

The Hate U Gave (T.H.U.G.): Reflections on the Bigger Figures in Present Day Hip Hop Culture

The Bigger Figures in Hip Hop Culture investigates a continuum/trajectory of African American expressive culture from Richard Wright and Bigger Thomas to Hip Hop culture and several of its lyricists who report similar cultural, racial, social, and economic phenomenon. The essay extracts lyrical examples from the artistic repertoires of Biggie Smalls (Notorious B.I.G.), Tupac Shakur, DMX, and Eminem. Through these examples specific connections are made between several important aspects of Richard Wright's most significant literary figure, Bigger Thomas. Although the relationship between the authors and their narrative characters are explored, the arguments find their greatest strength in the unfortunate similarities between the oppressive environs detailed in *Native Son* and the realities articulated and reported on by some of the most popular and most gifted lyricists of Hip Hop Culture.

The image of black men that sells to the rest of America wasn't
mapped out by Biggie Smalls, but Bigger Thomas.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

My mission in this essay is to explore sociological and aesthetic relationships between the powerfully drawn portrait of Bigger Thomas, an original thug, in Richard Wright's modernist classic, *Native Son* and certain emcees within Hip Hop Culture who have, in turn, achieved big success by mimetically returning to the socio-economic mapping referenced in the epigraph above. The transition from literary Bigger figure to oracular thug/Bigger figures in Hip Hop culture reflects a continuum of social conditions that continue over

time to contribute to the existential challenges of these figures (and those they represent).¹

If, as Houston Baker asserts, “Bigger’s culture is that of the black American race, and he is intelligible as a conscious literary projection of the folk hero who embodies the survival values of a culture” (11), then the oral narratives and characters that reflect certain conceptual and social resonances with the character of Bigger Thomas can be considered examples of a similar representational characterization within Hip Hop Culture.

My reflections in this essay revolve around three interlocking culturally significant issues. Firstly, the character, Bigger Thomas, created by the late Richard Wright, confronts a set of racial and socio-economic challenges and forces within the urban environs of America that are still readily present in our society. Secondly, these conflicts between the individual and society are most poignantly articulated by and through various rappers—some of whom are relegated to the category of ‘gangsta rappers.’ And thirdly, the importance of the autobiographical factor in the construction of these Hip Hop personae and characters parallels the importance allowed to Wright’s vital experience as factors in the characterization of Bigger Thomas and of the social situation portrayed in *Native Son*. Similarly, the general lack of economic opportunity along with the police brutality that characterize the post-industrial inner cities of Hip Hop era are rendered through realistic and naturalistic techniques that match those employed by Wright to articulate similar challenges in the urban environment of *Native Son*.

There are dozens of rappers that could be used to explicate this set of relationships. Many rappers hail from post-industrial inner city environments where the educational systems are dilapidated, the communal relationship with the police force is violent and contentious, and the lack of economic opportunity is a continuous fact of urban living. I have deliberately chosen the most popular artists who fit this Bigger Figure paradigm within Hip Hop Culture in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of these reflective themes. Thus the Bigger Figures in Hip Hop discussed in this essay are several of many that reflect and represent even more and certainly much more anonymous Bigger figures in Hip Hop culture. They are as follows: Christopher Wallace whose rapper/character sports the names he is better known by, Biggie Smalls and the Notorious B.I.G.; Earl Simmons, only known as DMX (which stands for Dark Man X); Marshall Mathers, also known as Eminem; and Tupac Shakur, whose

rapper moniker, 2Pac, maintains a powerful homological and ideological connection to his real name.

Each of these rappers exemplify particular aspects of the ways in which Bigger Thomas is reflected in Hip Hop Culture. Yet it must be pointed out here at the outset that Richard Wright and these alleged artistic counterparts in Hip Hop are operating through very different media and although there are ways in which Wright's urban naturalism is readily apparent in the works of these rappers, the distinction between 1940s American novel and 1990s rap is certainly worth noting here in a proper definition of the form known as gangsta rap.

Gangsta Rap is an expressive art form that originates from a complex set of cultural and sociological circumstances. The term itself is a media term partially borrowed from the African American vernacular form of the word gangster. When the popularity of rap music shifted from NYC and the east coast to Los Angeles and the west coast, this geographic re-orientation was accompanied by distinct stylistic shifts and striking differences in the content and sound of the music. West Coast rap sampled more Parliament and Funkadelics than it did James Brown (if it sampled at all). The funkified aesthetics of George Clinton and Bootsy Collins (synthetic sounds with extraordinarily catchy bass rifts) form the musicality of the Funk movement. The music's content focused on a politics of escape centered on multi-layered allusions to space travel via the 'Mother Ship.' James Brown, on the other hand provided the soul of Hip Hop's musical origins most often and still regularly exemplified through break beat samples of James Brown's most contagious rhythms such as those found in "Funky Drummer." Accordingly, the beat-per-minute rates in gangsta rap were less, not signifying a slower pace of life but a more stretched-out landscape. But these are only the stylistic differences. West Coast rappers embraced (in their music and lyrics) the nihilistic attitudes that resulted from unchecked gang warfare, police brutality, and the injection of crack cocaine in its poorest communities. According to Eithne Quinn's brilliant investigation into the world of gangsta rap: "Although clearly the outcome of highly mediated and commercialized forces, Gangsta rap is in most ways a natural extension of badman lore—a hyper-mediated version of the folk process in which *stories* about the exploits of real men fueled and informed myth" (19). My emphasis is on 'stories' here because these gangsta raps are narratives. The hyper-mediated reporting on the

actual lives of some of these gangsta rappers serves the dual purpose of authenticating their lyrics and enhancing the retail consumption of their records by a predominantly young white male buying audience.

This shift took place in the late 80s through the early 90s and is most readily represented in the career peak of late 80s politically conscious group Public Enemy (PE) and the subsequent meteoric rise of the much more nihilistic gangsta rap vanguard, Compton's NWA (*Niggaz With Attitude*). Just as the marketing and retail potential of rap music was coming into prominence (both PE and NWA were early beneficiaries of rap music's now legendary platinum selling potential), the music industry media clamored to find the terminology to report on this new, powerful and vulgar phenomenon. Since the challenges of gang warfare in Los Angeles (and gangster narratives in general—consider *The Godfather* Saga and *Scarface* especially) were already journalistic—and cinematic—legend, the term gangsta rap was coined and it stuck.

Gangsta Rap forced scholars, journalists and critics to confront the cruel realities of inner city living—initially in the South Bronx and Philadelphia with KRS ONE and Schooly D and almost simultaneously with Ice-T and NWA on the west coast. The whole point of a rapper rapping is to exaggerate through narrative in order to ‘represent’ one’s community and one’s culture in the face of violent social invisibility—consider our collective shock at the rampant poverty in New Orleans. According to De Genova, “The lyricists and performers of gangster rap are also intellectuals; indeed, as non-academic but highly articulate cultural practitioners, they are extraordinarily *public* intellectuals” (94). It is not surprising then that gangsta rap was a radical wakeup call to the aforementioned social ills. Yet, only the very general realities of poverty, police brutality, gang violence, and brutally truncated opportunity were subject to any such literal hearings /comprehension.

Thus 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. The relationships between author and narrative or rapper and rap lyric are not necessarily autobiographical, but these narratives in their most authentic forms do tend to be representative of certain post-industrial inner city realities. This point is much more clearly articulated by Perrine and Arp:

When poets put themselves or their thoughts into a poem, they present a *version* of themselves; that is, they present a person who in many ways is *like* themselves but who consciously or unconsciously, is shaped to fit the needs of the poem. We must be very careful therefore about identifying anything in a poem with the biography of the poet. (25)

Gangsta rap lyrics are poetic narratives deliberately based on reality for the desired literary effects traditionally known as Realism and, in the case of Wright, urban Naturalism. The style (exaggeration, rhyming, and signifying), and content (misogyny, murder, and antisocial behavior) of the music clearly reveal that so-called gangsta rap is in reality a recent manifestation of the African American oral and folk tradition; a tradition that obviously includes the work of Richard Wright and his anti-hero, Bigger Thomas, in *Native Son*. This tradition originates in the verbal practices of slaves, develops through the spirituals and the blues, through Jazz music and Harlem Renaissance poetry, and finds its most comparable links to gangsta rap in/through the tradition of ‘toasting.’ Toasting is a black folk oral practice involving the spontaneous performance of long and occasionally improvised narrative poems. These toasts were most typically performed and exchanged by men in street corner conversations, barbershops, and prisons (Quinn 17). Moreover, along this trajectory there are very direct connections/reflections between Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas and several emcees/rappers and their narrative personas—e.g. Christopher Wallace and Biggie Smalls or Notorious B.I.G. and Marshall Mathers and Eminem or Slim Shady.

In order to conceptually organize these reflections on the Bigger figures in Hip Hop Culture I rely heavily on Richard Wright’s taxonomy of Bigger Thomases detailed in the—dictated—essay “How Bigger Was Born.” Not long after the earliest critiques and praise directed at *Native Son*, Richard Wright lectured on the ethnographic experiences that introduced him to the nihilistic subjectivity of a number of Bigger Thomases with whom he crossed paths in the Jim Crow south as well as the industrially developing Midwest/North of the mid-20th Century. With a tinge of obituary-like prose, Wright summarizes five Bigger Thomases biographically in “How Bigger Was Born.” Each of these Biggers met a terrifically predictable fate due to to their behavior and the racial climate in which they acted out. Bigger 1 was basically a bully. Bigger 2 deliberately hustled his way through every outpost of white economic power. Bigger 3 bum-rushed

the movie theater every week. Bigger 4 ended up in an insane asylum and Bigger 5, who deliberately and blatantly flouted the separatist rules of Jim Crow, more than likely ended up dead: “They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken” (Wright 27). For a young Richard Wright these Bigger Thomases were the only indication that there was any kind of willful resistance in the South due to the conditions of white supremacy and racial terror.

Similarly, Richard Wright had lived and observed many of the experiences expressed in *Native Son*. The Bigger types inhabiting the South Side of Chicago were familiar to Wright because he spent over a decade living and working “in cramped and dirty flats with his aunt, mother, and brother, and [he] had visited scores of similar dwellings while working as an insurance agent” (Kinnaman 120):

The general similarities between Wright at the age of twenty and the fictional character (Bigger Thomas) are obvious enough: both are Mississippi-born blacks who migrated to Chicago; both live with their mothers in the worst slums of the Black Belt; both are motivated by fear and hatred; both are rebellious by temperament; both could explode into violence (Kinnaman 119).

Interestingly, it is not difficult to identify several of the most popular and successful figures in Hip Hop culture with Wright’s Bigger figures. They are, in no particular order, nor specific referential connection to Wright’s delineation of Bigger Thomases: Biggie Smalls, DMX, Eminem, and Tupac Shakur. Each of these emcees—all in some way connected to or representing the *gangsta rap* subgenre of Hip Hop—has a particular relationship to their own artistic personas, the sociological conditions of their respective post-industrial urban environments, and the millions of people who purchase and listen to their music.

However, the oratorical authors enacting the Bigger Figures in Hip Hop shift identities within their narratives and over various songs/albums and film performances, sometimes taking on the personas of multiple characters. This proliferation of characters does not necessarily distance the author from the characters’ realities. Thus the relationships between Christopher Wallace/Biggie Smalls and the album *Ready to Die*—Biggie’s equal parts suicidal thug and Dionysian recording debut—are comparable to the canny authorial and at times autobiographical connections between Richard Wright and *Native Son*. That is, as Kinnaman notes in the excerpt above (and

as I argue with regards to the Bigger Figures) certain specific claims can be made about the common circumstances and/or challenges that exist for both the author and his creation(s).

Furthermore, the economic success of both Wright's novel and gangsta rap, thug tales that span cultural eras at least 30 years apart, may force critics to wrestle with the socioeconomic realities at play in the sales and circulation of these narratives. Stories that depict violent (if at times strategic) responses to economic and racial oppression in the narrow spaces and places of depression-era (*à la* Wright) or in post-industrial Black life (via Biggie Smalls) undeniably have extraordinary cultural and monetary capital. *Native Son* and *Ready to Die* both exemplify this.

In the preface to his now classic critical assessment of black youth cultural expression in *The Hip Hop Generation*, Bikara Kitwana reflects on the plight of Bigger Thomases of this generation:

Understanding the new crises in African American culture that have come about in my generation's lifetime—high rates of suicide and imprisonment, police brutality, the generation gap, the war of the sexes, Blacks selling Black self hatred as entertainment—I often wonder what life will be like for the generation of African Americans that follows. (xi)

With so many racial and socio-economic challenges in common, Bigger Thomas the literary figure, functions as the *sui generis* focal point of an artistic trajectory that employs a mimetic two-step as it depicts the lived realities of African American men.² For example, the resonance of certain real life exigencies—take for example the institutional racism of the American Justice system—is central to the authentic connection between the Bigger Thomas figure in the American literary tradition and the broader reading public of the 1940s and beyond.³ This original Bigger Figure, wrestling with a cruel urban environment, an abiding sense of misogynistic retribution and socio-economic worthlessness, finds eloquent re-articulation in/through the narratives of the MCs who will be glossed in this essay. In the examples that follow I will pinpoint these similarities.

Christopher Wallace

Since Biggie Smalls bears such striking resemblances to Bigger Thomas in both nomenclature and in their shared nihilistic narrative

content, exploring his debut album is an important point of entry to the discussion of the Bigger Figures in Hip Hop Culture. Especially important is *Ready to Die*, his initial album which was released in September 1994. In order to fully understand the impact and significance of this momentous debut we must also understand the state of Hip Hop at this time. Two years earlier Dr. Dre had released *The Chronic*. This multi-platinum g-funk inspired West Coast gangsta rap record crystallized the dominance of West Coast artists on the international rap landscape. Although New York City, the birthplace and mecca of Hip Hop culture had not produced a multi-platinum star in years, West Coast styled gangsta rap had dominated the culture and industries of Hip Hop. However, as Dee explains,

He single-handedly shifted the musical dominance back to the East Coast. From [19]91 to [19]94, the West Coast style of rap was the dominant force in Hip Hop. Biggie, with the guidance of Puffy, used familiar melodic R&B loops, combined with his voice texture and rhyme skills, and caused a Hip Hop paradigm shift (Dee 264).

In many ways, the New York/East Coast audiences were given to the belief that the center of the Hip Hop universe had shifted to Los Angeles. But “[i]n just a few short years the Notorious B.I.G. went from Brooklyn street hustler to the savior of East Coast hip hop . . .” (Huey 359).

Ready to Die was East Coast rap’s saving grace for many reasons. The cinematic intro to the album promised a fresh and gritty portrait of the urban underground hustler turned rap artist. The intro track on *Ready to Die* features snippets of four previously released songs with various voiceover skits corresponding with key moments in B.I.G.’s life. The first ‘scene’ is B.I.G.’s birth featuring an ironically proud pappa—who isn’t in B.I.G.’s life too much beyond his toddler years—coaxing B.I.G.’s mother to ‘push!’ The soundtrack for this portion of the intro interpolates snippets from Curtis Mayfield’s classic, “Super Fly” released during the year of B.I.G.’s birth, 1972.

The second scene begins with Sugar Hill Gang’s Rapper’s Delight, the single that inaugurated Hip Hop culture in the mainstream music industry circa 1979. The voiceover here is an argument started by B.I.G.’s father who finds out that his son has been caught shoplifting. Of course he wonders profanely why neither he nor B.I.G.’s mom can control the youngster.⁴ The music snippet here is important because it provides listeners with a sense of where B.I.G. was when “Rappers

Delight”—and by extension modern popular rap music—exploded onto the American pop cultural landscape.

The third and most powerful scene features B.I.G. in a heated conversation with an anonymous crime partner. B.I.G. challenges his partner in crime to “get this money” just as they are about to rob a New York City subway train. The musical snippet for this scene is the classic single by Audio Two, “Top Billin’” released in 1987. As “Top Billin’” fades out and then back in, B.I.G.’s shouts, gunshots, and screams from his victim flesh out the scene.

The final cinematic portrait of the intro track features an exchange between B.I.G. and a prison CO. As B.I.G. is leaving prison the CO claims that he will be back, “you niggas always are” (B.I.G.). The musical snippet for this scene is taken from “Tha Shiznit” on Snoop Dogg’s debut album, *Doggystyle*, released in 1993. Even though this particular sample/snippet gives no credit to Snoop in the *Ready to Die* liner notes, listeners can actually hear Snoop rapping in the background of the final piece of B.I.G.’s cinematic introduction. Moreover Snoop’s *Doggystyle* was an important model for *Ready to Die* because of its extraordinary success and its ability to straddle the hardcore gangsta rap tensions and a lighter sensibility with popular mainstream appeal. The remainder of *Ready to Die* realizes the power and complexity of this four-part introduction and indeed went on to achieve extraordinary success.

What is most important is the fact that Biggie Smalls enacts a Bigger figure in Hip Hop as Wallace’s persona reifies the nihilistic pathologies that continue to permeate the lives and mentalities of inner city youth. Most of the tracks on B.I.G.’s *Ready to Die* flip back and forth between two polar opposite themes. One theme is the celebration of success in the music industry. Perhaps the most significant distinction between Wright’s Bigger figures and the ones in gangsta rap narratives is the nihilistic willingness to attain economic success by any means necessary in Hip Hop. Partying, running through numerous anonymous women, and flashing (or flossing) newly acquired monetary resources dominate the content of these songs. On the opposite side of the spectrum, other songs are much more thematically aligned with the album title. These rhymes reflect a pursuit of material sustenance and/or wealth that transcends relentlessness: “These [s]ongs . . . express the futility of ghetto life in terms explicit and real enough to speak to the streets, but human enough to avoid myopia” (Mao 309). In each of these darker tracks, B.I.G.’s narrators are literally ready to die for material gain, but this

preparedness is not glorified. It is not sexy or appealing. In fact, B.I.G. makes it clear that being ready to die for material things is in many real life cases, the equivalent of already being dead.

This peculiar relationship between material desire and the thin existential line between life and death are also apparent in certain reflections that appeal to Bigger Thomas early on in “Book Two: Flight” of *Native Son*. After he has experienced the material wealth of the Daltons’ lives, he engages in a deep moment of self-hate with regards to himself and his own family’s abode

He hated this room and all of the people in it, including himself.
Why did he and his folks have to live like this? What had they done?
. . . Maybe they had to live this way precisely because none of them
had ever done anything right or wrong that mattered much. (105)

Bigger’s self-directed hate here is a growing death wish—he is in fact ready to die—that results from the utter lack of opportunity and options in his life. After contemplating his gruesome murder of Mary Dalton, he inverts his logic regarding material lack and inactivity into the following conclusion: “He had murdered and had created a new life for himself” (105).

Along with several other debut albums from New York City artists—Nas’ *Illmatic*, Wu-Tang’s *Enter the Wu-Tang: 36 Chambers*, and Black Moon’s *Enta Da Stage*—, *Ready to Die* recaptured the flag for East Coast Hip Hop when it went on to sell millions of records. It was solidified as a quadruple platinum release on October 19, 1999. But none of these other artists enjoyed the meteoric rise to fame that Biggie enjoyed and most, if not all of them, avoided the ultra-violent pitfalls of over exposure that surely contributed to B.I.G.’s early and unfortunate death. Spoken word poet and self-professed Hip Hop ‘head,’ Saul Williams explains this clearly in perfect Hip Hop idiom: “We nodded our heads in affirmation and then when Biggie named his first album *Ready to Die* we all acted surprised when it happened. Word is bond, son. Plain and simple” (171).

Marshall Mathers

Besides the similarity between Biggie Smalls and Wright’s protagonist, the relationship between Marshall Mathers and his rapping alter egos, Eminem and Slim Shady also parallels that of Wright and his fictitious and autobiographical characters, Big Boy,

Bigger Thomas, and himself (especially in *Black Boy*). This authorial relationship is constructed in order to artistically wrestle with severe social and familial alienation. Of all the Bigger Figures in Hip Hop, Eminem represents most poignantly the familial and natal alienation articulated through the character of Bigger Thomas. Eminem's oedipal hatred for his mother has been documented in his music, in the media, and in the film *8 Mile*, a loosely based bio-picture in which a voluptuous, drugged-out Kim Basinger plays his mother. A brief excerpt from Eminem's "Cleaning Out My Closet" will bear all of these points out.

Now I would never diss my own momma just to get recognition
Take a second to listen for who you think this record is dissin
But put yourself in my position; just try to envision
witnessin your momma poppin prescription pills in the kitchen
Bitchin that someone's always goin throuh her purse and shit's missin
Goin through public housin systems, victim of Munchausen's
Syndrome
My whole life I was made to believe I was sick when I wasn't
'til I grew up, now I blew up, it makes you sick to ya stomach
doesn't it? Wasn't it the reason you made that CD for me Ma?
So you could try to justify the way you treated me Ma?
But guess what? You're gettin older now and it's cold when your lonely
(Mathers)

Here Eminem references his own (earlier) diatribe against his mother in the song, "Mommy," on the previously released Slim Shady EP. His mother responded with a CD of her own and he answers her here in "Cleaning Out My Closet." Aside from his troubled relationship with his mother Eminem also references Mathers' economic challenges in the public housing system as well as his sense of the public health community's response to his troubled childhood. Each of these elements is reminiscent of the challenges encountered by Bigger Thomas and the real life subjects from which Richard Wright drew the Bigger inspiration. In the second verse of "Rock Bottom" off of the Slim Shady LP, Eminem fleshes out key socio-economic and domestic aspects of his Bigger figure resonance:

My life is full of empty promises and broken dreams
I'm hopin things look up; but there ain't no job openings
I feel discouraged, hungry and malnourished
Living in this house with no furnace, unfurnished
And I'm sick of workin dead end jobs with lame pay
And I'm tired of being hired and fired the same day (Mathers)

The corollary experiences in the narratives of Bigger Thomas and Eminem obscure the character's attendant racial distinctions. Bigger Thomas also abhors his living conditions and reflects upon them immediately following the residential perspective granted to him through his initial experience working with the Daltons. He reflects thus on his family's one-room public housing unit: "He hated this room and all the people in it, including himself. Why did he and his folks have to live like this? What had they ever done?" (105). He ultimately concludes that his family's socio-economic condition is a result of the fact that none of them had ever done anything either good or bad. Bigger's contemplation here reveals a burgeoning psychotic rationale for his murderous actions. That is, committing any action, even that of murder is better than the economic stasis to which he feels utterly condemned.

The economic humiliation of public housing is not the only challenge that Eminem and Bigger have in common. They both share a healthy disdain for their mothers. Eminem's hatred stems from his mother's neglect, her drug abuse, and her general ineptitude at providing for the family unit. Bigger's humiliation does not derive from any substance abuse on the part of his mother although one can interpret Wright's depiction of Bigger's mother's Christian piety in the Marxist vein through which Wright often castes the opiate-like qualities of religion. The most striking similarity here though is the willful alienation from the mother manifested in thoughts of hatred and disgust. Bigger is humiliated daily by the fact that his entire family must dress in their one room unit with little or no privacy, much less, dignity. The morning after he murders Mary Dalton and stuffs her dismembered body into the Dalton's furnace, he is extra anxious when his mother awakes as he is packing for the 'flight' section of the novel: "He heard her getting out of bed; he did not dare look around now. He had to keep his head turned while she dressed" (101). The reader is drawn to this moment because in it a daily humiliation (having to dress/undress in front of one's family) engenders epic significance through Bigger's guilt and anxiety stemming from his crime. He needs to look his mother in the eye and appear to be normal in order to avoid too many questions from her but he cannot adequately cover-up his guilt because of the economic oppression built into his residential space.

Lastly though, Bigger exudes sheer hatred for his mother in certain key passages of the novel. In this same scene, before his mother rises to dress herself to his turned back she asks him several questions

about the time at which he returned home and his experiences with his new job. Even as he tries to contain his guilt and anger he responds to his mother's questions by thinking the following: "He knew that his mother was waiting for him to give an account of himself, and he hated her for that" (100). Earlier at the onset of the novel Bigger confronts a huge rat that has been harassing his family, seemingly for some time. After Bigger squares off with the over-sized vermin and before he disposes of the body, he causes his sister Vera to faint from the disgusting spectacle of it all. Bigger's mother responds immediately: "Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you . . ." To this Bigger responds: "Maybe you oughtn't've. Maybe you ought to left me where I was." The natal alienation of this scene underscores the expressed alienation in Eminem's ongoing feud with his own mother, in reality as well as in the film *8 Mile* and in his music.

Dark Man X

Yet a third gangsta rapper who mirrors Wright's Bigger Thomas is DMX. Coming from extreme poverty in post-industrial New York, Dark Man X emerges artistically as a simulacrum for abused stray pit bulls abandoned first by society and sometimes by owners who breed them for internecine battle royals that often maim and kill. DMX (government name—Earl Simmons), hails from Yonkers, New York. Close examination of His Ruff Ryders/Def Jam debut, *It's Dark and Hell is Hot*, reveal that this release is rife with imagery and themes that directly reflect and riff on the most potent themes in Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

First, the narrator/rapper, DMX is a self-professed robber. This is an important distinction amongst most gangsta rap narratives since for the most part these narratives tend to focus on drug dealing, gang or drug organization violence, sexual exploits and consumerism. DMX narrates the exploits of a thug-thief who robs not because he wants to, but because he has to. Bigger Thomas is also confronted with this apparent option: "He walked home with a mounting feeling of fear. When he reached his doorway, he hesitated about going up. He didn't want to rob Blum's; he was scared. But he had to go through with it now" (35). Bigger's decision to rob is not clear to him. He knows that he has an opportunity to work for the Daltons, but subconsciously this opportunity to work presents its own challenges of racial and economic humiliation which are both manifest in his first night as

Mary's chauffeur. His anticipation of these dehumanizing elements in his singular option for employment are what force him to decide to rob Blum even as his plans for this robbery are dogged by his subconsciously inclinations and the general incompetence of his crew.

The robber-theme develops and segues into other imagery for DMX such as bestialized references to Black men. These references are central to understanding DMX as one of several Bigger figures in Hip Hop Culture. In the lead single, "Get at Me Dog," Dark Man X crystallizes his rationale for embracing various forms of canine imagery throughout all of his music: "What must I go through to show you shit is real/And I ain't really never gave a fuck how niggaz feel/Rob and I steal, not cause I want to cause I have to . . ." (DMX). This embrace includes countless references to dogs—his pets as well as his crew, friends, boys, etc., growling and barking sounds and several paradigmatic rehearsals of the traditional dog-cat power dynamic. These canine themes reflect agency, ferociousness, loyalty, and undying dedication. Similarly, Bigger reads several bestial references to himself in the newspaper coverage of the manhunt to bring him to justice. Also, during his trial the prosecutor Mr. Buckley refers to him as follows: "In due time the relief authorities send notification to the oldest son of the family, Bigger Thomas, this black mad dog who sits here today, telling him that he must report to work" (409). This 'black mad dog' reference is one of many—others include: 'moron,' 'subhuman,' 'savage' and 'beast'—such references designed to utterly diminish Bigger's humanity in the eyes and minds of the white jury with his fate in their hands.⁵ This strategy works to perfection as the judge needs little deliberation to sentence Bigger to death.⁶

These bestial images that both DMX and Bigger Thomas engage and employ with vastly different results reflect a confrontational, empowered engagement with what cultural critic Karla Holloway refers to in *Codes of Conduct* as turning over to others, who do not have our best interests at heart, the power of the image:

[K]nowing what others may imagine they see when they look at us is necessary and critical information. Without this awareness, we behave as if our bodies and our color do not provoke a certain stereotype and initiate a particular response. (34)

DMX is aware of the subhuman bestial ascriptions directed toward young men of color and depicted in/by the media and various institutions (especially the criminal justice system). He simply uses

the art form of rapping to play on these ascriptions in order to detail the human elements of modern-day economic oppression and to personally profit from the mainstream consumption of the bestial African American image. DMX assumes canine imagery as an artistic and narratological strategy to harness the power of the stereotypical black male bestial image. He is somewhat successful in this strategy—*Its Dark and Hell is Hot* purportedly achieved multi-platinum record sales—but the striking interactive engagement with Wright's native son is even more remarkable.

In the refrain to “Let Me Fly,” DMX chants: “Either let me fly, or give me death/ Let my soul rest, take my breath /If I don't fly I'ma die anyway, I'ma live on /but I'll be gone any day” (DMX). These lyrics ruminate on the conversation between Gus and Bigger very early on in the novel. In this conversation, Bigger and Gus lament that the freedom to fly is granted only to white men. As many scholars have suggested, this scene is a metaphor for how Bigger envisions his socio-economic limitations in a white supremacist society: “Maybe they right in not wanting us to fly . . . Cause if I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along drop ‘em as sure as hell” (15). Thus DMX’s “Let Me Fly” distills Bigger’s sense of frustration into a spiritually inflected lyric that wrestles with multiple meanings of flight, including freedom, transcendence, and existence itself. This trope of flight can ultimately be traced back to the classic folk tale in the African American oral tradition, ‘The People Who Could Fly.’⁷

In addition, DMX’s role in the Ernest Dickerson film, *Never Die Alone*, is the emblematic gem of his macabre career reflections of the Bigger figure. DMX plays King, a mid-level hustler who flees—literally flying across country—his ‘hood in order to avoid conflict with a super-thug boss. After taking flight from New York City to Los Angeles, he quickly sets up shop as a dealer in LA. He immediately hooks an attractive blonde-haired Caucasian woman on heroin. He is calculated as he seduces her and secretly gives her heroin rather than cocaine. After he takes control of her body sexually and physiologically, he takes pleasure in ruining her life and nearly killing her. King executes the same design for his African American love interest with some startling differences. King has genuine feelings for his Black (Bessie-like) girl friend. It is only after she rejects his sincere and serious approach to their relationship that he turns on her, hooks her on heroin through deception, and finally rapes her as payment both for her inability to pay for drugs and her unwillingness to be with him in a serious, committed relationship.

King's relationship to his black and white love/lust interests echoes Bigger Thomas' existential and ultimately violent interactions with the females in *Native Son*, Mary Dalton and Bessie Smith.⁸ Unfortunately Bigger's limited sense of his own humanity is projected first onto Mary because they are in a sense both alienated outsiders in their respective worlds. This feeds their illicit attraction for each other but ultimately also provides the taboo circumstances that encourage Bigger to brutally murder and dismember her. Similarly, Bigger projects his environmental frustrations onto Bessie even as he coerces her into his criminalized existence. Since Bessie reflects the forces of racism and urban naturalism that haunt—and hunt—Bigger, he ultimately cannot act out his desire to control her very existence in any other way but through rape and murder. Robert Butler's essay on the function of violence in *Native Son* makes this point clearly:

Bigger's consciously formulated thoughts [about Bessie] therefore have little to do with his actual treatment of Bessie. Their entire relationship, especially his murder of her, is instead a revelation of his deepest subconscious drives. (15)

As the experiences with the women in the film *Never Die Alone* render a distinct portrait of DMX/King as a Bigger figure within Hip Hop culture, DMX's portrayal of King updates the experiences of and the ideological considerations found in Wright's Bigger narratives, *Native Son* and "How Bigger Was Born."

Tupac Shakur

More so than any other Hip Hop generational Bigger Figure, Tupac Shakur embodies the socio-economic challenges and frustrations of Wright's classic anti-hero. Tupac Shakur's binary star shone so brightly in the popular public spheres that his constituents and the broader pop cultural audience still struggle to separate his gangsta rap narratives and film performances from his real life collisions with the criminal justice system and lethal inner city violence. He is a classic Bigger figure in the sense that his alienated interactions with an oppressive racist and classist society end ultimately in his demise, the circumstances of which are utterly exacerbated by his counter-hegemonic instincts and extraordinary verbal expressions. In this instance, Tupac's representational Bigger narratives became an impending reality that he was unable to survive.

Though over a decade has passed since his death, Tupac Amaru Shakur (b. 1971, d. 1996) is a figure who remains vibrantly alive in the minds of many people. His status as one of the most visible figures in Hip Hop culture remains undiminished nearly a decade after his unsolved murder. Perhaps his fans still wrestle with Tupac's memory and continue to consume his posthumously released music because of his life's elusive implications. He was murdered in a very public drive by shooting after an extraordinary life and career. As a child of Black Panther revolutionaries, Pac was poised and primed to become one himself. He said as much in interviews during his pre-teen years. His lyrics and poetry are also thoroughly informed by his varied regional experiences. Born in New York City, his family moved to Baltimore City, where he attended the school of performing arts, and then to Marin City, California. Although this migratory pattern from Northeast to South to West does not mirror that of Richard Wright from South to Midwest to Northeast and beyond, certainly, Pac's movements reflectively continue the tradition of migration as one of the touchstones for certain representational experiences and authorial certitude in African American narratives. As Walter Edwards explains,

He had lived the life of a poor young Black male in inner cities on the East and West coasts; he understood the struggles, temptations, triumphs and strength of the urban poor; and he knew the sense of oppression that racial and economic discrimination engenders in most members of these communities. (63)

The social and literary elements of the Bigger figures are nearly ubiquitous in Tupac's life and lyrics. Tupac's life was riddled with contradictions; he was at once a gangsta and a brilliant poet, a conscious leader and a gun-wielding menace, a feminist and a misogynist. As an extraordinary figure of popular culture, Tupac consistently resists categorization. It is for this reason that he was and remains so profoundly significant to his fans and so profitable to those who have commercially released his music.

Tupac's early career, reflected in his first solo album *2Pacalypse Now* released on a major label, was the portrait of a revolutionary son-as-artist. He poignantly chronicles the plight of teenaged motherhood in "Brenda's Got a Baby" and challenges us to understand the new slavery of the prison system in "Trapped." His angst in narrative and real life situations reflected a troubled and dangerous upbringing plagued by surveillance, poverty and drug addiction: "You know they got me trapped in this prison of seclusion/Happiness, living on tha

streets is a delusion/Even a smooth criminal one day must get caught/Shot up or shot down with tha bullet that he bought . . ." Here Pac probes the reduction of ghetto spaces to a naturalist environmental prison. The narrator's 'seclusion,' a stark kind of alienation captured by many gangsta rap narratives, works hand in hand with his 'delusion' with happiness and life in the streets. In this realm everyone gets caught or captured, suggesting literal imprisonment or they are faced with the rampant homicidal suicides that constantly claim the lives of young black people in America.⁹ Walter Edwards explains: "Tupac had gained first-hand knowledge of central behaviors in the urban 'hood, including its rich vernacular language, its thug subculture and the crime, violence and nihilism which result from poverty and social neglect" (64). Lyrics from the song, "Trapped" will bare this out:

Cause they never talk peace in tha black community
All we know is violence, do tha job in silence
Walk tha city streets like a rat pack of tyrants
Too many brothers daily heading for tha big penn
Niggas commin' out worse off than when they went in (Shakur)

These lyrics from "Trapped" cover the sociological template for Tupac's T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. movement which was designed to harness the nihilism spreading amongst young Black males in order to channel constructive energy toward the systemic forces that continue to oppress urban Black America—especially the criminal justice system. In the absence of peace, violence is the central episteme for the Black community according to the environment outlined in "Trapped". Laboring in silence is the order of the day and people—most likely Black men in this instance—are rat-like tyrants. Finally, Tupac critiques the prison system that so readily incarcerates but rarely rehabilitates.

T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. is an acronym for "The Hate yoU Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody." These sociological conditions foster generations of dispossessed alienated Black youth. Tupac fully realized his representational status beyond the discourse of his Bigger figure narratives. He also understood that through the experiences detailed in his lyrics he could leverage a more directly political influence over his listeners and constituents. This understanding was essentially what birthed the THUG LIFE movement. He immediately inducted those in his immediate artistic circle to this movement by dubbing them The Outlawz and set about making music that spoke directly to thugs. The alienated figure or the THUG, may be reached

through narratives such as *Native Son* or “Trapped” and his/her alienation and angst could then be channeled toward political consciousness and socio-economic progress. The culpable “U” in the acronym begs the question of who is responsible for the rampant inner city conditions of poverty in the United States. Whether this “U” takes the form of the US government, white supremacists, or the at times self-righteous Civil Rights generation, it plants a seed of understanding the challenges of inner city living beyond the Moynihanian ascriptions of deficiency and the nihilistic framings of Cornel West.¹⁰ In this sense, the “U” also interprets the violence and the narratives that treat inner city violence as a mechanism to cope with a fierce environ that must be faced daily. Everybody is ‘fucked’ by the hate that results. Moreover the violence and its accompanying mimetic narratives—especially gangsta rap—will spill over into the larger society. Thus, the emphasis on ‘everybody.’

We might now come to terms with Tupac’s more violent lyrics that took hold on his second album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.* (1993) but found their fullest initial expression on his first collaborative project entitled: *T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E. Volume One* (1994). In “Under Pressure,” Tupac raps: “Right before I die I'll be cursin the law/Reincarnated bitch, even worse than befo' / My fo'-fo' screamin payback / My underhanded plan to get them niggaz while they laid back . . .” Arguably, this kind of violent intensity in Pac’s narratives is not merely the glorification of lawlessness and gun-toting reincarnation. It is similar to the strategy that scholars such as Robert Butler and Walter Edwards perceive in Wright’s Bigger configurations. Thus, Butler explains that “Wright’s extensive portrayal of violence in *Native Son* . . . is neither gratuitous nor sensationalist. Rather it is a powerful reflector of both the central character’s drive for selfhood and the social environment which is intent on wasting that drive” (24).

If only we could pause to hear the pain in the voice of Tupac Shakur and the chorus of Bigger Figures reflected upon in this essay, we might direct our critical attention to the social, racial and economic forces that collude not just to diminish the drive for selfhood—what Wright might refer to as the individual—but to challenge as well the very existence of young Black inner city men. As violent, misogynistic and powerful as these creative narratives are, they should not obscure the environments upon which they are attempting to report. As readers become aware of the current reflections of

Bigger in the newer form of artistic production that is gangsta rap, a double conclusion is reached. If, on the one hand they mirror our own realities, they also underline the continued desire to consume artistic narratives of misogyny and violence that results from lack of money and goods.

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Notes

¹ This essay is dedicated to the loving memory of my late best friend, David Lamont Holley.

² I realize that Baldwin, amongst many others, argued the exact antithesis of this statement, as he suggested in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” that Bigger Thomas is not representative at all.

³ By authentic here, I merely mean to gesture toward the various discourses about authentic black (male) identity and whether or not Bigger Thomas is a representative figure of certain (potentially) essentialist African American experiences.

⁴ Please note here that according to Violette Wallace, Christopher Wallace actually was a model child until his HS school years when the allure of the streets simply overwhelmed her domestic influences (16).

⁵ The rest of these dehumanizing references are found on pages 409, 410 and 411 respectively.

⁶ Note here also that some of the most compelling passages in *Native Son* that reveal a news media all too eager to dehumanize and condemn Bigger Thomas are based on actual cases that developed in Chicago in the midst of Wright’s writing process. Professor Kinnaman asserts that “this case involved Robert Nixon and Earl Hicks, two young blacks with backgrounds similar to that of Bigger” (Kinnaman 121).

⁷ “The People Who Could Fly” is a traditional African American folktale in which field slaves with dormant powers of flight escape the brutal lashings of an evil overseer—and the institution of slavery itself—when a mysterious African whispers to each of them an unknown word that triggers their ability to fly.

⁸ This argument regarding Bigger’s existential relationship to both Mary and Bessie is made convincingly by Robert James Butler.

⁹ I argue elsewhere (“Dead Prezence . . .” *Callaloo* Fall 2006) that the high rates of Black on Black homicide elide the suicidal nihilism that haunts many young, violent perpetrators.

¹⁰ See Cornel West’s classic text, *Race Matters*, Chapter One, “Nihilism in Black America,” Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

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