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It's Bigger and Hip-Hop: Richard Wright, Hip-Hop, and Masculinity

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IT'S BIGGER AND HIP-HOP: RICHARD WRIGHT, HIP-HOP, AND MASCULINITY

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IT'S BIGGER AND HIP-HOP: RICHARD WRIGHT, HIP-HOP, AND MASCULINITY

By

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Chapter 1: Bigger Thomas is Hip-Hop

“Native Son, speaking in the native tongue

I still got my eyes on tomorrow (there it is)

While you still try to follow where it is

I’m on the Ave where it lives and dies

Violently, silently”

-Mos Def, “Hip Hop”

Midway through *Native Son*, as Bigger Thomas seeks shelter from the harsh Chicago winter and the thousands of cops and vigilantes looking to arrest him, he breaks into an empty apartment. After eating some bread, he tries to sleep, but an anxiety described as a “disturbing, rhythmic throbbing” awakens him repeatedly (253). Subconsciously, his mind takes the pounding beat and “[weaves] the throb into patterns of innocent images,” acting as a palliative, but, “[t]he throb pulsed on, insistent, and he saw hundreds of black men and women beating drums with their fingers.” Bigger realizes there is actual music being made somewhere nearby. As Bigger looks out the window, he sees a church with parishioners seated inside and hears the sounds and voices of a Christian hymn. The narrator states, “Would it not have been better for [Bigger] had he lived in that world the music sang of? It would have been easy to have lived in it, for it was his mother’s world...” The kind of comfort the music offers starkly contrasts with the lies, schemes, and murders Bigger committed over the past few days.

He wants the song to ground him in what he feels is its “center, a core, an axis, a heart,” that would allow for hope, forgiveness, redemption, and inclusiveness—all qualities Bigger wished were involved in his life. Unfortunately, Bigger, because of the kind of world he experiences daily, those qualities exist only in his dreams “...unless he la[ys] his head upon a

pillow of humility and [gives] up his hope of living in the world,” and by this point in his life, “...he would never do that” (254). In resisting the soothing call of religion, Bigger also recognizes the deep moral crevice existing between him and his mother. In his introduction to the novel, Arnold Rampersand states:

Slavery and neo-slavery had led not simply to the development of a psychology of timidity, passivity, and even cowardice among the African American masses [...] but also to an ominous emerging element of which Bigger Thomas, the central character of the novel, is a reliable if particularly forbidding example. (ix-x)

Bigger’s mother represents the older generation of African Americans, the sons and daughters of former slaves who depended on negro spirituals and faith in Christianity as their source of hope and salvation. The tremendous economic injustice of the sharecropping system combined with the reign of Jim Crow led her generation towards taking a passive role when confronting racism and poverty and believing that their suffering would be rewarded in heaven. Bigger, as a member of the younger, frustrated, and restless South Side Chicago generation, needs something different and stronger than his mother’s religion. Rather than carry a shield against obstacles and oppression, Bigger wants to strike back. He yearns for action and agency. The inaccessibility of the church music leaves Bigger further isolated from a society that already has him feeling marginalized. He yearns for something creative.

Perhaps what Bigger needed was hip-hop. Although at least forty years away from developing, if what Bigger needs is an art form that could take his “throbbing” anxieties about being a young and poor African American male and provide an unyielding, resistant message that reflects his life in the slums of South Side Chicago, then the voice of hip-hop seems like an appropriate solution because it was born in the Bronx out of a need for a creative outlet under

similar socioeconomic conditions, and hip-hop music has provided an outlet for many to voice their thoughts and respond to their conditions.

For example, sixty-eight years after the publication of *Native Son*, rapper Kanye West, another son of the Chicago South Side, released a music video for the first single off his fourth album, *808's and Heartbreak*, that seems to follow Wright's creative path. "Love Lockdown" features a throbbing bass beat playing throughout the song that mimics a heartbeat, and when West reaches the chorus, taiko drums appear, dominating the beat. The sound of the drums evokes feelings of frustration, agony, and anger. The music video alternates between scenes of West sitting on the floor of his apartment, looking hopeless, and the battle in West's mind, represented by scenes of thousands of what appear to be African tribesmen and tribeswomen marching towards battle. Drummers, similar to Bigger's "hundreds of black men and women beating drums with their fingers" lead the men and women in beat as they march towards their enemy. The concept for West's video echoes this same need to react against adversity and isolation that Bigger Thomas finds himself struggling against as he sat alone in the abandoned apartment.

At first glance, the connection between Kanye West and Richard Wright seems unlikely and downright dismissible other than them both being African American males from the South Side. Yet, on a broader scale, although at least thirty-seven years separate the publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the birth of hip-hop music, both cultural products share significant commonalities that produce productive discussions regarding the impact and importance of African American art. First, both cultural products shocked national audiences and exposed them to alarming social conditions prevailing in black inner-city neighborhoods and communities across the United States. In 1940, a review in the *Journal of Negro History* stated,

“The status of the Negro treated in this book has been so long neglected by the American people until it has been thus suddenly forced upon public attention...” (251). It is this sense of outcry, this voice thrust upon the unaware American public, forcing those who ignored deplorable living conditions in places like the Black Belt that also exists in hip-hop. In 1994, Michael Eric Dyson stated that gangsta rap, “[a]t its best, this music draws attention to complex dimensions of ghetto life ignored by many Americans [...] gangsta rap has most aggressively narrated the pains and possibilities, the fantasies and fears, of poor black urban youth” [source Dyson reader]. When one considers rappers like Chuck D (of Public Enemy) or Ice Cube, who criticize American government and society through their anger-filled lyrics, then their use of art as activism falls under the same objective as Richard Wright’s. The insight into the minds of young black males provided by hip-hop and Richard Wright offers a deeper, chilling image of the ghetto: namely, the attitudes and thoughts developing as a result of living in the conditions both cultural products expose. Wright’s portrayal of a young, angry, and violent black male like Bigger Thomas made many readers feel they had an increased reason to fear black males since the novel seemed to confirm perceived assumptions about the desire of African Americans for revenge against the government and white Americans.

The critical praise, awareness, panic, and controversy both *Native Son* and hip-hop created also created a buzz among consumers of both art forms, which ensured commercial success. Wright’s novel stirred reading communities and garnered critical recognition well before its publication. The novel was so heavily anticipated that in its manuscript form, it won Richard Wright a Guggenheim fellowship (Poore 25). According to Hazel Rowley, the literary world spent much time discussing the novel, which made the question, “What do you think of *Native Son*?” a common line within influential reading circles (194). Once published, *Native Son*

became “a literary phenomenon,” selling 215,000 copies within three weeks of publication, skyrocketing Wright towards becoming the first African American bestselling author (193). Many critics compared Wright’s novel to the work of Steinbeck and Dostoyevsky, while others, like Lilian Johnson worried about the implications of presenting *Bigger Thomas* as a representative of the African American community to a reading public (Rowley 192). According to Rowley, one of Wright’s readers wrote, “They will believe him typical of all of us. They so easily lump us into one classification” (193). It is this fascinating relationship between writers speaking from marginalized, oppressed communities in the United States, and the larger, Anglo public that evokes important discussions of the nature and reasons behind the success of a novel like *Native Son*, that presents the opportunity for racial spectatorship and social voyeurism by members of the white, middle and upper class readers. The question, then, is: Did a predominantly white readership feverishly purchase copies of *Native Son* because of Wright’s mastery as an author or did the thrill of peeking behind *Bigger Thomas*’s back seduce readers? This same sort of reception anticipates a similar reaction for hip-hop, especially once it soared in popularity starting in the late 1980s and early 90s.

Angry hip-hop voices, ranging from solo rappers and rap groups like Public Enemy, Niggaz With Attitude, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Ice-T, ignited similar national anxieties about the perceived violent and dangerous nature of African American communities and their young men. While N.W.A. rapped, “A young nigga on a warpath/ And when I’m finished, it’s gonna be a bloodbath/ Of cops, dying in LA,” politicians, journalists, and parents shouted an outcry that N.W.A. promoted violence and reinforced stereotypes. In a *Washington Times* editorial about N.W.A. and other gangsta rap groups, Michael McMahon challenged the argument that rap artists were merely reflecting the realities of their lives in the ‘hood:

Great art [...] never disguises [reality], but neither does it ever surrender to it by merely vomiting up only the ugliness that reality contains. No one will much care about the ‘inner me’ of Schooly D and his buddies if all that’s inside them is the ugliness they brag about and all that comes out is the artistic equivalent of diarrhea. After their novelty wears thin, they’ll be about as enduring as The Beatles’ soup bowl haircuts in the early ‘60s. (F2)

The characterization of hip-hop as a detrimental, inadequate, and crude art form has been a popular argument against it ever since hip-hop became perceived as a threat to white, upper-class morals and values. These arguments stem out of conservative ideologies that do not attempt to understand hip-hop, its function, or the mastery and artistry required to make great hip-hop music. McMahan focuses the brunt of his argument on a concept of “ugliness” he feels is literally “inside” hip-hop artists that he feels qualifies a quick dismissal of their art. It is these comparisons of black art as “vomit” or “diarrhea” that also brings to mind the unfortunate tradition of degrading certain artists and/or works based on moral, ignorant, and racist terms. McMahan was correct in that the novelty aspect of hip-hop did deteriorate, but rather than lose popularity, hip-hop grew and developed into a larger, more dominant art form extending outside of music and ingraining itself deeply in American society, and increasingly, the world.

A year after McMahan claimed hip-hop would soon lose its popularity, the “Financial Desk” column of the *New York Times* reported that major music labels like MCA and Warner Brothers were buying up the independent rap labels primarily responsible for producing the majority of hip-hop in the 1980s because the genre passed the \$100 million mark in sales, and it anticipated “higher revenues this year [1990]” (D11). When questioning risk in investing in “a fringe style like rap,” the article states, “...rock-and-roll, soul and disco music have followed the

same course.” Clearly, executives of record companies took note of the rapidly expanding popularity of hip-hop in urban neighborhoods; but, increasingly, hip-hop audiences expanded in neighborhoods outside of the poverty-laden neighborhoods where it first developed. As hip-hop rapidly received more media exposure, and rappers catapulted towards the national spotlight, much like an earlier generation of debate surrounding Richard Wright, the debate over whether hip-hop was dangerous to American society also grew. The following year after the *New York Times* article, David Samuels declared:

Neither side of the debate has been prepared, however, to confront what the entertainment industry’s receipts from this summer [1991] prove beyond doubt: although rap is still proportionally more popular among blacks, its primary audience is white and lives in the suburbs. And the history of rap’s degeneration from insurgent black street music to mainstream pop points to another dispiriting conclusion: the more rappers were packaged as violent black criminals, the bigger their white audiences become. (24-25)

White, middle-class, and young consumers increasingly became the main patrons of hip-hop, which at first glance would signify a positive moment for the relationship between black and white Americans and the adoption of hip-hop music into the national conversation. Yet, what Samuels identifies is a troubling relationship between the motivation and allure of the purchase and consumption of certain *kinds* of hip-hop. Artists like Public Enemy and KRS-One, who wrote songs infused with political protest, righteous anger, and acted as direct descendants of the Black Panthers sold less records as hip-hop increased in popularity. These types of rappers, who would now be classified as “Conscious” rappers, typically do not appeal to broad audiences despite their focus on producing songs meant to create positive change. Meanwhile, rappers like

Snoop Dogg and Too Short, who glorified the pimp and thug lifestyle, while appearing to be the direct descendants of Huggy Bear, saw their record sales increase dramatically. Jeffrey Ogbar, in his analysis of KRS-One's song, "My Philosophy," shows how KRS-One points out "the insidious practices of the record industry, which cultivates problematic images of blackness" (19). The song works as a hip-hop *ars poetica* where KRS-One explains his reasons for rapping and the differences between good and bad hip-hop. KRS-One raps:

But I don't walk this way to portray
Or reinforce stereotypes of today
Like all my brothas eatin' chicken and watermelon
Talk broken English and drug sellin'
[...]
But they don't care 'cause the company is sellin' it
It's my philosophy on the industry

He explains that some rappers extend stereotypes and act as modern-day minstrels, which ensures them success, but sadly plays into the hands of record executives who want to exploit and extend damaging stereotypes in the name of profit. Extending the relationship between hip-hop and African American scholars of the early 20th century, Ogbar qualifies KRS-One in the same conversation when he states, "Much like black intellectuals of the 1920s, he argues that white-controlled businesses would rather promote tired black stereotypes" (19). Clearly, the nature of the popularity of a novel containing a character like Bigger Thomas and purchasing a Snoop Doggy Dogg album point at the what portrayals of blackness are not only preferred, but also the racially-charged motives behind these preferences.

Utilizing the publication of *Native Son* and its story helps the reader understand the issue of mass exposure and reception and their effects by an American audience who is primarily Anglo and lives under hegemonic structures favoring whiteness and white values while maintaining its control over attitudes and perceptions of blackness and black values. After all, according to Ogbar, “White supremacy, of course, is based on a system that demands political, economic, and social marginalization of black people and other people of color” (19). Thus, while a novel as important as *Native Son* may have exposed mass audiences to the Black Belt and the attitudes of its inhabitants, at the moment of mass consumption, the novel and its author give up their intended purpose, which becomes transformed according to what those in power determine. Hip-hop music belongs in the same conversation because it functions in a similar manner. While a song like “Murder Was the Case” by Snoop Dogg shows what a Bigger Thomas-type would be thinking while on trial, the fascination of the song by popular audiences falls along the lines of promoting the black criminal type. Hip-hop provides an additional perspective by males living under similar conditions as Bigger Thomas. In fact, many rappers are the descendants of Bigger Thomas: still growing up in poor, crime-ridden neighborhoods; still subjected to unfair, racist practices; and still harboring angry, violent thoughts against the rest of society. If Bigger Thomas grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, he would probably declare “I was a terror since the public school era” like Biggie Smalls (Notorious).

A study combining *Native Son* and hip-hop also encourages the need to view literary studies under different interdisciplinary lenses that create important connections, as in this case, that bridge gaps between generations, helping readers understand the deep connections between seemingly unconnected, or barely-connected cultural works. Michael Warner, in his description of the aims of New Historicism, states:

New Historicism has a motto: “The text is historical; and history is textual.” The first part means that meaning does not transcend context but is produced within it; the second part means that human actions and institutions and relations, while certainly hard facts, are not hard facts as distinguished from language. They are themselves symbolic representations, though this is not to say, as many old historicists might conclude, that they are not real. (7)

Under Warner’s parameters, both *Native Son* and hip-hop music produce their own ideas and conclusions about the state of African Americans within their own specific contexts. The South Side of Chicago in the early 20th century created the conditions for a character like Bigger Thomas who felt his only recourse against racism and oppression to be violent thought and action, while rappers found their recourse in making music since the late 1970s. The meaning behind both cultural products belongs exclusively to the context of their respective time and place; yet, the connections described previously between *Native Son* and hip-hop echo Warner’s idea of the “textuality,” meaning that the similarities between both reactions share much in common and are facilitated under a continued tradition of African American responses to oppression and the white reception of black cultural products. In other words, Richard Wright, his work, and hip-hop serve as symbolic representations and bridging these similarities historically and thematically explain why Richard Wright and Bigger Thomas serve as precursors to hip-hop, and help inform why current issues in hip-hop culture exist as they do.

Building off the framework New Historicism provides, Brook Thomas provides the idea of categorizing the relationship between literary works and other cultural works in the form of a chiasmus in order to provide new, creative ways of producing scholarship. He states:

To rely on chiasmus to extend literary analysis to cultural analysis is to imply a different relation of literature to a culture. It no longer speaks for—or represents—culture as a whole. Instead, chiasmus allows the critic to place literature in relation to another specified cultural practice. (9)

Thus, just like a rapper in the middle of a freestyle may create unlikely connections and bridge gaps between genres, history, politics, street slang, etc, my argument will take Wright's novel and hip-hop to show how both cultural works can work together within what Thomas calls, "a dynamic sense of cultural interaction," but help readers and listeners make stronger connections between the voices of the inner city of South Side Chicago of the 1940s and the voices still living in the same or similar areas (12).

In addition, placing a novel like *Native Son*, that has achieved the prestige of belonging to the American literary canon, with hip-hop, an art form still struggling for respect within many critical circles, offers the possibility of elevating hip-hop in importance and validity in American cultural history. My study will prove how hip-hop music and its artists share equal, if not similar, artistry, message, and intent towards the same, if not similar, intellectual level as Richard Wright's. In fact, an explicit negotiation of the connection between rap artists and Bigger Thomas helps promote the importance of the message sought by Richard Wright through his character: the need for creative outlets and reform in impoverished communities across the nation.

The discussion between *Native Son* and hip-hop ultimately boils down to a discussion of several questions surrounding the subject of the black, inner-city male. How do these males function in their neighborhoods and American society? Why are Americans afraid of them, and yet, fascinated at portrayals of their lives? Often, inner-city males are analyzed, characterized,

and discussed as lost, misdirected, unfortunate, and inherently flawed. Countless studies have portrayed young, urban males as an archetype lacking the ability toward upward mobility, often placing the blame on the males themselves. In 1939, a year before the publication of *Native Son*, E. Franklin Frazier published *The Negro Family in the United States*, which “argued that urbanization was undermining the ability of men to provide for their families” (Coates 60). Less than twenty years later, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report on African American families cited inadequacies in males as the main explanation for the lack of social mobility for many black families in poverty. Frequently, the problems within the African American community are often centered on its young men and their lack of agency. What this study attempts to do is use Wright’s work and rap music and videos to explain how young, black men living in the nation’s ghettos create meaning, relationships, and ultimately, the sanity needed to survive oppressive, racist conditions existing both in Bigger’s and Biggie’s eras.

What makes this study particularly timely is the recent discourse surrounding the African American community since the ascendance of President Barack Obama. President Obama’s election again unearthed national anxieties about the dangers of the black male to American society. One only need to think about Rev. Jeremiah Wright, worries Obama is a secret Muslim, and his Kenyan roots to see that many attacks against President Obama relied on fears that a black man is incapable of running the nation. In fact, just like Mr. Dalton and Britton feared Bigger was a communist, opponents of President Obama continue raising fears that the United States is fast becoming a socialist state. According to Christine Car, as recently as April 2009 major newspapers and journals “have—respectively—lamented, heralded, and observed the coming rise of socialism” (21). Dick Morris believes Obama’s brand of socialism will emulate FDR’s policies, and “Obama’s record will be similar, although less wise and more destructive”

(74). These anxieties connect back to a fear of black males as inadequate, intellectually inferior, and/or dangerous to American society.

On the other end of the spectrum, the academic and political success of Obama also fueled the “bootstraps” discourse calling for African Americans living in poverty to work their way out of the ghetto while ignoring the effects of environment Richard Wright wanted the American public to recognize. One of the most critical and vocal public figures pushing this philosophy is comedian Bill Cosby. Over the past few years, Bill Cosby has actively participated in political discussions, criticizing parents and children of the hip-hop generation for what he believes is a mass culture of apathy, lost morals, and victimhood in the inner city.

In 2004, Cosby received an invitation to deliver an address to the NAACP during its fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision. Cosby took the opportunity to address his concerns in the African American community. Throughout his speech, Cosby repeatedly concluded that males were the root issue towards improving the lives of African Americans living in the inner city. He stated:

I’m talking about these people who cry their son is standing there in an orange suit. Where were you when he was two? Where were you when he was twelve? Where were you when he was eighteen, and how come you don’t know he had a pistol? And where is his father, and why don’t you know where he is? And why doesn’t the father show up to talk to the boy?

Cosby often talks about the embarrassment of so many young black men being arrested and incarcerated and reminisces that older generations instilled a healthy fear based on responsibility on their children that he feels no longer exists. In this speech, he questions the mother, but the problem ultimately falls on the assumed absence/inadequacy of fathers. Next, Cosby seems to

share Bigger's frustration with religion discussed at the beginning of this chapter. He says, "And you can't keep asking Jesus to ask doing things for you. You can't keep asking that God will find a way." What is interesting is that although Cosby wants to criticize the Bigger Thomas type, he believes these men need something beyond the hope religion traditionally offers.

Understandably, what Cosby wants is action, and his speech challenges his audience to heed the call. He belongs to what Ta-Nehisi Coates refers to "the populist-conservative black" philosophy that believes "...the idea of the Great Fall—the theory, in this case, that post-Jim Crow blacks have lost touch with the cultural traditions that enabled them to persevere through centuries of oppression" (57). As he continues his speech, his anger begins targeting hip-hop more and more explicitly. He alludes to fashions associated with hip-hop, such as young men "putting on their clothes backwards," and "with their hat on backwards, pants down around the crack." Cosby scoffs at these forms of self-expression and clearly reveals his target when he describes young men hanging out at the corner:

It's right around the corner. It's standing on the corner. It can't speak English. It doesn't want to speak English. I can't even talk the way these people talk: 'Why you ain't where you is go, ra.' I don't know who these people are. And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. Then I heard the father talk. This is all in the house. You used to talk a certain way on the corner and you got into the house and switched to English. Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with, 'Why you ain't...' You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth. There is no Bible that has that kind of language. Where did these people get the idea that they're moving ahead on this. Well they know they're not; they're just hanging out in the same

place, five or six generations sitting in the projects when you're just supposed to stay there long enough to get a job and move out.

This argument appears often whenever Cosby gives speeches. Cosby's anger and frustration is understandable because he wants to see people in his shared community and ethnicity escape the cycle of poverty afflicting generation after generation. The problem with his tirade is first, that he further strips the humanity of people living in ghettos across American. Simply by calling young men "It," he refuses to recognize their worth, which fuels the sort of anger Bigger Thomas and rappers share. Next, he insults colloquialisms and slang inherent in the hip-hop community that have served as a form of empowerment and creativitizzle. He claims that the slang spoken on the streets is an obstacle towards social advancement, claiming doctors and pilots speak standard English. Certainly, Bigger, who tells a friend, "I *could* fly a plane if I had a chance" (emphasis original), would take exception to Cosby's claim.

Ta-Nehisi Coates responds to Cosby's argument by turning his ideas on their head:

Cosby is fond of saying that sacrifices of the '60s weren't made so that rappers and young people could repeatedly use the word *nigger* (emphasis original). But that's exactly why they were made. After all, chief among all individual rights awarded Americans is the right to be mediocre, crass, and juvenile—in other words, the right to be human. (62)

It is this right for a sense of self-respect and humanity that Bigger Thomas ultimately seeks from the moment he looks around his neighborhoods and sees constant reminders of his impoverished state to the moment he stares at the reader with "a faint, wry, bitter smile" (*Native Son* 430).

Rather than seen as an "It" or a societal ill, the contributions of writers like Wright and MCs in

hip-hop expose audiences to the ways black young men strive for a sense of belonging when they have experienced marginalization in many aspects of their lives.

My argument does not seek to absolve African American males of having to work towards achieving social mobility. Like anyone else part of a marginalized community in the United States, there is certainly a need for a local, home-grown effort towards promoting family, hard work, and education in order to move people out of poverty and into a better, self-sustaining socioeconomic status. My study does not contradict those ideas, but it does refute the assumption by many that African American males have laid dormant and/or complacent. On the contrary, my study demonstrates that these males *are* working and attempting alternative stratagems that seek to serve the same emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic needs as anyone else in a nation driven by capitalism and patriarchy. Because socioeconomic conditions in places like South Side Chicago, the Bronx, and Compton provide few opportunities for social advancement, these males simply go about achieving their goals in different ways based on available means and resources, of which few exist. In other words, like the break-dancer using an old refrigerator cardboard box, black males living in the ghetto made do. The violent, misogynistic nature of these expressions shock audiences once they reach the national conversation, which in turn creates the potential for significant social capital. This is important because this social capital carries with it the potential towards leveraging it in order to make social change. If the public is alarmed by Bigger Thomas, then it follows the nation should work towards saving the other Bigger Thomases living in ghettos across the nation. Instead, as will be discussed in further chapters, these works are commodified and exploited for financial gain, which then strips these cultural products of their original intent. Recipients of these commodified products no longer purchase works like *Native Son* or rap music in order to understand. They buy for the thrill of violence, misogyny, and

criminality. With the market set in place, other acts mimicking the same characters, attitudes, and content appear, but under the intent of profit.

When hip-hop elder statesman and legend, Nas, declared, “Hip-Hop is Dead” in 2006, the debate over whether the art form still retained its roots raged among the hip-hop community. In the song, Nas laments:

Went from turntables to mp3’s

From ‘Beat Street’ to commercials on Mickey D’s

From gold cables to Jacob’s

From plain facials to Botox and face lifts.

Nas recognizes the significant change hip-hop underwent from its days as the music of the streets to advertisement background beats. He sees that the money created a different kind of hip-hop artist. If Nas is correct, then perhaps Bill Cosby’s anger should be aimed at those who alter and change the intent of African American cultural products at the moment they offer the potential for profit, rather than at those young people creating art in order to express, escape, and survive crime, poverty, and racism. After all, it is these products that allow many in the ghetto to feel a sense of connectedness and humanity.

To continue the discussion between *Native Son* and hip-hop culture, an exploration of the socioeconomic conditions present in Richard Wright’s South Side Chicago and DJ Kool Herc’s Bronx will provide the context and explanation of why these artists chose to portray their neighborhoods in a realistic manner that reflects poverty, crime, and racial discrimination. In addition, by showing how similar conditions existed despite being more than fifty years apart, ties between Wright and hip-hop will appear clearer, which will then facilitate a deeper discussion into how both cultural products reflect masculine expressions in the inner city.

Chapter 2: Sociopolitical Conditions in the American Ghetto

“Sitting at home scratching off serials eating cereal

The way we find a way to survive, shit is a miracle

We got mice in the crib and roaches in the toasters, rice in the fridge

Bread in the oven by the roaster”

-Talib Kweli “Around My Way”

The above quote illustrates the paradoxical nature of the American inner-city. Many people living outside the ghetto have a vague understanding of what it *might* entail (poverty, crime, welfare, and a majority population of ethnic minorities) without ever gaining a true idea of what it actually *is*. This superficial idea of the ghetto stops short of a deeper, more adequate understanding of the adverse conditions existing in these communities. Depending on superficial ideas leads to imposing stereotypes regarding the nature, appearance, and actions of individuals living in the inner-city. Voices coming out of these communities, such as Talib Kweli’s, provide this deeper understanding through cultural works such as rap music and videos that provide visual images and lyrics. These works provide a context that goes beyond the surface to provide insight into the sights, sounds, and people of a place like the Bronx, Compton, or the South Side.

Additionally, if an audience understands the complexities of the ghetto, the possibility opens up towards understanding the often violent, misogynistic nature of cultural texts produced by African American males. This chapter attempts to show how sociopolitical conditions existing in poor, inner-city communities influenced the development of the subject matter and intent created by both Richard Wright and hip-hop.

Part of Richard Wright’s intent in writing *Native Son* was to provide a sociological argument describing why real males existed that shared the same frustrations with Bigger

Thomas. One of Wright's major goals in creating Bigger Thomas was to critique the assumption that all African Americans held a passive attitude when confronting racist laws and practices. Early in the novel, during an introspective moment, the narrator states, "These were the rhythms [Bigger's] of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger—like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force" (29). Bigger and his friends constantly struggle with the oppressive forces existing in their community. The periods marked by passivity: indifference, brooding, and silence are the times where oppression makes Bigger feel constrained by poverty, and racism. The periods marked by reaction: violence, desire, and anger are the times where Bigger wants or takes agency. Wright wants the reader to understand that individuals like Bigger feel a sense of restlessness and frustration as a direct result of having to live in the ghetto. He is in no way content in his environment. The narrator continues when stating, "[Bigger] was bitterly proud of his swiftly changing moods and boasted when he had to suffer the results of them," which shows the sort of nature someone may adopt when living in the ghetto. The phrase "bitterly proud" evokes the idea of desperation—of attempting to find something tangible that justifies self-worth/importance. Wright wants to bring his reader into the mind of the ghetto youth while providing external reasons behind why it functions as it does.

Although the novel is a fictional account, Wright's intention was to write a novel based on a real setting and realistic events according to what he witnessed growing up. According to Cynthia Tolentino, "By making fiction behave like sociology, Wright is able to rewrite dominant sociological narratives that assign particular social roles to white Americans, other Americans, and non-Americans" (381). Wright is able to provide his own sociological study of South Side Chicago and is able to use his work to prove that many people living in ghetto communities

reacted against living in those conditions despite stereotypical notions that African Americans passively accepted their conditions.

In addition to rewriting social roles, Wright also provides a character study of what he calls the many “Bigger Thomases” he met while growing up in Mississippi and Chicago. Any conversation regarding Bigger Thomas as a character and type should consider Wright’s essay “How ‘Bigger’ was Born.” Although, as Wright himself states, this essay should not determine a complete analysis of Bigger’s origins; nevertheless, the author provides key insight into male figures on which Wright based his character, and according to Tolentino, “The genesis of Bigger Thomas... is conveyed in a ‘personal’ account of the process through which [Wright] achieved racial and class consciousness” (382). By using life experiences as part of the inspiration for creating Bigger, Wright justifies the sociological aspect of the novel. Additionally, “Wright’s investigation into ‘what made Bigger and what he meant’ considers the options available to black men for challenging racism, as well as the consequences of such actions” (382). Presenting available “options” and “consequences” provides important insight into why a person like Bigger would feel powerless and isolated in the South Side, which would explain the extremes in thought and action Bigger experiences in his life. The assault on Gus in order to avoid robbing Blum’s store and the decision to murder Betsie both are explained by this sense of desperation.

In “How Bigger was Born,” Wright states, “The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect,” meaning that growing up in both Mississippi and Chicago, Wright took note of men in his community subjected to the oppression created by racist practices in the early twentieth century (434). Wright lists six archetypal figures, and he admired their resistant resolve towards the face of racism. As a result, each Bigger also met tragedy and loss. Wright recalls:

The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken. (437)

For Wright, the figure of Bigger Thomas represents a violent, desperate response towards racist injustice. In a 1945 interview, Wright asserts, “I was not trying to show a type of Negro, but even more than that—a human being reacting under pressure, reacting the only way he could because of his environment” (Kinnamon 84). Adding to Wright’s idea, Tolentino states, “Not merely an inventory of available black subject positions, however, Wright’s essay is also an argument for the ways in which knowledge of racist conventions can either substitute for or join with force as a means to challenge Jim Crow laws and social practices” (382). Thus, *Native Son* argues that anyone placed under the same conditions as low-income African Americans in Southside Chicago could develop a Bigger-like mentality, which fosters feelings of resentment, hate, and disassociation from the rest of a society that could potentially lead to destructive results.

When Wright arrived to Chicago, he was part of the large migration of African Americans from the South to Northern cities occurring during the early part of the twentieth century. Blacks moving to Chicago during this time experienced extreme subjugation and isolation from the rest of the city. Thomas Lee Philpott tracks how population growth rates from 1910 to 1920 shot up 146 percent, which prompted white homeowners, politicians, and businessmen to ensure a strict segregation of the black community using both the law and violent force (121). The segregation grew so extreme, that “In 1930 two out of three black Chicagoans were packed into tracts where the population was 90 percent black, or more. One black person in

five lived in a tract where 97.5 percent or more of the people around him were also black” (132). Philpott also states that the influx of white, European immigrants simultaneously arriving to Chicago never experienced the same kind of segregation and violence. Additionally, the majority of the black population lived in extreme poverty.

In Chicago, employment opportunities were few for African Americans. They also received lower wages than other workers, which coupled with disproportionately high rent prices in the South Side, made life increasingly difficult for black families. When Bigger is hiding from the police, he remembers “that his mother had once made him tramp the streets for two whole months looking for a place to live” (*Native Son* 248). Then the narrator states, “And [Bigger] had heard it said that black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats.” With no money, families struggled in finding housing, food, and other basic needs. Since the majority of African Americans in Chicago were forced into crowded neighborhoods, very few places for recreation existed, which meant young people lacked places to hang out. Gareth Canaan states:

In addition to the poor quality of housing, the African-American neighborhoods had little to offer in the way of parks and recreational facilities. There was little relief for those living in overcrowded apartments. [...] Rood’s study noted that in the neighborhood between 45th and 52nd Streets along Federal Street, most backyards were filled with shacks, accumulated garbage and refuse, junk collected by junk collectors, and even ‘an occasional pig.’ Consequently, there was no room for children to play there and they had to go out in the streets for lack of a nearby playground or park. [...] The average population to each acre of public park area in that [second] ward was 8059.9 people per acre. (163)

Less than eight total acres of park space existed in areas populated by African Americans. Living under a constant state of overcrowding and having severely inadequate spaces for leisure or recreation increased health problems and juvenile delinquency. Young men resorted to hanging out in the streets and pool halls, which are clearly displayed by Bigger's recreational habits in *Native Son*. According to Canaan, because many of these men lacked employment, they joined gangs and eventually found trouble with the police whether they committed crimes or not. Lack of employment also promoted stereotypes regarding African Americans as inadequate and lazy, which made it increasingly difficult for those arrested to defend themselves. Canaan states, "By 1930, African American youths accounted for 21.2 percent of the arrests while blacks overall accounted for 6.9 percent of the total population" (163). This disproportionate rate of arrests shows both how youth without places for recreation are more likely to resort to delinquency and that racist practices also made black youth more susceptible to trouble with the law.

In his essay, Wright explains how these isolating, ghetto conditions he experienced affect the mind. "In Dixie," he states, "there are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated" (437). This barrier between white and black makes social distinctions regarding success, privilege, progress. Wright argues this mode of disenfranchisement creates modes of control over people. He believes Jim Crow existed to "build up a vast, dense ideology of racial superiority that would justify any act of violence taken against him to defend white dominance; and further, to condition him to hope for little and to receive that little without rebelling" (438). These same ideas still circulate among people living in ghettos today. During the 1990s, Sudhir Venkatesh studied the Chicago South Side as part of a sociological study on ghetto communities, poverty, and gangs. While interviewing older South Side Chicagoans, Venkatesh found men such as Leonard "Old Time" Combs making statements

such as, “We live in a city within a city. They have theirs and we have ours. And if you can understand that it will never change, you’ll start understanding how this city works” (7). The emphasis on boundaries separating what part of Chicago belongs to black and white also denotes beliefs towards who deserves social and economic development and advancement. While interviewing Charlie Butler, a much younger man, Venkatesh finds:

You got blacks who are beating their heads trying to figure out a way to live where *you* live! Don’t ask me why. And then you got a whole lot of black folk who realize it ain’t no use. Like us. We just spend our time trying to get by, and we live around here, where it ain’t so pretty, but at least you won’t get your ass beat. At least not by the police. (7)

After Butler’s statement, Old Time adds, “That’s how it’s been since black folk came to the city, and it’s not going to change.” These two native sons of the ghetto still maintain the same attitudes Wright witnessed in his community. Although no longer acknowledging Jim Crow, these men still exhibit the same fears towards racist oppression.

Old Time and Butler show how the constant presence of racist oppression can lead people towards adopting alternative coping methods in order to survive. Butler is the product of several generations of South Side Chicagoans who developed the belief that staying put ensures, at minimum, avoidance of harassment by the police, which infers that he and his family know all too well the history of abuse by the police in ghetto neighborhoods. Although Bigger would identify more with the “blacks who are beating their heads” Butler mentions, they both understand the message of futility constantly visible in their neighborhoods. Bigger tells his friend Gus, “They [white people] do things and we can’t. It’s just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence...” (20).

Bigger's resentment towards being limited echoes Old Time's comments of two different worlds with significant differences existing for two different races.

Wright expands his analysis of ghetto isolation through two main psychological factors:

First, through some quirk of circumstance, he [Bigger] had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race. Second, he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life. In many respects his emergence as a distinct type was inevitable. (439)

These two forces emphasize identity and place. Without religion or folk culture, Bigger lacks spiritual grounding to find and/or develop a source of hope or relief. In contrast, his mother still holds a spiritual and cultural connection to her racial identity. When Bigger goes home to pick up his gun in order to rob Blum's, he hears his mother singing over and over, "Lord, I want to be Christian / In my heart, in my heart" (35). Through singing a prayer, Bigger's mother connects to African American traditions, namely the function of Christian songs. Additionally, her identity as a seeker of Christianity connects her to a community of others seeking the same spiritual goal. Finally, she grounds her religious goal in an imagined space. Because she lives in a society oppressive to her race, Bigger's mother knows the only place where she may find solace from her reality is in the one she creates in her heart. Singing the song makes the space possible through the act of song and prayer. Bigger's mother sings in the comfort of her own home, which shows how private spaces also allow expressions of hope and identity.

In contrast, upon arriving at the house, Bigger quietly slips into the house to retrieve his weapon. He prefers his mother not know about his presence, first, for obvious reasons, but

second, because he does not feel comfortable in the private space of his home. His small home and family represent the failure of his role as oldest male, which only continues when he enters the public where “the call of dominant civilization,” mentioned earlier works as a constant reminder of what Bigger may never achieve. Wright presents a clear example when Bigger and Jack watch newsreels of young ladies who “[represent] over four billion dollars of America’s wealth and over fifty of America’s leading families...” (31). The physical separation shows how the only way these poor, young black men can see these wealthy, young, and white women is on the screen. Also, after Jack expresses desire to experience a vacation on the beach, Bigger answers, “But you’d be hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas...” (32). In Bigger’s mind, the possibility of participating in a bourgeois activity, vacationing, is impossible. It is an activity reserved for the rich and white, such as Mary Dalton. It seems as if the film’s narrator speaks directly to the men because he states, “*Oh, boy, don’t you wish you were down here in Florida?*” and “*Ah, the naughty rich!*” (sic). Watching those scenes only reinforces the perceptions of race and class that, as Wright argues, would inform the actions and views of the Bigger Thomases of the world.

A study done by the Center for Urban Research and Poverty Studies at the University of Illinois found that children growing up under ghetto conditions feel so isolated that “that the only peer group open to them is composed of other outsiders and deviant youths,” which increases the likelihood for aggression, violent behavior, and criminal acts (255). Those who make it out of the ghetto usually feel support from at least one member of the family and find “a certain type of social support and structure outside the family” that features “a type of altruistic activity” (266). For Richard Wright, writing provided a space for escape—a space that, for Bigger, was unreachable, but became accessible for a later generation of hip-hop artists.

The function of *Native Son* as a novel that provided a sociological insight into urban communities populated primarily by African Americans also served as a call for awareness to an ignored community. In his 1940 review of *Native Son*, Malcolm Cowley wrote Wright's central message was:

Listen, you white folks [...] he [Wright] seems to be saying over and over. I want to tell you about all the Negroes in America. I want to tell you how they live and how they feel. I want you to change your minds about them before it is too late to prevent a worse disaster than any we have known. I speak for my own people, but I speak for America too. (38)

Wright's novel signaled an aggressive call for change and reform that echoed the sentiments of black militants and nationalists. This is partly because of the novel's ghetto setting. According to Robert Butler, *Native Son* is an important work of American fiction because "it boldly presented a new black hero who was radically different from any of his predecessors in formal literature" (8-9). Wright presents "a fresh literary point of view" allowing readers entrance into a world once only known to those living in a community like Bigger's (Butler 9). Wright understood the importance in presenting this perspective because in his "Blueprint for Negro Writing," he criticizes African American writers for being "confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America" (97). He felt these writers catered too much to the expectations of white audiences, which he felt made black authors look like "French poodles who do clever tricks." When writing *Native Son*, he admitted to confronting the same pressures that forced the conditions under which his predecessors worked. Rather than fall into the same role Wright criticizes, he persisted in writing a character and story he felt reflected reality. In "How 'Bigger' was Born," he comments, "I knew that I

could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he was: that is, resentful towards whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times..." (449). For Wright, deciding to present South Side Chicago accurately to his audience was a vital, conscious, and deliberate choice.

Butler highlights that the American city was an important subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but "none of the many urban novels written by whites during these times focus on black people in any sustained or meaningful way" (9). When considering black fiction prior to *Native Son*, it "is also noticeably lacking in detailed, realistic portraits of the impoverished masses of urban blacks." Authors like Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson all focused on issues primarily affecting the middle class, which preponderantly exclude the plight of Bigger Thomas.

This is why Wright begins the novel by immediately placing the audience in the heart of South Side Chicago, where Bigger and his family live under miserable conditions. The room where Bigger, his mother, and his two siblings all live is small, cramped, and unstable. The immediate concern of the day forces Mrs. Thomas to say, "Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you-all out of here" (3). Above rest or breakfast is making a living. After getting up, Vera and her mother salvage their sense of dignity by asking Bigger and Buddy to look away while they change because there are no other rooms.

Wright adds a heavier element of misery by introducing a large, black rat that terrorizes the room. Bigger must use a skillet to kill the rodent, and once he hits the rat, he finishes the job by smashing its head with a shoe (6). The brutal killing of the rat certainly jars the nerves, but the reader also gets the sense that this is just another day in the ghetto. Once the situation settles down, the family reverts to annoying, arguing, and fighting with each other, which also seems

routine. Bigger receives most of the insults. His mother complains about his lack of employment, his aggressive nature, and his mischievous activities. Out of frustration, Mother Thomas states, “Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you” (8). Rather than a source of familial love, Bigger represents regret and a burden. A few lines later, she warns “If you don’t stop running with that gang of yours and do right you’ll end up where you never thought you would” (9). Stuck with his own feelings of futility, Bigger must also deal with his mother’s resentment, which adds to the audience’s understanding of Bigger’s feelings of hate, frustration and isolation.

It is no coincidence that as soon as he steps out of the house, he encounters the State Attorney’s large, white face staring at him from a billboard that states, “YOU CAN’T WIN” (13). The narrator describes the poster as “show[ing] one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it kept looking unblinkingly back [...]” The atmosphere is hopeless and oppressive for Bigger because at home he receives judgment for being an inadequate male figure, and out in the streets, he feels the constant reminder of his socioeconomic status and subjective to a system of law in which he is already presumed guilty.

The conditions described by Richard Wright in his novel and the sociological information presented thus far prove that the majority of African Americans living in Chicago lived under crowded, miserable conditions caused by racist and oppressive laws and policies. In the second half of the twentieth century, similar conditions prevailed in urban centers across the country. Young black and Latino males saw similar conditions in the Bronx. According to Jeff Chang, during the 1950s-1960s, white, middle-class families moved out of the Bronx as black and Latino families moved in (12). During the 1970s, conditions in the Bronx, particularly its south

side, only grew worse. This was where the next crop of Bigger Thomases would arrive and create hip hop music and culture. America was witnessing the birth of another native son.

Groups like the Black Panthers, Young Lords, and the Five Percenters, who developed as a direct result of voices like Richard Wright's, suddenly found themselves competing with street gangs who formed in response to the Jewish, Italian, and Irish youth gangs who terrorized African Americans and Latinos (Chang 12). According to Chang, "The optimism of the civil rights movement and the conviction of the Black and Brown Power movements gave way to a defocused rage and a long exhaustion. [...] Heroin dealers, junky thieves and contract arsonists filled the streets like vultures" (12-13). Once again, the same conditions Wright describes, the same feelings of isolation, entrapment, and frustration among young men in the ghetto gave rise to a response.

After furious gang wars throughout the 1960s and early 70s, young men in the Bronx began hosting the block parties that would eventually lead to the monumental evening when DJ Kool Herc would host the party many credit as the official birth of hip-hop (Chang 67). Hip-hop aligns with Wright's ideas because both give voice to those living in the marginalized black ghetto, and both elicited the same fears from the dominant, white community. When gangsta rappers N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitudes) released, "Fuck Tha Police," their statement against police brutality in Compton, California, the aggressive message scared people from the suburbs to the federal government. The FBI released a warning to the group's record label that stated the song "encourages violence against and disrespect for the law enforcement officer," which echoed a backlash against the group from politicians and advocacy groups worried the song's message would provoke resistance and retaliation against the police (Chang 325). Some critics within the African American community also spoke against N.W.A. out of fears that the group presented

images hurting the black community (Chang 325). Similarly, Wright answered similar outrage from other African Americans. As also stated earlier, many critics thought Wright's novel reinforced stereotypes and added to hate and trust issues between different races in America. In a 1941 interview, he answered his critics by stating, "You see, certain elements among Negroes conceive of literature as a cultural achievement rather than as an instrument probing for truth" (Kinnamon 45). Wright felt his critics' negative reviews came from anxieties within the African American community regarding success. The idea of "literature as a cultural achievement" implies that only certain kinds of works and content should reach mass audiences, such as Ellison's *Invisible Man*, with a likeable protagonist. Because Wright immediately presents Bigger as bitter, angry, hateful, and violent, the idea of a character like Bigger reaching mass audiences whose interaction with African Americans may be limited, it is understandable why certain critics would find issues with *Native Son*. If Wright's novel presents a realistic portrayal with an aim at exposing audiences to knowledge suppressed by the isolating nature of the ghetto, then *Native Son* serves as the "tool" Wright states a work of literature could be. In spite of how the novel is received by readers, *Native Son* shows the ghetto's effects on individuals and communities. Arguably, hip-hop artists such as N.W.A. also sought to challenge accepted notions and attitudes while presenting their own perspective on the truth.

Both *Native Son* and hip-hop culture gave voice to marginalized people living in urban ghettos. Specifically, Wright and hip-hop produce cultural texts emphasizing the struggle of young, black men and the ways they function under these conditions. A closer look at black masculinity and the way black ghetto males express themselves reveals an emphasis on male homo-social relationships, groups, and networks that create frameworks and methods of coping

with the oppressive conditions previously discussed. To combat feelings of futility, despair, and powerlessness, black males depend on each other for support and survival.

For example, in Jay-Z's music video for the 1999 hit, "Big Pimpin," the emphasis is on male friendship and dominance over women. Jay-Z and his friends board a luxury yacht, where they drink champagne, dance, and bask in a sunny paradise. Women in bikinis dance in the background who interact only when the males approach them for a dance, a drink, or flirtation. The yacht approaches an island where the party continues on the beach, and later a mansion conveniently located within walking distance. During the first beach scene, the four males in the video each receive one camera shot depicting sexual dominance over women. Jay-Z dances arm in arm with a crowd of women; Damon "Dame" Dash, Jay-Z's former business partner and co-founder of the Rock-A-Fella brand, is tackled and dragged into the ocean by several women. The guest voices on the song, Texas rappers Bun B and Pimp C untie the bikini tops of women in thongs and massage them as they lie on beach towels.

Further south in the Atlanta hood, rapper T.I. presents his song, "Rubber Band Man," which focuses on drug dealing culture in the ghetto. The rubber band man commonly is a drug dealer, and his money clip is a rubber band. Since the rubber band man carries so much cash on hand, a rubber band is the only suitable means for keeping the roll of dollar bills in his pocket. The song and video use the rubber band man as a metaphor for T.I.'s ability to sell copies of his album. The video features T.I. hanging out on street corners, in his friends' front yards, and in an underground factory where women in silver hot pants and bikini tops manufacture the CDs. Various camera shots throughout the video feature scenes of a crowd filling the streets and following T.I. to a final shot where they dance and stand behind their community hero. These people represent T.I.'s neighborhood, mainly those living in the area surrounding the Bowen

Homes public housing projects, one of Atlanta's poorest neighborhoods. Some shots show the crowd dancing to the beat of the song, and others show the crowd standing still with defiant looks aimed at the audience. In these defiant scenes, only males appear, while in dance scenes, including one where T.I. dances surrounded by four women, feature a mix of both genders.

Although Jay-Z and T.I.'s videos contrast significantly in their choice of setting, both emphasize male dominance, homo-social relationships, and hypermasculinity. Tricia Rose argues, "Over most of its brief history (...) rap video themes have repeatedly converged around the depiction of the local neighborhood and the local posse, crew, or support system" (10). Many critics argue these depictions highlight how hip-hop music can degrade gender roles and promote a modern-day minstrelization of black performers. Blues and Jazz musical art forms never received this sort of criticism, although these genres and hip-hop began on the fringes of society and eventually became adopted by the mainstream. According to Jeffrey Ogbar, what distinguishes hip-hop from other African American cultural products is that "much of hip-hop's core expressions have been boldly centered on a black masculinist identity that has unapologetically insisted on both racial and gender markers" (72-3). While Ogbar notes that feminist hip-hop voices and perspectives exist within the culture, a "hypermale trope" oftentimes dominates hip-hop discourses.

The importance of focusing on the male-dominated discourse within hip-hop culture, and specifically, music, is that a unique relationship exists between young, urban males living within the conditions present during the genesis of hip-hop and its continuing growth. Ogbar establishes three criteria that help define manhood within a hip-hop context:

In the expression of this masculine discourse, manhood is typically reduced to three very common core points of reference to (male) authenticity: (1) willful

ability to inflict violent harm on adversaries, (2) willful ability to have sex with many women, (3) access to material resources that are largely inaccessible to others. (75)

These three qualities instrumentally define for many living in black ghettos what it means to be a man. Many young, black males strive for all three qualities as a way of earning respect and position within their communities, and namely, with respect to other males. In the cases of Jay-Z and T.I., both artists and their videos exemplify this need to assert male dominance over others, and this is especially evident when the ubiquitous shots featuring the artist dancing or posing appear. Usually these shots angle from the ground up, expressing enormity, strength, and dominance. The artists and other males do not smile. Rather, they must look intimidating towards any potential threat. Their appearances also suggest acquisition of wealth and affluence. This also helps explain why organized crime figures, such as Al Capone, Pablo Escobar, and John Gotti, serve as icons in hip-hop.

Ogbar also roots hypermasculinity in the historical treatment of black males in the United States. In a male-dominated society where many times, “black men of any age were called ‘boys,’” and denied basic rights and opportunities, these men “[compensated] for their powerlessness by creating the hypermale” (76). Focusing intensely on developing a male identity along the lines of violence, sexual dominance, and power respond to feeling weak and emasculated within a broader societal context.

Violence often serves as a tool towards asserting power. The ability to fend off violent attacks and the ability to suppress others asserts control of the neighborhood, and in a broader sense, the community. Guns symbolize both the presence of power and the ability to assert it. Michael Eric Dyson specifically addresses the iconography of the gun within a hip-hop context

when he states, “Too many young black and brown men view their sense of strength and industry, and machismo, and manhood through the lens—and sometimes literally through the scope—of a gun” (92). Dyson specifically focuses on gangsta rappers and how they use the symbol of the gun in their lyrics. A gun offers instant power, and its violent force cuts across race, class, and location because anyone with a gun can kill. It is also the weapon associated with figures responsible for maintaining order such as the policeman or the soldier. Thus, in the possession of the ghetto, black male, the gun becomes a volatile threat to the social order, while also implying the existence of an alternative order. A gun allows males to rearrange power structures within their neighborhood. This represents a fear within suburban communities when a black ghetto youth goes beyond his neighborhood. Dyson goes on to state, “The gun is at once the merchandise of manhood and the means of its destruction. The gun is the most lethal means of undermining the masculine stability that many rappers desperately seek” (92). Guns also emphasize the importance of material wealth. Those with the most guns represent the better equipped, stronger groups, which in turn can contest space and property such as neighborhoods, allegiance with other males, and women.

Dyson continues his discussion of the gun by stating its increased importance when considering “the postindustrial urban setting where young black and brown men contest one another over smaller and smaller living and recreational spaces” (92). Once again, the feeling of isolation the ghetto maintains comes into play. Within the space of a ghetto, the males controlling the most space control the social power structure of the community. These males ensure a stronger sense of safety, material goods, and women.

Under this context, the gun also symbolically serves as a hyper masculine and phallic symbol of power. In privileging the male, hypermasculinity also develops an interesting “tension between homophobia and homoeroticism in hip hop” (Dyson 117). Dyson states:

First, when hip hop artists speak about M.O.B. (money over bitches), they are emphasizing the crass relation between commerce and misogyny. But there’s another element to M.O.B. as well: placing “homies” above women, because men make money with men—or take money from them. In any case, the male relation becomes a fetish in hip hop circles: hanging with “my boys,” kicking it with “my crew,” hustling with “my mens and them,” and dying for “my niggas.” There is an unapologetic intensity of devotion that surely evokes at some level homoerotic union. (120)

In both the Jay-Z and T.I. videos, the emphasis on male relationships is not only visibly evident by the placement of males in the foreground and the females dancing in the background, but also the depictions of unity and camaraderie among men.

Ironically, the first collaboration between Jay-Z and T.I. occur on the latter’s 2004 song, “Bring ‘Em Out,” in which the phrase, “Bring ‘em out/ Bring ‘em out/ It’s hard to yell with the barrel in your mouth” loops over and over during the song’s hook. The person rapping the phrase is a sample off Jay-Z’s song, “What More Can I Say,” out of his 2003 album, *The Black Album*. If the gun serves as a symbol of the phallus, T.I.’s use of Jay-Z’s phrase only emphasizes the symbolic meaning behind sticking the barrel of a gun in an enemy’s mouth. In the song, T.I. primarily boasts about his reputation as the king of his hood. In the third verse, T.I. challenges his opponents by specifically making reference to his collection of guns with the implication of his virility. He raps:

If you knew what I knew then you'll be hittin' the deck
Got a tool and a vest I can get some respect
I'm a make it hard for a sucka nigga to flex
Show 'em this ain't the squad for a nigga to test
Pimp, my nuts too large and we way too fresh
Work well with nines, AK's, and techs.

T.I.'s ability to undermine others from asserting their power and masculinity in the hood places him as the alpha-male. The final two lines specifically make reference to outward displays of virility, his crew's attractiveness in being "fresh," and his dexterity with guns. An intimate connection exists between social and sexual status. The one who can control the most guns/phalluses is also the one that commands the strongest reputation as the king of the neighborhood¹.

Dyson's second point about male homoeroticism informs the nature of some male, homosocial groups in hip-hop, which also applies to Bigger Thomas:

Second, there is great exaggeration or even mythology about sexual conquests performed in the presence of one or more participating men. "I hit it, then my boy hit it," some young men brag, while others boasts of multiple men having consensual sex with a woman. One assumes that males expose their sexual organs in such conquests, especially as they mimic the sexual gestures adapted from the

¹ In the music video, T.I. is wearing a t-shirt with the album cover of Jay-Z's first album, 1997's *Reasonable Doubt*, as both homage and a symbol of brotherhood between both rappers.

pornographic tapes that are increasingly popular in certain hip hop circles. This is surely a heated and heady moment of homoerotic bonding. (120).

Immediately the rising popularity of “Uncut” videos over the past ten years comes to mind, especially Nelly’s infamous music video for “Tip Drill²,” which features the hook, “I said it ain’t no fun unless we all get some,” while Nelly and his crew provocatively touch and dance with women in bikinis in what epitomizes misogynistic behavior. Elizabeth Farrell describes the video as, “includ[ing] images of topless women gyrating as Nelly and fellow rappers throw money at them, and of a man [Nelly] sliding a credit card between a woman’s bare buttocks...” (A27). The relationship displayed between all the men in the video is reminiscent of the early shared masturbation scene between Bigger and Jack. Bigger and Jack, in masturbating at the movie theatre, engage in a shared erotic moment. The way Bigger “glanc[es]” at Jack and their shared laughter suggests this activity occurred several times before (30). Furthermore, while committing the act, they talk to each other, further connecting their homoerotic bond. Their conversation revolves around the hardness of their penises, sexual prowess, and the acknowledgment of orgasm and ejaculation. In discussing the desire for Bessie’s and Clara’s presence suggests the shared erotic experience Michael Eric Dyson described earlier, and in this case, the males involved actually expose their genitalia. Additionally, when Jack discusses what he knows about rich, white women, he says, “Ah, them rich white women’ll go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have their chauffeurs” (33). The suggestion is that Mary Dalton will probably have consensual sex with Bigger. Then Jack offers, “...if you run across anything too much for you to handle at that place, let me know,” which expresses the desire for sharing

² “Tip Drill” is a slang term referring to a woman considered attractive with the exception for her face. The music video caused controversy in 2004 at Spellman College when women protested and prevented Nelly’s visit on campus to promote a bone marrow drive.

women. Both in *Native Son* and rap videos such as “Tip Drill,” shared homoerotic experiences between men show a ritualistic attitude towards money, women, and weapons for the purposes of emphasizing control and status towards the rest of the community. Those who own the most of all three own the neighborhood.

For the hip-hop artist, the quest for alpha-male status begins with the establishment of a reputation among others based on the ability to rap. Under this context, a rapper without guns, money, or women may challenge others by using those themes in a freestyle or song. Cultural critic Rafael Perez-Torres argues, “Rap and hip-hop use sampling, mixing, toasting, wordplay, punning, and personal affirmation—indeed, creation—of self. These are manifestations of a formal and thematic *mestizaje*³,” or use of hybridity to create a new space (89). Perez-Torres continues, “Rap and hip-hop as postmodern art forms evoke a simultaneous placement and displacement,” which offers a space where poor, ghetto males may create identity and meaning. At the heart of hip-hop culture are two “primary thematic concerns: identity and location” (Rose 10). Because the art form demands a posse of homies, competition, and an audience, it creates a community that draws males to each other in order to establish their hip-hop space. The assertion of identity and space arrives through the ability to utilize and express one’s voice.

This need for voice relates back to the previous discussion of isolation within ghetto conditions. Having the ability to assert and express one’s identity in a broader, public context means the individual asserts and maintains her/his space on a national level. Thus, at the moment a male in the ghetto feels inclusion, he belongs to the nation. If not expressed through a creative

³ *Mestizaje*, refers to the blending of races, white Spaniard, American indigenous, and African, inherent in Mexican and Mexican-American culture. In this case, Perez-Torres uses the term and its underlying concept that *mestizaje* to the Chicano represents a push and pull (neither Mexican nor American) that ultimately serves as a space for the development of identity and critical consciousness.

outlet, such as hip-hop for rappers and writing for Richard Wright, the tendency then falls towards violence. This also explains why the iconography of the gun is so important to ghetto communities.

In *Native Son*, Bigger discovers the empowering effects of voice, especially after he murders Mary Dalton. Bigger begins thinking about the implications of his actions, which then develops meaning through experience. While at the breakfast table with his family the day after the murder, Bigger discovers his actions “formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself” (*Native Son* 105). As the murderer of a white woman, Bigger feels self-affirmation because he now embodies the black male as threat to white society, whereas that label was merely imposed on him. He owns something “others could not take from him” (105). Although morally wrong, the act in and of itself opens a new realm of confidence and possibility for Bigger Thomas. He realizes:

There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed. (106)

The idea of rupturing the public space with a declaration presents an extremely charged act: the assumptions and stereotypes representing African Americans males as lazy and complacent, fears of black males as violent and dangerous, Bigger taking agency on behalf of himself and others in his community, the reputation Bigger would acquire in his community and the greater Chicago area, etc. A public declaration ensures the attention of the city. This carves an identity and space for Bigger among the mainstream, although it also entitles him to punishment by the

law. The importance must not be missed. The simple act of transcending the confines of the ghetto is so powerful that it keeps Bigger fascinated.

The connection between actual murderer and hip-hop cop-killer appears later when Bigger further contemplates his actions. After Bigger offers his false account of the previous evening's actions to Mrs. Dalton, he thinks about "rare moments when a feeling and longing for solidarity with other black people would take hold of him" (114). His dreams circle "making a stand against that white force," but he soon finds his aspirations deflated by the realization of the futility of his dream based on the unlikelihood of uniting so many people with different perspectives. Bigger comes to the conclusion that "Only when threatened with death could that happen; only in fear and shame, with their backs against a wall, could that happen. But never could they sink their differences in hope" (114). What Bigger longs for is an organizing force that could galvanize the resentment, frustration, and anger towards being an African American in the United States, and fight for change—and it is a fight he believes it must be. In his mind, the catalyst for change will only arrive through intimidation and murder, which makes the solution equally violent and threatening. Harnessing the potential of violence, much like a rap from T.I. or N.W.A., appears to be what Bigger feels will yield the best results, but then an interesting change of opinion occurs.

Bigger considers the nature of the relationship between him and his friends. After having fought his friend Gus in order to avoid robbing a local shop, Bigger wonders whether violent action would solve poverty and racism. The narrator states:

Ultimately, though, [Bigger's] hate and hope turned outward from himself and Gus: his hope toward a vague benevolent something that would help and lead him, and his hate toward the whites; for he felt that they ruled him, even when

they were far away and not thinking of him, ruled him by conditioning him in his relations to his own people. (115)

The phrase, “benevolent something,” calls for something productive and creative that could counter negative forces and conditions placed upon Bigger and his community. One could argue that Bigger’s thoughts, and perhaps Wright’s, foretell the coming of a massive social phenomenon like the Civil Rights Movement. The development of hip-hop culture also belongs in the same conversation because hip-hop served to unite ghetto youth under the expression of art. Hip-hop culture essentially fulfills all these needs Bigger expressed. The purpose of the M.C. is to move the crowd, to bring people together. It allows for that “common binding” Bigger longs for that would bring his community together. The positive message infused in many hip-hop songs calls for that fusion of “gnawing hunger and restless aspiration” (*Native Son* 114). The need to assert identity and space through voice by black, ghetto males living under racially-oppressive and isolating conditions signals the need to create valid spaces where males may challenge and explore these issues.

As discussed in this chapter, living in a place like the South Side isolates the people living in that community from the rest of the city, and broadly speaking, the nation. Additionally, deplorable housing, overcrowding, and lack of public places for recreation create feelings of depression, frustration, anger, and hate towards themselves and others, which oftentimes lead to violent thoughts and actions. The dehumanizing effect the ghetto has on individuals leads people to develop coping mechanism and systems in an effort to assert their claim and worth as human beings. One method by which males in the ghetto cope is by creating homosocial relationships that serve as spaces they may control and manipulate, which contrasts with feelings of futility and powerlessness associated with the actual place in which they live. This circle of friends most

notably occurs within the phenomena of the “cipher” in hip-hop communities, where reputations are made, knowledge is shared, and momentary escapes from poverty and injustice occur. The following section shall explore the development of the cipher and its function as the preferred physical and intellectual space for ghetto males.

Chapter 3: Cultural Capital and the Cipher

“The Corner was our magic, our music, our politics.

Fires raised as tribal dances and war cries

Broke out on different corners.

Power to the people!

Black power!

Black is beautiful!”

-Dead Poets (featured in Common’s “The Corner”)

When Bigger Thomas reaches trial, Max, his lawyer, delivers an impassioned speech aimed at convincing the jury that Bigger’s sentencing carries major implications beyond the case. Max wants to prove the opportunity exists to reconsider and examine what would lead a black male like Bigger to commit a murder against a seemingly-innocent white woman. Max stresses how poverty and racial oppression led Bigger to murder out of lack of power over his own life. Max argues “[i]t was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him” (396). Bigger found significance and power through murder because it validated his existence as a human being. His act created the sort of ripple the entire city of Chicago noticed. Max goes on to state that Bigger accepted his actions as crimes because “it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight” (396). To Bigger, the act carried implications beyond a single murder.

Throughout the speech, Max returns to the importance of recognizing the reasoning behind Bigger’s crimes as: lack of creative outlets (377); crime as a form of expression (391); the “backwaters of religion, gambling and sex” as inadequate outlets (394); African Americans

being “stunted, stripped, and held captive *within* this nation(emphasis original)” (397); and finally, urging the jury to consider “[t]he actions that resulted in the death of those two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one’s eyes. It was an act of *creation!* (emphasis original)” (400). Max’s speech and its emphasis of the lack of expressive outlets are important for two reasons. First, Max recognizes that Bigger shares the same ambitions and desires for self-actualization as any other human being living in the United States. He wants to live a meaningful life. Second, Max’s highly-eloquent speech is able to express Bigger’s thoughts and emotions to an audience comprised of both white and authoritative individuals.

James A. Miller points out that many critics such as Irving Howe, Robert Bone, and Dan McCall argue Max’s speech “leads to the conclusion that Bigger Thomas himself is inarticulate, incapable of negotiating conflict between ‘thought’ and ‘feeling’ which defines his emotional life for a great deal of the novel, incapable of telling his own story and, therefore, of defining himself” (501). Miller adds that the use of a third-person narrator “who is clearly more politically informed and verbally articulate than Bigger himself” is central to proving Bigger’s lack of voice. The argument that Bigger is inarticulate is certainly valid when considering his “yessuh” and “yessum” responses to the Daltons and the various moments when he fails responding to questions or gestures early in the novel. For example, when Jan states, “I’ll call you Bigger and you’ll call me Jan. That’s the way it’ll be between us. How’s that?” Bigger does not know how to answer and feels confused when Mary assures Bigger that “Jan *means* it (emphasis original)” (66). Having never been approached by a white person in such a friendly manner baffles Bigger and makes him wonder throughout the evening whether Mary and Jan are in the middle of playing some sort of practical joke. He feels so insecure before a white audience that he avoids conversation and fumbles with words when forced to speak.

In the last section of the novel, while Bigger is in jail contemplating death, the narrator states:

But Bigger wanted to save his own life. Yet he knew that the moment he tried to put his feelings into words, his tongue would not move. Many times, when alone after Max had left him, he wondered wistfully if there was not a set of words which he had in common with others, words which would evoke in others a sense of the same fire that smoldered in him. (364)

Bigger wishes to express to others what he felt were the reasons behind the murders, while asserting his humanity to those seeking vengeance against him. He figures that if he could express his thoughts to other people, they would understand the frustration and hate he feels towards the world. Critics arguing for Bigger's inarticulateness would read the latter passage as proof, but those critics miss the importance of Bigger's desire to communicate to "others." While Bigger is searching for words with which to express his thoughts and emotions to a white audience, he is articulate within his own community.

If, as established in the previous chapter, *Native Son* and hip-hop each function as sociological lenses for studying the conditions of ghetto communities and how they affect many males living in these places, then they also provide insight to how males relate to each other. Many times, they adopt coping strategies through homosocial relationships. The nature of the relationship Bigger Thomas shares with his friends serves as a precursor to the arrival of the "cipher" in the hip-hop community because it reflects the desire and ambition to engage in intellectual activity despite the educational disadvantages Bigger's friends suffer as a result of living in the South Side. Both *Native Son* and hip-hop also demonstrate the reclaiming of public space, which is best explained through Pierre Bourdieu's theories behind the *habitus*, practice,

and social capital. Bourdieu's work helps reveal that male, homosocial relationships in the inner-city create their own circles that provide outlets meant to ensure intellectual and emotional survival.

Pierre Bourdieu's views on language, and his sociological experience working in Algeria, provide a theoretical context appropriate to the experiences of many African Americans in the United States, specifically, those living in hip-hop communities. Bridget Fowler argues Bourdieu's childhood in the "peasant area of Béarn" coupled with his anthropological work in Algeria "shaped his analysis of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist forms and of the distinctive patterns of domination associated with modernity" (13). A similar, not exact, situation existed as many African Americans from the post-Civil War South migrated northwards and settled in cities such as Chicago and New York. Additionally, black Americans were forced to live in segregated, socially stratified communities affording little opportunities for economic, social, or political advancement.

What Bourdieu witnessed in Algeria was the colonial introduction of capitalism by the French government into Algeria. What he also saw was how communities (Algerian tribes) that were subordinated by a dominant community (France) functioned. His thoughts in terms of language, culture, and cultural capital correlate with the African American experience and bring definite insight into how African American communities have responded to their living conditions since modernity.

For example, Bourdieu shows that the "peasant Kabylia" tribe follows "the logic of social honour or symbolic capital which takes the place of the accumulation of economic capital in the Kabylia life-cycle" (Fowler 14). Bourdieu uses this to refute against popular notions of the Kabylia and other tribes as being stereotyped as primitive or barbaric for their lack of adjustment

within the imposed capitalist system. With little opportunity for economic advancement, the Kabylia instead took the Western preference for “self-expression” and adopted a “dialectic of distinction” (16). Thus, where once a member of the Kabylia assumed a communal approach towards his/her society, there arose a new need to distinguish oneself, thereby creating and accumulating cultural capital, which then ensured status within the community. Bourdieu finds that the confrontation between Algerian and French culture yielded “a small compensation, a new culture,” which led to the development of a new Algerian poetic form that composed “songs of resistance composed anonymously during the war against the French” (16). Through these experiences, Bourdieu conceives of the idea that one of the results of being colonized and/or dominated by a stronger, capitalist community creates the need for art or, “a sacred aesthetic sphere” (16). It is here that the strong connection to African American cultural products of protest occurs.

The development of hip-hop primarily in the Bronx by gangs rather than tribes is that exact “sacred aesthetic sphere.” People living in the poorest neighborhoods in New York and other ghettos were commonly referred to as barbaric or other similar words. Also, because these neighborhoods (and Richard Wright’s) lacked the economic means for advancement in a capitalist society, they searched for alternative ways of creating capital. In other words, the development of hip-hop culture can be read as the attempt by youth in the inner city to create forms of social and cultural capital, thereby developing a structure that would allow the building and development of status, one of the important motivators in a capitalist system.

The ways people in the hip-hop community created social capital depended largely on the nature of what category (breaking, djing, rapping, and graffiti art) of hip-hop in which they

worked. For my purposes, I want to focus on the “cipher” because of its continued use and relevance in hip-hop communities, from street corners to backstage areas of arena concerts.

The “cipher” is a hip-hop term defining the cyclical space between two or more rappers who are engaging in a freestyle rap session⁴. Abiodun Oyewole, of the Last Poets⁵, describes the cipher as the same sort of phenomenon that occurs in school-yard fights, where suddenly a spontaneous circle forms, and the fighters are in the middle. He states, “...but now you see the circles [and] the same energy is there, but it’s like somebody is doing a poem” (Fitzgerald). The cipher does take on the poetic nature of spontaneous free verse, and it privileges poetic and clever rhymes. Oyewole also mentions that the “circumference” of the cipher creates “...a protection, and at the same time, it’s an expression, so the circle is there [and] it seems to be almost claustrophobic, but everybody’s free and they want to be tight like that, together like that.” The space promotes unity to all involved, from the rappers competing against each other, to those creating the beat, and all the other spectators who shout and applaud a great flow.

Because the space promotes unity, it is considered sacred for several reasons. First, because ciphers usually occur in public places, its location becomes a reclaimed and redefined space. In an interview, rapper Mos Def describes what ciphering meant to him while growing up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn:

Hip-hop for me was always a way to, like, kinda stay outta trouble, it was moments when it was just sublime you know you was just standing in the cipher, [and] it would just form [...] you be three or four other MCs, and ya’ll bump into

⁴ Ciphers are also created and used in break dancing, but again, for the purposes of this work, I will concentrate on rapping.

⁵ The Last Poets are considered one of the major precursors to hip-hop. By writing and performing poetry on street corners and performing works based on growing up in the ghetto, the Last Poets are heavily respected by the hip-hop community. They last appeared in a song and video in Common’s “The Corner,” off of the 2005 album, *Be*.

three other MCs and the cipher would just start, and the people around you would just start looking. (Fitzgerald)

Mos Def's comments on the cipher being a sort of "sublime" activity presents the next reason why it is considered sacred. Because freestyle sessions require spontaneous, creative rapping, and a sort of brotherhood among MCs, many believe the actual ritual of the cipher creates a moment of transcendence, which many equate with the sorts of experiences associated with religion. Toni Blackman, founder of the Freestyle Union, and the first hip-hop cultural ambassador appointed by the State Department, believes the cipher is "about completion of thought and a circle of unity" that theoretically may last infinitely (Fitzgerald). When the conditions are correct, when the participants and their rhymes all fall into place, Blackman argues the cipher feels "...like next level spirituality." Under this view, the cipher serves as a powerful cultural site where black males unite to create meaning, power, spirituality, and transcendence literally out of thin air.

Richard Wright observed the need for the creation of spaces like the cipher. In his essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Richard Wright argues, "There is, however, a culture of the Negro which is his and has been addressed to him; a culture which has, for good or ill, helped to clarify his consciousness and create emotional attitudes which are conducive to action" (99). He names two sources for this culture: "(1) the Negro church; and (2) the folklore of the Negro people" (sic). Here, Wright makes his own connection to hip-hop music and culture. He states:

It was, however, in a folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, to confidential wisdom

of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns—all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed. (99)

This use and need for orality in order to exchange information, to understand each other is at the basis of hip-hop culture. The previous statement alludes to the ability of African Americans to create and develop culture by making due with available resources, which historically has been the oral tradition.

Most notably in hip hop culture, the oral tradition exists within the cipher. Those who make up the core of the cipher must participate, which makes the practice exclusionary towards strangers, and yet, a cipher may occur spontaneously. Because of its nature and development on the streets, any group of rappers may start a cipher on a random street corner, on the school playground, or anywhere they deem the occasion appropriate for a freestyle session. In Wright's latter statement, it seems that "the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular" occurs often within ciphers as well as the sharing of information, wisdom, attitudes, etc.

In *Native Son*, although Bigger Thomas and his friends live decades before hip hop, they do engage in a cipher of their own. Early in the novel, he runs into Gus as he nears the pool hall where Bigger and his friends usually meet. Both men begin chatting about the weather, which leads them to noticing a plane flying overhead. Bigger and Gus discuss the possibility of ever flying, which leads them to a sort of freestyle session. During the discussion of flight, they touch on the subjects of pilot potential, racial and economic barriers preventing flight, the racist treatment of African Americans, and finally Bigger's declaration: "Cause if I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along and drop 'em as sure as hell...." (17). This is a moment of

discussion and creativity where two men in the cipher discuss a random topic. This is a practice within freestyle rapping many commonly practice. An object, subject, topic, etc. will be thrown into the cipher at random, and rappers must use it as the launching pad for their lyrics.

The flight discussion seems like a sort of warm-up because after they share a laugh over bombing white people, Bigger gets the idea to “play ‘white’” (17). This is a moment of act and play where Bigger and Gus, as explained by the narrator, “imitated the ways and manners of white folks.” They jump from portraying a general in the army, to J.P. Morgan selling shares of stock, and the President of the United States making policy decisions. Each situation involves someone playing a powerful character making decisions that adversely affect the African American community. The moment delivers levity, but also allows both young men to vent their frustrations towards a government and society they feel deliberately oppresses them. What connects this particular moment to a hip-hop cipher is that both men are engaged in a creative moment where they rely on orality in order to communicate, exchange ideas, and create arguments. According to James Miller, Bigger is part of the “world of the black, urban, male, lumpenproletariat” (503). Miller argues that when he is with his friends, such as the previous scene with Gus, “Not only is Bigger articulate in this world, he exercises considerable power within it.” This explains why he would make daring assertions about bombing others, and why he and Gus comfortably poke fun at how they believe white men behave. In other scenes, such as Bigger’s interview with Mr. Dalton, he is powerless, which is signified by his change in diction and tone.

Additionally, the cipher serves as a useful tool towards understanding Bigger when considering the nature of Bigger’s gang. Oftentimes, because hip hop is a male-dominated phenomenon, ciphers tend to be homosocial. According to Aimé J. Ellis, one of the least

examined aspects of *Native Son* by critics is the nature of the relationship between Bigger and his friends. He states, “Bigger’s deeply emotional conversations with his homeboys constitute a site of black male community that allows them to purge the psychic pain of urban blight as well as symbolize an intimate space for sharing their dreams, aspirations, and joys” (184). Certainly, Wright conveys the sentiment that young black men are on the verge of losing their minds. Soon after their exercise in mocking white men, Bigger falls into a depressed state where he confides in Gus that he feels tragedy is in his future. He tells Gus, “Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me...” (20). Gus advises Bigger to ignore the oppression much like they do every day. He warns his friend, “Aw, nigger, quit thinking about it. You’ll go nuts” as both advise to avoid feeling overwhelmed and an acknowledgment of the constant presence of oppression.

Ellis’s analysis echoes Wright’s assertions about the development of African American culture, that, “the social and cultural world that those poor urban black males created for themselves on the streets, in poolrooms, and even in the balconies of segregated movie theaters was a place to commiserate over and recover from the absurdity of living within a culture of terror” (185). The same cultural world that Bigger creates in order to breathe against the overwhelming oppression of his socioeconomic state is the same kind that launched ciphers at block parties in the Bronx during the 70s and 80s.

Bigger’s conversation with Gus seems like a routine occurrence, since they found each other near their local haunt, the pool hall. One could imagine Bigger “playing white” at least on a weekly basis, and if according to Ellis, this is a way of creating sanity for young black males,

then this cipher bridges another connection with their hip-hop counterparts. Michael Newman, who studies ciphers in the New York area, argues ciphers share four common characteristics:

- Opposition and competition are assumed.
- The MC boasts of his own abilities and puts down his opponents
- Motifs assume what Kiesling (1997, 1998) calls hegemonic masculinity, largely comprising penetration, potency, and destruction.
- Action takes place in ‘concept,’ a rhetorical space clearly distanced from reality. (sic) (413).

Newman elaborates that the four qualities he describes above “are certainly formulaic and may appear limiting and even monotonous to an outsider,” but he found that those who engage in ciphers never expressed ennui. In looking over the four qualities, one finds Bigger and Gus engaged in all four. The kind of oppressed, black young man Richard Wright presents in Bigger Thomas certainly thinks, acts, and interacts in the same manner as young MCs engaged in ciphers on contemporary streets.

A rapper can make or break his name among the community through the cipher. Jeff Chang believes ciphers are at “the core of hip-hop” because:

If you have the guts to step into the cipher and tell your story and, above all, demonstrate your uniqueness, you might be accepted into the community. Here is where reputations are made and risked and stylistic change is fostered.

(“It’s a...” 60)

Crowds form around ciphers, especially when people feel a work of genius is happening. There are legendary stories behind ciphers in neighborhoods around the country, and internet sites like *YouTube!* feature thousands of ciphers ranging from unknown adolescents to the famous footage

of a 17-year-old unknown named Christopher Wallace who freestyles in front of a crowd in the Bedford- Stuyvesant neighborhood years before becoming the Notorious B.I.G.

The circular, give-and-take interaction among males contradict notions of the lack of intellectual activity and articulateness among males in ghetto communities. Within a comforting space, black males express their thoughts, emotions, and intelligence to each other. Additionally, the competitive spirit of the cipher creates alternative forms of social capital that function in a local system designating status, notoriety, and upward mobility within inner city communities.

The nature of the cipher brings to mind Bourdieu's concepts of *practice* and the *habitus*. Fowler explains Bourdieu's *practice*, "means an agent makes decisions and moves his or her body in a 'regularized improvisation' like jazz" (16). Additionally, Bourdieu roots practice in "the everyday life of modernity," meaning that people learn practice through simply living and acquire knowledge through experience (17). Practice fits nicely with the concept of the cipher because expertise and success in the cipher depends on experience, and more importantly, by acquiring the subtle rules in an activity seemingly chaotic to an outsider.

For example, entering a cipher can require difficult maneuvering once the actual cipher commences. Simply intruding or interrupting the cycle could interrupt the "flow" of the cipher and ruin the rhythm occurring among the participants both vocally and intellectually. One could only enter the cipher if the moment allows. Usually, a friend may transition his flow towards introducing one into the cipher. An MC with prestige and notoriety usually may enter a cipher at will, once again emphasizing the importance of carrying significant social capital.

Another, more abstract example is the actual order of the cipher. Many times, the cipher goes from person to person in a cyclical fashion, but other times, when more than two rappers are involved, the cipher may jump to the person across, the person to the right, the person

diagonally to the left, etc. The moment when a rapper ends his freestyle to the moment another picks up the flow should be quick and as subtle as possible. After experiencing cipher after cipher, those involved know the subtle rules and should execute them seamlessly.

Additionally, ciphers demand a specific tone of voice, preference for slang, and even a specific way of moving the body. All of these behaviors display Bourdieu's belief that "It is not just that social learning is ingrained on the body, like the scars sometimes signifying transition into adulthood, rather it is imitated unconsciously through specific bodily actions" (Fowler 17). The crowd, the rappers, the circle itself, all make up the hip-hop habitus. Bourdieu's habitus can be defined as "[the] system of schemes of ... perception, thought appreciation and action which are durable and transposable" (18). Out of this form of the habitus, as stated earlier, a street rapper gains street credibility and fame, or social capital. Additionally, as Bourdieu also states, for members of a subordinate community, the habitus "leads them to choose actively what they are objectively constrained to do" (18). Bourdieu's point here is important because it shows that subordinated communities acquire and share the same desires reflected by the broader, dominant community. Whether it is Bigger Thomas or an M.C., the urge to acquire social capital arises out of the need to distinguish oneself in a competition for superiority, respect, and dominance. The desire to generate and acquire social capital reflects the market-oriented nature of a capitalist society. This affects all factors of the community, including matters such as taste. For example, the decision to create ciphers in public spaces as a reclaiming of space and making it one's own also reflects the lack of private spaces many living in inner cities know all too well.

For Bourdieu, "Successful practice requires the actor both to operate within a specific habitus and to act creatively beyond the specific injunctions of its rules" (Fowler 18). In other words, an individual succeeds when s/he understands the rules of her/his habitus and understands

how to bend the rules in order to create something new or different. This idea is especially conducive to the cipher because rappers who produce the most creative rhymes win the most battles and gain the most accolades. Here is where hip-hop most closely resembles poetry because the best rappers will utilize poetic devices, forms, and modes in order to stand out. For example⁶, one of the most popular freestyle moments on the internet is the footage of rapper Mos Def in Brooklyn when he was a rising star⁷. He stands in the middle of a cipher, bobbing his head up and down as an unidentified person beatboxes⁸ for him. He plays with the “ee” sound over several rhymes at a quick pace. He states:

Brown skin I be
Standing 5’10 I be
Rockin’ it when I be
In your vicinity
Raw style, synergy
Recognize symmetry
Don’t try to injure me

⁶ Mos Def’s freestyle lasts about fifty seconds and length and mastery of his flow is worth looking at. The *YouTube* link is provided in the works cited page. Here are the lyrics in case you would like to follow along: Slim brown skin I be/ Standing five ten I be/ Rockin’ it when I be/ In your vicinity/ Raw style synergy/ Recognize symmetry/ Constant to the edge of me/ Broken down chemically/ Ain’t another ten MC/ Talking about how I been I be/ Styled like Kennedy/ Late like a ten to 3/ When I say when I be/ Girls say *venga aquí*/ Cuz they tend to be/ Way out like Tennessee/ Take me to a place called the BK/ Without pause or delay/ Yet run like Penn relay/ Don’t deal with he say she say/ Ain’t working for no cheap play/ Mos Def beat play/ This what the streets say/ Hey mister DJ/ Play that devil Mo’gain/ That jam got me open/ Beside to break it broken/ From front side to side/ Middle to back/ Never the wack/ I come from Bedstuy black/ From Louis CVE to be exact/ Brooklyn...

⁷ Originally seen in the documentary *Freestyle: The Art of Rhyme*.

⁸ The hip-hop art of making “beats” or the rhythm and bass sounds to which freestylers rap along. This is usually done with one’s mouth or whatever can be turned into an instrument (for example: banging a lighter against the fender of a car).

Broke 'em down chemich'ly

Attempting to freestyle is difficult enough, but to follow a strict meter and tempo like Mos Def does shows mastery of the cipher. Also, the lines show a progression from introduction of self, to self boast, to a description of why he boasts. He shows “successful practice” most a few lines later:

Way out like Tennessee

Take me to a

Place called the BK

Without pause or delay

Get run like pen relay

Don't deal with he say she say

Ain't workin' for no cheap pay

Mos Def borrows the line “Take me to a place called” from the 1992 song, “Tennessee,” by the rap/R&B/jazz fusion group Arrested Development. Off the top of his head, Mos Def joins a nostalgic song about growing up Tennessee with a nostalgic view of Brooklyn, his home growing up. Additionally, instead of sticking to the rhythm and cadence of his rap voice, Mos Def also adds a creative twist to the way one can freestyle in the cipher. If anyone needs more proof of his successful practice, one only needs to look at the crowd behind him and the roar of approval when he finishes his freestyle.

Rhyming words and drawing a crowd seems like a task that requires some skill, but the ability to produce a truly impressive freestyle in a cipher requires “difficult practice skills” that many times are dismissed by those looking from the outside (Fowler 18). This has been one of the biggest challenges to rappers and the rap industry. Critics often say that rap is a degeneration

of music because it involves a speaking form of communication versus more traditional or pure singing. Rap seems like the kind of art anyone can do. Here again, Bourdieu concept of practice explains this relationship, except rather than hip-hop, he talks about athletes and painters. An athlete, such as a football player has a “feel” for what must happen when playing (Fowler 18). In painting:

...the painter not only acquires a sense of how other artists fit together in the chain of producers, but also masters the medium practically by solving the problematic issues present at any given moment. This often distinguishes him from the art critic, who frequently lacks awareness of such difficult practice skills.
(18)

Thus, those looking from the outside, without catching the subtle behaviors and practices within the habitus, are likely to miss the skill and mastery required to appreciate the activity. This is one reason explaining the dismissal of rappers as artists, and the neglect of rappers in major awards such as the Grammys.

Alternatives to the cipher are few and inadequate and so are opportunities for the acquisition of social capital. Bigger Thomas acquires a noticeable amount of social capital after murdering Mary and Bessie, but suffers his own death in return. As Lowe states, one of the goals of living in both pre-capitalist and capitalist societies is the desire to “achieve recognition as one of the great” (20). In other words, “symbolic capital” is important. Lowe argues “than an important category of the possession of symbolic capital may simply mean achievement of a *human* existence” (sic). Lowe’s statement raises an interesting point, especially when considering the social position of someone like Bigger Thomas who only feels recognized as a human being after he commits murder.

Bigger recognizes how a racist society will judge him and develops a sense of belonging in a society in which he felt marginalized as a result of Mary's death. When being questioned by Mary's father and Britten, he finds power in the ability to mislead both men based on their underestimation of Bigger based on race. After the initial shock and paranoid fears subside, Bigger comes to what he believes is an empowering realization:

The shame and fear and hate which Mary and Jan and Mr. Dalton and that huge house had made rise so hard and hot in him had now cooled and softened. Had he not done what they thought he never could? His being black and at the bottom of the world was something which he could take with a new-born strength. What his knife and gun had once meant to him, his knowledge of having secretly murdered Mary now meant. No matter how they laughed at him for his being black and clownlike, he could look them in the eyes and not feel angry. The feeling of being always enclosed in the stifling embrace of an invisible force had gone from him.

(150)

The importance of the moment is that Bigger arrives at a feeling of symbolic capital. Although no one else knows he murdered Mary, the act is so powerful that he knows the act potentially could establish him both fame and infamy within both the larger Chicago community, and his South Side neighborhood. After the aggressive inquiry by Britten, Bigger increases the value of his symbolic capital:

The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score. (164)

Bigger believes that by killing Mary, he took her symbolic capital as the female ideal and made it his own. Despite her death being an accident, the act is so charged by Bigger's identity as a black male that it is sure to win him some symbolic capital.

Lowe's previous statement about symbolic capital being important merely when achieving "human existence" applies to Bigger Thomas because for the first time in his life, he feels like a person. A black man murdering an important white woman suddenly entitles Bigger to a new set of considerations and treatment by his and the white community. In other words, Bigger now feels more like a human being because in his mind, he was able to accomplish a feat considered almost impossible for anyone in his community. The last section of the novel, with the outpouring of attention and media coverage over Bigger's trial, also elevates Bigger's status.

Once Bigger perceives he acquired social capital, the decision to murder Bessie, his girlfriend becomes a cold, rational decision. As he stands over her sleeping body, Bigger goes through a moment of indecision over whether he should commit murder. Again, one must remember that Mary Dalton's death was the result of circumstances outside of Bigger's control. When Bigger holds the brick over Bessie's head, he panics for a second, but he is able to control his nerves and decide, "He couldn't take her and he couldn't leave her; so he would have to kill her. It was his life against hers" (236). After he disposes of her body, Bigger reaffirms his self-importance. The narrator states:

And, yet, out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power. *He* had done this. *He* had brought all this about (emphasis original). In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes.

Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight.

(239)

The sentence describing “living truly and deeply” harkens back to Lowe’s idea of “human existence.” Bigger finds so much value and worth in his two murders because he feels an element of control and agency beyond anything he felt previously. The narrator describes Bigger’s sense of self-actualization as a merging of thought and action:

There was something he *knew* and something he *felt*; something the *world* gave him and something he *himself* had; something spread out in *front* of him and something spread out in *back*; and never in all his life, with this black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together; never had he felt a sense of wholeness (emphasis original). (240)

What Bigger essentially experiences is successful practice on a level he never considered. In being able to commit both murders and elude capture up until this point in the novel, Bigger feels success in being able to utilize his faculties and abilities to ensure survival.

Eventually Bigger is caught and isolated in a jail cell where he appears inarticulate to the broader public. His confession follows the same pattern of short responses he used when speaking to the Daltons. Bigger does not testify in court. Max delivers a long, eloquent speech that seemingly contains more words than all the dialogue attributed to Bigger in the entire novel. Yet, the amount of social capital Bigger acquires as a result of all the people visiting him in jail, the angry mobs threatening to lynch him, and the vast media coverage, lead Bigger to ponder the value of his own life. When Bigger attempts to engage with Max at the end of the novel, he

terrifies and scares Max because both characters lack sufficient practice in each other's worlds to understand each other, but Bigger feels qualified to offer his own words. He struggles with his capture and sentencing until the moment he expresses his thoughts to Max. It is at this moment that Bigger provides his perspective on the entire situation, apologizes to his mother, and appears at peace with impending death. Most notably, Bigger waving goodbye, he says, "Tell....Tell Mister....Tell Jan hello...." (430). Bigger feels entitled to call Jan by his first name when the thought of the action once terrified him. The final image of the "faint, wry, bitter smile" on Bigger's face expresses a kind of moral victory for someone who always felt on the losing end.

In the final pages of *Native Son*, Bigger achieves a level of articulateness before a white audience that once frightened him. Unfortunately, in Bigger's case, it was murder that created sufficient social capital for Bigger to arrive at a level of comfort that would allow him to state his thoughts. In the hip-hop world, rappers battling each other in ciphers develop the reputations and skills that transition into careers as professional MCs that build social and economic capital. Once rappers turn their work into profitable cultural products, the moment of reception moves from the cipher to the broader economic market, which affects the nature of subsequent cultural products and their intended uses. Discussion over the past ten years has raged over whether hip-hop lost its soul in the name of profit, which replaced the MC expressing anger and hate out of the need for change with the rapper using popular stereotypes to sell records. The publication of *Native Son* informs this discussion when considering the commercial success the novel achieved. The final chapter will examine whether mass commodification of African American cultural products such as hip-hop and *Native Son* helps promote awareness and change or strips these products of their power through racial voyeurism and stereotyping.

Chapter 4: Cultural Consumption and Voyeurism

“Now the former slaves trade hooks for grammies

This dark diction has become America’s addiction

Those who ain’t even black use it

We ‘gon keep baggin’ up dis here crack music.”

-Malik Yusef (featured in “Crack Music” by Kanye West)

The creation of African American cultural products like *Native Son* and hip-hop present opportunities to challenge accepted notions about the societal status quo. Sharing the story of Bigger Thomas allowed Richard Wright to confront the American reading public with issues regarding class and race he felt needed urgent attention. Many hip-hop artists also feel compelled to use their talents to spread awareness and express the male ghetto experience through their songs and music videos. Additionally, as discussed through my study, the narratives of hip-hop and Bigger Thomas also offer insight into how males adapt to the inner-city through group formation that allows for the development of social capital, which serves as an outlet for emotion and creative intellect. In addition to raising awareness, part of the activist nature of *Native Son* and hip-hop is to humanize African American males for the broader public.

The idea of exposing audiences to these narratives carries the hope of informing and changing perspectives. But do they really? What happens once these works move from the margins to the center? My chief concern in this chapter is to examine in what ways do African American cultural works such as *Native Son* and hip-hop function and change once commodified for consumption not only for other people living in ghetto communities, but the larger, white-dominated American market. Do these works gain power by increasing awareness and understanding, or do they diminish in strength at the point of reception based on motive for

consumption? What ties Richard Wright's novel to hip-hop is the astronomical rise both experienced as a result of quick, massive consumption by eager audiences. Also, the current debate over the role and responsibility of hip-hop in American society continuously centers itself around the reasons behind consumption. Similar to the questions Richard Wright once faced, are hip-hop artists promoting African American culture, or are they promoting stereotypes in the name of profit?

While composing *Native Son*, Richard Wright held specific notions regarding cultural consumption, which unfold through the progression of the novel. As mentioned in my second chapter, Richard Wright criticized previous works by African American writers as "confined to humble novels, poems, and plays," that converted these artists into "prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America" ("Blueprint..." 97). Wright felt that previous black authors created works that reinforced racist, hegemonic structures governing African American art and expression. According to Barbara Johnson, *Native Son* was the novel "that transformed the avuncular diminutions of previous Negro writing (including his own) into a larger and bolder form of assertion, changing the uncle, Tom, into a bigger Thomas (sic)" (149). Wright's goal for producing such a raw, gruesome, and violent novel was that it would shake readers into paying attention to the pressing issues regarding the state of impoverished African Americans living in ghetto communities. He also understood how scandal would attract more readers, and thus, a larger audience to listen to his warning. After all, audiences today still trouble over the hatred and violence displayed in *Native Son*.

From start to finish, the reader experiences the novel by peeking over Bigger's shoulder, which transforms reading into a voyeuristic activity. The reader, as peeping tom, engages in the sort of alarming cultural consumption that allured readers into vicariously living out sexual and

violent fantasies. Wright's goal was to turn this consumption on its head in order to promote understanding rather than catharsis. Hence, rather than a clear and/or happy resolution, Bigger stays in jail awaiting death and Max leaves regretful in his failure to both save Bigger's life and teach him what he felt was the importance of Bigger's trial.

Voyeuristic consumption plays a prominent role throughout the novel to show the reader how the framing and exploitation of cultural content affirms hegemonic structures. Early in the novel, Bigger and Jack watch commodified images expressing societal roles based on race while at the movie theater. First, a newsreel features Mary Dalton and other young, white women at an idyllic beach in Florida. The film's narrator states, "*This little collection of debutantes represents over four billion dollars of America's wealth and over fifty of America's leading families... (sic)*" (31). The use of the word, "little," juxtaposed with the amount of money the women represent sets up the paradoxical nature of wealth distribution in the United States. The images and continued commentary emphasize idealism, exclusivity, and racial superiority for Bigger and Jack. As the film progresses, the narrator reveals that Mary prefers the company of an unidentified Communist, who most likely is Jan, over other men. While watching Jan and Mary chase each other on the beach, Jack and Bigger draw conclusions about the sexual nature of white women based on stereotypes they previously heard. The camera's focus on both Mary and Jan's legs creates a hyper-sexual portrayal of their relationship. When Mary's legs flex as she stands on her toes to kiss Jan, the narrator's comment, "*Ah, the naughty rich! (sic)*" affirms the belief that the daughters of the wealthy seek pleasure from encounters with dangerous elements such as Communists. Jack explains to Bigger, "These rich folks do their dirt on the sly" (32-33), which both allows Jack and Bigger to indulge in the pleasurable act of consuming hyper-sexualized images on screen, and Bigger begins wondering whether Mary would ever want him.

Bigger thinks to himself, “Maybe Mary Dalton was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money; maybe she’d like to come to the South Side and see the sights sometime” (34). It is through consuming these images that Jack and Bigger develop beliefs inscribing sexually-charged, idealized meanings on white women. The film scene displays how cultural consumption powerfully takes hold of individuals and informs their beliefs and attitudes. The voyeuristic quality makes the individual feel complicit and thus, assumes ownership of her/his thoughts without considering what forces influenced the adoption of those notions. After the newsreel ends, *Trader Horn*, the 1931 film about a white explorer’s adventures through Africa, plays. The film creates a powerful contrast from the wealth and status of Mary Dalton by showing “pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances...” (33). Wright includes the contrast to show how images are juxtaposed to reinforce social roles and attitudes.

The use of the media as a site of consumption increases in prominence throughout *Native Son*, most notably in the form of newspapers. According to Ross Pudaloff, the strongest example of cultural consumption in the novel occurs through Bigger’s increasing interest in reading the newspaper to learn more information about himself. Bigger’s interest in reading the newspaper begins once reporters begin investigating Mary’s disappearance. Once on the run, Bigger engages in the pleasurable experience of cultural consumption. When the edition appears that Bigger worked under Jan because “the plan of the murder and kidnapping was too elaborate to be the work of a Negro mind,” Bigger wants the newspaper to assert his place as the sole murderer (245). The narrator states, “At that moment he wanted to walk out into the street and up to a policeman and say, ‘No! Jan didn’t help me!’” Bigger’s “smile that was half-leer and half-defiance” shows that he understands how media accounts shape narratives for others. He wants

the power and prestige associated with being a black criminal who pulled off a scheme without help.

Pudaloff maintains that Bigger fosters a sense of identity framed through the various articles detailing Mary's disappearance, the manhunt, his arrest, and the trial. Pudaloff states:

[Bigger] wants to read 'the story, his story' in the papers, and with his pun Wright collapses history into the contents of the front page to suggest that Bigger can understand himself only as a product of mass culture at its most destructive. Bigger searches for that 'fullness' which he finds not in reality so much as in the representations of reality he encounters [magazines, newspapers, movies, etc] ...the self he finds can only be found in those images of himself that the culture presents to him. (161-62)

Prior to reading newspaper accounts, Bigger felt invisible among the greater Chicago public. The acknowledgment of his existence by the media allowed Bigger to conceive how others viewed his role in society, which dictated his identity. Thus, through the newspapers, Bigger roots the meaning behind his life in how others see him. What is most compelling about this conception of identity is that Bigger, by watching himself, is both subject *and* voyeur. While the reader looks over his shoulder, Bigger is looking over the shoulder of the media to view himself, and just like the reader's perceptions are framed by Richard Wright's narrative, Bigger's perceptions of himself are framed by the *Tribune's* reporters. Just like the newsreels in the theater, the power of affirming hegemonic beliefs through cultural consumption occur through the newspaper.

Moreover, Bigger's hunger to engage in this act of self-voyeurism increases with each additional article. While jailed, Bigger develops a specific routine for reading the newspaper that reflects self-indulgence and guilt. First, he waits for privacy and reads until despair forces him to

quit. The desire for consuming more compels him to seek out the latest edition and always overpowers the misery of the previous article. Pudaloff specifically points to the instance when Bigger wakes up after fainting at the inquest because he awakens “physically and psychologically hungry” (Pudaloff 162). Bigger’s voracious appetite reflects the level of satisfactory pleasure consumption offers:

Gingerly, he cut a piece of steak and put it into his mouth. It tasted so good that he tried to swallow it before he chewed it. He sat on the edge of the cot and drew the chair forward so that he could reach the food. He ate so fast that his jaws ached. He stopped and held the food in his mouth, feeling the juices of his glands flowing round it. When he was through, he lit a cigarette, stretched out upon the cot and closed his eyes. He dozed off to an uneasy sleep. (278)

The act of eating in this instance mimics the progression of a sexual act. Bigger’s eagerness described in the first three sentences displays an excited, desperate reach for pleasure. The aching, savoring, and function of glands all evoke sensuous images associated with sex, primarily climax, and finally, the cigarette and nap sound more like the final acts at the end of a love scene in a film than the reaction to a meal. In creating a highly-charged eating experience, Wright wants the reader to understand the level of pleasure physical consumption may create and link that same sort of hunger and pleasure to cultural consumption. After his nap, Bigger’s immediate need is to acquire a newspaper. He wonders, “What were they saying now?” as he approaches the policeman guarding his cell. Although “still weak and giddy,” Bigger is so excitable that the guard on duty tells him to “take it easy” (278-79). Again, Bigger is eager and desperate to consume. According to Pudaloff, “It can be no accident that these two forms of consumption are linked in the text. What gives Bigger the ability to live and assert himself in the

world is the act of consuming what the world gives him” (162). Thus, Bigger’s hunger develops into an addiction for more.

By linking both acts, Wright shows the tremendous power cultural consumption holds over individuals, which means those controlling the content and messages expressed through cultural products also exert control over consumers. Bigger’s reliance on newspaper accounts reflected Wright’s concern with power structures involved in cultural consumption. Because prominent images produced by the media are created and manipulated by the “ruling elite,” they control what is most accessible to consumers, which means they are more likely to produce images that will “maintain its profits and hegemony” (Pudaloff 165). This is certainly visible in the racist, damning language used in the newspaper accounts portraying Bigger as simple-minded, animalistic, and brutal.

Bigger is not the only character voyeuristically watching the events surrounding his life. Readers of the *Tribune* as well as readers of the novel follow the events of Bigger’s jailing and sentencing also through the act of reading. The article describing Bigger’s inquest contains language evoking the act of voyeurism. Aside from describing Bigger’s physical appearance along animalistic terms, the article states, “It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex passion, overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her, then stuffed her body into the roaring furnace to destroy the evidence of his crime” (279). The vivid description of Bigger’s actions signifies a fascination evoking a thrilling sense of pleasure. Racism, rape, and murder all become commodified products for the reader’s consumption primarily through the site of black masculinity. John G. Russell in his study of black media images argues, “...‘blackness’ is first and foremost an overpowering physical presence, an invitation to forbidden pleasures and sexual experimentation that offers the illusion

of personal and racial transcendence” (127). At the point of reception, Bigger Thomas functions as a vehicle for the voyeuristic act of simulating forbidden acts without the audience actually having to commit them. This form of consumption functions insidiously because as Russell states:

... the desire for blackness assumes two characteristic expressions—‘blackface’ (Body) and ‘black face’ (Soul)—which endeavor to capture in essentialistic terms the black persona through physical caricature, burlesque, and the allophagous ingestion of qualities thought to be physically, spiritually, or magically embodied in the mimicked object of desire. By mimicking the Body, outward form, the Soul is thought to follow, as Self is transcended and becomes the Other. Although these forms may give the illusion of self-transcendence, by ritualistically retreading the boundaries of difference they reinscribe the line separating the Self and Other. (140)

This form of cultural consumption maintains power structures detrimental to perceptions of African Americans because consumers of blackness may inhabit black bodies through voyeurism and freely exit those bodies at will, while keeping black bodies isolated. Thus, a reader could inhabit Bigger Thomas and leave him in the jail cell upon finishing the novel. This alarmed critics like James Baldwin who worried that *Native Son* merely presented and affirmed stereotypes about African Americans. In the essay “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin faults Wright for affirming the image of African Americans as “that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash. This is the significance of *Native Son* and also, unhappily, it’s overwhelming limitation” (82). Again, the stress is on “limitation” for the black body. Thus, if at the point of reception, readers merely want to watch or simulate

violent fantasies, then Wright's intention of using this draw in order to provide awareness and understanding fails.

Russell's comments about pseudo-transcendence particularly apply to *Native Son* because of its status as the first African-American text selected to the Book-of-the-Month Club. The club's base of members ensured significant sales and notoriety for an author on a level no African American ever experienced which meant readers would have to take note of Wright's message. On the other hand, selection into the Book-of-the-Month Club also meant that *Native Son* would become commodified by a company providing a leisure service. If the novel serves as a site where readers may engage with the "illusion of personal and racial transcendence" Russell mentions, then rather than create change, the cultural text reifies the status quo. Russell believes that, "[i]n the commodity-driven world of late capitalism, transnational media iconography equates blackness with sexual and athletic prowess, disease, and violence" (114). Wright's novel, if used as a commodity for leisure, loses all of its activist power, thereby subverting the ability for the reader to understand the novel's sociological aims and its insight into male, homosocial relationships.

The selection of *Native Son* into the Book-of-the-Month Club presented an interesting moment in cultural consumption, primarily because one of the club's primary functions was to predetermine literary tastes for its customers. Joan Shelley Rubin's historical analysis of how the club's selection committee functioned during the early twentieth century reveals that they anticipated "the multiple anxieties and aspirations the club both exploited and promised to assuage" in order to establish a dependant relationship for the reader similar like Bigger's relationship with the *Tribune* (806). As the purveyors of taste, the Book-of-the-Month Club kept its readers informed through newsletters about what they felt were the most important literary

and cultural conversations regarding literature. By utilizing an “automatic distribution system,” the club pledged its customers “would stay *au courant*,” in order to join and inform literary conversations (792). This element of prestige formation through the commodification of books alters the power of a novel’s message. In anticipation of the audience’s reaction, the Book-of-the-Month Club could frame novels using narratives most accommodating to their customer demographics. A novel like *Native Son* could easily become a novelty rather than an agent for change.

When the committee of five judges examined *Native Son*, they expressed trouble over the novel’s content, especially the use of vivid, raw images. In a letter to Wright, the committee asked if he would consider making changes in the novel, such as rewriting the early movie theater scene between Bigger and Jack. The letter states, “They [members] are not a particularly squeamish crowd, but that scene, after all, is a bit on the raw side” (qtd. in Rowley 181). Wright agreed to revisions, which arguably stripped the novel of part of its political force. For instance, the newsreel scene described in this chapter was completely changed because the committee did not like Bigger and Jack’s sexual reactions to the images of Mary Dalton. They also did not like displays of Mary’s sexuality onscreen and in her actions. The driving scene between Bigger, Mary, and Jan where Mary and Jan engage in foreplay in the backseat changed to merely “some kissing” (Rowley 182). The club’s requests censored a significant amount of the novel, which according to Mary Rowley, signified that “[Wright] gave into white pressure” (183). Rowley states that the novel’s changes made “Bigger [look] more guilty; [and] the white woman was back on her traditional pedestal as the inaccessible object of desire.” The changes ensured *Native Son* would gain selection into the Book-of-the-Month Club, which provided a hefty financial

reward for Wright, earning him today's equivalent of \$450,000 in 1940 which ironically placed Wright the Communist in the nation's top tier tax bracket (Rowley 229).

Although a financial boon, the novel also provided its share of personal disappointment for Wright. As international markets embraced the novel, particularly predominantly Communist ones, it abruptly stopped selling the United States. According to Rowley, the novel initially sold because of its selection into the Book-of-the-Month Club and the readers' beliefs that "they were getting a murder thriller," which led to disappointment that "the book contained a 'political argument'" (228). After the strong debut, *Native Son* abruptly stopped selling. Thus, with a choir made up of critics, academics, and activists, Wright's preaching did not perform according to his goals.

The politics of representation and consumption extend from *Native Son* to hip-hop because both cultural products are susceptible to the same commodification of black masculinities through social voyeurism. As a prominent defender of hip-hop, Ta-Nehisi Coates believes, "The image of black men that sells to the rest of America wasn't mapped out by Biggie Smalls, but Bigger Thomas" (qtd. in Peterson 203). Coates refers to critics of hip-hop who believe that rappers and their music promote images detrimental to African American communities. These images are the same commodified images of black masculinity used to perform the pseudo-transcendence described earlier by John G. Russell. The commodification of *Native Son* serves as an important reference point for understanding the commercial growth of hip-hop over the past thirty years, and how it has evolved from street art to a billion-dollar business. Like *Native Son*, the content of many hip-hop songs is meant to shock audiences and raise questions about the reasons behind racism and poverty. According to Russell, hip-hop cultural products are allowed to enter the marketplace so long as they do not threaten hegemonic

structures and beliefs (127). Music lyrics and videos lose their activist power by becoming commodified into objects for voyeuristic pleasure that keeps citizens living outside of ghetto communities separated from its reality. Russell states, “[Anglos] can channel surf the ‘inner-city CNN’ for signs of black rage that they may then convert into profitable merchandise in the international marketplace, where the style of rage—not its substance—is reproduced for consumption abroad” (127). The already-commodified “black rage” mentioned by Russell experiences further commodification ensuring a further separation between the voyeur and the subject. Thus, a rapper like T.I. can make a video about being the “rubber-band man” and appear in ads for Chevrolet.

The use of inner-city blackness for profit is at the heart of the debate over the role and responsibility of hip-hop. Many argue that the grassroots, local spirit of hip-hop stopped existing when major record labels began purchasing independent hip-hop labels in the late 1980s. Carmen Ashurst-Watson, the former president of the Def Jam rap label, remembers the proliferation of gangsta rap coincided with the major label takeover. She states, “We went to Columbia, and the next thing I know, our producers of Public Enemy were over producing an Ice Cube album, and then the next thing I know we’re pushing a group called Bitches With Problems” (Hurt). Now controlled by corporate interests, hip-hop is commodified according to what will make the most profit, namely violence, misogyny, and sex.

Marc Anthony Neal while interviewed in the documentary, *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* argues that out of desperation for a record deal, rappers cater to the demands of executives who look at profit margins rather than artistic expression. He states, “We [the public] want to see the hardcore thug performing hip-hop. We want to see booty shaking in the background, and when hip-hop don’t fit into those conventions, they don’t get played.” The

perception is that in order to earn a record contract, achieve high record sales, and receive heavy rotation on radio stations, rappers must engage in what many feel is modern-day minstrelsy. Rapper Jadakis, who has enjoyed both independent and major-label success, explains the sensation of a rapper like 50 Cent occurs because, “After you scan past the 700,000 [albums sold] it’s all white people, and he’s well past 700,000. So, the white people want to hear that killing and everything. They want to hear about that shit” (Hurt). Although Jadakis essentializes the consumer, his point infers that sales of rap music depend on the broader public, which is predominantly white and determines what content achieves the most sales.

While hip-hop markets favor artists with the same dangerous allure of Bigger Thomas, to argue that all these artists blindly follow the demands of white-owned corporations assumes that none of these artists learn to manipulate power structures. Many rappers create or embellish realistic narratives to gain access to record contracts, a skill they learned in the cipher. James Braxton Peterson believes “the popularity of gangsta rap is more a reflection of pop culture’s insatiable appetite for violent narratives than it is a reflection of any one individual rapper’s particular reality” (206). Michael Eric Dyson believes that although some “black artists are often ripe for the picking [...] many of them are quite sophisticated about the politics of cultural representation” (413). Self-branding has become one of the primary ways hip-hop artists have manipulated markets to move ahead in the industry, and in fact, rappers often hide their actual backgrounds in order to maintain street credibility. Rappers P.Diddy and Ice Cube rarely mention their college experience to keep their thug status among customers. Rapper 50 Cent insists on wearing his bulletproof vest on stage despite his investment in Glaceau’s Vitamin Water and his deal to produce juvenile literature under the publishing company, Pocket/MTV Books. According to Michael Eric Dyson, “Much of gangsta rap makes voyeuristic whites and

naïve blacks think they're getting a slice of authentic ghetto life when in reality they're being served colorful exaggerations" (413). The question is, then, do these narratives serve a productive role in society?

On the one hand, audiences outside of ghetto communities are exposed to images and expressions historically ignored and marginalized by the nation. An artist may create a cultural product featuring commodified images of blackness in order to gain entry into a larger market and subvert narratives much like Wright intended with *Native Son*. By drawing readers using violence and hate, Wright engages readers into a discussion about sociological conditions of the ghetto, how individuals are manipulated through the exploitation of cultural consumption, and the rampant racism existing in American society. On the other hand, the novel's commodification by the Book-of-the-Month Club showed how easily a serious work of fiction could turn into a novelty item used as a conversation piece at cocktail parties. The same issue occurs with hip-hop. What would happen if rappers suddenly decided to eliminate glorified violence, sex, and misogyny from their lyrics?

The length of this work has shown that *Native Son* and hip-hop both are deeply-entrenched in a conversation regarding the nature of black masculinity since the development of urban ghettos in the United States. Like Richard Wright displays, the inner-city environment strips people of their sense of humanity while constantly bombarding them with images of capitalistic wealth and privilege. The constant reminder of power structures based on class and race combined with extreme isolation creates mentalities rooted in hate and resentment that, as Wright warns, could lead to violent action. Additionally, the dialogue between *Native Son* and hip-hop emphasize the need for creative outlets that allow males an escape from the suffocating emotions produced by the ghetto. In adopting group structures like the cipher, black males are

able to reclaim and redefine space as a site of mental and emotional release, which helps these males maintain their sense of sanity. The cipher and its antecedents also serve as a site for the production of cultural capital within the ghetto, which expresses a candid wish to practice capitalistic rituals despite lacking economic capital. The acquisition of cultural capital builds prestige, which to a hip-hop artist may mean ascendance into stardom as a professional rapper that may create cultural products for financial gain. Richard Wright warns that those controlling markets for cultural capital exploit and manipulate them in order to reinforce and maintain hegemonic structures.

During Max and Bigger's final conversation, Max attempts to explain the nature of American power structures through the example of Chicago's buildings. He explains that men have to believe in change and progress in order to keep the structures from falling apart, and that the few men who own the buildings want to keep other men down. Max says, "In order to keep it, they push men down in the mud and tell them that they are beasts. But men, men like you, get angry and fight to re-enter those buildings, to live again" (427). Perhaps a constant battle against complacency will redeem the commodification of male blackness. Richard Wright continued publishing work despite a waning audience. Rappers like KRS-One and Talib Kweli maintain rigorous tour schedules and continue producing music, while Lil' Wayne exhausts every facet of the rap market and moves into rock music. The hope lies in communicating to another reader the struggle, intellect, and humanity existing in the harshest conditions.

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Curriculum Vitae

Marcos Del Hierro was born in El Paso, Texas. The first son of Jesus Gustavo Del Hierro and Gloria Del Hierro, he graduated from Montwood High School, El Paso, Texas, in the spring of 1999 and entered Baylor University in the fall. While pursuing a bachelor's degree in English literature, Marcos was active in student organizations, such as the Hispanic Student Association, that promoted diversity and inclusion. After graduating in the summer of 2006, Marcos entered the English and American Literature graduate program at The University of Texas at El Paso. Marcos plans to pursue his Ph.D. in literature at Texas A&M University at College Station in the fall of 2009.

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