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There has been a renewed interest in street literature (also referred to as urban fiction) in public libraries across the country. This research examines how street literature is treated in five North Carolina urban public library systems, specifically in terms of collection development, displays, and programming. The study shows that all of the counties use different methods for marketing the genre to their patrons, and that there are varying levels of acceptance of street lit titles throughout the counties. All five counties report high levels of use of the street lit collection despite differences in the treatment of the genre throughout the counties.

Headings:

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STREET LITERATURE IN FIVE NORTH CAROLINA
PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEMS

by
Katrina C. Vernon

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Approved by

Sandra Hughes-Hassell

Introduction

Street lit, also referred to as “urban,” “ghetto,” or “hip” literature, is gaining popularity in contemporary media and becoming a hot topic for public librarians in urban areas across the country. Although there are political issues surrounding the genre and some hesitation to “push” these books, there is also a large following and a need to be filled through street lit. Urban African-American adults and young adults alike have a strong interest in street lit titles, and many libraries have difficulty keeping the books on the shelves.

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the role street literature plays in urban libraries. Since street literature appeals primarily to urban minority adults and teenagers (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006), five library systems in the most urban counties in North Carolina were studied to determine how street literature is treated in North Carolina public libraries. Specifically, this study examined collection development practices (when and why titles are selected for purchase), where street literature titles are physically housed within libraries (i.e., in adult fiction, young adult fiction, or separated out into an African-American collection), and specific programming that deals with the genre (such as author readings.)

Literature Review

In order to understand the importance for street literature to have a presence in public libraries, it is first necessary to understand where it came from, who it reaches, and where the genre is going in the future. The combination of these elements demonstrates the need for the genre to be reflected in collection development decisions and programming within public library systems.

What is Street Literature and who is its Main Audience?

Street lit is not a “new” genre, by any means, but it is currently enjoying a wave of main-stream publicity. In the 1970s, authors like Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim began what became known as “ghetto pulp fiction,” the roots of what is now commonly known as street lit. Ghetto pulp fiction found a market in the “Civil Rights Era-raised, Black Arts Movement-nurtured, Toni Morrison-worshipping” African-Americans looking for novels that spoke to their lives (Venable, McQuillar, & Mingo, 2004). Although the genre has been out of the news and public eye for over 30 years, we are now witnessing an upswing in street lit publications and authors. With this new popularity comes an emergence of mainly black-owned publishing companies willing to publish and distribute the books, followed by recognition by mainstream publishers that money can be made from the genre (Dodson, 2006). Although some street-lit authors jump-start their popularity through word-of-mouth and by selling their books out of the back of their cars, this is not always the case (Campbell, 2004). Mainstream publishing companies such as Simon & Schuster and Pocket/MTV Books want to capitalize on the

popularity of street literature with a demographic that has thus far proved elusive-- African-Americans (Young, 2006).

Although perhaps meant to target an older crowd, African-American young adults have shown an increasing interest in the genre in recent years. This appeal for this demographic may relate to the protagonists commonly featured in the genre, young men and women usually in their mid to late teens themselves. Series of books (and even individual books) often trace a character or group of characters throughout a five to ten year period of their lives, beginning in their early teens. Flashbacks may be used to show even earlier childhood memories of the characters (Morris et al., 2006). This emphasis on minority teens (primarily African-American, though Hispanics are prevalent within street lit as well) and the problems faced by that group in urban settings make the genre an instant hit with the demographic that it concerns.

Although street lit is primarily read by females (both young adults and adults), the genre has also attracted a demographic that has proved difficult to reach in public libraries; young African-American males (Rosen, 2004). Urban males between 14 and 25 are traditionally a group that librarians are hard-pressed to interest in library activities; both in terms of circulation of materials as well as participation in programming. With street lit titles, this demographic not only reads the books, they also discuss them with their friends (Meloni, 2007).

The Controversies Surrounding Street Literature

The jury is still out on whether street lit has a positive or a negative effect on its targeted community. Harlem book vendor Sidi Ib sees the role of street lit as an important one within Harlem as it shows an honest representation of what can occur to someone

running in a world of drugs and crime. Although many have said that the genre glamorizes street life, author Vickie Stringer disagrees. “There's nothing glorifying, because [the main character] goes to jail in the end.” An ex-convict herself, Stringer began writing while still incarcerated in order to make a decent living for herself once she re-entered society. She claims her books are “a cautionary tale” (Campbell, 2004).

African-American author Nick Chiles sees the issue from a different perspective:

[A]ll I could see was lurid book jackets displaying all forms of brown flesh, usually half naked...often accompanied by guns and other symbols of criminal life. I felt as if I was walking into a pornography shop.... We were all represented under [African American Literature], the whole community of black authors—from me to Terry McMillan and Toni Morrison...surrounded and swallowed whole...by an overwhelming wave of titles and jackets that I wouldn't want my 13-year-old son to see.... (Fialkoff, 2006)

In a panel sponsored by the African-American Program for Bookselling Professionals at BookExpo America in 2006, Chiles spoke with Nikki Turner, a popular street lit author who has her own imprint with publisher One World/Ballentine. As the only author of the genre in a panel entitled “Too Hood or All Good: The Impact of Urban Fiction on African-American Literature,” Turner responded to Chiles’ criticism of the genre by saying “I am not interested in how we look to white people. I am interested in literacy in the community and being able to get people to read books who have never read before” (Dodson, 2006).

So, is street lit really literature? And if not, does that matter at the end of the day? The genre as a whole often suffers from poor grammar and spelling mistakes, run-on sentences, and plots that do not remain cohesive throughout an individual book or series. As *Washington Post* columnist Linton Weeks so eloquently wrote, “It venerates grams over grammar, sin over syntax, excess over success” (Weeks, 2004). Nonetheless, “Hip-

hop fiction is doing for fifteen- to twenty-five [year] old African-Americans what Harry Potter did for kids,” intuit Waldenbooks buyer Matt Campbell (Venable et al., 2004). As street lit authors are being picked up by mainstream publishers more often, the quality of the writing is also improving. No longer having to wear the hat of the author, editor, and publisher of a work, the works are changing for the better.

Street Literature in Public Libraries

Street lit has become, as a genre, more and more important in public libraries as the demand from both young adults and adults has increased. Although the renewed street lit movement has been underfoot for some time, it was not until 2006 that a wealth of articles about street literature in a library setting began to crop up in the media. In 2006, David Wright’s article on street lit collection development within libraries was one of the first of its kind. Wright’s article provided selection resources for librarians to use, discussed best-sellers, and listed places to go for reviews of street lit titles. Wright refers to an “alternate network for reviews, discussion, and marketing” that includes sources that librarians would generally not use, such as *Essence* book forums or the African American Literature Book Club. Libraries, however, were slow to adopt the genre in part due to the lack of reviews in respected library literature, such as *Publishers Weekly* or *Booklist*. This article was an important debut for street lit into the library mainstream, and added to the small collection of articles about street lit in libraries.

In early 2008, *Library Journal* published the first in a series of street lit themed articles, which will give librarians advice on collection development of the genre (Welch, 2008). This addition of a series of articles on the topic shows that the genre has truly stuck; librarians know that street lit is not going anywhere, at least not anytime soon. In

addition, many public libraries now have resources on street lit available online for their patrons. Street lit booklists and read-alikes are popping up more and more, showing that libraries have taken note of the importance of the genre to patrons. The American Library Association (ALA) even has a wiki devoted to street lit topics and, although still small, contains information on collection development and upcoming (and past) panels and events (*Street Lit/Urban Fiction*, 2007).

Throughout the literature, it has been demonstrated that street lit, although not targeting a teen audience, has a strong hold on that demographic. Although the novels may have graphic plot lines and themes, they also open the doors of discussion among urban teens. By creating street lit collections in young adult areas, public libraries can promote improved service to this hard-to-reach demographic. The question then becomes one of where the genre should be physically housed within the library; in the adult section, young adult section, or in both? There are several models for how to house adult and young adult collections, as seen in Table 1. The most common models for young adult services are to interfile the resources with children's books, to interfile with adult books, and to have a separate young adult section, which may duplicate the efforts of the adult section (Chelton, 2005).

The first option, that of interfiling street lit titles with a children's collection, has obvious downfalls. Although the genre contains themes that are relevant to the lives of many urban youth, much of the subject material is too advanced for children. The topics of drugs and sex are controversial enough for a young adult age group. Another issue with this model is that, when the time has come for a person to begin using the adult section of a library, they have never had experience with anything other than a children's

section. This handicaps the searching ability of young adults and hinders their future library use (Jacobsen, 1999).

Table 1.

Pros and Cons of Various Print Collection Housing Options

Models	Pros	Cons
Interfiled in youth services	Near designated service specialist. Takes wide developmental range of early adolescents into account.	Political problems because of accessibility by young children. Purchasing authority and budgets may need excessive coordination.
Interfiled in adult	Fewer political problems because of location. Easily available to others as well as to YAs.	Materials become invisible if not promoted outside housing. Purchasing authority and budgets may need excessive coordination.
Separate young adult with specialist	Focused on interests of YAs.	Cost of duplication, if any. Political problems if controversial materials included.

From: Chelton, M. K. (2005). Perspectives on YA practice: Common YA models of service in public libraries: Advantages and disadvantages. *Young Adult Library Services: The Journal of the Young Adult Library Services Association*, 3(4), 4-11.

Interfiling with an adult section is another common manner of dealing with young adult materials. Although this would prevent the necessity of duplication in a collection such as street lit, it also makes the books harder for young adults to access (Chelton, 2005). In an age where organizations such as the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) exist, there is an increasing importance placed on programs and physical areas designed specifically for the young adult demographic. Young adults are intellectually separate from both children and adults, and need to be treated as such. By

forcing the demographic to go straight from using a children's area to an adult section of the library, we are not nurturing their differences as a group. In a recent ALA Youth and Library Use Study Poll, 26% of the respondents said that they would use the library more if there was an area just for teens, and 20% said they would if there was a librarian just for teens (2007). This study shows a need for teen-only areas and services within public libraries, a need that is being cast aside by housing young adult literature within traditionally adult sections.

To some, the duplication of materials seems an extravagance that most libraries are unable to afford (Jacobsen, 1999). However, in the case of street literature, duplicates are needed due to the high demand (and high "loss" rate) of the genre. Many libraries have already been forced to shorten the check-out periods for street lit titles in order to have enough of the books for everybody to read (Morris et al., 2006). With duplication of the collection already needed, there are few downsides to interfiling the collection in both the adult and young adult department of libraries, thus allowing all interested parties to easily access the materials.

It is evident that young adults have a strong interest in street lit and that libraries can help to start discussions about the genre among people who may not use the library for other purposes. Street lit allows young adults to enjoy the physical collection at their local library as well as the activities and programs that libraries offer. In North Philadelphia, the Widener Branch Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia formed a street lit book club to help librarians better understand why teens are so immersed in the genre. The branch performed outreach to inform middle school students of the book club, and requested input on which street lit titles to purchase in the future. The response to the

Widener Branch was overwhelming, and “kept [the students] off the streets with something positive to do.” The students, as well as their parents, have created a high demand for street lit titles at the Widener Branch, and the urban fiction collection there has contributed to the rising circulation statistics at that library (Morris et al., 2006).

In Antioch, California, a reading group called “Sistahs on the Reading Edge” does monthly outreach in the form of a reading group for young adults. The students generally pick street lit titles for the book club (Rosen, 2004). These book clubs and other outreach programs allow young adults to discuss the overarching themes within the genre as a whole. In this way, the controversial material discussed in street lit is used for positive means, and the young adults are able to talk with others that have similar backgrounds as themselves through the books that they have in common. Although the novels may have graphic plot lines and themes, they also open the doors of discussion among urban teens. By creating street lit collections in young adult areas, public libraries can promote improved service to this hard-to-reach demographic.

Street literature is a controversial and important genre in public libraries today. The topics that are being discussed in libraries now, such as where to house the physical collection, how to make collection decisions about the genre, and how to deal with the topics within the books in terms of young adult programming and circulation will remain for years to come.

Methodology

Study Sample

Since street lit circulates primarily in urban libraries among minority teenagers and young adults, public library systems in the most urban counties in North Carolina with the highest percentages of African American and Hispanic residents were chosen as the sample for this study (see Table 2).

Table 2.

*Study Sample*¹

Library System	County Population	Percent African American or Hispanic
Cumberland County	302,963	41.80%
Durham County	223,314	47.09%
Forsyth County	306,067	32.01%
Guilford County ²	421,048	33.07%
Mecklenburg County	695,454	34.32%
Wake County	627,846	25.13%

Procedure

The study took place in three phases. First, the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) of each county system was searched to determine the holdings of street lit titles within each system. For this phase of the study, street lit was defined as any title written by the following authors:

¹ Data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

² For reasons discussed later, Guilford County was excluded from the study.

Baker, T. N.	Hunt, La Jill	Souljah, Sister
Brown, Tracy	Jones, Solomon	Styles, Toy
Carter, Quentin	K'wan	Turner, Nikki
Chunichi	Long, Thomas	Tyree, Omar
Clark, Wahida	Lynch, Tanika	Williams, Precious
Glenn, Roy	Noire	KaShamba
Goines, Donald	Poole, Daaimah S.	Woods, Teri
Holmes, Shannon	Slim, Iceberg	Zane

This list was compiled using a 2007 list of Street Lit Bestsellers included in *Library Journal* (LJ bestsellers: Street lit, 2007), as well as a list of titles examined in a study on teens and street lit in a Philadelphia Public Library (Morris et al., 2006). The authors on this list represent the most popular authors writing street lit, both today and in three past decades.

Each county, with the exception of Guilford County, offers an OPAC that shows the holdings of all libraries within the system. Guilford's system does not have this cohesive nature, which would make the data found during this step of the process not comparable to the other five counties. For this reason, Guilford County was eliminated from the study, despite its urban makeup.

Within the OPACs of the remaining five counties, the name of each author on the above list was searched within the author field. From there, each resulting title was examined to determine the number of unique titles held, the total number of books held (including duplicate copies) by each system, and the number of lost or damaged items for each author. Items were considered to be lost or damaged if they were listed as "lost," "missing," "trace," "damaged," "in repair," or "deleted," or other similar terminology. Any books marked as "in processing" were considered to be held by the library system. Authors' names were searched in multiple ways to ensure that all books in the system by

that author were found. (Example: Precious KaShamba Williams may be listed under Precious Williams or KaShamba Williams; both names were searched for maximum results.) The resulting spreadsheet containing this information for the five counties allowed them to be compared in terms of size of the physical collection, array of authors held, and shrinkage of the genre within that system.

The second phase of the study involved collecting the circulation statistics for the list of authors used in phase one. Each library was asked to provide circulation statistics for any and all titles that the system holds for each author. These statistics are dependent on the system providing them and will not be directly comparable. Nonetheless, any available circulation numbers will help to show the whole picture of how street lit is used within the individual systems.

Finally, in phase three, interviews were conducted with personnel in each county to discuss various aspects of street literature within that particular county, including how and when collection development is conducted for the genre, where the books are physically housed, the demographic that primarily uses the genre, the theft rate for the genre, any programming that relates to street literature, and any other anecdotal information about how the books are used by patrons and library staff. The only requirement for inclusion in an interview was that the individual had interacted with the street literature collection either from a collection development, programming, or circulation stand-point. An MLS degree was not a necessity for inclusion in the study and gender, ethnicity, race, and age were not considered as reasons for exclusion or inclusion. Interview subjects were identified by contacting the branch manager (or equivalent) from either the main branch or regional branches within the library system.

Once the appropriate persons were identified, in-person interviews were scheduled with each. The interviews were conducted as a series of free-flowing conversations. Any and all information about the genre and its use within the county was discussed. Appendix A shows the interview guide used, although interviews were not limited to the listed questions.

Results

Physical Collection

All of the five counties house large physical collections of street literature titles. Table 3 shows the 22 selected street lit authors and the holdings for each county. It should be noted that the counties do not all have the same population sizes, so differences in the sizes of the physical collections between the counties do not necessarily imply different treatment of the genre. All the counties agree that there is room for growth of the genre within their systems which budgets, time, and resources have prevented.

All counties report having a problem with shrinkage (lost or stolen items), which can be seen in detail in Table 3. Durham County reports that 70 to 80% of street lit shrinkage within the county occurs within its main library, which is a “walk-in” branch in downtown Durham. Warren Library, the “old black library” also has a wealth of missing titles. Although the county uses security procedures, most trade paperback books in the system do not have tattle-tape strips in them that would trigger an alarm. As almost all street lit titles are trade paperbacks, the genre is an easy target for theft.

Cumberland County replaces Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim constantly, due to both theft and the physical condition of the books. Since the titles are all paperbacks, they “wear hard”, and the county often only gets one or two circulations out of books before they are either stolen, not returned, or need to be removed from the system due to damage. Although Cumberland County uses tattle-tape, most of the shrinkage within

Table 3.

Physical Collection Data

	Cumberland Lost/				Durham Lost/				Forsyth Lost/				Mecklenburg Lost/				Wake Lost/			
	Unique Titles	Active Copies	Damaged Copies	Total Copies	Unique Titles	Active Copies	Damaged Copies	Total Copies	Unique Titles	Active Copies	Damaged Copies	Total Copies	Unique Titles	Active Copies	Damaged Copies	Total Copies	Unique Titles	Active Copies	Damaged Copies	Total Copies
Baker, T. N.	3	11	0	11	4	32	3	35	3	5	0	5	3	14	3	17	4	42	7	49
Brown, Tracy	1	2	0	2	4	25	6	31	5	20	0	20	4	33	12	45	2	10	5	15
Carter, Quentin	3	8	0	8	3	23	3	26	3	15	0	15	2	29	1	30	0	0	0	0
Chunichi	8	60	6	66	4	20	5	25	4	11	0	11	6	50	34	84	4	23	13	36
Clark, Wahida	4	13	2	15	4	31	4	35	3	16	0	16	4	43	8	51	3	13	2	15
Glenn, Roy	10	49	4	53	2	4	2	6	3	6	0	6	7	53	17	70	9	75	24	99
Goines, Donald	16	301	11	312	13	114	48	162	16	41	0	41	8	22	20	42	12	30	4	34
Holmes, Shannon	6	38	2	40	5	37	4	41	3	9	0	9	5	39	35	74	4	35	8	43
Hunt, La Jill	7	44	2	46	6	24	3	27	8	14	0	14	7	76	20	96	8	50	7	57
Jones, Solomon	3	9	0	9	4	16	3	19	2	3	0	3	4	11	9	20	5	20	1	21
K'wan	9	56	0	56	8	55	10	65	4	14	0	14	3	32	11	43	4	54	13	67
Long, Thomas	5	18	0	18	2	3	3	6	3	3	0	3	4	31	10	41	3	29	3	32
Lynch, Tanika	1	7	0	7	1	6	1	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	8	2	10
Noire	5	34	1	35	6	47	13	60	5	25	0	25	6	74	9	83	6	49	20	69
Poole, Daaimah S.	7	33	1	34	5	19	8	27	2	3	0	3	6	55	11	66	7	57	5	62
Slim, Iceberg	5	20	0	20	9	60	3	63	5	8	0	8	0	0	0	0	3	11	1	12
Souljah, Sister	2	67	0	67	2	20	17	37	2	20	0	20	2	33	37	70	2	41	3	44
Styles, Toy	3	10	0	10	2	15	0	15	1	2	0	2	3	46	5	51	1	15	0	15
Turner, Nikki	11	150	9	159	11	60	43	103	11	42	0	42	12	108	58	166	11	140	20	160
Tyree, Omar	13	305	2	307	13	155	75	230	12	101	0	101	12	126	101	227	12	142	14	156
Williams, Precious KaShamba	5	24	0	24	7	29	3	32	3	5	0	5	8	56	41	97	7	42	12	54
Woods, Teri	8	60	3	63	7	70	9	79	8	13	0	13	7	64	12	76	7	63	16	79
Zane	18	447	15	462	12	86	35	121	16	122	0	122	16	155	116	271	16	271	28	299
Total	153	1766	58	1824	134	951	301	1252	122	498	0	498	129	1150	570	1720	131	1220	208	1428
Percent Lost	3.18%				24.04%				0.00%				33.14%				14.57%			

Note: Forsyth County does not show lost or damaged items in their public OPAC, so shrinkage statistics for this county are not evident through this chart.

the county is not from items being stolen from the library, it is from books not being returned after being properly checked out.

Wake County used to have security precautions in the branches, but disbanded these several years ago in favor of a culture of trust between the library and its patrons. The county never buys fewer than 15 copies of any street lit title in order to combat the quick loss rate.

Forsyth County has had a problem defending their street lit budget due to the loss rate associated with the genre. With certain titles (such as Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*) the county's loss rate is close to 80%. None of the counties interviewed have thought of shortening the check-out time for street lit titles, all check-out periods are consistent with other books in the system. Often, the circulation statistics of the libraries collections do not tell the whole truth about the use of the collection within a county, as items that have been lost or stolen may only have one or two circulations, but would have been much higher otherwise.

Although shrinkage is a continual problem for the genre, none of the counties have thought formally of no longer replacing "lost" books. Durham County is in favor of giving patrons what they request, and the county replaces almost all of the items that "walk." In fact, during a recent two-part re-order of street lit titles, the county re-ordered every single book in print by every author on the list of street lit authors used for this study. Since the re-order, the county has experienced fewer patron requests on street lit titles; there used to be an 80% chance that a book would not be available for check-out; that has now dropped to a 50 or 60% chance. The county spent approximately \$8500 on street lit books (purchasing books that run from \$8 to \$15 each), placing half of the order

in August of 2007 and the second half in October of the same year. This re-order took some 40 to 50 hours of librarian time, in addition to 20 hours of time that an intern contributed to the project.

Wake County purchased 25 to 30 copies of Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*; one year later almost all of the titles had one circulation before they were considered "lost." There has been informal talk of not replacing certain titles as they disappear from the system, such as debut authors who have not written any new books to add to the collection. Wake's collection focus is on the new and the popular, so as items begin to no longer fit into this category, they may not be replenished in the county. Cumberland County has more luck with being able to fulfill patron requests, claiming that nine times out of ten, an author (though not a specific title) can be found within the library for immediate check-out. Durham County notes that patrons seem less willing to put a hold on street lit than on other genres. They will ask for another author instead of putting in a request, even though it only takes a day or two to bring a title in.

Placement of Street Literature Titles in the Collection

None of the counties in question have an area designated for street literature, although some have sections for African-American literature. In the counties with neither, the genre is worked into the rest of the adult fiction collection, often with a spine sticker alerting patrons that it is an African-American title. Forsyth County, although one of the counties with an African-American section, does not house most street lit titles in this section, instead keeping the area reserved for works that could be considered literature. Although Zane is included in this area, the majority of authors on the lists used for this study are not. Within the systems, the highest circulation statistics (as well as loss

rates) come from those branches in the more urban areas of the county. Among those counties that use bookmobiles for adult book circulation, street lit titles are often not included. Bookmobiles often attract older adults in rural areas of the county, a demographic that does not traditionally read the genre.

Only one of the counties interviewed has true street literature titles within the young adult section of the library. Forsyth County's Teen Central not only houses street lit titles, but also has a street lit book club just for teens. The book club is targeted towards older teens, from 15 to 18, but does not exclude younger patrons who choose to join. The club is primarily female, and the group much prefers the true street lit titles to the more teen-friendly titles that are sometimes chosen for discussion. When *Black*, by Tracy Brown, was selected, the title flew off the shelves and into the hands of the book club members. A selection from the *Bluford High* Series, on the other hand, has not held the teens' interest in the same way. The teens are attracted to street lit titles for many of the same reasons that adults are; sex, the glamour of the hip-hop lifestyle, the edginess of the topics, and that the books are not always feel-good, polished, or what one would expect out of the library. The group talks about the morals often found within the genre, and how they are not always cut and dry. Parents have had little interaction with Forsyth County's group, and have not complained about any of the subject matter being read by the group.

Cumberland County makes an attempt to purchase books that are teen-friendly but that also mimic street lit; series such as *The Hazelwood High* Trilogy by Sharon Draper or the *Bluford High* Series by Anne Schraff generally concern African-American youth in urban areas, though without the language and situations found in adult street lit

titles. Concerns about language and the age of characters have prevented the county from adding actual street lit titles to the YA collection, although they are aware that adolescents as young as 12 are checking out street lit from the adult section. The county is, in general, attempting to collect more African-American books within their teen section.

Collection Development

None of the selected counties has a specific collection development policy dedicated to street lit, and each selects which titles to add to the collection in a slightly different way. Ranging from *Library Journal* to *Publisher's Weekly* and *Booklist*, each county has a unique method for finding titles and authors to add to the collection. Most counties report using Baker and Taylor's Title Source, which allows a county to specify certain authors or publishing houses to automatically buy titles from. Cumberland County has included Zane on its "Automatic Buy List," meaning any new Zane title will immediately be purchased by the county. Other authors on the list include Eric Jerome Dickey, E. Lynn Harris, and Omar Tyree. Thirty to forty copies of these authors' books will automatically be added to Cumberland County's purchase list each time a new title is available.

Wake County's use of Baker and Taylor's Title Source differs slightly, relying on publishing houses instead of authors names to create purchase lists. The county receives lists from both Title Source and Ingram's Advanced Buyer's Checklist (ABC) through this method. Any new titles from companies such as Urban Books and Triple Crown, publishing houses that specialize in street lit, will be added to a list for collection development librarians to examine. Although this method adds some books to the list that

are not street lit (often African-American authors who write other genres are picked up by these publishing companies as well), it allows Wake County to see new works from many debut authors in the field, which creating a list by author name alone would not allow.

Unlike those in other genres, street lit authors do not need to “prove themselves” before the Wake County is willing to purchase their books, almost all street lit titles are instantly checked out and read by patrons. In addition, Ingram’s ABC shows buying levels based on the publisher’s print run and other factors; this level helps determine whether or not Wake County will add the title to the collection. Any books rated as an A or a B will automatically be purchased by the county. Large orders are placed once a month, and the county is constantly gathering information about which titles and authors to invest in.

Wake County also tries to support the local community and may purchase books by local street lit authors. In addition, some local authors may bring their own works in to donate to the library and attempt to build a local fan base.

In Durham County, all possible tools are used to provide Readers Advisory and collection development for street lit titles. Every single street lit author that the library holds has been entered into Amazon to search for possible read-alikes and to find other similar authors who should be incorporated into the collection. Although the county was reluctant to purchase the genre due to their poorly proofed passages and bad grammar, the county has noticed better quality books (in both physical condition and content) over the years. Compared to the goriness of Stephen King or the sexual situations of Danielle Steel, Durham does not see a problem with offering street lit to its patrons.

Forsyth County uses many different resources to find titles and assist in collection development for the genre. Librarians subscribe to blogs that cover street lit, looking for

up-and-coming authors and new works on the market. They look through articles on the genre, pulling titles from there, also read through more traditional booklists to find mainstream items. Although Forsyth tries to blend true street lit titles with “more acceptable” forms of similar literature, the county supports the genre and recognizes it as a favorite among patrons. The book-buying season for the county is September through May, and new titles are purchased constantly throughout that time.

Mecklenburg County uses Baker and Taylor carts, though not in the same street lit-specific manner that Wake County uses the product. New street lit titles are added to an “All Fiction” cart which librarians then cull through to make additions to the collection. The county also looks in *Black Issues Book Review*, *Essence*, and *Ebony* for new titles. All books that are selected for purchase within the county must have a review, which can sometimes be problematic for street lit titles, which are not reviewed with the same consistency as other genres. Librarians within the system may need to read a given book and write a review for it before it will be considered for the collection. This can slow the system down, and the county reports that Wal-Mart often has new titles before the library does.

All counties also reported patron requests for titles and authors as being an important part of the collection development process. Wake County has made a conscious choice to try and increase street lit materials of late. High demand for the genre has occurred in the last two years, and patrons request titles that the library doesn’t hold between 5 to 10 times a month. The library fills these requests between a quarter to a third of the time, which is slightly higher than the fulfillment of patron requests for other genres. Because of its high demand throughout the county, collection development

librarians may be more willing to buy street lit requests than those of other genres. Mecklenburg County receives patron requests for new titles once or twice a month, generally for items that the patron saw on Wal-Mart shelves and wanted to find at the library for free.

Throughout the counties, similar patron tastes in street lit authors prevail. Cumberland county ranks Donald Goines, Teri Woods, Nikki Turner, and Noire among the most often checked out authors. In Wake County, Teri Woods again tops the list of authors, along with Vickie Stringer and K'wan. Durham County sees many requests for Zane, Nikki Turner, Teri Woods, along with Omar Tyree and, more and more, Noire. Sister Souljah's book, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, often goes in waves of popularity as the title is sometimes read in the Durham school system. Within Mecklenburg County, Omar Tyree, Sister Souljah, Nikki Turner, Vickie Stringer, Wahida Clark, and 50 Cent top the lists of requested books. Forsyth County sees Nikki Turner on the weekly request lists, along with Zane titles.

Large-print and hardcover titles are generally not purchased by any of the libraries within the system as few of those items are available for street lit titles. Street lit publishers often try to keep the price point for their products low in order to appease the demographic that most often buys the genre. None of the counties report much dependence on the interlibrary loan system to bring street lit titles into the county, although Durham County often sends books to other libraries because of the breadth of their street lit collection.

Typical Patron

The counties generally describe the “typical” street lit patron in similar ways. According to Durham County, 85 to 90% of the time, that demographic is an African-American female who is 15 to 25 years old. Sometimes Hispanic patrons will also ask for specific street lit titles. White patrons rarely check out street lit titles; the only author that tends to attract a white patron-base is Sofía Quintero, who writes some of her books under the nom de plume of Black Artemis. Her books are considered more hip-hop fiction or chica lit than street lit. Durham County shows distinct differences between the preferences of male and female patrons; males are more interested in “gangster” authors, such as Donald Goines or Iceberg Slim (and occasionally Zane) while female patrons are more interested in the books that deal with romance. Most of the people who ask for help in finding street lit titles are female (about 95%.)

Wake County describes their typical patron as being a young, urban, professional black woman in her early 20s to early 30s, while Cumberland County sees women from their teens and above, mostly African-American, checking out the genre. Though Wake County does not notice much of a difference between men and women’s check-out preferences in terms of street lit titles, most of the men in Cumberland County who check out the genre are looking for books by Donald Goines, and are generally anywhere from their teens to around 25 years old. Mecklenburg County’s street lit patrons are generally African-American women from 15 to 35 who are very well-read in the genre; once they have read one title they want to find as many as they can. The county does not have many male readers of the genre, but the men who are reading choose the same authors and titles as the female patrons. Forsyth County has a very similar demographic for the genre;

African-American women between 14 and 35. The county says then some men read street lit, but not a large amount.

Programming and Displays

None of the counties have many programs or display dedicated to street lit, although the genre is often incorporated into African-American programming and displays. Durham County recently collaborated with Carolina Circuit Writers (a North Carolina library consortium supporting African-American and Hispanic authors) for a month's worth of programming in which writers of color were brought in to speak. The number of attendees to this program is unknown, as it happened in many different locations and statistics were not kept. Advertisements for the programming were displayed in the library, and bibliographies of chicanx lit and hip-hop fiction were created. Patrons seemed more interested in the Hispanic side of hip-hop fiction for some time, but the interest slowly faded. Since the venture was a joint one, there has not been much feedback to the library about the month of events.

The Durham County system has had African-American authors into the library, though not necessarily street lit authors. They currently do not have plans for future programming regarding street lit, although the county is rethinking programming in general in terms of their strategic plan. The county is looking to engage young people in events such as poetry slams and other forms of creative writing.

Wake County is preparing to start a Contemporary Book Club which will include street lit titles. This book club has been created due to popular demand, and will focus on some of the better written titles. A young adult book club within the county has also read some Sharon Draper books, which fall into the category of teen appropriate street lit. An

existing African-American book club within the system is looking into expanding reading choices to include street lit titles. One branch in Wake County organized a street lit author panel, though the county reports that it is sometimes hard to compete with programming that Wal-Mart has done, which includes hosting street lit author panels and signings. Wake also has offered internal programming to librarians and library assistants in order to enable them to provide reader's advisory assistance for the genre. A street lit reading list was created for this program which some branches have on display for patron use.

Cumberland County hosted urban fiction author Carl Weber for a turnout of 28 people, who were mostly middle-age women. The author visit was advertised on the radio and through press releases. The attendees of the event were excited about it, though upset that Weber only stayed to discuss his new book for an hour. The program led to increased circulation stats for Weber's books. Like Durham County, Cumberland County has not looked seriously into any street lit programming, although stated that this does not mean they won't in the future.

Mecklenburg County hosted Omar Tyree in December of 2007 to a crowd of 45 people. The demographic of the attendees did not match that of regular readers of street lit; it was much more diverse. The event was a spur of the moment decision, and as such was not advertised in the county's normal newsletter. Instead, flyers were distributed to beauty shops and a beauty school near the library that was hosting the event, and news was spread through word-of-mouth. The event did not create any real increase in the circulation of street lit titles, and there is no future programming in the works for street lit at this time. Mecklenburg County also hosted an afternoon with teen-appropriate street lit

authors such as Victoria Christopher Murray (as keynote speaker), L. Divine, Cecil Cross, Joyce E. Davis, and others. The teens were invited to attend writer's workshops, learn how to start teen book clubs, and enter to win door prizes.

Forsyth County has hosted several visits for street lit authors and has book clubs throughout the county that deal with African-American literature and sometimes include street lit titles. All advertising for events is county-wide, not just within the branch hosting the program.

Displays throughout the counties are often incorporated within African-American displays and are not solely based on street lit. In Durham County, the libraries do not have an abundance of display space; the main branch has only four A-frames to use for displays. At this point, there has not been a street lit display, although in a current African-American author display street lit titles were more likely to be picked up than books by Toni Morrison or Octavia Butler.

Cumberland County has a permanent display of the African-American experience in their main branch, but street lit titles are often not included on it due to their physical status (paperbacks may have ripped covers and broken spines.) Sometimes the county will use street lit titles for an end-cap display.

One of Wake County's libraries has two permanent displays of street lit titles. They are able to keep the displays stocked by placing titles there directly instead of having them go to the shelf first. The county reports the books of certain authors will not stay on these displays for more than a few hours before they are checked out by another patron. Patrons will often stand by the displays and speak to each other, or to staff, about street lit. The patrons have grown to understand that the displays (located near the

circulation desk) are the first place in the library that they should go for street lit titles that have been published in the last three years. Another branch in the system has a permanent African-American end-cap (the display area on the end of a bookcase) which includes copies of a street lit reading list as well as the Essence bestseller list.

Mecklenburg County has thought of having a street lit display, though at this point has not implemented one due to restrictions on staff time. Forsyth County has a display in Teen Central each month highlighting the book that has been chosen for the next street lit book club meeting. There are generally not displays for street lit in the adult sections of the library.

Although Durham County has not had enough staff time for a banner or bibliography on street lit, they do keep a list of African-Americans by the desk which is often requested. On this list, nine of the street lit authors from the list of 22 used for this study are included. Cumberland County has a similar list, entitled “African Afro-Caribbean and African-American writers,” which only lists three of the 22 street lit authors.

Discussion

While all five counties have the beginnings of strong street lit collections, there is room for improvement. The issue of shrinkage of the genre is one of great concern across the state, though at this point little is being done to prevent it. Most counties do not have a system that will automatically re-order a title that has been lost or damaged, leading to incomplete collections and gaps in circulation statistics.

Although none of the counties has a special section of the stacks devoted to street lit, many libraries use displays (either African-American literature or solely street lit) to promote the genre. This has seemed to work well for street lit titles, as patrons can easily locate the books within the library and also have the chance to engage in conversations about the genre with other patrons or with staff members. Having a display area where street lit can always be found allows patrons to easily see which titles are available and be aware of new authors. As public libraries may be in competition with bookstores or Wal-Mart, having a dedicated street lit section of the library encourages patrons to use the library to fulfill their needs.

At this stage, public libraries have not fully tackled street lit related programming due to both funding as well as restrictions on staff time. Those programs that have occurred have received interest, and libraries should continue to try to program for the demographic that reads street lit through author panels or sessions on self-publishing. These types of programs would promote both the reading and writing of street lit on a community level.

The needs of teens are, for the most part, not being met in the five counties. Only Forsyth County has a commitment to promoting the genre to teens, and for taking responsibility for the effects of this by discussing the content within the books. All counties report that teens are reading the same street lit titles that adults are, so it is necessary for the libraries to take an active role in promoting the titles to way in a healthy and positive manner.

Conclusion

Although each of the counties selected for this study have different methods for collection development and programming of street lit, it is evident that each is aware of the importance of the genre to public libraries. As the genre becomes more well-known, and is picked up by larger publishing companies in the future, it will be important for public libraries to already have systems in place for the collection and marketing of the genre. There is still a stigma surrounding the genre; it is often not thought to have the same intrinsic worth as other items in the collection despite high interest and circulation. This may continue to hinder the promotion of the genre within public libraries, and needs to be addressed in order for the genre to be treated in the manner that its high patron-interest warrants.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me about your library's street literature collection. I am interested in all aspects of street lit within your library, so please feel free to bring up anecdotes, statistics, or other information that you think is relevant to the discussion if I don't specifically ask about them. This interview will not be rigidly structured, and we can spend as much or as little time on any topic as is seen fit. If you do not know the answer to a question, or do not feel comfortable answering something, please let me know.

Describe your library's street lit collection:

- How large is the collection?
- Who are the most popular authors? What are the most popular titles?
- How often are new titles introduced into the collection?
- Where are new titles found to be added to the collection?
- How do you decide which titles to add? Who is involved in the decision?
- Does the library have a collection development policy specifically for street literature?
- How often do patrons request titles that the library doesn't hold?
- How well do you feel the library fulfills these requests?
- What are circulation rates like for the genre?
- Are specific circulation statistics available for street lit titles?
- On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate the strength of the collection? (1=weak; 5=very strong)
- On a scale of 1-5, how well do you think the collection meets the needs of patrons? (1=not at all; 5=very well)

Describe the typical patron that requests/checks out street lit titles:

- What age and demographic is the typical patron, if there is one?
- How often do patrons outside of this typical demographic (if there is one) request/check out titles?
- Are the books requested/checked out by the same demographic consistently?
- Do males and females request/check out the books at a similar rate?
- What types of programming has the library done in the last year that relates to street lit?

- What was the turn-out for the programs, in terms of number and demographics of attendees?
- Who initiated the programs?
- How is programming advertised?
- Where are programs held?
- What conversations were initiated by the programming?
- What feedback resulted from the programs?
- How does a program effect circulation of the genre?
- Are any programs in the works for the future?

How often are street lit displays incorporated in the library?

- What are the patrons' responses to the displays?
- What are the library employees' responses to the displays?
- Where are the displays within the library?
- Who initiated the displays?
- What conversations were initiated by the displays?
- What feedback resulted from the displays?
- How does a display effect circulation of the genre?
- Are any displays in the works for the future?

Where is the collection of street lit within the library?

- How was this decision made?
- How do you think the placement of the collection affects circulation? The types of patrons who check out the genre?