of themselves.

Paula: Well, just have a backup plan. I mean, don't ever get too comfortable because whatever situation, or whatever level you are...

Belle: Even in the church, huh.

Paula: It, you never know. You know you always wanna, I mean you give them the benefit of the doubt, and you wanna do that, but don't be naive, and just be like it could never happen.

Group: Right.

In the previous sub-section, I presented the ways in which participants used contemporary street fiction as a catalyst for articulating the concept of a single mother's mentality standpoint and identified self-reliance, the value of education, and knowledge of multiple perspectives as characteristics. Participants were critical of the mother-daughter relationships portrayed in the texts as they held mothers responsible for passing on the value of these characteristics to their daughters. In addition, I discussed participants' fears of becoming dependent and feeling trapped as reasons they had adopted such a concept. In the next section, I discuss health and romantic and familial relationships as areas in which participants revealed the concept of a single mother's mentality leads to stress and conflict.

## Summary

In general, this section provided examples of detached and attached responses. While detached perspectives remain at the surface level when it comes to the emergence of situated knowledge in responses, Kinefuchi and Orbe (2009) have argued that attached perspectives are necessary for the articulation of standpoints. During the book club discussions that involved Belle and me, we made few personal connections to characters' lives and rarely examined those understandings that were guiding our comments. However, as more participants joined the group and opportunities for collective interaction and dialogue increased, participants began to challenge representations of motherhood and femininity, particularly those situations where female characters were presented as lacking self-reliance, the value of education, and knowledge of different perspectives. In criticizing mother-daughter relationships in contemporary street fiction, we relied on situated knowledge to articulate the importance of these characteristics. Central to these themes was the concept of a single mother's mentality, which emerged as a standpoint that had been transmitted to participants from their grandmothers, mothers and aunts. Because research participants varied in terms of marital status, it became apparent that this way of understanding their experiences was not exclusive to single mothers. In addition, even though a great deal of the discussion focused on gender politics, I was unsure whether participants saw race as significant to their understandings of the texts. Participants also saw self-reliance and education as areas in which the concept of a single mother's mentality resulted in conflict, and such tension signaled to me that this standpoint is both an empowering and contradictory notion.

### Understanding Societal Issues through Contemporary Street Fiction

In addition to articulating the concept of a single mother's mentality, this study deals with the societal issues depicted in contemporary street fiction. In particular, participants responded to

images surrounding the American dream and violence against women and children. Concerning the American dream, participants seemed to experience conflict. They desired to achieve the success it promises but struggled with how doing so perpetuated disenfranchisement in their communities. With the depictions of violence against women and children in novels we read, participants wondered about the reality of these representations as they made connections to the disparities experienced by women and children in contemporary society. They admitted they would not have talked or known about these issues had they not read about them in the novels. Contemporary street fiction raised awareness of these topics and the conflict surrounding them. In this section, I describe the ways in which contemporary street fiction served as a catalyst for discussing the American dream and learning about the atrocities affecting women and children in contemporary society. This section speaks to the second research question: How are the characters in contemporary street fiction to which readers respond positioned with regard to the intersections of race, class and gender?

### **Interrogating Understandings of Concepts**

Yarborough (1981) argues that African Americans have continued to believe in the American dream despite critics who suggest it is more myth than reality. Although Yarborough (1981) suggests that Americans, in general, have been duped by the American dream narrative, he explains that African Americans attribute racism to their lack of access to the prosperity it promises. African American writers have frequently depicted such disenfranchisement in their works, and in this sense, contemporary street fiction takes its place within the African American literary tradition. In *Murderville: First of a Trilogy* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2011), the narrator points to the limited choices disenfranchisement presents in an excerpt which explains A'shai's choice to work the streets rather than become a business man in the legal economy.

[A'shai] was the epitome of the American dream. If he was white, he would have been a businessman, but with skin as dark as mahogany he felt that his rightful place was on the throne as the king of the streets. (p. 7)

The fact that the narrator refers to A'shai as the "epitome" of the American dream is interesting. On the one hand, this reference could refer to A'shai's dark skin as a physical marker which ensures the American dream is inaccessible to him. On the other hand, it could signal his internalization of racist views as the reason he feels compelled to pursue a career as a criminal. Nonetheless, the American dream and access to it are issues commonly raised in contemporary street fiction.

For the purposes of this study, the American dream was an issue to which participants gave attention as they attempted to understand what it means. According to Clark (1992), the American dream has been defined as "the measuring of 'success' in monetary and material terms" (p. 496). Participants struggled with this definition and attempted to revise it in ways that might advance their communities. From my interpretations of participants' responses, I concluded that they equated the black community with their communities and those portrayed in the texts. As a result, when they talked about "community," they talked about their communities as disenfranchised areas and presented themselves as "conflicted" for wanting to leave. In response to the fictionalized character Sister Souljah in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), participants considered the importance of becoming successful and staying in their communities. The fictional character Sister Souljah, much like the activist and hip-hop rap artist, is the antithesis of Winter. She resides in her community and works to solve its problems. She visits Rikers Island prison to speak to women who are HIV positive, hosts benefits for AIDS victims, and builds community through the men's and women's group meetings she holds in her home.

For participants, Sister Souljah's work and presence in her community made discussion which involved leaving their communities problematic. Comments also suggested difficulty in defining the American dream solely in monetary and material terms.

Carmen: It takes people like her [Sister Souljah] to still be in the community because if all the African Americans get good jobs and then they leave, the people that's still there, they really... Once again, it's about what you see and what you're exposed to. They still don't see it, so that's why I like that she was actually, you know, very in the community. She like kinda lived in the community. So that's imperative. But really, who wants to get some money and still stay in the hood though?

Yvette: The expectation, well, maybe not. I was about to say that the expectation is that you, you go to college, you get a good job, you move away. Like that's the...

McKenzie: The American way.

Yvette: The natural progression, the American dream, uhm, but...

Carmen: We know about America.

Group: (laughs)

Participants further recognized that such discourses rob their communities of valuable resources in terms of role models and education.

Yvette: But I like what you said about, you know, far too many people who are successful, who become successful, do move away, and then, so how is it going to change if people, you know, get theirs, and then just keep on going?

Carmen: And then it's going to become, and then, uhm, this makes me think about, you know, they have, what is it?... They trying to merge off and become their own school district... and they were having a debate about it, the school board. And I was kind of just listening, but I was conflicted. 'Cause I was like, you know, they're bussing all these students in and it's becoming behavior issues and all this stuff going on in school. The reality of it is, you do want your child to be in the best learning environment. And I don't even have a child, but if I did, I would not want them to be seeing violence and drugs in [school] and this and that, but if they create this [district], then all they are doing is segregating. So once again, you're putting all these high risk kids, clumped together in one area. It's so conflicted. That's even with moving out. You don't want your child to see violence. You don't want your child to see someone getting shot. You don't want

to see all those things so you're conflicted. Like should I move, or should I stay?  
So it's, the world is so crazy.

Success measured in terms of material and monetary wealth robs the communities to which participants referred of new ideas and new ways of handling community problems that are more in tune with the lives in the communities. It limits the choices for those left behind—that is, the role models they see every day. Although I posed that the American dream means going to college, getting a good job, and moving away, participants recognized limitations associated with this view. This put participants in conflict because they wanted to help their families communities like Sister Souljah but also wanted to be in better situations. Carmen's comments about a local community's pullout of the school system and knowing how the people who want their children to go to better schools feel pointed to the conflict and contradictions participants experienced concerning access to the American dream. In addition, it raised questions about whether this standard can be achieved if measured solely by material and monetary terms.

In this section, I discussed the ways in which participants used contemporary street fiction to challenge understandings of the American dream. These challenges were based on their social locations and concern for their communities. In the next section, I describe the ways contemporary street fiction raised awareness of issues concerning violence against women and children.

### **Learning About and Negotiating Inequalities**

White (2014) also situates contemporary street fiction within the African American literary tradition due to its connections to slave narratives. In the same way that slave narratives provided insight into the horrible realities of slavery, contemporary street fictions raises awareness about the exploitation of women and children as it relates to the foster care system and

human trafficking. Opportunities that suggest participants saw contemporary street fiction as a catalyst for learning about these and other issues emerged across discussions.

In *Murderville 2: The Epidemic* (Ashley & JaQuavis, 2012), the narrator recounts the day Liberty's and Dahlia's village is attacked by rebels. The two watch as rebels ransack their thatched hut home and murder Liberty's parents. Liberty's father is shot by rebels, and her mother is brutally raped. As the exchange below illustrates, the rape scene was difficult for Belle and me to imagine.

Yvette: One of the things that I had a really difficult time reading was when, uhm...

Belle: Back to Liberty.

Yvette: Yeah, her mother.

Belle: When she was small.

Yvette: And her mother was raped. Like I had a...

Belle: That was a bad scene.

Yvette: Yeah, it was just like so vivid, like so. I had a difficult time.

Belle: You was right there.

The vivid images of rape were difficult for me to recount.

After reading all of the books in the *Murderville* trilogy, Belle and I again commented on the amount of violence experienced by women in the novels.

Yvette: Right, but like the violence that the women have to endure, like Liberty and Dahlia were raped, and you know, had to be prostitutes, and then the momma was raped, and then the girl, Po's first girlfriend was shot up. It's like the violence that women, one of the things I'm...

Belle: It was a lot of violence against women. Women didn't stand no chance.

Belle and I wondered how violence against women and children related to other areas.

Yvette: It made me think about, you know, women, like women in the real world, like how, uhm, like is it really, like how realistic, not realistic, but just how, even if you're not talking about like this...

Belle: Particular...

Yvette: This situation, but just in general, women having to...

Belle: Yeah, in, uhm, white collar America, yeah. Women, I mean, women are up there, but men get paid more. That's why they tell us don't discuss pay. (laughs) You know what, I work in the medical profession and I know the males get paid more than the females. But, men don't ever talk about their money. They don't talk about it...I believe men have a big advantage over women when it comes to that.

I found the connection Belle made between physical and sexual violence toward women in contemporary street fiction and economic disparity between women and men in the workforce interesting. Later, as I considered her comment during data analysis, I wrote in my notes:

The connection Belle made between the novels and the advantages men have over women when it comes to income is interesting. It makes me wonder whether economic disparity can be seen as a type of violence. How is it similar to the ways in which women are abused in the novels? If participants have adopted a single mother's mentality that relies on self-reliance and independence, then having equal pay becomes important especially if you have to be prepared to escape the kind of violence depicted in contemporary street fiction and to raise children alone.

Belle's comment led me to consider the complex ways in which gender equality is connected across various sites.

During Meeting Six (August 2, 2014), Belle, Davie, Kiersten and I discussed the images of inner-city life that emerged in *Silenced* (Dupree, 2011). We made connections to images of the candy lady in the novel, recalling from childhood the women in our neighborhoods who sold an assortment of products such as frozen cups of Kool-Aid, pickles, candy, beer, and cigarettes from their homes. Given the authenticity of these images, I wondered about the authenticity of images related to human trafficking and life in housing projects in contemporary street fiction. I discuss my ideas in the following excerpt:



...a lot of the issues that are discussed here I wouldn't know anything about them if I were not reading. Or, I wouldn't even, I wouldn't even think about them in my own life, if I had not read about them in like the books that we've been reading. Like for sure in the *Murderville* trilogy, like human trafficking. I would have never, even though you like, you kinda, you hear about it and you know it, but it doesn't become real. It didn't become real, like this is something that is actually something that happens in the real world, until I read the book and kinda like the same thing here like you know. Yeah, I mean where we're from the projects is just kinda like a little small, like it's not, it's just apartments. I mean, it's not, you know, like, like it might be in [the inner-city]. It wasn't, it's not like that. It's not like that for, uhm. And when, it's like when you see it on tv it's so far away from you. It's not real. It's not, but when you read it in a book it's like it becomes... So I think that's one of the reasons maybe why I like, uhm, these books and this particular genre. Because I even, in thinking about myself as a, you know. I'm a black woman and the places I could have been, the things I could've done, you know. To read about stuff through other people's experiences. That's, not that I'm saying that I'm, uhm, fortunate, but it's like my world is really small compared to other black women's lives. Like my life is just one little small piece of that and, uhm, I don't know. It's just, cause you tend to think, I guess we become conditioned to believe that the projects is just about a bunch of bad people doing crazy stuff and these are just really people, every day, tryna survive and make it just like the rest of us.

As the excerpt perhaps suggests, I felt overwhelmed by the myriad of images contemporary street fiction depicts concerning women's lives, inner-city life, and life in housing projects.

An exchange between Kiersten and me further indicated the prevalence of such images, especially when it comes to foster care. During Meeting Seven (August 23, 2014) as participants discussed *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999) and *Shattered* (Dupree, 2012), Kiersten shared that sexual abuse while in foster care is a topic that emerges quite often in contemporary street fiction.

Kiersten: That's common though.

Yvette: Which is scary.

Kiersten: I read another book, *Prada Plan*. She was in foster care. So this kind of stuff...so that's common like...

Yvette: So it's kinda interesting that all of these authors are talking about...

Kiersten: The foster system.

Yvette: Foster care.

Kiersten: And these kids getting molested.

Contemporary street fiction depicts the violence endured by women and children through repeated graphic images of physical and sexual violence.

Similarly, during the first discussion of the novel *Shattered* (Dupree, 2011), Kiersten and I responded to a scene in which Shakira, the main character, and three other women are kidnapped by Smurf, a drug dealer, while vacationing with male companions in Costa Rica. The women are given laxatives to rid their bodies of wastes and then forced to swallow bags of cocaine so that they can transport the drugs back into the United States. As the women are prepared to transmit the drugs, one is raped and commits suicide. Another dies after the one of the bags of cocaine bursts inside her body and is cut open so that the bags can be retrieved.

Kiersten and I discussed how the women are treated.

Yvette: Women are objects. They were like vessels. Put the cargo in them. They're not really human beings. The value of them for him was that they could take drugs and carry them through and then they, when they get here, get them out some kind of way.

Kiersten: 'Cause the girl that died, they just cut her open and took the drugs out.

Yvette: So why was it women? Why not men? I guess that was my, and not that it should be done any way.

Because of the frequency of these kinds of scenes and the vivid details through which they are presented, White (2014) argues that contemporary street fiction presents the normalcy of abuse suffered by women and children. Although profitability is the goal when it comes to the images these novels depict, White (2014) explains that the texts also warn of the dangers women and children face in contemporary society through the narratives' dramatization of "the harmful and

detrimental activities of drug dealing, drug addiction, pimping and promiscuity very much associated with ghetto culture” (p. 118).

White’s reference to promiscuity is interesting, for a comment made by Kiersten suggests the danger that lies in being “that type of woman.”

But it was done to that type of woman, running behind a man. Oh, he’s gonna buy me this. They are naïve, and easily influenced. Even in the other book [*Damaged*], when the pimp had the two little [girls]...you know he was buying them breakfast, or I-Hop, whatever, and they were so excited because he was giving them stuff. That’s how he drew them in.

When I consider participants’ articulation of the concept of a single mother’s mentality as explained in the last section, Kiersten’s comment becomes justification for self-reliance, the value of education, and knowledge of multiple perspectives as important survival skills for girls and women. The concept of a single mother’s mentality might be one way girls and women can protect themselves from the physical and sexual abuse depicted in contemporary street fiction.

Finally, as Belle and I discussed *Shattered* (Dupree, 2012), we wondered about the safety of girls in the foster care system and the larger society in general. Belle considered the extent to which girls live in a world in which they are preyed upon and asked, “You think a lot of American girls have to face that now? Do you think it matters where you live, where you came from?” We addressed her question in the following exchange.

Yvette: Yeah, like it was, like women do really live in a world where they are, uhm, preyed upon.

Belle: Yes, really and truly.

Yvette: And it's not, even if it's not in the home, you still...

Belle: In the schools.

Yvette: Yeah, it could be any...

Belle: Sporting activities.

Yvette: Right.

Belle: The church.

Yvette: So where are our girls safe? And if we can't, we can't protect them, I don't want to say we can't protect them, but how, like how would you educate somebody like Kiki to not, to like, you know, not be easily taken advantage of by somebody like Dizzle. Like what would you, what could you do?

Belle: What do you do?

In this exchange, I referred to how ten-year-olds Shakira (Kiki) and Nausy are forced into prostitution by Dizzle after running away from their foster home. As a result, both Belle and I wondered what can be done to prevent these kinds of situations. As I addressed concern for my granddaughter, two solutions which emerged involved examining our own roles in the sexualization of girls and making girls aware of these issues.

Yvette: I have a granddaughter. She is four. I mean she is gorgeous. I mean just a cute little ol' thing. But she, and we're always like dressing her up and doing her hair and ribbons, and I'm wondering is that a good thing, or is that... 'cause she's gonna wanna dress up and be...

Belle: Like somebody's gonna get me dressed up, somebody's gonna do my hair and get my clothes. Well, who's gonna do it? First Joe come along...look I got money. I can get your hair done and put your clothes on you, okay.

Yvette: So I'm like we really need to start having conversations. I mean, like at four maybe not, but you, you don't need anybody to...

Yvette: Exactly. So it just makes me think about, you know, if we're dressing them up and making them be pretty, who are we dressing them up and making them to be pretty for? Like, you know, with my granddaughter, like who are we, what's the point? Like, you know, there's a lot of money to made off of, you know...we have to kind of think about the message, and if we are going to dress them up and she is gonna dress...then she needs to be educated about...

Belle: And she needs to know that if she's not all dressed up like that, that you're still pretty.

Another solution involved examining the ways in which we might perpetuate gender inequality.

Yvette: Even teaching girls how to, 'cause I know when we were growing up, the girls had specific chores. Dishes, clean up the house, doing the laundry. Like we were, we were pretty much being taught how to be wives and that sort of stuff.

Belle: That's right.

Yvette: Right and our brothers were you know...

Group: Go outside.

Belle: Cut the grass, clean up the yard... Then you can go play when you're done.

Yvette: Right... So, what kind of mess, you now, and I, that's just the way things were. But I'm like we have to really think about the messages that we're sending to girls. That this is your place, to be in the house, cleaning and cooking, and taking care of everybody and maybe they need to get outside and the boys need to get inside.

Belle: Or share things. Y'all wash the clothes together, wash the dishes together, clean up the house together.

In this section, I discussed how participants worked to interrogate the American dream in more productive ways. In addition, I provided examples of participants' responses to violence against women and girls in contemporary street fiction as well as possible solutions for protecting girls.

## **Summary**

Participants in the study struggled with discourses surrounding the American dream, especially when it came to leaving their communities. They wanted better circumstances but struggled with understandings of the American dream that relied too heavily on success in terms of monetary and material wealth. Participants understood how this viewpoint harmed their communities and robbed them of valuable resources. In addition, they expressed that contemporary street fiction presented the opportunity to learn about issues such as human trafficking and violence against women and children in contemporary society. The prevalence of these issues in the novels and the graphic portrayals caused them to talk about their roles in the

perpetuation of the sexualization of girls and gender inequality and how girls might be made aware of these issues.

## **Chapter Five: Implications and Conclusions**

In the chapter “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Haraway (2004) suggests researchers recognize objects of knowledge as agents in the production of knowledge. She states:

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of “objective.” (p. 95).

In addition, Haraway (2004) argues that “actors come in many and wonderful forms” and that we must “[come] to terms with the agency of the ‘objects’ studied...to avoid gross error and false knowledge (p. 95). Essentially, Haraway (2004) proposes that we see objects of knowledge (i.e., objects of the world) as actors engaged in situated conversations that present possibilities for identifying commonalities. Rather than appropriate such matters in ways which perpetuate unequal power relations, Haraway (2004) further asserts we see them as agents in the politics of interpretation. This study supports this idea and contends that contemporary street fiction and its readers are “active, meaning-generating axes” (Haraway, 2004, p. 97), and as Sumara (1996) points out, “incapable of escaping their prior histories of interaction in the world” (p. 112). Thus, when viewed as active agents engaged in situated conversations, contemporary street fiction and its readers present possibilities for “connections and unexpected openings” (Haraway, 2004, p. 93) through “ongoing theorizing and dialogue among [marginalized individuals] who occupy different standpoints as a result of their race, class, and sexual experiences” (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000, *Where is Feminist Standpoint Theory Now?* section, para. 10).

This case study describes the engagement of contemporary street fiction among eight African American women participating in a book club held at a small-town public library. The purpose was to explore the ways in which situated knowledge emerged in our responses to

contemporary street fiction texts. The findings of the study indicate that situated knowledge was most prevalent during book club meetings that involved high levels of interaction and dialogue (O'Brien Hallstein, 2000). Participants articulated the concept of a single mother's mentality in response to representations of mother-daughter relationships. In addition, they used the texts as catalysts for interrogating understandings of the American dream and learning about societal issues which impact the lives of women and children in contemporary society. In the sections that follow, I reconsider the contextual framework of the study and discuss the social positioning of characters in response to my first two research questions, which are presented as reflections on the research process. I then discuss major findings as related to remaining research questions, followed by implications and recommendations for educators and feminist standpoint theorists. Finally, I suggest areas for further research and conclude with musings concerning my roles as a reader, researcher and future academic.

### Reconsidering Context

In planning this study, I did not want to predetermine who participants would be in terms of age, race, class and gender. For this reason, I constructed the first research question: Who are the readers of contemporary street fiction in this setting? Even though African American female readers represented the demographic I was interested in investigating, I decided to wait to see who would join the book club and participate in the study. Based on my own experiences reading contemporary street fiction, I knew that African American women's engagement with the novels was complex. I understood that social positioning concerning race (African American) and gender (woman) factored into those reading experiences. However, with this research question, I was subconsciously trying to respond to criticism of the texts. I was attempting to show critics who had marginalized the genre and its African American female readership that if an extremely



diverse group emerged, I could earnestly shout, “Hey, look, contemporary street fiction can’t be devalued if it appeals to different types of people!” Fortunately, the eight African American women who joined the book club made it difficult for me to inadvertently use this tactic. I expected their views concerning contemporary street fiction to align more closely with those of characters. I did not expect the critical stances I encountered, and since conducting this study, I have realized that my rationale for this research question could have silenced the very group I was interested in investigating.

In addition, my initial conceptualization of setting—that is, the physical location of the library and the community in which it was located—was limited. As I now reflect and think about setting in terms of social positioning, the idea of context becomes complex. Belle was the only research participant from the Rivertown Public Library and Rivertown community. Other participants joined the group after hearing about the book club through conversations with me about my research and/or social media. Observations of how readers spoke about contemporary street fiction prior to conducting this study indicated discussion remained at the surface level. As I have tried to figure out what brought about articulation of the concept of a single mother’s mentality, I recall that, although Belle and I covered a variety of topics, our discussions resembled those I had seen before— exclamations such as “Girl, this book is good!” followed summaries and discussion which lacked the articulation of situated knowledge. In hindsight, I realize that I had used a relativist perspective in designing this case study, where I was concerned primarily with capturing the responses of different book club members (Yin, 2014). I did not give enough attention to group dynamics. I had not anticipated the unexpected ways in which the number of participants, the kinships and friendships among members, or how the book club had

been formed (i.e., it was not a preexisting case) would impact context. Certainly, these factors informed how we spoke about texts across book club meetings.

According to O'Brien Hallstein (2000), "a standpoint is more than just individual knowledge; it is achieved through social mediation and group interaction" (Where is Feminist Standpoint Theory Now? section, para. 7). As a result, it makes sense that the second half of the study which involved more participants proved to be productive in terms of situated knowledge and standpoints. Although participants brought different experiences to these book club discussions, as a group they were critical of the mother-daughter relationships in the novels. In particular, they disagreed with Mrs. Santiago in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999) for teaching Winter, her daughter, to rely on her beauty and sexuality. As O'Brien Hallstein (2000) explains, "shared material experience [in this case as African American women] shapes epistemology and, as a consequence, provides groups with common experience" (para. 9). The book club approach presented opportunities for participants to engage with texts and each other in ways that supported the articulation of a single mother's mentality. As I have reconsidered the discussions between Belle and me, I have realized that my role as participant observer worked against soliciting elaboration that may have led to Belle's articulation of situated knowledge and standpoints.

#### Social Positioning of Characters

With the second research question—How are characters in contemporary street fiction positioned in terms of race, class and gender?—I assumed that participants would react to the circumstances of characters, particularly those who were African American females. I also assumed that commonalities related to the intersections of race, class and gender would emerge as a source of contemporary street fiction's appeal. As a result, I explored how participants'

comments answered this question and realized that their shared material experience was at the root of concern for the ways female characters exhibited self-reliance, the value of education, and knowledge of multiple perspectives. Despite the different experiences they shared, participants relied on these characteristics as they responded to characters in the novels. Their responses indicated that characters were either positioned favorably or unfavorably with regard to these traits.

Our discussion of the ways in which African American female characters exemplified such characteristics was not a dismissal of the intersections of race, class, and gender in their lives. Discussion was underpinned by African American women's locations within these hierarchical structures. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), bell hooks argues that racism and sexism are "naturally intertwined" in the lives of black women (p. 13). Our attention to education and self-reliance, skills Collins (2000) asserts black mothers teach their daughters, are responses to racism and sexism in our own and characters' lives. hooks (1981) explains that racism suffered by the black community takes precedence over sexism within the community and argues that "to make [racism and sexism] separate [is] to deny a basic truth of [black women's] existence" (p. 13). The intersecting and multiple oppressions suffered by black women have led to separate struggles for their own survival (hooks, 1981). Participants' attention to survival skills black mothers pass on to their daughters is an aspect of the conversation concerning the racism and sexism experienced by black women. That participants struggle with representations of female characters who lack self-reliance and education and criticize characters whose perspectives conflict with these values is indicative of their resistance to these systems of oppression.

Likewise, participants' responses to the interview question "Who should read contemporary street fiction?" also indicated how characters were positioned in the texts. When asked this question, Carmen answered that "anybody can enjoy these books" but that "African Americans and other minorities will be able to understand and relate to the stories." Similarly, Davie answered that people who read these novels "look like the people in the book" or "can kinda relate to the community." She doubted that those unfamiliar with such lifestyles would find the novels engaging and stated, "If rich, upper class, white people were to ever read it, they'd be like, *What!*" Although Paula likewise answered that race was important, her comments suggested that the circumstances of characters might make the novels appealing to readers from different racial backgrounds. She wondered how readers would respond to the books if race were depicted as ambiguous and what a study exploring reader engagement in such a case would reveal. Thus, per participants' responses, characters in contemporary street fiction represented minorities, typically African Americans, living in inner-city communities. In the next section, I present a summary of the major findings.

### Summary of the Findings

The first major finding of this study, "Using Communicative Patterns" (p. 93), addresses my third research question: How do readers of contemporary street fiction situate themselves in their discussions of such texts? Data revealed that participants used several techniques in order to interact with texts and each other while situating themselves and others in book club discussions. As they spoke about the texts, their use of third-person pronouns such *he*, *she*, *it*, and *they* often shifted to the fourth-person, indefinite form of *you*. This worked to position the speaker, book club members, characters, and government systems in book club discussions. In some cases, pronominal shifts served as distancing devices, with participants taking critical

stances as they anthropomorphized and “talked back” to characters and the foster care system. In other instances, the use of *you* was more inclusive and served to elicit camaraderie and empathy for anyone whose children might be placed in foster care. Interaction among participants also involved the use of the different types of responses—co-signing, encouraging, repetition, completer, and “on T”—Smitherman (1977) has associated with call and response. In this case, responses blurred the lines between speaker and listener in ways that signaled engagement in discussion and encouraged collective interaction and dialogue (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). Given the ways in which context was shaped by a book club case study design and friendships and kinships among participants, this finding contributes to the scholarship concerning pronominal shifts and the use of the indefinite *you* in specific discursive activities. Research concerning pronoun use has focused primarily on pronouns and antecedents (Thomas-Ruzic, 1998; Yates & Hiles, 2010). This finding adds to the limited research concerning how pronouns function in discursive contexts.

The second finding, “Articulating a Collective Standpoint” (p. 106), focuses on the attached responses of research participants. Attached responses deal with positionality, or the “proximity...with which [participants] viewed, interacted with, and ultimately processed” contemporary street fiction (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008, Key Organizing Principles for Themes section, para. 2). With this type of response, participants “positioned themselves as actively involved within the reality that was reflected in the [novels]” (para.2) and introduced the concept of a single mother’s mentality. This finding addresses my fourth and fifth research questions:

4. How do readers of contemporary street fiction use socially situated knowledge as a resource in relating to characters across the intersections of race, gender, and class?
5. In what ways do standpoints emerge from readers’ socially situated knowledge and engagements with contemporary street fiction?

While conversations between Belle and me included a range of topics concerning women's lives, the second half of the study, which involved more book club participants and high levels of interaction, revealed the understandings that guided our responses to contemporary street fiction. Participants gave attention to mother-daughter relationships and, in doing so, identified European beauty ideals and transactional sexuality (Bragg & Ikard, 2012) as central to characters' perspectives. Participants recognized the limitations of these perspectives and, in struggling against such narratives in their responses to *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), presented the values of self-reliance, education and knowledge of multiple perspectives. These values had been passed on to participants by female relatives such as their grandmothers, mothers, and aunts, and although essential to their survival, caused stress and conflict in heterosexual and familial relationships. A review of transcripts from earlier book club meetings attended by Belle and me also revealed evidence of these values.

It is debatable as to whether participants' responses exemplify what hooks (1981) has referred to as an "oppositional gaze," which she defines as "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it" (p. 116). An oppositional gaze involves actively resisting and looking critically at those images in mass media and popular culture which work to negate black womanhood and further racism and sexism (hooks, 1981). But, as described by hooks (1981), it encompasses more than resisting. Development of an oppositional gaze consists of "consciously nam[ing] the process," "creat[ing] alternative texts that are not solely reactions," and "participat[ing] in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels" (p. 128). Thus, for black women who adopt an oppositional gaze, mass media and popular culture become sites for finding agency and developing a double consciousness through which they learn to see from the dominant point of

view and their own and decide the best course of action in defining black female subjectivity for themselves (hooks, 1981).

The women in my study presented aspects of an oppositional gaze. They enjoyed the fast-paced action, drama, and conflict between characters, but they also read against those aspects of the novels that did not align with the standpoints they had adopted. Such resistance, however, was not characterized by “the pleasure of looking” hooks (1981) describes—that is, the pleasure of interrogating and resisting images where “black women are represented voiceless...where our words are invoked to serve and support, the spaces of our absence” (p. 159). Participants did not name their engagement with contemporary street fiction as active resistance to the racism and sexism which underpin the novels. I argue that their responses were more reactive than a deliberate approach to reading and responding that involved the pleasure of interrogation.

Nonetheless, contemporary street fiction is useful for locating agency and resistance. The standpoint that emerged in participants’ responses to such texts reflect their everyday lives and experiences. Through participants’ discussions of contemporary street fiction, they articulated a counter-hegemonic discourse that was symbolic of their ways of knowing and looking. Fish (1970) argues for looking more closely at what happens during reading experiences. Given that readers are subject to “a matrix of political, cultural, and literary determinants” (p. 146), Fish (1970) views meaning as an event and advocates moving towards describing and analyzing reading events rather than evaluating texts, which affords a variety of semantic possibilities. He describes such events as:

...something that is happening between the words and in the reader’s mind, something not visible to the naked eye, but which can be made visible (or at least palpable) by the regular introduction of a “searching” question (what does this do?). (Fish, 1970, p. 128)

For Fish (1970), what a text does “to, and with the participation of, the reader” is where meaning lies (p. 125). Articulating those aspects of the novels that lead to response and interrogation by the women in this study was central to “Articulating a Collective Standpoint.”

Finally, the third finding, “Understanding Societal Issues through Contemporary Street Fiction” (p. 131), which also addresses my third research question, involved discussion surrounding the American dream, foster care, and violence against women and children. Participants examined representations of the American dream in contemporary street fiction, and although they saw education and lives outside of disenfranchised communities as measures of success, they were concerned that leaving such neighborhoods robbed them of valuable resources. In addition, participants recognized that contemporary street fiction raised awareness about social issues such as the foster care system and violence against women and children in contemporary society. They learned that the foster care system’s failure to protect the children in its care is frequently addressed in contemporary street fiction novels. In addition, they became aware of issues such as human trafficking and sexual exploitation and considered how such issues are related to the sexualization of girls and gender inequality and how they might educate young girls to confront these situations. Such interrogation and discussion relates to “problem posing education” as described by Morrell (2008), where “teachers and students engage in authentic dialogues centered on real problems or concerns in the community” (p. 108). In this study, contemporary street fiction served as a site through which participants were able to recognize social problems and engage in dialogue that focused on possible solutions.

### Implications and Recommendations

An area in which I was interested for the purposes of this study involves the benefits of reader engagement with contemporary street fiction in academic settings. The findings I have



outlined offer several implications for educators and feminist standpoint theorists. As presented in this chapter, these include possibilities for critical literacy education as it relates to situated knowledge, communicative patterns, gender politics, and social issues. In the discussion that follows, I present each of these areas in more depth.

The first implication of this study deals with the significance of situated knowledge—the ways in which the hierarchical structures surrounding race, gender, and class shape our experiences and understandings—as an important aspect of critical literacy education. Given that texts produce/reproduce particular ideologies, critical literacy practice permits readers to examine situated knowledge as it relates to their lived experiences and the raced, classed, and gendered discourses they encounter in texts (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). The emergence of situated knowledge enabled the women in my study to use their lived experiences as a resource for interrogating mother-daughter relationships in contemporary street fiction. As Moje et al. (2008) have pointed out, critical literacy involves interrogating how identities are defined by the ideologies which operate in texts. Adopting a critical literacy stance in English education means creating spaces in which situated knowledge can emerge. Morrell (2008) states, “[I]f we acknowledge the centrality of language to our development as raced, gendered, classed beings, then we must also consider possibilities for English education to create spaces for the development of resistant and empowered identities” (p. 89). Critical literacy education presents opportunities for students “to discuss relations between literature texts and ideals and values in the dominant society while coming to a better understanding of their own humanity” (p. 84). From my study, one can conclude that situated knowledge empowers readers to engage with texts on their own terms. Situated knowledge presents possibilities for agency and resistance and is thus essential to critical literacy practice.

Another implication for this study is the possibilities communicative patterns offer for critical literacy. When I began reviewing transcripts of book club discussions, the ways in which participants interacted seemed awkward. The use of call and response seemed more appropriate for church than a book club even though I too used these modes of communication as we discussed novels. In particular, the ways in which participants interchanged pronouns to position themselves and others in discussion seemed strange. As I reflected upon these communicative patterns, I wondered how I would have interpreted such behaviors. I wondered whether I would have seen these modes as disruptive to classroom discourse. Asserting that such ways of communicating deserve attention, Johnson (2011) and Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) assert that such behaviors are evidence of critical literacy practice.

As Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) explains, “[C]ritical literacy is an embodied performance that is always and already occurring, regardless of whether or not it is recognized as such” (p. 35). Speech, laughter, gestures and silence present possibilities for communicating critical perspectives (Johnson, 2011). Johnson’s (2011) analysis of the communication patterns used by a female student in a high-school English classroom revealed interjecting undisclosed facts, mocking the teacher, joking, and using silence and gestures as “embodied dimensions of critical literacy” (p. 28). Like Johnson (2011) who asserts that shifts in modes of communication and audience present embodied critical performances, I argue that the pronominal shifts made by the participants in my study also demonstrate critical viewpoints. In response to the foster care system’s failure to ensure the safety of the young girls depicted in *Damaged* (Dupree, 2010) and *Shattered* (Dupree, 2012), Belle’s use of the fourth-person, indefinite *you* in the statement, “If *you’re* going to take them out of their home, *you* should guarantee at least their protection somewhere else,” functions as a distancing device. Belle’s use of *you* as she “talks back” to the

foster care system supports her critical stance and the contradictions she recognizes in its care of children. This way of communicating illustrates how participants “denaturalize power relations in their lives” (Johnson, 2011, p. 40). As Johnson (2011) suggests, educators should give attention to these subtle modes of communication and how they embody critical literacy practice.

As I have previously stated, in choosing a book club approach for this study, I was looking for a space in which to talk about contemporary street fiction with readers. The face-to-face interaction of this setting presented possibilities I had not considered in designing this study, possibilities that are especially potent when I consider the connections between the texts and hip hop culture. Contemporary street fiction parallels the language, socioeconomic conditions, entrepreneurial practices, and representations of gender found in hip hop (Graaff, 2013; Morris et al., 2006). Concerning femininity, both forms of popular culture address representations of women as objects for male consumption. Women are often depicted as objects in music videos; in contemporary street fiction, they are presented as partners which accessorize masculinity (Graaff, 2013). The prevalence of such parallels make the connections between contemporary street fiction and hip hop difficult to ignore. As Dunbar (2013), asserts, “The *word* links Hip Hip music to Hip Hop fiction in ways that the dichotomy between the written and oral tradition seems to obscure” (p. 100, emphasis in original).

With regard to contemporary street fiction book clubs, Dimitriadis’s (1996) assertion that early hip hop was characterized by small-scale community events that as spaces for communal production were extremely dependent upon face-to-face interaction and integrated the elements of hip hop (i.e., DJing, graffiti, breakdancing, and rap) is significant. While Dimitriadis (1996) explains that these localized spaces diminished with commercial rap and large-scale performances, he also recognizes the significance of these events for marginalized groups and

traces the ways in which hip hop has continuously refashioned itself to maintain some sense of these spaces. Dimitriadis's (1996) work speaks to the reappropriation of hip hop performativity moving from the stage to other forums as new generations attempt to make the message of inner-city and youth culture relevant in present day contexts. Given the connections between contemporary street fiction and hip hop and the ways in which situated knowledge and communicative patterns present possibilities for critical literacy practice, book clubs are a site within which readers, particularly female readers, can engage critically through face-to-face interaction with the various topics these cultural forms address.

The fourth implication of this study involves the use of contemporary street fiction as a catalyst for learning about social issues. During this study, discussion of contemporary street fiction led to conversations about slavery, human trafficking, prostitution, rape, economic disparity, the sexualization of girls, and gender inequality. Because these issues intersect in the lives of women and children, contemporary street fiction presents possibilities for exploring these topics in different settings such as book clubs or gender studies courses where critical literacy can be employed as a pedagogical practice which promotes consciousness, agency and activism (Moje et al., 2000; Morrell, 2008; Simmons, 2012). In this way, contemporary street fiction can be used to continue where this study left off to generate both awareness of these issues and activism on local, national and global levels.

Morrell (2008) and Simmons (2012) present examples of how this can be accomplished in English classrooms. Recognizing popular culture as a bridge to academic literacies, Morrell (2008) presents several teaching units for secondary English classrooms which offer students opportunities to engage with classical and contemporary texts. In one unit, Morrell (2008) juxtaposes a reading of the *Odyssey* (Homer, 1996) with

a viewing of the *Godfather* (Puzo, 1969) in order to explore what it means to be a hero. In another unit, students read *Native Son* (Wright, 1940) and through the use of a range of critical literacy skills engage in a reenactment of the main character's trial, activities which enable them to consider the relationship between disenfranchisement and violence in inner-city communities. As Morrell (2008) points out, such activities allow students to participate in authentic conversations about real world issues and to exercise agency and authority through the interrogation of texts and persuasive writing.

Similarly, Simmons discusses how themes such as hunger, forced labor, violence, and sexual exploitation in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy can serve as a catalyst for raising awareness about such issues. Simmons (2012) talks about the use of the trilogy as anchor texts and suggests including statistics which indicate starvation is a worldwide problem. Like Morrell (2008), she argues students can be encouraged to understand these real-world problems and to use literacy skills (reading, research, technology, expository and persuasive writing skills, public speaking, reflection, creativity) as they take action to create solutions. As described by Morrell (2008) and Simmons (2012), critical literacy education and academic skills are complementary goals when it comes to English education.

#### Future Research

Future research concerning reader engagement and contemporary street fiction should continue to explore how different groups consume popular culture. In the final evaluation administered at the end of the study, Kiersten stated, "Although we all read the same books not everyone will have the same feelings towards the books. We (each) tended to compare the books to our own life experiences and made a relation." In addition, in response to a question

concerning suggestions for improving the study, she responded, “Maybe if we could have found other readers to join us from different backgrounds, upbringing, race etc... to see if there were any correlations in our ideas.” As with Radway’s (1994) findings, Kiersten’s comments suggest that different groups of readers might, through the particular styles of communication they bring to or develop during discussion, uncover their own versions of shared material experiences.

In addition, studies which focus on the communicative patterns used in specific discursive contexts should be conducted. Based on this project, two areas are of particular interest. The first involves the use of pronouns in conversations. As Yates and Hiles (2010) point out, research has given little attention to the functions of pronouns in discursive contexts. In particular, Stirling and Manderson (2011) assert that this also applies to the fourth-person, indefinite *you*. Given that this form of *you* is used to position oneself and others in conversations in ways that create distance and camaraderie between speakers and those to whom the speaker is referring, it is useful to explore the perspectives that guide such use. The second area of research involves exploring the relationship between less visible modes of communication and critical literacy practice. Johnson (2011) and Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) contend that embodied communicative patterns are absent in literature which focuses on critical literacy and call for teachers to consider the ways in which such modes might function as critical literacy practice. Both of these areas present possibilities for understanding the subtle ways in which students engage in critical literacy that often go unrecognized in academic settings.

Studies which explore the use of contemporary street fiction or other popular culture forms as anchor texts present a third possibility for future research which can present opportunities for readers to make connections between current social issues and historical events. According to White (2014), contemporary street fiction depicts the normalcy of sexual

exploitation as it relates to women and children. While reading the *Murderville* trilogy, Belle and I made connections to a news story about 200 girls in Chibok, Nigeria, who were kidnapped by the Nigerian Islamist Group Boko Haram (Smith, 2014). We also asked questions about the significance of the trilogy beginning in Sierra Leone, West Africa, and the characters being transported to the United States through Mexico. We wanted to know how the authors knew so much about these topics and how they were able to paint such vivid pictures of the rebel attack. The significance of the events in the novel did not make sense to me until I watched the documentary *African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* narrated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2013) and realized that slaves were held in Sierra Leone until shipped and that the route traveled by the cargo ship *Murderville* is similar to that of the Middle Passage. Studies involving the use of contemporary street fiction alongside related classical and contemporary texts can contribute to the scholarship in this area. In this conclusion that follows, I reflect on my role as a reader, researcher and future academic.

### Conclusion

Completing this study has caused me to think about the various factors which shape reading experiences. At this point, I see context as multi-faceted and involving a physical space as well as the people who come together at a particular moment in history within that space with their respective experiences and understandings in that space. Context is also punctuated by the hierarchical structures through which race, class and gender are organized and involves those discourses and conventions which tell us how to behave and act as we interact within a particular space. For this reason, I see reading as a social activity even as we read in isolation (Long, 2003). As Sumara (1996) explains, readers bring their histories of interactions in the world to their reading experiences. As I consider the ways participants enjoyed reading and discussing the

contemporary street fiction at the same time that we criticized characters who did not articulate the concept of a single mother's mentality, I realize that readers' responses are prime for critical literacy. As Fish (1970) suggests, I am interested in chronicling readers' responses and their interpretations of what happens as they engage with texts.

In conducting this study, I have also learned that I enjoy going out into the field. The chance to learn from and work within a community (in this case, readers) has made me eager to understand how individuals experience similar events differently and how diversity within a group presents opportunities for negotiation and agency. This project explored African American women's experiences of reading contemporary street fiction from their perspectives and how the books motivated them to take up conversations surrounding representations of African American motherhood and femininity. This study has presented a range of new interests for me as a researcher. Given the various ways modes of communication are used in discursive activities and the ways in which such modes can be interpreted, I am interested in investigating the communicative patterns students use in classrooms. If the literacy skills students' use as they engage with popular culture are to be used as a bridge to academic literacies, I am interested in what we identify as useful and for what those purposes.

Finally, understanding the perspectives and experiences that participants or students bring to their readings of contemporary street fiction, feminist standpoint theory encourages the interrogation of power relations and dominant ideology. For this reason, I am now interested in the areas of stress participants shared as we discussed the novels. While the same survival skills that were passed on to participants by their grandmothers, mothers and aunts have been passed on to me and I, in turn, have passed on to my daughters, I wonder how the concept of a single mother's mentality can be altered or negotiated to accommodate an ethics of care (Gilligan,



1982). As described by Gilligan (1982), an ethics of care involves the ways in which women define themselves as responsible for the nurturing and caring of others. However, a facet of the ethics of care about which I am speaking involves women nurturing and caring for themselves. As a practice, feminist standpoint theory asks women to consider how an ethics of care focused largely on others situates them in society. It asks women to consider who such understandings privilege. Who do they disadvantage? I want to remain cognizant of how dominant understandings of women's lives impact their health. As a practice, feminist standpoint theory projects involve questioning dominant ways of knowing as they relate to women's experience. As a future academic, I am concerned with interrogating those standpoints that seem natural to us, particularly as it relates to women's health, and plan to foreground these issues as I move forward.

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## **Appendix A: Data Collection Instruments**

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST



Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5663  
[lr@lsu.edu](mailto:lr@lsu.edu) | [lsu.edu/irb](http://lsu.edu/irb)

TO: Yvette Hyde  
Education

FROM: Robert C. Mathews  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: May 27, 2014  
RE: IRE# E8811

TITLE: Engaging with Urban Street Fiction in a Small-Town Public Library Book Club

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 5/26/2014

Approved X Disapproved \_\_\_\_\_

Approval Date: 5/26/2014 Approval Expiration Date: 5/25/2017

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

By: Robert C. Mathews, Chairman

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –  
Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, faithfully with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects;
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved;
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submission of a termination report, prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination;
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends;
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent;
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study;
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure;
8. SPECIAL NOTE:

*\*All investigators and supporters will have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

## Consent Form

1. **Consent Form for the Project:** “Engagement with Urban Street Fiction in a Small-town Public Library Book Club”
2. **Performance Site:** Lutchter Public Library, 1879 W. Main St., Lutchter, Louisiana 70071.
3. **Investigator:** The investigator listed below is available to answer questions about the research, M-F, 8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.  
  
Yvette R. Hyde  
(225) 747-0493  
[yhyde1@tigers.lsu.edu](mailto:yhyde1@tigers.lsu.edu)
4. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to explore how engagement with urban street fiction determines readers’ understandings of their lived experiences.
5. **Subjects:**
  - A. **Inclusion Criteria:** Library patrons participating in an urban street fiction book club at the Lutchter Public Library.
  - B. **Exclusion Criteria:** None.
6. **Number of Subjects:** 10
7. **Description of the Study:** The study will examine the potential pedagogical implications of 1) how urban street fiction functions in the lives of readers and 2) how readers situate themselves in their discussions of urban street fiction novels. The project will entail organizing an urban fiction book club at Lutchter Public Library and recruiting patrons to participate in the case study. Book club members will meet twice monthly over the course of five months to participate in group discussions which focus on their responses to urban street fiction texts selected by the group. The data collected will include field notes, audiotaped transcriptions of group discussions and interviews, and final evaluations. Book club participants will be given the choice to participate in the case study but may attend meetings even if they choose not to do so.
8. **Benefits:** The results of this study will be shared with other educators and/or researchers interested in the literacy practices of urban street fiction readers.
9. **Risks:** There are no known risks.
10. **Right to Refuse:** Participation is voluntary, and at any time, participants may withdraw from the study without penalty or loss of any benefit to which he or she might otherwise be entitled.
11. **Privacy:** Results of the study may be published, but no names of identifying information will be included in the publication. Participant identity will be protected through the use of

pseudonyms that will represent the participants in discussion of research results. Participant identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

12. **Financial Information:** There is no cost for participation in the study, nor is there any compensation to the participants for participation.
13. **Signatures:** The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, [irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu), [www.lsu.edu/irb](http://www.lsu.edu/irb). I acknowledge the investigators' obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

---

Participant's Name (please print)

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

\_\_\_\_\_ I am interested in participating in a final evaluation to be administered via email at the conclusion of the book club.

## Sample Data Instruments

During the data collection phase of this study, multiple sources will be used to investigate readers' engagement with urban street fiction. Data collection methods will include field notes, group discussions, interviews, and a final evaluation. Instruments will include, but are not limited to, the following sample questions/protocols:

### **Sample Group Discussion Strategy/Questions:**

#### Discussion Strategy:

Each participant will share a question or point out something they found interesting in the novel.

#### Discussion Questions:

7. What do you think about the book?
8. To what characters or parts of the novel do you relate and why?
9. What do you think about the location(s) in which the story is set?
10. What do you think about how the characters relate to each other?
11. What do you think about the ending of the story?
12. What lesson(s) do you think the story tries to communicate?

### **Individual interview questions (these will be semi-structured interviews):**

#### Interview Protocol:

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me as part of this study. On the consent form, I indicated that any personal information you may reveal about yourself will be kept confidential unless its release is required by law. This interview will be tape-recorded and you can choose to end this interview at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which you might otherwise be entitled.

9. How do you decide what to read? How do you find titles?
10. Describe a typical book you might read.
11. A lot of people describe urban street fiction books as “keeping it real” or representing real life. What are some examples of novels you have read that you think keep it real?
12. Tell me about a character or situation in an urban street fiction novel to which you can really relate.
13. Who should read urban street fiction and why?

### **Final Evaluation:**

Thank you for participating in this study and agreeing to complete this evaluation. Your responses to the questions listed below will be used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the overall project.

1. Why did you join the book club?
2. What did you learn from this experience?
3. What suggestions do you have for improving this study?

## **Vita**

Yvette Perry-Hyde is a native of Covington, Louisiana. After completing a Bachelor's degree from Southeastern Louisiana University in 1997, she began working as office manager for a high school radio training program. In 1998, she enrolled at Louisiana State University to complete a Post-Baccalaureate Alternative Teacher Education Program in English Education and received state certification in 2000. In 2005, Yvette completed a Master's degree in English Education at Louisiana State University and her English Education Specialist certificate in 2005. Yvette has served in various teaching, leadership, and literacy coaching positions in East Baton Rouge Parish. As an English Language Arts teacher, she taught for five years at the middle school level and three years at the high school level. Additionally, she has served as an English department chair, a member of a district instructional management team, and an adolescent literacy coach supporting teachers in the implementation of a district-wide literacy program. Yvette has also twice been named Teacher of the Year at the school level and was a finalist for district Teacher of the Year. At the university level, she has taught introductory women's and gender studies and college study courses. Yvette and her family reside in Baton Rouge.