

# “Something Like a Harlem Renaissance West”: Black Popular Fiction, Self-Publishing, and the Origins of Street Literature: Interviews with Dr. Roland Jefferson and Odie Hawkins

Justin Gifford

*University of Nevada, Reno*

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, the popularity of self-published street literature (also known as urban literature, ghetto fiction, and hip-hop literature) has exploded among African American readers. Starting with the publication of titles such as Teri Woods’s *True to the Game* (1998), Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), Vickie M. Stringer’s *Let That Be the Reason* (2001), and Nikki Turner’s *A Hustler’s Wife* (2003), street literature has emerged as a driving force in the African American publishing industry. Dozens of independent imprints, each publishing several books per year, sprang up virtually overnight, and now thousands of street literature novels compete for the attention of an ever-growing black readership. Some of the more influential independent publishers of this new genre include Urban Books, Teri Woods Publishing, and Stringer’s Triple Crown Publications, though new publishing houses arrive on the scene each year. Triple Crown Publications is probably the most successful of these new publishing houses, having sold more than a million books between its founding in 2001 and 2006.<sup>1</sup> As a further indication of street literature’s growing power in the marketplace, mainstream trade publishers (including Ballantine Books, Simon and Schuster, and St. Martin’s Press) have begun offering six-figure, multiple-book deals to some of the biggest names in the business, including K’wan Foye, Shannon Holmes, and Turner. These books can be purchased at Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com, at book vendor tables along 125th Street in Harlem, and in state and federal penitentiaries across the country.<sup>2</sup> Street literature is particularly popular in American cities with large black populations, including New York, Detroit, Houston, Oakland, and Atlanta. At a moment when the

---

© MELUS: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States 2013. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States.

All rights reserved. For Permissions, please e-mail: [journals.permissions@oup.com](mailto:journals.permissions@oup.com).

DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlt048

MELUS • Volume 38 • Number 4 • (Winter 2013)

publishing and bookselling industry appears to be in decline, the rise of street literature reminds us that reading is very much alive in America today.<sup>3</sup>

Not everyone is thrilled about street literature’s growing popularity. Many of these books feature stories of drug dealers, pimps, hustlers, and sex workers and focus on urban violence, racism, misogyny, and sexuality. The explicit presentation of these issues combined with the casual editing practices of many publishers has resulted in a moral panic about these apparently pornographic novels. The most famous criticisms leveled at street literature were issued by Nick Chiles’s op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut.” In it, he argues that the rise of street literature represents nothing less than the “sexualization and degradation of black fiction” (A15). On the other side of the debate, librarians, booksellers, and even some educators argue that these books have created an unprecedented reading culture among young black people and that they offer inexperienced readers a gateway to such African American classics as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Whatever the case, it is clear that street literature is a growing cultural and economic enterprise. Driven by Internet fan sites, as well as the ever-expanding audience of black American prisoners, street literature represents an emerging popular genre of African American literature that cannot be ignored.<sup>4</sup>

While this black literary movement is a recent development, it has its origins in a small Los Angeles publishing company called Holloway House. In the mid-1960s, two white Hollywood copywriters, Bentley Morriss and Ralph Weinstock, came up with the idea of publishing black crime literature. They published the autobiographies and crime novels of Robert Beck (also known as Iceberg Slim) and Donald Goines, now two of the most widely recognized pioneers of the street literature genre. Beck’s and Goines’s books have sold millions of copies in liquor stores, barber shops, and newsstands in black communities all across America; they established Holloway House Publishing Company as the first niche publisher of popular black fiction.<sup>5</sup> Holloway House branded this body of literature “black experience” fiction, and like the street literature to which it is often compared, it centrally featured stories of pimps, sex workers, hustlers, and revolutionaries told from the perspective of the criminal. As an important forerunner of today’s mass-market black literature, black experience fiction constituted a significant literary movement among African American readers who were largely ignored by mainstream publishing houses.

Although Beck and Goines are the two best-known originators of the street literature genre, there were dozens of lesser-known black writers working for Holloway House and self-publishing their works throughout the 1970s. Predating today’s street literature authors by a few decades, writers such as Joseph Nazel, Charlie Avery Harris, Omar Fletcher, and Amos Brooke wrote

their own novels of pimps, hustlers, black detectives, and revolutionaries.<sup>6</sup> With titles like *Whoredaughter* (1976), *Black in a White Paradise* (1978), *Black against the Mob* (1977), *The Iceman* (1974-75), and *Stack A. Dollar* (1979), these books established a literary renaissance of popular urban fiction that provided black readers with entertainment and escape from the real-world problems of ghettoization, deindustrialization, and incarceration in the emerging prison-industrial complex. Numbering in the hundreds and expanding upon the themes and urban vernacular established by Beck and Goines, the paperback books from Holloway House became the first coherent body of popular literature published for black American readers on a grand scale in the 1970s.

Two of the most significant black authors from this early period still writing today are Roland Jefferson and Odie Hawkins. Jefferson began his publishing career in the 1970s, though his path to authorship was quite different from that of Hawkins. Moving to Los Angeles at an early age from his birthplace of Washington, DC, Jefferson became a forensic psychiatrist after serving in the Air Force. Beginning his writing career by composing short movie reviews, Jefferson self-published his first novel, the cult classic *The School on 103rd Street*, in 1976 with Vantage Press (he would later republish the novel with Holloway House). The story of a black doctor who discovers underground prisons beneath a variety of facilities in inner-city neighborhoods, *The School on 103rd Street* has drawn comparisons to Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969) and John Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967) (Fabre). Jefferson is the author of six novels, as well as a number of film scripts, and his work attempts to balance overt political themes with popular elements such as heists, spy plots, and hard-boiled detective investigations.<sup>7</sup>

Hawkins is the author of twenty-four novels, numerous television scripts, radio programs, and short story collections. Born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, where Beck used to pimp, Hawkins moved to Los Angeles in the early 1960s and became a member of both the Watts Writers' Workshop and the Open Door Program. A contemporary of Beck and Goines at Holloway House, Hawkins published his first novel *Ghetto Sketches* in 1972. It is now considered a classic of the black experience genre, intertwining the stories of pimps, sex workers, street corner revolutionaries, and the everyday people of a nameless black neighborhood on a single day. Hawkins is still actively publishing, working with the popular genre of pimp autobiography, the conventions of science fiction, and even inventing a new genre that he likes to call "Pan-African Occult," a kind of black nationalist magical realism.

In these interviews, Jefferson and Hawkins weigh in on a wide range of topics, including the origins of black popular literature, their experiences with Holloway House, the racial politics of black pulp publishing, and the unique poetics of mass-market black fiction. As both authors suggest, a "Harlem Renaissance West," as

Hawkins calls it, never quite materialized in Los Angeles for a number of reasons. In part, black writers found it difficult to create a cohesive literary and cultural movement in the sprawling, decentralized city of Los Angeles. Even more significantly, black writers faced a wide range of constraints created by the white-owned paperback publisher, Holloway House. The company often sacrificed artistic quality for fast production, sometimes publishing rough outlines submitted by authors as full novels without showing authors the galleys. Holloway House also attempted to neutralize any political or racial messages of the novels by consistently advertising them, regardless of content, as spectacles of sex and violence. Marketed as disposable pulp by Holloway House, the popular novels written by Hawkins, Jefferson, and dozens of other black writers of the post-Civil Rights period were overlooked because they were considered neither literary nor political. Providing much-needed context for the genesis of self-published black literature, Jefferson and Hawkins offer insight into the complex racial politics of writing and publishing mass-market black literature.

## An Interview with Roland Jefferson

**Justin Gifford:** What inspired you to start writing?

**Roland Jefferson:** I hate to use a term that's not scientific, but probably instinct. I had always been one who enjoyed movies. I had always loved adventure stories, even cartoons that were adventure stories. I would come home from junior high school and look to see what movies were on because I used to just love adventures. I always wondered in the back of my mind if I could write something like that, but I never bothered.

**JG:** What movies especially appealed to you?

**RJ:** I liked a lot of the Bogart films, detective stories. I liked a lot of the Africa-set films like *Mogambo* [1953] and films of that type. Films in the 1950s really interested me. Of course, it was all movie magic, but I still liked it, this movie adventure sort of thing. Some of the books that I read were books that were made into films. Believe it or not, I was not a big reader as a youngster, surprisingly. The books I did read were books that had usually been made into a film. So just about all the Dashiell Hammett books, a lot of the Raymond Chandler books. Anything that was made into a film. If it said, “based on the novel by,” then I would go to the library and get the book and read it.

**JG:** Could you talk a little bit about your background?

**RJ:** In junior high school, I remember there was a paper I had to write. Of course I had terrible penmanship. There was a teacher who gave me an “A” on the subject but a “D” on the penmanship, and her comment in the margins was, “Your writing

is going to be a detriment to you” [laughs]. Because it was so hard to read. And to this day, my penmanship is horrible. But then as a physician, people think that’s normal.

**JG:** Why did you decide to become a physician rather than a writer?

**RJ:** When I got to college, the interest in writing really became stronger. I would read a lot of the letters to the editor in the *Los Angeles Times*. It just so happens that there was a black physician who wrote editorial comments about various subjects, and it would often get published in the *Los Angeles Times*. My grandmother knew him, so she would say to me, “You need to read this.” So I would look on Sundays, and this guy would have various comments on what someone had written. Coincidentally, I knew his daughter because she was a student at USC [the University of Southern California] where I was. She was a journalism major, and I began to think at the time that it might be kind of cool to be a journalist. But my father, grandmother, and aunt said, “You know, that’s not very practical.” They were very pragmatic. They would say, “This is the 1950s. Black people have to be educated and build foundations. You have to make money. You either have to be a physician, or a dentist, or a lawyer, or an engineer. Something where you can earn a living.” They didn’t think very much of journalism.

**JG:** Did you write in college at all?

**RJ:** I persisted. I remember I was a junior in college. I had just finished reading *Island in the Sun* [1955]. I had seen the film several times over the years. But I finally got the novel by Alec Waugh. That really excited me. I said to myself, “I think I can write something.” So I wrote about five chapters of a novel. I can’t even remember what it was about. I gave it to the daughter of the man who submitted letters to the *Los Angeles Times*. She read it and sent it back. She said, “This is terrible. Don’t even try to be a journalist.” That was the end of that [laughs].

**JG:** When did you publish your first work?

**RJ:** I put the writing aside, though I continued to be fascinated by movies. I always went to films in medical school. That’s the one thing I did do. I didn’t do any writing in medical school, as an intern, or when I was training to be a psychiatrist. But when I went into the Air Force seven years later, I started writing again. The Vietnam War [1955-75] was going on. I was stationed at a military base in Columbus, Ohio, called Lockbourne Military Base. I was the psychiatrist on the base. Of course, you got all the magazines: *Air Force Times*, *Army Times*, *Navy Times*. I started writing movie reviews for them, and I think I got a couple of them published, and that really interested me in writing again.

**JG:** What inspired you to write your first novel, *The School on 103rd Street*?

**RJ:** I got out of the service, came out to Los Angeles, and went into practice. I didn't do very much writing. But I went over to a colleague's house one day. He had been stationed in Japan during his two years of the Vietnam War. We were just kicking it around one night, and he said, "I want to show you something," and he showed me this book. It was called *Ward 402*. It was written by a physician who had been stationed at the same military base in Japan as my friend. This guy wrote this book about his experience on Ward 402. And that really energized me. I said, "Wait a minute. This guy is a physician?" I said, "You know what, I can write something like that." And that's when it began. This was 1973 or 1974. At that point, I went home, and I began writing *The School on 103rd Street*.

**JG:** Could you talk about how you self-published the book?

**RJ:** I finally got it finished in about 1975. It took me about a year to write it, off and on. Of course, I couldn't find a publisher for it because of its theme. My thinking at first was that it was not well written, but later I realized it had to do with the political theme. So I ended up having it published with a company called Vantage Press, which was a vanity press. As it turned out, the book was a hit. Unbeknownst to me, the company only published so many copies, and once those copies were gone, you had to start all over, and that was expensive. But in fact, I sold out every single copy: five hundred hardbacks. I did something at that time that very few self-published writers did, which was, I wanted a personalized, artistic, four-color cover. So I had a friend of mine who was an artist draw up a design, and that became the cover.

**JG:** Could you tell me a little more about the genesis of *School*?

**RJ:** When I first got out of the service but before I opened my office, I went to work as a psychiatrist for an inner-city facility called the Watts Health Clinic. It was in the heart of Watts, right next to an inner-city high school. I would see the kids passing by every day. For some reason, this idea of underground concentration camps sort of just popped into my mind. That was the storyline. But even before this, I always attended the scientific conventions that the medical community held. I was a member of the National Medical Association, which is the black version of the American Medical Association [AMA]. It was formed because at the turn of the century, black physicians were not allowed to be in the AMA. I would go to the meetings and attend all of the psychiatric conferences. That was about the time, 1968 or 1969, when a lot of consciousness was coming about. Black psychiatrists and social scientists were beginning to espouse theories about racism. I was already being exposed to that as a psychiatrist. That just suddenly connected with this idea about this school and whether or not the government would plan to incarcerate blacks. I did some research and found that there was a law on the books that would allow for something called the McCarran Act [1950, requiring

Communist organizations to register with the US Attorney General], which was subsequently rescinded. I read a number of books—*The Spook Who Sat by the Door* by Sam Greenlee and John Williams’s *The Man Who Cried I Am*—and all of that just clicked. The entire story from beginning to end was just there.

**JG:** Were you aware of Holloway House Publishing Company at this time?

**RJ:** I was. Holloway House was one of the publishers to which I submitted my novel. I submitted *The School on 103rd Street* to virtually every mainstream publisher in existence. I submitted it to Holloway House, and of course it came back zilch. Maybe five to seven years later, I got approached by a fellow who said he was an agent, and if I wanted to get *103rd Street* republished, he could get me a deal at Holloway House. I told him that I had already submitted the book. He said, “You have to go through an agent. That’s the way that Bentley Morriss operates.” So I said fine, and it worked. The only problem was, they didn’t like the title. They changed it to *The Secret below 103rd Street*. I wasn’t wild about that, but they didn’t change the story. That’s how I got a paperback version of it published with Holloway House, even though it was under a different title.

**JG:** Did you ever meet with Bentley Morriss?

**RJ:** I met with him a number of times. He was enthusiastic about the book, but he had a different take on the marketing, which explains why there were never any reprints. Here was the problem. They change the title. Well, okay. I told them that the book really is political. It is clearly a political book. He said, “We know. It’s got that strange title. We are going to change it so that it will have a more popular appeal.” We were talking about where it was going to be advertised. I gave him a list of all of the publications that I knew that were primarily African American political instruments like *The Black Scholar* and *Freedomways*. There were two or three others. I said, “This is really where you should take the ads out because this is the readership for this book.” Well, they really didn’t want to do that. I think they took out an ad in *Players*, the black version of *Playboy*. I said, “You really need to send it to a political magazine.” So they submitted an ad to *Freedomways*. The ad, instead of addressing the political ramifications, said this was a sexy, sensuous book. They sent that back so fast and said, “Not in this magazine at all.” And that was really my last contact with Bentley after that. I told them where to send it, but they wouldn’t take any of my ideas on structuring the ads. When I had done the book with Vantage Press, I did all of the ads. I have to give credit to *The Black Scholar*, who really had the greatest influence with the book because they printed the political ads the way I wanted. The book is now a collector’s item.

**JG:** How has your academic training helped or hurt you as a writer?

**RJ:** Since I am a physician, people view [writing] as a hobby. They don't really take me seriously as a writer. I think Bentley's attitude was pretty much the same. It has been helpful as a psychiatrist in developing characters. I've seen every conceivable form of mental illness that exists on the earth. That's not an exaggeration. I am able to draw on that experience in terms of how characters are formed and developed, how they behave, how they operate, things they do, things they don't do. I am able to bring that into play.

**JG:** Can you talk about your second book, *A Card for the Players* [1978]?

**RJ:** It is a character book. That is the book that has the least political impact. That's just pure pulp fiction, or whatever it is. It's about a casino robbery. But I thought I would make the characters interesting and make their motivations somewhat different. It was the first time I really started to expand on character development. In the first book, the characters were just sort of there. But I really made *A Card for the Players* more of a character study than anything else. I just threw them into this heist.

**JG:** One of the recurring tropes in your books is the failed heist. Could you talk about why the heist holds such an appeal as a plot device?

**RJ:** The heist is always something that someone wants to pull off that they shouldn't. The failed heist occurs because people themselves fail. I did two books with a failed heist. The first was *A Card for the Players* and the second one was called *Damaged Goods* [2003]. In both books, you have people who are inherently intelligent but who just believe in the hustle. They believe they have such an enduring power of grandiosity that they think they can do whatever it is they are going to do. They do it as a challenge, in terms of something that might appear impossible at the outset, but they go into it with the real belief that they can do this. Maybe one day I'll write a book where the heist succeeds [laughs].

**JG:** What can you tell me about your little-known novel *559 to Damascus* [1985]?

**RJ:** That's probably the least reviewed and least available of my books. I started writing [it] in the mid-1980s. I think that it was a reflection of my political attitudes at the time. The question was, what would really happen if some Middle Eastern radical groups really got ahold of an atom bomb? At that time, the news was full of stories of Lebanon and truck bombs being blown up in a Marine camp, and they were searching for this terrorist named Carlos who supposedly had a backpack atom bomb or something to that effect. This was all in the news. So that's where this story came from. I decided I wanted to write that subject, but I wanted a black protagonist, so I made the central character a black woman. She gets involved in a racial romance with another agent, and they sort of stumble by accident into this

plot by a Middle Eastern Islamic group to acquire plutonium. It's interesting that twenty-five years later, we are staring it right in the face.

**JG:** Has anyone come back to you subsequently and remarked what a prescient book it is?

**RJ:** No, because very few people have read it. There aren't that many copies. I had to do that one self-published, of course. I don't think that there are but a hundred copies in existence. I went with a different company, and the company went out of business shortly after publication. I only got one or two reviews. I got a review from a newspaper in Arizona. People thought it was preposterous.

**JG:** Your work consistently strikes a delicate balance between the political and the popular. Is that something that developed over the years?

**RJ:** *A Card for the Players* and *559 to Damascus* were written in an effort to expand the base beyond the black readership. I had done *103rd Street*, and I knew what the readership was, but it didn't get read much beyond that. So I said, "Let me write a generic book, a heist book. That should get me some exposure." *A Card for the Players* actually got reviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*. They didn't like it, but it got reviewed. But those two books were my effort to expand past the African American readership. That did not occur.

**JG:** Could you talk about how your more recent work fits into the contemporary literary scene?

**RJ:** I self-published *Damaged Goods* initially. Within a year, there was an agent from William Morris who happened to pick it up at a used bookstore in New York City. He called me and asked me if I would be interested in having it republished. I said, "Of course." I got it published by Simon and Schuster. *Damaged Goods* came out shortly after *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah. *Damaged Goods* is really a hip-hop *Ocean's Eleven* [1960]. That's really what it is. I told the editor and the publicity people at Simon and Schuster that they needed to promote this as a hip-hop book because it's got all the elements of hip-hop. They didn't want to do that. They wanted to promote me as a Walter Mosley type of a person because *Damaged Goods* was pretty well written. My style had improved significantly since *The School on 103rd Street* [laughs]. They didn't spend a lot promoting it. They just sort of put it out there. The reality is that this book was for a black audience, and the majority of the audience is black women. *Damaged Goods* is about the last thing they want to read. They want to read about relationships. So this book died basically.

I had another book to give Simon and Schuster, so I gave them *One Night Stand* [2006]. On this book, I decided to expand and take it beyond just a black audience. I wrote the story of this white female lawyer who has to defend this black inner-city

gangbanger [for] a crime that he is innocent of, and they ultimately get caught up in a larger political conspiracy of Rampart-like bad cops.<sup>8</sup> Again, Simon and Schuster didn't spend any money advertising at all. I never saw any. I never even saw any reviews. So it just sort of faded away.

**JG:** It sounds like you have tried a number of narratives and styles to reach different audiences, only to find uneven success.

**RJ:** You are right about that. I think I could have had more success. I have never been able to get a review for any of my books in *Essence* or *Ebony*. Even though *The School on 103rd Street* got enormous reviews from some of the black political press, *Essence* and *Ebony* would not review it. *559 to Damascus* was never reviewed. They never even reviewed *Damaged Goods*, and that had Simon and Schuster behind it. It's hard to say what the issue is. I have not really been able to connect to the public in a big way. I think I could have with *Damaged Goods* and certainly with *One Night Stand*. I could have if the publisher would have been behind it.

**JG:** Do you think it's an issue of the publishing industry not understanding the black readership?

**RJ:** No, I don't think so. I think the publishing industry understands the black audience reasonably well. Basically, the black audience is women. I mean, I think that's just the reality. The editor at Simon and Schuster said, “You know, the audience is women.” Do black men read? Of course they do. But they don't read anywhere near the level that women do. Women are the book-buyers. When you look at the books that are in the Black Expressions book club, every single book is about relationships.

**JG:** Tell me about your most recent novel, *White Coat Fever* [2009].

**RJ:** The term “white coat fever” is a genuine term. I went to school in the 1960s, and when I went to school, black physicians were considered the epitome of education and middle-class status. It's what everyone wanted to be and what every woman wanted to marry. I first heard the term “white coat fever” as a freshman, referring to women who would do anything to marry doctors. By any means necessary. I started to write it, but I wasn't feeling it because it was just a lot of vignettes about what it's like to be a medical student. How to go to law school and how to go to med school turns people off, so I said to myself, “I can't do it that way.” So I took another ten years to think about it, and I finally decided to create some fictional characters and focus on the women who go after the doctors. But it's taking place during the Civil Rights era, so there are a number of political components. These characters are all caught up in the Civil Rights Movement.

**JG:** It sounds like you have created an interesting tension in the book between a larger social struggle for freedom and the damaging ideology of upward mobility.

**RJ:** I will tell you what precipitated that. In the 1970s, there was an article I read in *Essence* or *Ebony*. It was an article about black women going to college or getting into college, and the last line of the article said that perhaps now black women will be less interested in marrying a doctor and more interested in becoming one. That really tells you what black women were in college for before this moment and that now schools were opening up, and women were getting into the profession. That last line is really the spine of the book.

**JG:** How did you get into film?

**RJ:** This was in the 1970s when they were doing the blaxploitation films—*Coffy* [1973] and *Superfly* [1972]. That was all the rage. A friend of mine said, “You can write screenplays. If you can write a book, you can write screenplays. So why don’t you try doing that?” So I did. I had never written one, so I said to him, “You need to get me some screenplays so I can see how to write them.” He got me some screenplays: *Shaft* [1971], *Shampoo* [1975], and a couple of others. I read through them to see how they were structured. So I started writing screenplays. Usually, they were much longer than they needed to be until I learned you do a minute a page. I had success with two films. The first was called *Disco 9000* [1976]. At that time, Travolta’s *Saturday Night Fever* [1977] was such a hit that every studio in Hollywood announced in the trades that they were going to do disco films. There must have been ten to twelve scripts written. Of the ten to twelve, only two more ever got made: Donna Summer’s *Thank God It’s Friday* [1978] and the one I wrote, *Disco 9000*, which was an all-black one. Those were the only ones that came out. The other ones dropped by the wayside because they couldn’t figure out the story. I knew how to write the story. That wasn’t the problem. When you look at it today, it still holds up because the story was so good. It was a cast of unknowns, but it was very successful financially. I made the rounds of Hollywood, but Hollywood sort of considered that a fluke. Also, I was a doctor writing films, and they don’t take that seriously. I spent a lot of years when I probably should have been writing books trying to get further screenplays sold. I just never really had much success at it.

**JG:** Which of your novels do you think will have the most enduring impact?

**RJ:** I’m really hoping that it’s *White Coat Fever*, but I think it’s probably going to be *The School on 103rd Street*. I hope it’s *White Coat Fever* because it’s better written. It deals with sociopolitical themes of striving for middle-class acceptance on the part of blacks. It’s about an educated class of physicians and the women who are in college. It’s on a completely different level. I don’t mean this in an insulting way, but it’s not a thug book. It’s not street literature. It’s something where I hope people will read it and say, “Gee, y’all really did that?” To me, it is the book that I hope would last.

**JG:** Why do you think it’s going to be *The School on 103rd Street* that will endure?

**RJ:** When you look at books that people have written, there is always one book that stands out. Sometimes you just catch lightning in a bottle, and it’s there, and you can never duplicate it. You really cannot. For some reason, the theme of *103rd Street* has just resonated with people. So what can I say? The others did not. *Damaged Goods* is hip-hop. I think it could have been the vanguard, but the publishers dropped the ball on that.

**JG:** What can we expect from you in the future?

**RJ:** I am working on a detective story, *Dr. Fandango* [laughs]. I’ve got all these strange ideas. *Dr. Fandango* is about a black woman who is a junior detective in Los Angeles and gets put on a high-profile case when the surgeon general is killed. She is bumped up to head the team over seasoned white detectives. There’s a reason for that that she doesn’t understand and neither do the detectives. Ultimately, she comes to find out that she has to track a serial killer, a female serial killer with multiple personalities. That’s all I can tell you [laughs]. I can’t tell you any more.

**JG:** What is your opinion of the recent explosion of street literature, starting with writers like Sister Souljah?

**RJ:** I think it’s very interesting. Two come to mind. Relentless Aaron, whom you have probably heard of, and Nikki Turner, who started writing out of the back of her car and is now a millionaire with her own deal. Clearly, urban literature has a market. The question you have to ask is: is the readership for Terry McMillan, Walter Mosley, and all of the relationship books the same readership who reads “*Baby Momma Daddy*” or “*I Was a Hustler’s Granddaughter*”? Is it the same readership, or is it a younger, hip-hop version of the readership that relates to that literature? Clearly, not everybody who reads that stuff is coming out of a ghetto lifestyle. It wouldn’t be able to survive if it was based on that. Is it a market of curiosity? Do people who read those books do so just to titillate themselves, to find out what that lifestyle is like, or do they read them because they really, truly enjoy them, and they enjoy the fiction? I really don’t know the answer to that, quite frankly. I know they sell a lot of books. There’s no doubt about that.

**JG:** How does the modern street literature of today relate to the literature of black crime fiction pioneers like Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines?

**RJ:** It would be interesting to hear what Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim thought about it. They would be right in the vanguard because the urban literature reached the audience that they wanted to reach except on a much larger scale. They also didn’t have the benefit of the Internet, which has fueled this. I’m on Facebook, I have to admit. Every day somebody has a book signing. Every day. All with the same theme. It’s either hard-core street literature with dope deals, dope dealers,

somebody trying to get out and reclaim the streets, or it's from a woman's point of view. These are hardcore sisters getting over—kind of a take on *The Coldest Winter Ever*. They're all the stories. Everybody's got a book. Desktop publishing has fueled that.

**JG:** How has self-publishing changed the literary marketplace?

**RJ:** The one thing I can say is that the mainstream publishers for years really felt that the only people who read books were white people. Then once Terry McMillan and Walter Mosley became famous, they said, "They're the only two writers that people read." That was their reason for not wanting to publish anything else. It's nonsense, but that's the excuse they used. You have the sudden reality that "Oh my heavens, there's this market. Black people do read. Really?" We've been telling you for fifty years, but you didn't know that of course. Now the issue is, will Random House do street books, urban literature, and will the hip-hop generation continue to support that? Or as the hip-hop generation becomes more sophisticated, will that literature die off? You can't read about the same drug deal over and over again.

**JG:** Has self-publishing democratized literary production, specifically African American literary production?

**RJ:** It will be democratized when people buy more self-published books than books from Simon and Schuster. I mean, that will democratize it real quick. Part of the difficulty now is the economy. A lot of bookstores are closing. But what books are available online? The Internet street books. I was talking to a guy who is a manager of a Barnes and Noble out East to see if I could get my book in, and he says, "You know, we have a self-published section now" [laughs]. When *103rd Street* came out, I couldn't get a major bookstore in Los Angeles to carry it. Their response was, "We don't carry self-published books." Then you would send it to major newspapers, and their response was, "We don't review self-published books." Now I don't know whether or not that has changed, but they review Nikki Turner's books. Amazon now has its own self-publishing company. It's called BookSurge. Barnes and Noble is getting into self-publishing. Now they are all getting their own imprints because they are realizing there is an enormous amount of money [to be made].

**JG:** Do you think that was in some ways driven by the emergence of the street literature market?

**RJ:** I can't help but think it had to be. You have a lot of books that major publishers don't control. People made a lot of money, and for once, it wasn't them. I can't help but think that street literature and hip-hop really drove that. For Amazon to come out with its own self-publishing label says it all right there. I would not be

surprised in the future if you began to see major publishers like Random House and Simon and Schuster have a self-publishing arm, particularly if the self-published books continue to steal away the dollars.

## An Interview with Odie Hawkins

**Justin Gifford:** What first inspired you to start writing?

**Odie Hawkins:** I grew up in a storytelling family. I had three uncles from Mississippi. On the West Side of Chicago, in the basements, we had coal stoves, and in the wintertime especially, people sat around telling stories. At about eight or nine years old, I was wandering around Maxwell Street, around that area, and I stumbled into the vestibule of a library that I didn't know existed. I heard Tchaikovsky playing. I went upstairs to see who was playing the piano, and I opened up the door, and there was a library. I had never been to the library before. I'm coming from a very smart but not literate family. I went in and started reading all of the books immediately. That took me into reading because reading made me feel that I could write some of the stories that my uncles were telling me. My writing career dates from eight, which gives me sixty-eight years or something. That was the beginning of it.

**JG:** Could you talk about your childhood a bit?

**OH:** I went to seventeen grammar schools. We were nomads. My father was in jail at the time. By the time I got to high school, which is really the time when I begin to date a writing career, Dr. Margaret Burroughs, who started the DuSable Museum of African American History, the first in the country, was my teacher. I was making money writing little pornographic stories for my friends, who paid me a dollar for a nasty story and maybe a dollar-and-a-half for a note to their girlfriends. Dr. Burroughs came and picked up one of these stories I had been writing. At that time, anytime you said F-U-C-K, it was a nasty word, and I thought, “Oh my God, I am going to fail. She is going to put me out of class.” She kept me after school to give me the address of a white woman named Margaret Peterson, who was doing a writing workshop at 50th Street and South Parkway.

**JG:** So it was Dr. Burroughs that got you writing seriously for the first time?

**OH:** Margaret Burroughs was the person who was the inspiration. I went to high school from 1952 to 1956. She gave me a ream of paper for that summer vacation and said, “Go home and write.” I wrote my first novel. It was titled *The Peps*. The Peps was a dance hall on 47th Street and St. Lawrence in Chicago. It was mambo time, and people went to The Peps to do the mambo. They were doing a dance called the Walk, which looks like the tango with really fancy moves. I wrote a novel about the people who went there and the affairs they were having. A girlfriend of

mine stole the novel out of my locker because she thought I was writing a letter to another girl. Teenage hormones. Who the hell would write a five hundred-page note to another girl? She stole my novel, but to me, that was the beginning because Dr. Burroughs opened up the idea of being a writer rather than a thug, something else I was going to be.

**JG:** So you became a writer in order to avoid becoming a criminal?

**OH:** I was being conditioned to pimp at the time. The place I lived in was full of pimps and hos. One of the guys, Big Al, had taken a liking to me. He said, "You could do this, but you will have to do some other things first." I decided not to do some other things first. The place I lived in, the hos did their work on the first or second floor, we lived on the third floor, and the fourth floor was rest and relaxation for Big Al and his seven or eight women.

**JG:** Which books made you decide to write?

**OH:** I would really have to say all of them. I could name special people. I remember the impact that Richard Wright had on me, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes. I could pick those four people. I was one of those people who started off with Dylan Thomas, you know, reading everything with my eyes hanging out. The black writers made an impact because they were writing about something that I could relate to. But I found a lot in the novels of Junichiro Tanizaki, the films of Nagisa Oshima, and the screenplays of Bob Zack.

**JG:** Which other writers inspired you?

**OH:** The Russians made a big impact on me, especially when I went into the army in 1962. I was drafted in 1962. I got to be friends with a Russian Jewish guy. I had to learn something about Russian literature in order to talk to the guy. Everything was Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. At the time, the Fort Gordon [in Augusta, Georgia] library had a thick book of Russian short stories. I stumbled through. It's one of the things I have against the people saying specifically who influenced them because if you read, everybody influenced you. I hate to come up against black nationalist writers who say, "No white writer ever had an impact on me." What kind of brain do you have?

I didn't get to Henry Miller until I was in the army in 1962. I had my first leave to go to San Francisco. I wound up going to a bookstore on Market Street and picked up *Tropic of Capricorn* [1938]. I was supposed to be on leave, which meant hunting down some female to share two days with you. I picked the book up, jumped back on the bus, and wound up on my bunk all weekend reading Henry Miller. That was crazy. It was like an exposure to, I want to say, white sensuality, [of] which I was unaware. I will be honest with you; I didn't think white guys got a hard-on because I didn't know it [laughs].

**JG:** How did you get involved in the Watts Writers’ Workshop?

**OH:** I saw the Watts revolt on television in Chicago after having worked two weeks of twelve-hour days at the post office to earn money for my family. I said, “You know what? They are going to throw money at that situation.” That’s what they did in those days. Kerner Report and all of that aside, we knew that they were going to throw money at it.<sup>9</sup> I looked at my then-wife and said, “We should move to Los Angeles.” She looked at me like I was out of my mind. Someone at the Beverly Hills Post Office decided that they wanted to come to Chicago, so there was an exchange. That’s serendipity. I wound up coming to the Beverly Hills Post Office. I sent for my family six weeks later, and I immediately jumped into the Watts Writers’ Workshop. I was a carpetbagger. They had some of the best teachers in the country.

**JG:** What was your experience like in the Watts Writers’ Workshop?

**OH:** Some of the writing was some of the worst shit you ever heard. I am thinking of one guy, a big brother, who said, “Wait until you hear this.” Budd Schulberg [the teacher] says, “I have heard it, and I think you should destroy it, or, after the first two paragraphs, rewrite all of it.” I wrote a four hundred-page book. He says, “Page one is fine. The other ones need to be rewritten.” We all cussed him out from time to time. “Fuck you. You are a white boy. You don’t know what this shit is about.” He’d say, “That’s not the point. I am talking about beginning, middle, and end, crisis, climax, and resolution.” That was all new to a whole bunch of us.

**JG:** What kinds of things did you learn about writing there?

**OH:** This guy had me write a short story for two years. From every perspective. There were eight people in the family. What kind of dog does he have? Why did this particular family have this particular dog? I would say, “John, fuck you. I don’t give a shit,” and he would say, “Well, you should.” When he felt I was ready one day, he said, “Odie, come over and meet me. We are going over to Stu Robinson’s, my agent, and I have asked him to sign you up.” Robinson and Weintraub later became the Paradigm Agency. Stu Robinson was an excellent agent, and he got me a lot of work. I ended up writing seven or eight screenplays, which I was paid for.

**JG:** Did you have a working draft of your first novel, *Ghetto Sketches*, when you came to the Watts Writers’ Workshop?

**OH:** I had been doing *Ghetto Sketches* for maybe two or three years before I got to the Watts Writers’ Workshop. The greatest influence for *Ghetto Sketches* and the way it’s put together comes from Dylan Thomas’s play *Under Milk Wood* [1954]. There is a Welshman writing about a little town in Wales, but I thought, “I grew up on a street like that.” There are not very many books like *Ghetto Sketches*. Having done writing workshops for years, I see that many of our younger writers don’t

know how to write. If they get off the track, they can't go back and forth; they can't cut in and out. They get lost. Sorry, y'all.

**JG:** Can you talk about why you use multiple voices in your books?

**OH:** I grew up in a multilingual, multi-accented culture. I grew up in an area called Jew Town. It was called that by the Jews. Just between Maxwell and Halsted. A little bit to the South was the Italian section. Right behind the Catholic Church was the Italian neighborhood. In my own neighborhood, you had three different levels. You had Southern black folks who could barely speak Standard English. They were at the Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters level. Then you had someone who could translate, who had been in the North three years longer than the others had. Then you get up to sophisticated people like me and Redd Foxx. He tells a joke, "Well, you know how black people talk. You can start out with jungle grammar at the beginning and end up with Oxfordian English at the end." I think you have to interweave these linguistic threads so that they never wind up being isolated. In families, you have it. I keep trying to push us away from this purely racialistic understanding of how language operates. It operates as a cultural determinant.

**JG:** Was it ever dangerous growing up in a neighborhood like that?

**OH:** If you went across Roosevelt Road after dark, the Italians would beat you up. I have a hearing problem from being caught one night. I was taken down into a basement, a coal cellar. I was maybe ten. The guy hit me with the flat of a shovel. It could have been a bad scene, but I was a little boy. Some of the older guys said, "Leave the kid alone. Get the fuck outta here." So they kicked me out. But I couldn't hear for a long time.

**JG:** How did you get involved in Holloway House?

**OH:** I saw something with Holloway House that I could take advantage of and that I needed. Holloway House was reaching a constituency that I wanted to reach: convicts, people in my family who didn't read books cover to cover. Holloway House focused on black population centers: Chicago, Detroit, New York. I don't think I got the kind of play I could have because I wasn't focusing on one genre. I had a tapestry in mind. It doesn't have to be all hos and pimps. Let's have a detour here. Let's look at it from this perspective or that perspective. With Holloway House, I could see you had a small and, in some kind of ways, avant-garde publishing house on the West Coast.

**JG:** You were a contemporary of Iceberg Slim. Did you ever meet him?

**OH:** I knew Iceberg Slim. I had a funny kind of relationship with him. I knew him as a boy. He was *not* a major league pimp—no, no, no. That's a correction that needs to be made. He was a pimp, and he had women, of course. But what

I remember most about him was that he was extremely articulate. He was a very intelligent man. He would have made a great trial lawyer. He could make his case. He stood up on the corner of 39th Street and Cottage Grove. It's not there any more. But, at one point, from 39th Street and Cottage Grove to 38th Street and Ellis, it was the red-light district. If you went through there, just that one block, they had everything going on. Around the corner were the Morocco Hotel and the DuSable Hotel. He would stand on the corner and talk, and if you were privileged to be around, you could hear. I don't know if it was comedy or if he was just talking to kill time. I remember him giving a lecture on the phantom ho: “One must be extremely careful that one's major-league, well-defined hos are not pushed out of joint and destroyed by the phantom ho, who is apt to be an insidious creature, who creeps up from murky depths of the night.” This is the shit he was writing in *Pimp* [1967]. But that's the way he talked.

**JG:** So he said this many years before he wrote his autobiography?

**OH:** Oh yeah. As a matter of fact, what disappointed me in *Pimp* was that the language was so sterile in comparison to the way he really talked.

**JG:** What did you do after the Watts Writers' Workshop?

**OH:** After the Watts Writers' Workshop began to fold, the Open Door Program was started by the left-wing members of the Watts Writers' Workshop. Harlan Ellison and these people. We had meetings at Nick Stewart's Ebony Theater. A lot of good people came out of it. Believe it or not, Octavia Butler came out of there. Harlan Ellison was her mentor. It was a fertile time. We never had the chance to have something like a Harlem Renaissance West, but there were a whole bunch of us: Wanda Coleman, Stanley Crouch, Quincy Troupe, and K. Curtis Lyle.

**JG:** Why do you think a Harlem Renaissance West never happened?

**OH:** I think we were all maybe a little bit too frightened. How did we get here? We just came from Long Beach, you know? I don't think many of us had a common ground we came from. In Chicago or New York, black people came from down South. I didn't know they had black people in Arizona until I came here. And the cars. You get in a bubble and come; you get in your bubble and go. There were no common pubs where you could go. The most common place was the Reaching Room. But once again, you were so overwhelmed by white people. You couldn't go have a little tight black thing, talking about what you wanted to talk about, because the guy who brought his white friend with him says, “Shh. Let's not talk about racial stuff because he's cool.” I'd respond, “Well, fuck him. He ain't cool. How's he cool and you can't talk about what you want to talk about because he's cool?”

**JG:** Tell me about your first-person narratives *Sweet Peter Deeder* [1979] and *Chili: Memoirs of a Black Casanova* [1985].

**OH:** As a bona fide literary schizophrenic, I can say that it has something to do with being able to identify so closely with what the character needs to say that you need to have him say that and then push yourself out of the way. I think you struggle to try to find the most appropriate way to have this character say what needs to be said. It's one of the things that leads me to feel a little bit down on people who are trying to use language that's inappropriate for their characters.

**JG:** Was your novel *The Busting Out of an Ordinary Man* [1985] a sequel to *Ghetto Sketches*?

**OH:** You are absolutely right. It was *Ghetto Sketches Two*. The rights of these books have reverted to me. I appealed to my unions, the National Writers Union and the Writers Guild; I appealed for reversion of rights. I got it for all of these books. The reason the book was called *The Busting Out of an Ordinary Man*, according to Ray Locke [an editor at Holloway House], was that they had an extra cover lying around, and they decided to slap that one on rather than make *Ghetto Sketches Two*. Also, Bentley Morriss didn't like sequels.

**JG:** What was your experience like publishing your novels at Holloway House?

**OH:** None of my books were ever edited. I wish they had been. *Casanova* was an outline. I wrote what I wrote and gave it to Ray Locke. I said, "What do you think of this?" I was willing [and] ready to flesh it out and make a book out of it. Next thing I know, it was in print. Very often, I did not receive galleys to correct. At the time, what did it matter, because I could correct the galleys, and they could still print the damn thing in a horrible way.

**JG:** Did Holloway House get worse over the years?

**OH:** I think that they started off with the notion of making money, and I think they were a little bit surprised how much money there was out there to be made. Gradually, it began to eat up everything else. They may have had some literary pretension at the beginning. I suspect that there was a thread of thought running through there that said, "When you begin to publish black writers, just publish all the shit they got." Which means that they didn't distinguish between excellent African American writers and others—and they didn't want to use the term *African American* because that meant that you were militant. They couldn't distinguish between those writers and people who were writing just pure dreck. So they published whatever came in there. Some books they published, I would say, "That's a fine book." But then there was a terrible cover, and it was marketed in that trashy way.

**JG:** What is your opinion of Bentley Morriss?

**OH:** Bentley Morriss is a shrewd businessman. He had enough foresight to exploit a bunch of black writers. If I were in business, and I saw an exploitable group,

I would do the same damn thing. *If* I were in business. That’s what business is. Bentley Morriss’s attitude was that I should be grateful because they published me. No. No. I said to him, “You should be grateful, because I was here, and you had something to publish.” He likes to think he did us a favor by publishing us. I didn’t buy into it. Joe Nazel didn’t buy into it. Joe Nazel was my closest friend there. We sat and drank a lot of times up in his office. What Bentley didn’t understand was that we were not small Negro boys who were grateful to him. That always pissed him off. It still pisses him off. He read a recent interview I did and wrote me a long e-mail. At the end, he complained, “Didn’t I do you well?” My response was, “No, it’s my birthright to speak as honestly about you as I want to. . . . I don’t care how often you clap your arms around my shoulders. . . . We ain’t ever going to be friends. You misunderstand the nature of our business relationship. I saw in you an avenue to a constituency.” Nobody was making an effort to publish that. I couldn’t go through Random House or even *Ebony*.

Bentley’s attitude was simply, “We put you guys out there.” In fact, we built Holloway House. We made Holloway House. I keep explaining to Bentley, “Don’t misunderstand. I don’t have any animosity toward anybody making money off of me, just so long as you share the money with me.” The problem is that Bentley keeps saying he gave us a chance to be who we are. No. No. No. I have been great since birth. Give me a break.

**JG:** What is your favorite book that you have written?

**OH:** I know it’s a cliché, but I don’t think the favorite has happened yet. You got to understand something. The age thing that has been put on me. Seventy years old. I don’t know about being seventy-two. I don’t have a firm sense of what that means. I didn’t really begin to write until my fifties. Up to that time, I was just having fun.

**JG:** What is your opinion of modern street literature?

**OH:** I have to say that I find it hard to call it *literature*. I don’t want to give a Harvard/Yale definition of *literature*. I might make an unpopular statement by saying that the so-called urban literature we are being saturated with nowadays is not what I would call literature. It is not well-written work. There are some exceptions. There are two black women I can think of. One is Sister Souljah. The other is Sapphire. Both young women. I consider what they are writing literature because I think what they are writing about will be considered of some substantial value in the years to come. A lot of the so-called urban literature that these other people are coming up with is not memorable. I picked up three or four books. I read the books. I put them down. I couldn’t remember which characters were which. There was nothing in it. Now I’m not after Captain Ahab and *Moby-Dick* [1851]. But if you are going to write about things of substance that will be memorable to people for years to come and you want to call it

literature, then you should create literature. It should be as well written as possible. We're looking at people with no particular style, no particular verve. When I write—and I'm not saying what I write is all literature—but I'm striving for that all of the time. I don't think that the people who are writing have any definite design in mind. They have a photo for a cover and some events that they want to recall.

**JG:** Do you think it is an issue of craft?

**OH:** You hit it. They are not seeing it as a craft. They have been raised on television.

**JG:** Can you talk about your own writing process?

**OH:** It has to do with Africa. I went to Africa to understand what it meant to be an elder. I went there in 1992. Somehow I got the bug. I needed to go to Africa. I wasn't searching for my roots. Alex Haley had already done that for me. I felt satisfied with his job. But I thought you should go to France, go to Sweden, see where those places are . . . in you. So I sold two quick books to Holloway House, which was always available for me at that time, got the plane ticket, and went to Ghana.

Each one of the major characters that I have written about has a character sketch that defines him psychologically, physiologically, sociologically, so that you know there is a three-dimensional character, not a cardboard figure. Most of the people that I am reading are writing about cardboard figures. If I go to work with a character, I'm really fighting against him to make sure his best traits show, not mine. I'm the instrument. I don't take a lot of credit for being a great writer. I don't know what kind of writer I am. I think that's for the public to decide—the perceptive public.

**JG:** Are you still writing now?

**OH:** I'm writing now from my down slope. I've been carefully gauging the effects of aging. It's a curiously satisfying thing to me because I have been a fighter all of my life. Fighting somebody and something. I mean physically. I grew up fighting. When I became aware that you need to scientific your stuff a little bit, I went off into tae kwon do, aikido, and capoeira. So now the down slope put me in tai chi. But I still know how to kick. But the kick is not for you. I'll just shoot you. The kick is for me. I can still raise my leg, which means I can still raise my pen.

**JG:** What do you think the future holds for black self-publishing?

**OH:** AuthorHouse has been a way out for us, at this point. It is self-publishing, but it is not vanity publishing. It is a step up from that. They reach a broader audience. They go on Amazon.com. In addition to that, they are conscientious. They send you galley sheets to correct commas.

**JG:** How has so-called black experience fiction influenced American literature—or is it separate?

**OH:** If you start from Phillis Wheatley and trace it all the way down to where we are right now, black literature has defined American literature. William Faulkner wouldn't be William Faulkner without Dilsey the cook. You couldn't name any major league white writer who does not have some black characterizations within that make him or her what he or she is. Name anybody. What would Ahab be without Queequeg?

**JG:** Could you discuss your current projects?

**OH:** *Little Sweets* is eight hundred pages. I wanted to finish the whole Sweets series. It starts with Peter Mansion. Peter Mansion had a son named Sweet Peter Deeder Number One. He had a son named Sweet Peter Deeder Two. That's Mr. Sweets. Then we're down to the current book, which is *Little Sweets*. What I'm doing is putting together a dynasty of pimps. *Little Sweets* encompasses all that has come before. At the end of the day, he ends up with a polygamy situation and becomes an export/import entrepreneur. In each case, what I have done is make an effort to bring these people out from the cloud of illegitimacy into something legitimate. This plays on what they have been doing. What the hell is the difference between a Hollywood producer and a pimp? They are both using other people's talents and strengths. That's what I found. Ain't no difference.

At the end of the day, *Little Sweets* hooks up with a guy named Yakuza Ronin. They hooked up together to create the first four robot hos. What happens when you end up in a society where robots begin to demand their civil rights? What's going to happen when robots begin to say, “Wait a minute. We contribute as much to this society as the blacks have. When do we get the right to vote?” When the first robot constituency brings up the first robot candidate, what's going to happen?

**JG:** How does your body of work fit within the tradition of Wright, Baldwin, Morrison?

**OH:** At the risk of sounding too arrogant, I don't think that tradition encompasses me. I don't think what I have done fits any of the circumspections of those genres. I broke out of that. Richard Wright went to Africa and wrote a terrible book about his experience in Africa. I went to Africa and had a wonderful experience. I said to myself, “This will give me a chance to write about how I relate to black people without having all of the baggage of Sharpton and Jackson.” It was liberating. I think I have come up with a new genre that I am calling Pan-African Occult. For those that know what I am talking about, all is cool. For those that don't [know] what I'm talking about, I am going to try harder in the future.

## Notes

1. For statistics about Vickie M. Stringer's Triple Crown Publications, see Zakiyyah El-Amin.
2. Black bookstores such as Black and Nobel in Philadelphia and Black Star Music and Video in Harlem ship large numbers of these books directly to prisoners in America's penitentiaries. For two useful recent articles on the street literature reading culture in American prisons, see H. Bruce Franklin and Megan Sweeney.
3. There are a number of sources that outline the emerging popularity of street literature. See Ta-Nehisi Paul Coats; Judith Rosen; Malcolm Venable, Tayannah McQuillar, Yvette Mingo; and Earni Young.
4. For a guide to fan websites, street literature publishers, and popular titles, see David Wright.
5. For an account of Holloway House's history, see Peter Gilstrap.
6. For a discussion of the relationship between pimp and black revolutionary novels in the black crime literature genre, see my book.
7. For a more complete biography of Roland Jefferson, see my encyclopedia entry in *African American National Biography*.
8. The late 1990s Los Angeles Rampart scandal entailed pervasive corruption in the anti-gang units of the Los Angeles Police Department and is one of the most well-documented cases of widespread police misconduct.
9. In July 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to explain the causes of urban riots in the mid-1960s and to recommend action for the future. The Commission's report, known as the Kerner Report, was issued in 1968.

## Selected Bibliography

### Roland Jefferson

- A Card for the Players*. Los Angeles: New Bedford, 1978.
- Damaged Goods*. New York: Atria, 2003.
- One Night Stand*. New York: Atria, 2006.
- The School on 103rd Street*. New York: Vantage, 1976.
- White Coat Fever*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2009.

**Odie Hawkins**

*The Busting Out of an Ordinary Man*. Los Angeles: Holloway, 1985.

*Chili: The Memoirs of a Black Casanova*. Los Angeles: Holloway, 1985.

*Ghetto Sketches*. Los Angeles: Holloway, 1972.

*Sweet Peter Deeder*. Los Angeles: Holloway, 1979.

**Works Cited**

Coats, Ta-Nehisi Paul. “Hustle and Grow.” *Time* 16 Oct. 2006: 75-76. Print.

Chiles, Nick. “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut.” *New York Times* 4 Jan. 2006, late ed.: A15+. Print.

El-Amin, Zakiyyah. “Queen of Hip-Hop Literature.” *Black Enterprise* Jan. 2006: 49. Print.

Fabre, Michel. “Book Reviews.” *Roland S. Jefferson*. Roland S. Jefferson, n.d. Web. 17 June 2013.

Franklin, H. Bruce. “Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy to Read?” *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 643-49. Print.

Gifford, Justin. *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2013. Print.

—. “Roland Jefferson.” *African American National Biography*. Vol. 4. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 416-17. Print.

Gilstrap, Peter. “The House that Blacks Built: Holloway House.” 1998. *The Misread City: New Literary Los Angeles*. Ed. Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia. Los Angeles: Red Hen, 2003. 87-99. Print.

Iceberg Slim [Robert Beck]. *Pimp: The Story of My Life*. 1967. Cash Money Content, 2011. Print.

Rosen, Judith. “Street Lit: Readers Gotta Have It.” *Publishers Weekly* 13 Dec. 2004: 31-35. Print.

Sweeney, Megan. “Books as Bombs: Incendiary Reading Practices in Women’s Prisons.” *PMLA* 123.3 (2008): 666-72. Print.

Venable, Malcolm, Tayannah McQuillar, and Yvette Mingo. “It’s Urban, It’s Real, but Is This Literature?” *Black Issues Book Review* Sept.-Oct. 2004: 24-25. Print.

Gifford

Wright, David. "Streetwise Urban Fiction." *Library Journal* 15 July 2006: 42-45. Print.

Young, Earni. "Urban Lit Goes Legit." *Black Issues Book Review* Sept.-Oct. 2006: 20-23. Print.