

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

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PREVIEW

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

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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. McMahon 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. McMahon 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 McMahon 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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