

KRISTINA GRAAFF, *Street Literature: Black Popular Fiction in the Era of U.S. Mass Incarceration* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 274 pp.

In the late 1990s, street literature novels emerged in urban areas in the United States and have since risen to popularity particularly among African Americans. So far, this kind of popular fiction has rarely been addressed by academia, and in the instances that street literature has attracted scholarly interest, the discussions largely center either on classificatory questions or on these novels' potential as an educational tool for promoting literacy among adolescents from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds.¹ Kristina Graaff's *Street Literature: Black Popular Fiction in the Era of U.S. Mass Incarceration* presents an attempt to comprehend this literary phenomenon outside of the already established critical discourse. Her interdisciplinary analysis acknowledges street literature as a genre in its own right and examines the interaction between its representational and material organization. It focuses on 'the streets' and 'prisons' as symbiotic spaces that figure prominently in the narratives as well as in the lives of the authors, publishers and readers. By investigating the narrative and social (re) configuration of these two spaces, the author convincingly argues that the genre essentially reflects and rewrites larger socioeconomic developments, e.g. the increasing dominance of neoliberalism and the so-called War on Drugs with its concomitant system of mass incarceration. Moreover, examining this genre as both a social practice and a literary phenomenon enables Graaff to show street literature's inherent ambiguities if not, in some instances, its double standards, in that it criticizes the street-prison symbiosis narratively while the involved actors often rely on it economically.

In the first part of her study, Graaff introduces her conceptualization of 'the streets'

and 'prisons' as the analytical framework undergirding her investigation. Her account of the current U.S. justice system is noteworthy in this context, as it places special emphasis on the processes that engendered the emergence of prisons as institutions of mass incarceration and continue to govern their maintenance. At the same time, the author critically examines the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans within the current U.S. justice system and criticizes the mainstream media and their coverage for amplifying racial prejudices about criminality by habitually portraying black men as violent perpetrators. Instead of accepting these populist explanations, Graaff proposes alternative explanatory models that better account for the growth of the (black) prison population: Besides the War on Drugs with "its variety of penal policies that [...] are discriminatorily implemented in black low-income neighborhoods" (49) and "are more punitive toward petty crimes" (52), she also zooms in on public and private stakeholders' economic interest in the preservation of the current prison system, as it puts a cheap workforce at their disposal.

The author then moves on to elucidate the symbiotic relationship between the streets and the prison system. Graaff primarily draws on Wacquant's sociological work on the ghetto-prison symbiosis, which traces the growing social, functional, and structural similarities between these two spaces. Likewise, Graaff's study rests on the assumption that the street-prison symbiosis is "a form of ethnoracial confinement particularly affecting African Americans from low-income areas" (13), and, accordingly, one aim of her study is to trace the circulation of writers, readers, narratives and financial resources between these confining spaces. However, Graaff also aims to demonstrate how the streets and prisons are reconfigured and rewritten through and in street literature. For these purposes, Graaff rescales Wacquant's ghetto-prison symbiosis into the street-prison symbiosis, as she intends to uncover the emancipatory potential implicit in the streets as a purportedly "empty signifier" (77).

Graaff presents close readings of three popular street literature novels in the second part of her study and scrutinizes the representational strategies employed by this genre's depiction of the streets and the prison system. A striking feature of her inquiry into the narrative organization of the street-prison symbi-

¹ See for instance: Karin Van Orman and Jamila Lyiscott, "Politely Disregarded: Street Fiction, Mass Incarceration, and Critical Praxis," *The English Journal* 102.4 (2013): 59-66; Vanessa Irvin Morris, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2012); Marc Lamont Hill, Biany Pérez, and Decoteau J. Irby, "Street Fiction: What Is It and What Does It Mean for English Teachers?" *The English Journal* 97.3 (2008): 76-81.

osis is the diversity of analytic sources, which underpin her analysis, e.g. psychological models of identity formation, contextual information about post-incarceration reintegration and treatment of HIV/Aids in correctional facilities. In order to provide a systematic outlook on the various narrative configurations of the street-prison symbiosis, the author structures her argument by discussing the individual novels as representatives of “three common novel types: the ‘street literature bildungsroman’ [...], the ‘circulation narrative’ [...] and the ‘heteronormative cautionary tale’ [...]” (81).

Whereas the ‘street literature bildungsroman’ mainly focuses on its protagonists’ personal and political maturation through reading and self-education and eventually leads to challenging the confining ties of the street-prison symbiosis, the ‘circulation narrative’ plays out the tension between behavioral (e.g. lack of perseverance) and structural reasons (e.g. stigmatization through prison record, racism) to explain the protagonists’ circulation between streets and prisons. The latter also avails itself of a neoliberal reasoning that places a special emphasis on a financially self-sufficient individual as a central force for liberating oneself from the confinement of the streets and the prison system. Despite their different stances in relation to the street-prison symbiosis, Graaff shows that both types represent the two main locations in a similar manner: They portray prisons, in a somewhat justificatory gesture, as a space to reflect and as a means to gain distance from the “lure of the streets” (118), which, in turn, are characterized by their corrupt and potentially destructive value system.

In discussing the last type, Graaff notes that her chosen novel is uncommon as it focuses on the spread of HIV through unprotected sexual activities in prison and, upon the prisoners’ release, in the communities. Choosing a novel that gives prominence to a commonly neglected topic initially seems counterintuitive in putting forth a representative overview of street literature’s narrative organization. Yet, the author explains her decision by referring to the significance of the largely ignored HIV related street-prison symbiosis and uses this last novel to call attention to the characteristic heteronormative stance that “promotes the same hypermasculine, homo- and transphobic ideas of manhood inside prison that are also a central feature of the daily street culture

portrayed in the majority of novels” (139). At this point, the author includes consideration about how gender plays into street literature’s depiction of the streets and the prison system. This inclusion is vital, or even overdue, in light of the literary material analyzed in the book, which exclusively consists of novels that have been written by male authors and center on male protagonists.

In the third part of the book, Graaff places street literature novels in a larger social and political context. Concentrating predominantly on the economic level of the street-prison symbiosis, she inquires into the processes and networks that guide the writing, publishing, and distribution of street literature. In this regard, the author explores a range of informative material, such as interviews with incarcerated black writers and independent publishers, and information gleaned during fieldwork activities. In her aspiration to uncover the institutional discrimination many African-Americans routinely face due to their confinement to the streets and the prison system, the author occasionally appears to overstate her case. Graaff, for instance, interprets the measures restricting and monitoring writing in correctional facilities as “institutional attempts to hamper literacy among the black prison population” (175). She thus implies an organized effort, deliberately applied in order to reduce the rate of literacy among African-Americans without providing the reader with sufficient empirical evidence (e.g. interviews or reports from prison officials).

By means of several case reports, Graaff unveils how the various actors involved in the street-prison nexus use street literature as a financial resource, and how the writing, production, and sale of these novels mirrors larger neoliberal advances of the state. She refers to the many cases where inmates pen novels solely with the intention of securing their subsistence after their release reacting in this way to the reduction of rehabilitative measures in prison. Their literary works, in turn, are usually accepted by independent publishing companies that have emerged as a consequence of the growing demand for street literature novels in low-income areas. Graaff repeatedly points to the ambivalent role these publishing companies play within the larger network of street literature’s production. On the one hand, independent publishing companies create business structures that particularly cater to incarcerated authors and their

respective needs and hence play a key role in making the production and dissemination of these novels possible in the first place. On the other hand, however, Graaff also presents cases where publishers decidedly exploit the writers' dependency for their own financial gain, for example by denying royalties or refusing to acknowledge copyrights.

Graaff further shows the various actors' attempts to re-claim and re-appropriate the streets and the prison system through the production of street literature novels. The streets in particular hold considerable potential for liberation from the street-prison symbiosis, as they seem to offer the possibility of economic independence. This perspective on the streets is further augmented by an ideology that encourages authors to transfer the entrepreneurial skills acquired in the drug selling business to the book selling business and to represent themselves as "entrepreneurial hustler[s]" (234). Such an outlook highlights the ideological nexus between the streets and the prison system. In light of the criticism many street literature authors express narratively, their financial reliance, sometimes even exploita-

tion, seems thus to be at odds with an effective agenda of change.

Kristina Graaff's *Street Literature: Black Popular Fiction in the Era of U.S. Mass Incarceration* has many qualities that, taken together, make for a noteworthy research project within the field of American Studies. First, the book's division into three parts buttresses the author's overall argumentative logic as each part is organized around a distinct aspect of Graaff's discussion, e.g. conceptual, narrative and material. Second, the study's power to convince rests to a great degree, albeit not exclusively, on the author's extensive research and knowledge of the scene. Graaff accomplishes translating the expertise gained during her fieldwork activity into a coherent and persuasive argument. Third, it constitutes a good example of how fictional and physical spaces can be mutually constitutive. By combining literary analyses of spatiality with ethnographic fieldwork, Graaff puts forth a genuinely interdisciplinary account and thus opens new perspectives and areas of (literary) inquiry.

Irina Brittner (Osnabrück)