

WRITING ON THE STREETS:  
POPULAR LITERATURE AND THE BAD BLACK HERO

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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December 2012

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the various ways in which pop-cultural illustrations of the “bad nigger” figure beginning in the late 1960s helped to shape the kinds of defiant and oppositional practices that define the lives of black male youths today. I offer a brief history of the cultural and literary trope of the so-called “bad nigger.” I not only chart the cultural and political expressions of the “bad nigger” trope from the antebellum South to the industrial North, I also offer a critique of these accounts of defiant black male behavior that have dominated much of the intellectual discourse.

*Writing on the Streets: Urban Literature’s Black Male Hero* does not pretend that the struggles of poor black inner-city life are somehow romantic or dramatic. What this dissertation does do, however, is offer popular black male cultural productions as a new critical site for engaging the cultural politics of economic power and racial oppression. Much of the scholarship on black male youth culture fails to engage popular texts that respond to black peoples’ negotiation of global issues. The works that do engage popular expressions and cultural productions often underestimate the importance violence, defiance, and opposition plays in the construction of a black male identity, not just for poor urban black male youths, but for men of color in general. Thus, this dissertation intends to magnify the need for more critical inquiry into popular cultural productions such as “street literature” and rap music, both of which contain poetic as well as practical elements of community uplift and self-empowerment and engage issues of cultural nihilism and self-destruction.

This project's focus on non-canonical texts follows bell hooks' methodology and whose intellectual philosophy argues for "learning in relation to living regular life, of using everything we already know to know more. Merging critical thinking in everyday life with knowledge learned in books and through study has been the union of theory and practice that has informed my intellectual cultural work" (hooks 2). My hope, therefore, is that the readings I offer here will open the possibility for scholars and students of literature to consider more earnestly the importance of popular cultural productions in black communities. Furthermore, I write this dissertation in an effort to convince cultural and literary critics to concern themselves with the unique history and plight of poor urban black males confronting oppression and struggling in this criminal society.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family.

A special feeling of gratitude goes to my wife Sameeya and our children who have been my support every step of the way. My daughter Leena Belle and my son Amari “Mars” were born in the midst of my writing this dissertation and they have been, and will continue to be my inspiration and the driving force in my life.

I dedicate this work to my loving parents, David and Frances Winston who continue to show me the power and perseverance of their love. Thank you for your strength, wisdom and patience.

I also dedicate this work to my big brother David Jr. and his family who have been my greatest cheerleaders.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Kimberly Nichelle Brown, who has been a truly valuable advisor. Her seminar on Postmodern African American literature provided the foundations for this study and further inspired my passion for contemporary African American literature. Her uncompromising high standards have made me a much stronger critical thinker, a stronger writer, and a better person. She has also shown me what teaching and scholarship should aim to accomplish.

I would also like to thank Dr. Mikko Tuhkanen, Dr. Shona Jackson and Dr. Wendy Moore for their caring advice throughout every stage of this dissertation process. I want to acknowledge all of the members of my dissertation committee for their guidance, patience, committed support, and encouragement.

I must also take time to thank the entire English Department at Texas A&M University and the many professors who made me a much stronger student, teacher, and individual, especially Dr. Charles Rowell, Dr. Janet McCann, Dr. Marco Portales, Dr. David McWhirter, and Dr. Jimmie Killingsworth.

And last, but certainly not least, I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Michelle Levy, Dr. Pat Bonner, and Dr. Anjail Ahmad who have been the most significant mentors in my academic career.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION:

#### THE “BAD NIGGER” BEGINNING

In many Negro communities ... the emphasis upon heroic devilry is so marked that the very word *bad* often loses its original significance and may be used as an epithet of honor.

—H. C. Brearley, “The Ba-ad Nigger,” 1939

Oppressed peoples cannot avoid admiring their own nihilists of the quarters, who are the ones most dramatically saying “No!” and reminding others that there are worse things than death.

—Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordon, Roll*, 1972

He’s a big bad wolf and you’re the three pigs

He’s a big bad wolf in your neighborhood

Not bad meaning bad but bad meaning good

—Run-D.M.C., “Peter Piper,” 1986

This dissertation examines popular literary and musical depictions of the “bad nigger” hero, created by black male artists who are intent on illustrating their frustrations with social and economic marginalization. The “bad niggers” under investigation are poor urban black male youths who express their rage through acts of nihilism and self-destructive violence as well as through testimonies of violent revolt and radical protest. This dissertation challenges a dominant body of knowledge that has viewed the “bad

nigger” as unredeemable and incompatible with racial progress and social uplift. To make this argument, I map the history and multiple meanings of resistance and self-empowerment embedded in characterizations of the nihilistic “bad nigger” figure in popular literature and music written or performed between 1960 and the present. I focus my attention of popular writers and artists such as the novelist Robert Beck, rap artists Tupac Shakur, Christopher Wallace, and Shawn Carter, and pulp-fiction writer, Victor Headley. I view all of these pop-cultural illustrations of defiance as political statements that illuminate the various ways poor black communities as well as the larger mainstream society assess violent opposition to social injustice. My dissertation seeks to define the cultural and political identity of “bad niggers” as adaptable, evolving, creative, dynamic, and most importantly, socially redeemable. That is to say, my dissertation refutes both the homogeneous and ahistorical conceptualizations of “bad niggers” as perpetually linked to the image of what Cornel West calls a “nihilistic threat” to the black community. *Writing on the Streets: Popular Culture and the Bad Black Hero* thus rigorously contests the social, political, and cultural marginalization of poor urban black men, seeing them instead as inextricably linked to and as an integral cultural manifestation of mainstream culture and life.

In “Nihilism in Black America,” Cornel West describes black criminals, drug dealers, substance abusers, and the like as nihilists in the black community because of the oppositional, defiant, and often self-destructive social behaviors they engender (West 221-26). West’s description of black cultural nihilism as well as his use of the term “nihilistic threat” to describe the behavioral practices of many poor and frustrated black



men living in American inner-cities explicitly recognizes the severe and oppressive history of racial, social, political, and economic terror in the U. S. According to West,

[W]e must acknowledge that structure and behavior are inseparable, that institutions and values go hand in hand. How people act and live are shaped—though in no way dictated or determined—by the larger circumstances in which they find themselves .... Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experiences of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. (221-23)

West clearly sees the plight of poor urban communities as intricately tied to historical and social factors; and it is evident that his understanding of nihilism focuses on the devastating *effects* of “meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness.” However, West’s reading of the “nihilistic threat” in urban Black America neglects to examine its underlying causes. West describes the “nihilistic threat” to Black America as “neither oppression nor exploitation but ... loss of hope and absence of meaning” (223). For West, the psychological, moral, and ideological failings embedded in cultures of nihilism are antithetical to racial progress.

West is not alone in his assessment of the “crisis” surrounding identity, culture, violence, and nihilism in urban black communities. West’s understanding of nihilism among poor black men addresses a number of other studies, which examine black urban culture. Black liberal intellectuals such as William Julius Wilson (*The Truly*

*Disadvantaged*) and Richard Taub (*There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America* with W. J. Wilson) as well as conservative-minded black critics such as Thomas Sowell (*Affirmative Action Around the World*) and John McWhorter (*Losing the Race*) have made similar comments about “urban decay” in black communities. In many respects, these black liberal and conservative viewpoints are not entirely different from each other in that they, either implicitly or explicitly, cast disparagements on the oppositional practices of urban black youths. Moreover, much of this scholarship bolsters the mainstream media’s coverage of inner city black communities, which depicts the “urban ghetto” as a site of chronic intraracial violence and black criminality. Furthermore, while the stigmatization of urban black women as “welfare queens” persists in many of these discourses, the vast majority of criticism points to poor urban black men who have emerged from this environment as the most recognizable purveyors of violence, defiance and opposition.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the question of how we are to interpret and understand this black male culture of opposition and defiance remains unanswered. While West and others have argued that cultures of opposition and defiance are largely nihilistic and self-

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<sup>1</sup> While this dissertation highlights the cultural and political significance of popular productions of black male violence and crime, it does not pretend to exhaust the numerous intersectionalities that operate within practices of defiance and opposition. For instance, popular productions of violent and criminal black women demand more research. My research largely excludes much of the contributions black women have made in the deconstruction and demystification of mainstream cultural values, beliefs and morals. However, my reading of popular black culture presumes that masculinity is the space that is most contested. I base this presumption in a long history that emphasizes black male aggression and anti-authoritarianism within mainstream political and cultural narratives. Furthermore, my focus on black masculinity provides a context, frame and point of entry into a critical discussion of popular black culture and literature. A comprehensive study of cultural productions by black women would require additional parallel, or perhaps entirely different, frameworks. At the risk of excluding black women, this dissertation presents a foundation for new discourses on a numbers of issues—such as revolutionary violence, death-bound-subjectivity, and cultural nihilism—addressing not just popular productions of black women or men, but the racial complexities of contemporary popular culture at large.

destructive, I am more interested in examining the full scope of oppositional cultural practices among poor urban black males and complicate the notion of a “nihilist threat” by suggesting that nihilism, particularly when discussed within sites of urban neglect and racial exploitation, might be read as political acts that hold potential for self-empowerment and racial uplift in the face of an oppressive white authoritarianism. Like Nietzsche, I see nihilism as a political response to oppression for many young and poor black men, particularly when viewed the outcome of repeated frustrations in the search for personal agency. More precisely, Karen Carr’s description of Nietzsche’s characterization of nihilism “as a condition of tension, as a disproportion between what we want to value (or need) and how the world appears to operate” allows me to argue that nihilism for many black men living in inner city ghettos which operate around and through systems of racial exploitation is necessarily justified (Carr 25). That is to say, black men who are confronted with a world that does not share their meaning or value of humanity find themselves in crisis. As such, many young black men, in both theoretical and practical spaces, attempt to empty the world of putative meaning, purpose, and value in order to replace them with new and often unstable truths.

Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s theory also sheds light on my understanding of nihilism as illustrated in poor urban black male youth culture. In *Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being*, Heidegger describes nihilism as the purposeful devaluation of life’s “highest values,” or the dominant class’ system of morals and beliefs (qtd. in Krell 48). The reason for this devaluation, Heidegger argues, is what Nietzsche called the “will to power,” the attempt to resist domination.

Much of this dissertation examines and offers a critique of the prevailing sociological and literary scholarship concerning black masculinity. Most of this scholarship has viewed the oppositional and defiant cultural practices of poor urban black males as nihilistic and unredeemable. However, this project understands this very same culture as politically and socially empowered. That is to say, this dissertation not only seeks to contest the social and racial overgeneralization concerning urban black masculinity, but also attempts to view inner city black male cultural practices and productions as redeemable in its astuteness to the socio-economic issues young black men currently face. Thus, this dissertation pivots on the idea that the history of opposition and defiance among black men has been the central issue in identity formation and self-actualization. More precisely, I argue that the historic figure of the nihilistic “bad nigger” is, perhaps, the most important reflection of the way in which urban black men in particular and people of color in general have sought to define themselves both against and within a system governed by a patriarchal and racial authoritarianism.

At the core of this dissertation are both popular literary productions and popular oral expressions of urban black male youth culture over the last sixty years. In particular, I am interested in examining semi-autobiographical works, popular fiction, and gangsta rap lyrics that not only identify a body of cultural knowledge specific to acts of defiance among black men, but also capture and express the complexity and history of the nihilistic “bad nigger.” Thus, critical attention to a historic trope of the nihilistic “bad nigger” reveals how the symbolic and thematic display of oppositional and defiant

black male cultural practices are not simply contemporary manifestations of violent resistance, but are practices that exist across and within distinct historical periods of racial and economic subjugation.

The etymology of the term “bad nigger” in the American cultural lexicon traces its origin to the institution of slavery and its reference to the most “disagreeable” black individuals who refused to consent to a permanent caste-like existence (Levine 420, Brearley 75-81). The earliest “bad niggers” were the most rebellious slaves who threatened to destabilize the wellbeing of white society, as well as the black slave community, resulting in a conceptual paradox of fear and admiration among many blacks.<sup>2</sup> Historians and cultural critics such as H.C. Brearley, Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, John Roberts, Jon Spencer, and Jerry H. Bryant have described the “bad nigger” as a black person, frequently male. Through my reading of their various interpretations of the “bad nigger”, I have divided the figure into two character types: (1) the *moral* “bad nigger”, whose politics, though seen as a direct affront to the law and white authority, are directed at improving the socio-political conditions of black communities; and (2) the *amoral* “bad nigger”, whose opposition to the law and white authority is seen as self-destructive, or as a nihilistic threat to stability in both black and

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<sup>2</sup> Sociologist and cultural critic Eugene D. Genovese notes in *Roll, Jordon, Roll* (1976) that for the slave terms such as “bad nigger” often had “directly opposite meaning in accordance with the way in which [they are] pronounced, the gestures that accompany [it], and the context in which [it] appear[s]” (436). Thus, the “bad nigger” who appears in plantation literature signifies either a very special sort of person to the slaves or a person of extreme distaste.

white communities (Levine 420, Bryant 28-39).<sup>3</sup> Both of these social types share a common counter-cultural practice of resistance to racial oppression and white authoritarianism. I argue that, while the *moral* “bad nigger” is “politically” conscious in a conventional sense, and is motivated by the illegal enforcement of the law and white authority, the *amoral*, nihilistic “bad nigger” is also “political” in his self-destructive behavior against all authority figures.

While Brearley, Genovese, Levine, Roberts, Spencer, and Bryant offer different readings of violent behavior among poor black men, these critics make very little distinction between the politics of *moral* “bad nigger” figures who attempt to uplift black communities, and defiant *amoral* “bad nigger” figures who threaten to destroy black communal harmony and stability within the dominant society. As such, I argue that in order to understand the cultural dynamics of black male violence rooted in the nihilistic “bad nigger” figure’s acts of oppositionality, we must consider the full scope and complexity of this historic trope, particularly when examining the heterogeneity of black men and their various emancipatory practices. Furthermore, by revising the *moral/amoral* “bad nigger” paradigm, scholars can offer a more complete reading of contemporary productions of violent and resistant black male cultures, such as street literature and rap music, beyond the initial Manichaeian polarity of “good” and “evil.” This dissertation attempts to redeem the image of the nihilistic “bad nigger” and affirm

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<sup>3</sup> While I use the descriptions *moral* and *amoral* to distinguish between the two categories of “bad niggers,” the concept is based on my readings of works by Brearley, Levine, Roberts, Jon Michael Spence, and Genovese. This reading is particularly influenced by Genovese’s discernment between the “bad nigger” and “ba-ad nigger” in which the critic argues that the prolonged “a” linguistically signifies the level of admiration certain defiant black men experience in the black community (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 436-37).

his radical political potentiality by looking to the historical, social and cultural contexts of liberation practices among poor black men living in urban communities.

Throughout slavery, black men existed within the psyche of white Americans as docile, childlike and lazy, as well as savage, hypersexual and dangerous. While images of docility began to wane to some extent following the American Civil War in 1865, the image of amoral and dangerous black men remained dominant and, in fact, became the prevailing consensus concerning black male behavior throughout much of the twentieth century. In “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War,” Martha Hodes discusses the prominence of the menacing “Black Buck” figure leading up to the Civil War and well into the Reconstruction era. Hodes argues that the stereotype existed to position blacks as a threat to white America; thus releasing them would be dangerous (402; Jordan 1968, 1977; Fredrickson 1981; Fox-Genovese 1988; Genovese 1972). Perhaps the most popular and influential illustration of amoral and violent black male practices following the abolition of slavery was D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, which solidified the image of black men as the perpetual threat to white women in particular, and the United States in general. The fact that the film screened at the White House for President Woodrow Wilson, and was the highest-grossing film of the silent movie era attests to the popular consensus about black men as violent, hypersexual threats (Finler 47). More importantly, the film’s popularity demarcates black men as violent criminals and speaks to socio-political practices of discrimination and injustice that persists today.

In 1932, for instance, Brearley published a study that draws ideological links between oppositional behaviors among poor black men, the experience of slavery, and African ancestry to conclude that violent practices are the primary cultural responses to racial oppression among black men (114). He argues that

[w]hen the Negro arrived in America as a slave, his owner did little to encourage high esteem for the sanctity of life. On the contrary, [he] often treated the Negro as if he were only a relatively valuable domestic animal, disciplining him by corporal punishment, using his wives and daughters as concubines, and increasing the instability of his family by the sale or exchange of members. The background may influence the traditions and attitudes of the Negro of today and decrease his regard for the sacredness of human life. (115)

Brearley's argument centers on the simple premise that black slaves, brutally torn from their families, were conditioned to develop and act out nihilistic behaviors toward the larger society, particularly focusing their anger on whites whom they believe to be the primary executors of their oppression. Brearley claims that, because of this traumatic historical experience, blacks in the early twentieth century existed as dangerous, uncivilized denizens outside the normative social values of the larger society.

Furthermore, in the same vein as Griffith's film, Brearley's study argues that amorality, violence, and criminality are intrinsic parts of black male identity. By framing black male criminality as a racial trait, Brearley strongly suggests that race and ethnicity, as much as the history of enslavement, constitutes the social and cultural ruination of



postbellum black communities. Thus, Brearley argues that the “bad nigger” demonstrates a social dysfunctionality against white authority, and a self-destructive threat within the black community. His analysis does not consider the possibility that deviant behavior of black men during the eras of slavery, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction are emancipatory acts of resistance against social, cultural, economic, and political oppression in equal measure. Thus, Brearley strips the African American community of all political autonomy. For Brearley, violent resistance is not a politically motivated reaction or response to white supremacy. Rather, it is an unconscious, or worse, innate symptom of inhumanity.

While Brearley’s conclusions concerning the politics of black male rage deserves attention, I am more interested in his understanding of the admiration “bad niggers” received in the black community. Brearley writes in “Ba-ad Nigger,” his 1939 follow-up article to *Homicide in the United States*, that “[the] use of bad as a term of admiration is quite likely an importation from Africa” (580). Apart from his racist equivocations, Brearley’s argument consists of a simple hypothesis: the glorification of reckless criminality is not only inherently African; it also constitutes and promotes problematical social and cultural behavior and conduct. From Brearley’s perspective, this would certainly seem true. Black men who violently lash out at whites pose serious problems for a white community that relies on the myth of racial inequality. However, black people systematically marginalized by white supremacy frequently celebrate the demystification of white power constructs.

Describing black male cultures of violent resistance as pure social deviance, Brearley outlines the reckless and criminal practices that make up the “bad nigger’s” notoriety:

One of his most effective methods of demonstrating his prowess is to “break up” a picnic, ball game, or “frolic” ... [I]f the [“bad nigger”] is often able to terrorize the onlookers, he may become more than a local celebrity and may even have a ballad sung in his honor, such as those telling of the deeds of Stagolee, Roscoe Bill, Eddy Jones, and other heroes. (“The Ba-ad Nigger” 584)

Brearley goes on to argue that defiant and oppositional notoriety hinges on the “bad nigger” figure’s ability to openly and publicly display reckless criminality specifically directed toward the law and white authority, but does not get at the root of this oppositional behavior, nor the popularity of notoriety (582-84). These early black communities celebrate notorious “bad nigger” figures, such as Stagolee, Roscoe Bill, Devil Winston, and Eddy Jones, for much of the same reasons poor black youths admire contemporary “bad nigger” figures like 2Pac, The Notorious B. I. G., and Jay-Z today. Poor black people’s admiration of defiant black men is likely because they demystify the image of a powerful white masculine identity, whether it is Roscoe Bill shooting a threatening white man in the Jim Crow South, or Jay-Z becoming a mainstream millionaire despite the instability and oppression he faced in the inner-city ghetto. The popularity of the “bad nigger” figure among poor and subjugated black people, as well as black artists’ reliance on him as a symbol of self-empowerment and the pursuit of

racial progress, reflect a critical portion of the black community that supports some defiant behavior and the redemptive quality of radical opposition.

In 1972, Genovese published *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, which counters Brearley's inattentive critical interrogations of defiant black male cultural behavior in the early twentieth century by designating them as emancipatory practices historically contextualized by racial injustice during the antebellum and postbellum periods. In other words, Genovese understands violent resistance among black men to be a direct response to the level and nature of racial terror inflicted upon them during slavery and the Jim Crow era. This interpretation of the "bad nigger" figure opens the door for an affirmative reading of nihilistic behavior, particularly when in response to extremely violent acts of racial oppression.

However, much of *Roll, Jordan, Roll* interprets the nihilistic "bad nigger" figure in terms similar to Brearley. More specifically, while Genovese argues that the "bad nigger" represents a direct affront to the violent enforcement of racist laws and white authoritarianism, he supports Brearley's reading of the "bad nigger" during slavery by emphasizing that fact that defiant black men often terrorized other blacks. Using the accounts of ex-slaves, Genovese discusses how many defiant black men who had the strength and courage to defy "those unjust white standards" frequently were labeled "bullies" within their own communities (626).

Further complicating this issue, Genovese defines what he calls a “ba-ad nigger”<sup>4</sup> as one whose politically based opposition “gave the white man hell,” but “was a very special sort of person to the slaves” (436). According to Genovese, while some “bad nigger” figures indeed terrorized and tormented weaker members of the black community, the “ba-ad nigger” figure experienced some forms of approbation among black slaves for his defiant practices in the larger society (625). However, Genovese argues against his own bifurcated categorization saying that the trope of the “bad nigger” is, at its core, dysfunctional (436-37). For Genovese, the “ba-ad nigger” and “bad nigger,” or as I describe them, the *moral* and *amoral* character types (respectively) are, in their totality, black cultural nihilists with no real hope for redemption. For instance, Genovese gives a telling observation of the *moral* “ba-ad nigger” figure’s affinity toward violent acts in the black community: “Tough Tony who would defend every kid on the block from outside aggression ... would probably inflict most of the beatings suffered by those under his protection ... too many [*moral*] ‘bad niggers’ had a streak of the bully in them” (625-26). Despite Genovese exhaustive examination of defiant and oppositional black men, the question of a redemptive or affirmative nihilistic “bad nigger” remains unanswered.

Nevertheless, Genovese raises some important issues that will prove beneficial to my affirmation of the nihilistic “bad nigger,” particularly when he argues that the most

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<sup>4</sup> Genovese develops his conceptual distinction between the “bad nigger” and “ba-ad nigger” figures from Roger D. Abrahams’ research on African and plantation vocabulary which tends to use words in such a way as to impart, often deliberately, a desired ambiguity (Genovese 436). As Genovese explains it, Africans and American slaves linguistically manipulated the sounds and structures of words for the purpose of subversion. As such, the black community could distinguish between nihilistic and admirable acts of defiance. Thus, the difference between a “bad nigger” and “ba-ad nigger” lies in “the prolongation of the *a*,” which signifies a high level of esteem.

popular “bad nigger” figures—the Railroad Bills, Devil Winstons, Stagolees, and the like—are the ones who not only confront white authoritarianism, but also threaten the stability of black communities. Genovese concludes that the “best of the ‘bad niggers’” were often “the nihilists of the quarters” who reminded other slaves that freedom and human dignity is more important than the fear or actuality of death (692).<sup>5</sup> However limited in his discussion of the political acts of the nihilistic “bad nigger,” Genovese offers an important conceptualization of oppositional and defiant black men. His consolidation of the “bad nigger” as a single embodiment of the *moral* and *amoral* socio-political type deserves critical praise, particularly his approach to examples of overlapping behaviors such as misogyny and patriarchy (436-37). As such, one could easily conceive a reversion of Genovese’s logic, one that would open the possibility for the nihilistic “bad nigger’s” capacity to provide politically and socially empowered outcomes. For now, however, let us continue to examine the historical, theoretical and critical terrain of the nihilistic “bad nigger.”

Unlike Brearley and Genovese, Lawrence Levine discerns a new, distinct, and separate identity formation within the trope of the “bad nigger.” Like Genovese, Levine describes the “bad nigger” trope as consisting of what he calls “bad men” and “bandits,” those radical racial confronters of the law and white authority who comprise the *moral* and *amoral* prescriptive, respectively. Also like Genovese, Levine determines both to

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<sup>5</sup> In the next chapter I discuss how Abdul JanMohamed’s reading of the “death-bound-subject” suggests that, for slaves, hopelessness and the subsequent “choice of death” are necessary responses if one is to “transform from ‘melancholic stasis’ to an ecstatic celebration of life” (JanMohamed 298). That is to say, JanMohamed’s theory of “death-bound-subjectivity” helps rehabilitate the nihilistic “bad nigger” insofar his “sustained commitment to the willingness to actualize [his own] death” is essential to his conversion into an autonomous subject.

be, at their core, regressive when examining the impact of their nihilistic behavior on the larger black community. However, Levine defines a third group he terms “moral hard men,” who exist outside the historical descriptive of the *moral/amoral* “bad nigger” figure. In this new category, Levine suggest that the “moral hard man’s” notoriety is achieved “not by breaking the laws of the larger society but by smashing its expectations and stereotypes, by insisting that their lives transcend the traditional models and roles established for them and their people by the white society”(420). Not only does the “moral hard man” resist white authoritarianism, he does so on the terms established by the dominant society, such as in sports, labor, and other acceptable arenas that display physical and masculine prowess. Furthermore, this new category of the “bad nigger” trope allows black communities to celebrate practices that might be conceived by the larger white community as defiant and oppositional. Thus, Levine’s “moral hard man,” whose morality is defined by his ability to resist within the boundaries of white authoritarianism and the law, provides an alternative conceptual model that broadens our understanding of the “bad nigger” figure and his emancipatory possibilities. Rather than defining the trope, as Brearley and Genovese do, in terms of a single, undifferentiated and unredeemable embodiment, Levine chooses to identify and interpret the trope within a range of distinct identities that stretch from Railroad Bill and Stagolee to John Henry and Joe Louis. While neither Brearley nor Genovese draw clear lines between specific acts of resistance, Levine’s conceptual arch illustrated by historic black figures speaks to the plurality of black male cultures of defiant opposition, and broadens our understanding of what the “bad nigger” represents for black people. In other words, not

only does “badness” define the search for humanity outside the confines of the law, but theoretically “bad niggers” also “confront [the law and white authority] on its own terms and emerge victorious” (Levine 420).

Nevertheless, Levine’s reading of the *amoral/moral* “bad nigger” type remains objectionable when measured up to his description of the “moral hard man,” whose form of defiant opposition is accepted, for the most part, in black communities and by the larger white society. Levine does not challenge prevailing understandings of the nihilistic “bad nigger” figure when he describes the behavioral practices of the “bad man” and “bandit” as “hypervirility [that] becomes a projection of the severely restricted masculine instincts and the ‘severely dislocated ego’ of the black male” (418).

Furthermore, Levine argues that the “bad nigger’s” search for notoriety and personal autonomy often comes at the expense of the black community and that, in an effort to disrupt the sensibilities of the dominant society, the “bad man” and “bandit” upsets the social fabric of the black community as well. According to Levine, the “bad nigger” is an anarchist. Levine, in his own words, describes the “bad nigger” figure as follows:

They were pure force, pure vengeance; explosions of fury and futility.

They were not given any socially redeeming characteristics simply

because in them there was no hope of social redemption. Black singers,

storytellers, and audiences might temporarily and vicariously live through

the exploits of their bandit heroes, but they were not beguiled into looking

to these asocial, self-centered, and futile figures for any permanent

remedies. (420)

In the above passage, Levine illustrates the nihilistic “bad nigger” as the embodiment of counter-productive and misguided aggression. The “bad nigger” figure’s practice of resistance to authority comprises an “explosions of fury and futility” and, accordingly, is markedly different from the tactics set out by the class of notable and heroic “moral hard men” who are “transcendent” and “politically viable.”

In describing “moral hard men,” Levine asserts:

The morality of these heroes [“moral hard men”] did not derive from their necessary acceptance of the society’s official moral code relating to such things as sexual conduct and personal behavior. Two of these heroes—John Henry and Joe Louis—did tend to operate within this code, while two others—Shine and Jack Johnson—did not. Their morality stemmed rather from the two characteristics that typified their lives: they never preyed upon their own people and they won their victories within the confines of the legal system in which they lived. They defeated white society on *its* own territory and by *its* own rules.... They were moral figures, too, in the sense that their lives provided more than vehicles for momentary escape; they provided models of action and emulation for other black people. (420-21)

Levine constructs of the “bad nigger” figure’s lawlessness and terrorism against the mainstream functionality and heroism of the “moral hard man.” However, note that undergirding this passage is the fact that Levine’s list of “bad nigger” figures is a combination of real people and fictional characters. While not a focus of his discussion,



Levine unwittingly calls attention to the cultural ambiguity of the “bad nigger” trope as both a real and imagined identity construct in the popular imagination, a concept I examine with more specificity in the third chapter of this dissertation. (In Chapter 3, “‘D-Boys’ to Men of Industry,” I explore the “street nigger” figure’s ambiguity by highlighting conceptual shifts between the literary poetics and cultural practices of contemporary/popular black male youth culture.)

Like Genovese, Levine deserves appreciation for historically contextualizing the “bad nigger” figure’s cultural practices of violent resistance. The “bad nigger” was responding to specific historical moments: the extreme hardships of slavery, the uncertainty of Reconstruction, and the disappointment of the post-Reconstruction era. However, Levine does not offer a positive reading of nihilistic “bad nigger” cultural practices and, instead, simply demonizes them as “pure vengeance” with “no hope for social redemption” (420). As such, the question of an affirmable interpretation of what are historically nihilistic behavioral practices continues to materialize. Levine creates oppositional identities between the “bad nigger” and the “moral hard man” by juxtaposing their dichotomous, albeit opposition and defiant, cultural practices. He certainly complicates the established one-dimensional, archetypal interpretation of black male cultures of violent resistance offered by Brearley and Genovese. However, Levine’s attempt to expand upon the interpretive scholarship concerning defiant and resistant black males by toward white authority raises more important questions than answers.

What prevails in the works of Levine, Genovese, and Brearley is the polarization of defiant black male behavior and anti-authoritarian practices. Black male cultures of violent resistance are consistently bifurcated into either a group of mainstream black heroes who reflect the always-moral aspirations of the dominant class within the confines of the law, or a group of psychopathic misfits who only want to inflict anarchy and chaos on an unjust world. Levine's interpretations leave no room for readers to reconcile these two separate and dissimilar cultural practices. On the one hand, there are heroic individuals who participated in a morally justified resistance *within* the boundaries of the law and maintained the limits of white authority. On the other, there are the lawless black males who commit "amoral" and "genocidal violence" against the dominant society to the detriment of black communities and institutions (Levine 420-21).

The polarized illustrations of early "bad nigger" figures outlined by Levine, Genovese and Brearley are replete with longstanding implications that have cast a shadow over the current realities of many black men, particularly those black youths in inner-city American ghettos as well as poor black communities across the globe who face the most severe instances of oppression, disenfranchisement and marginalization. The "asocial, self-centered, and futile" black men outlined in Levine's chapter on "bandits" and "bad men," and incarnated in such figures as Railroad Bill,<sup>6</sup> Stagolee,<sup>7</sup> and

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<sup>6</sup> Levine writes in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) that Railroad Bill was a folk hero based on the life of Morris Slater. Levine writes "In 1893, Slater, a black turpentine worker in the pine woods of Escambia County, Alabama, shot and killed a policeman during an argument and escaped on a freight train. For the next three years, freight trains were to be his means of sustenance. He robbed trains throughout southwest Alabama, stealing canned food and selling it to the poor Negroes who lived in shacks

others, are not only a way to provide a symbolic and historical tradition of the “bad nigger” figure (419). Levine is also charting some of the survival practices and characteristics of a culture of black male violent resistance, such as lawlessness and criminality, and assigning them to a generation of young and poor black urban youths. While Levine uncovers a group of black heroes in the larger culture of black male opposition and defiance, and emphasizes the brutal historical context that elicited nihilistic behavior among black males in the nineteenth century, he nonetheless reaffirms the conclusions of Brearley and Genovese concerning the nihilistic element within the trope.

Brearley, Genovese, and Levine arrive at the same conclusions. For them, the “bad nigger” figure, whether the *moral* or *amoral* variant of the trope, offers unreliable and unstable solutions for the black community’s goal of achieving socio-economic liberations and progress. These polarized readings argue that any emancipatory act performed outside the parameters of the law, or even mainstream society, is pathologically self-defeating and incapable of being socially redeemable, or achieving

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along the rails, threatening their lives if they refused. In a gun battle on July 3, 1895, he shot and killed Sheriff E. S. McMillan who had been devoting himself to Slater’s capture. Less than a year later Slater’s career came to an abrupt end. As he entered Tidmore’s Store in Alabama, in March 1896, his head was blown off by two men who ambushed him for the \$1250 reward” (410-411)

<sup>7</sup> According to Levine, “[t]he legendary prototype for many of these figures, the most important and longest-lived bad man in black lore, was Stagolee, who was known as Stackolee, Stackerlee, Stackalee, Stacker, Lee, and Staggerlee. Charles Haffer of Coahoma County, Mississippi, remembered first singing of Stagolee’s exploits in 1895, while Will Starks, also a resident of the Mississippi Delta, initially heard the Stagolee saga in 1897 from a man who had learned it in labor camps near St. Louis. In the first decade of the 1900s, Howard Odum found that songs of Stagolee were common throughout Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia, ‘besides being sung by thee negro vagrants all over the country.’ Half a century later, in the 1950s and 1960s, toasts, songs, and tales of Stagolee were still in the active oral tradition in Michigan, Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and Texas (413-14).

positive affirmation. Only recently have scholars attempted to interrogate these early interpretations of nihilism that make up the “bad nigger” trope. While critics like Levine acknowledge “positive” black heroes within the trope of the “bad nigger”, and historically contextualize the nihilistic behavior of some violent black males, it is not until the publication of John Robert’s *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*, Jon Michael Spencer’s “The Emergency of Black and The Emergence of Rap,” and Jerry H. Bryant’s *Born in a Might Bad Land* that we begin to see a more complex analysis that will prove useful to my understanding of a redemptive “bad nigger” figure.

One of the most insightful studies of the trope of the “bad nigger” is Roberts’ *From Trickster to Badman*, in which the folklorist maps a critical history of folk heroes in African American culture. Roberts attempts to wrestle away the heroic image of the “moral hard man” and tie it to his reading of the “bad nigger” trope in black folklore. His goal is to rework the findings of cultural critics such as Genovese, Brearley, and Levine, and undo the one-dimensional, stock-type characterization of the “bad nigger” trope. For Roberts, the “bad nigger” figure’s defiant acts need historical contextualization in order for us to understand the trope’s political implications. We see the beginnings of a historical analysis of the “bad nigger” trope in Genovese’s reading of black male oppositional practices during slavery, and later with Levine’s examination of defiance among black men. However, Roberts goes further in suggesting that there is a moral justification of defiant acts historically deemed dysfunctional. During the antebellum and postbellum periods, acts of resistance by black men confronting various

forms of corruption, “have had to contend with the power of whites under the law as the greatest threat to their well-being in American society” (Roberts 215). Instead of highlighting the “destructive and unproductive nature” of the “bad nigger” figure, Roberts examines the trope’s opposition to an unjust, illegally, and brutally enforced law and authority as the impetus of their violent acts (174). Reading the “bad nigger” figure in this manner refutes Brearley’s earlier argument that violent behavior among black men stems from an African ancestry. Instead, black male cultures of opposition and defiance are purposeful responses to oppression directly connected to the forms of terrorism that define their lives during slavery and in the Jim Crow South.

While Roberts attempts to reinterpret the identity of the “bad nigger” trope as a “badman hero,” the folklorist is clear that the “bad nigger” trope developed out of “badmen” who were “professional criminals or simply bullies who sought to take advantage of the law’s apparent indifference to the well-being of black people” (215). Thus, the “bad nigger” figure represents cultural acts of defiant opposition that have both negative and positive effects on the black community. As Roberts explains,

These individuals characteristically adopted aggressive behaviors in the slave system and refused to accept either their masters’ physical prowess as a match for their own psychological prowess and mental determination, or to accept the values of the black community as binding on them. They sought through open defiance, violence, and confrontation to improve their lot in slavery regardless of the consequences of their actions for their own or the slave community’s welfare. (176).

Roberts brings to light two very distinct behavioral patterns of the “bad nigger” trope. First, Roberts acknowledges the hyper-individualistic “bad nigger” figure that poses a serious threat to the stability and harmony of the black slave community. Following this interpretation, however, is Roberts’ description of the “bad nigger” trope after slavery as a “model of aggressive action for achieving the dreams of freedom through political action” (177). Roberts argues that, after slavery, the “bad nigger” trope changed into an open representation of the black community’s refusal to accept “white abuses,” or to participate in the “ritual of deference” (177) As Roberts suggests, “conditions during slavery inhibitive to a concept of the ‘bad nigger’ hero somehow changed after slavery” (177). In other words, the open admiration of the “bad nigger” trope during slavery was not a very politic method for securing the safety of the black community. After emancipation, however, blacks openly celebrated the “bad nigger” figure’s violent acts and his capacity to demystify and dismantle the power of white authoritarianism. Roberts’ reading of the “bad nigger” figure challenges those of Brearley, Genovese, Levine, and other scholars who broadly generalize criminal practices within black culture. Instead, Roberts’ “bad niggers” offer new possibilities for understanding black liberation practices during slavery, and the continuing tradition of black male radical opposition.

Spencer’s article “The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap” borrows from Roberts’ reading of the trope of the “bad nigger” to examine the nature of violence among black men after the Civil Rights Movement. Specifically Spencer discusses the significance of defiant cultural practices in the expressive music culture of young black

men. His primary argument is that rap music's representation of black manhood is overwhelmingly nihilistic, which has unfairly dominated mainstream perceptions of poor and young black people, as well as their cultural practices which are often depicted in gestures of rage. Spencer argues that "a close examination of the reactions rap causes in certain elements of American society reveals a terror that rap may lead to racial insurrection—not the sort of social unrest witnessed during the sixties, but chaotic gang warfare and rampant rape" (1). Spencer offers a polarizing reading of rap music, in hopes of restoring rap's political potentiality.

Spencer argues that rap music's message of resistance and defiant opposition to cultural, economic and political oppression in the U. S. is part of a historical continuum that begins with the "liberation spirituals and antislavery songs of the nineteenth century" (3). As such, the "bad nigger" trope, which figures so prominently in this tradition, also functions significantly in Spencer's understanding of popular cultural productions of violent black men. Spencer makes use of Roberts' dichotomous "bad nigger": the "moral hard man" hero whose oppositional stance is firmly within the boundaries of the law, and the *moral/amoral* "bad nigger" who breaks it. Thus, Spencer claims:

The difference is clear. The attitude of the "bad nigger" is ... narcissism and hedonism, and it is genocidal. The "bad nigger" is not viewed as a hero by the masses of the black community, whose safety and moral stability he threatens.

[The “moral hard man”] ... engage[s] in insurrection of subjugated knowledge ... practicing self-determinative politico-moral leadership. ... [They] speak “attitudinally” but knowledgeably about the conditions that the establishment has affected in their communities: social jingoism (such as black stereotyping) and civil terrorism (such as police-on-black crime). (7)

Spencer acknowledges historical understandings of the “bad nigger” figure outlined by social critics such as Brearley, Genovese, and Levine. In order to provide a positive reading of the “bad nigger” figure in hip-hop culture, however, Spencer invokes Roberts’ argument that emphasizes a distinction between the effectiveness of the “moral hard man’s” liberation practices, and those of the nihilistic “bad nigger” figure. Thus, Spencer recasts Roberts’ decision to affirm the practices of the “moral hard man” over those of the *moral/amoral* “bad nigger.” Spencer establishes two categories of rap: (1) “political” or “message” rap and (2) “gangsta” rap. Spencer labels gangsta<sup>8</sup> rap artists such as Public Enemy and KRS-One, “political/message rappers,” and links their ideology to Gil Scott-Heron and Malcolm X. Conversely, Spencer ties “gangsta rappers” such as N. W. A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) and Ice-T to the more self-destructive and nihilistic variants of the “bad nigger” trope. Spencer’s suggestion is that the spirit of the “moral hard man” lives contemporarily within “bad niggers” who perform “message rap” while Stagolee and Railroad Bill are the conceptual predecessors to “gangsta”

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<sup>8</sup> While Spencer is intent on making commercial-market distinctions between groups like Public Enemy and N. W. A., both, undeniably, are gangsta rap artists. See my discussion on the differences between “black nationalist gangsta rap” and “nihilistic gangsta rap” in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.



variants on the trope. Ultimately, Spencer invokes Roberts' reading of the trope of the "bad nigger" to elaborate "message rap's" politically conscious themes of moral harmony, racial solidarity, and self-determination in black communities in the face of "gangsta" raps more anti-social and alienating creative direction.

Indeed, Spencer's application of both the *amoral/moral* "bad nigger" and the "moral hard man" folklore traditions into a study of contemporary rap music and black youth culture proves to be an illuminating reading of the trope's subtle differences. However, his interpretation of black male cultures of violence and resistance does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and often competing realities of the trope of the "bad nigger," particularly when examining gangsta rap as a popular production of defiant and oppositional black youth culture. Roberts' extensively researched project rightly challenges prevailing understandings of defiant black male cultural practices as comprising a one-dimensional "bad nigger" trope. However, contemporary cultural critics, such as Spencer (and Bryant below), who apply Roberts' broad understanding of the "bad nigger" trope, have backed themselves into an intellectual corner. Spencer devises a rigid mechanism for defining rap music, which ultimately misreads the complexity of violence and resistance among black men today. Furthermore, Spencer reinforces much of the critical rhetoric surrounding gangsta rap, from black and white critics alike, that suggests the music defines, if not encourages, cultural of nihilism.

Take Jerry H. Bryant's examination of the nihilistic "bad nigger" figure in *Born in a Mighty Bad Land*. Using the findings of folklorists such as Roberts and Roger D.

Abrahams, Bryant begins with a review of slave tales that illustrate violence in the lives of animal characters. Bryant determines that Br'er Rabbit and other trickster figures symbolized black people's responses to the harsh world of slavery. However, Bryant distances himself from Roberts, in particular, when he argues that no clear "bad nigger" figure emerges during slavery. Bryant comes to this conclusion through his examination of black ballads at the end of the nineteenth century. He argues that the post-emancipation tales gave the "bad nigger" trope its distinct shape. During Reconstruction, for instance, the "bad nigger" trope begins to define a gun-slinging, gambling man that frequents all-black honky-tonks and roadhouses across the South. More importantly, Bryant claims that black laborers, prisoners, and many other defiant and restless black men began to celebrate the "bad nigger" figure's radical philosophies through "toasts" and other long, recited poems. Next, Bryant situates the "bad nigger" trope in his reading of African American fiction by writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison before ending with rapper like Ice Cube, and Chuck D. Bryant's conclusion is that African American writers and performers use the "bad nigger" trope to analyze and discuss the sociological, psychological, and moral implications of violence among black men.

However, while Bryant acknowledges the "bad nigger" trope's iconic value in the African American imaginary, he avoids arguing that the culture of black male defiance embodies the most important dimension of the history of African American men, or that it is the defining feature of contemporary inner-city life for young black people. While black male oppositionality may not define the most important features of

black masculinity, Bryant underestimates its impact in the identity formation of young black men living in U. S. inner cities today. In doing so, Bryant misreads, for instance, the major impact street literature from the 1960s and seventies has had in the popular and expressive culture of contemporary black male youths. As I prove in the following chapter, illustrations of the “bad nigger” trope by popular street lit authors such as Claude Brown, Piri Thomas, Donald Goines, and most importantly, Robert Beck have fundamentally defined the “pimps,” “thugs,” “hustler,” and “gangstas” that are frequently celebrated in popular fiction and song, and frequently mimicked in black youth culture. This underestimation ultimately conditions Bryant’s reading of gangsta rap’s employment of the “bad nigger” trope as a way to interrogate inner city life in the 1980s, 1990s and today. For instance, Bryant argues mistakenly that the crack epidemic “did not receive a great deal of attention from the makers of the [“bad nigger”] image” (7). Indeed, the “makers” of the “bad nigger” tradition are important to our cultural understanding of the crack epidemic in innumerable ways. Literary as well as musical depictions of drug dealers and abusers reflect the inherent push and pull of the “bad nigger” trope’s political role in contemporary black expressions and youth culture. Instead, Bryant attaches the trope of the “bad nigger” to the “classic badman” archetype, missing an opportunity to argue that the crack epidemic is not only a source of social and psychological destruction caused by institutional racism. The crack epidemic is also a site for an ambivalently admired badness, where rap songs and street literature illustrate young black men with the same legendary characteristics and status of Stagger Lee. Furthermore, Bryant misses an opportunity to highlight the significance popular street

literature from the 1960s and 1970s plays not only in the cultural productions of black male youth culture, but also in the cultural performances in and around the inner city.

Thus, what follows is a rigorous examination of the ways in which pop-cultural illustrations of the “bad nigger” figure beginning in the late 1960s helped to shape the kinds of defiant and oppositional practices that define the live of black male youths today. In Chapter II, “Writing the ‘Street Nigger’ Hero,” I offer a reassessment of violent and criminal behavior illustrated in Beck’s cult classic *Pimp*, as well as his episodic memoir, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*. Instead of defining Beck’s illustrations of Iceberg Slim as simply misogynistic, homophobic, and nihilistic, this chapter looks for redemptive features in Slim’s opposition and defiance that are integral to his pursuit of self-discovery and self-empowerment. I also argue that the novel *Pimp* demarcates Beck as the conceptual genesis of popular productions of violence among poor urban black men today. Beck’s representations of inner-city cultural practices have dominated popular productions of black male behavior that run counter to mainstream constructions of racial and class identity and subjectivity. By illustrating Iceberg Slim’s violent and criminal practices as heroic, I show how *Pimp* dismantles the Civil Rights’ socially conservative and culturally assimilationist ideology, thus providing a unique perspective on racial and cultural autonomy that spoke to the disillusion many young black men felt in the 1960s and continue to feel today. Furthermore, I argue that *The Naked Soul* re-contextualizes black male criminality and violence as revolutionary acts that define oppositional and defiant behavior as politically viable. Beck’s works not only allow for a reconsideration of alternative or radical black male practices, they also

allows me to analyze the conceptual limitations of violence and criminality. I reinterpret Slim's nihilistic behavior as an illustration of both an inferiority complex rooted in a history of systematic dehumanization, as well as a significant site of potentially successful reconfigurations of power, agency and identity. Indeed, Beck's interpretation of black masculinity and his use of the "bad nigger" trope illustrate a paradox of socio-cultural stereotypes and political reclamation.

In Chapter III, "D-Boys' to Men of Industry," I expand on my findings in the previous chapter by highlighting the most contemporary illustrations of the "bad nigger" trope in gangsta rap by Tupac Shakur, Christopher Wallace, and Shawn Carter. These artists allow me to explore and make sense of the increasing cultural presence and commercial appeal of the nihilistic "bad nigger" popular youth culture. I focus primarily on Shakur's, Wallace's, and Carter's descriptions of urban black male youths negotiating class and race within and outside the U.S.'s mainstream capitalist system. While much of gangsta rap music is misogynistic, homophobic, and nihilistic, all of which must be critiqued, I propose that even some of the most antagonistic rap lyrics provide a critical voice and political narrative that historically contextualizes poor urban black male cultural practices. Indeed, many mainstream cultural critics, both black and white, have criticized gangsta rap music as having a uniquely negative effect on the uplift of urban black communities. However, I contend that gangsta rap, particularly the emergence of "crack rap" in the late 1990s, demands a re-reading of popular illustrations of violence and crime that complicates its ambivalent nature, contextualizes the artists' hyper-

masculine performances, and highlights its emancipatory potentiality as well as its conceptual instabilities.

In the final chapter, “Yardie, or the Postcolonial ‘Street Nigger’ Identity,” I begin by discussing the social and political significance of contemporary cultural productions of black masculinity in relations to global imperialism and black internationalism. Proposing an interpretation of Victor Headley’s nihilistic illustration of oppositional and defiant black male practices in the context of postcolonial subjectivity, I set out to comment on a particular theory of representation among mainstream cultural critics and intellectuals. Hence, my reading of Headley’s popular dramatization of the self-defeating urban black male demonstrates the global appeal and growing investment in violent and criminal cultural practices. Furthermore, Headley’s work allows me to argue that “street nigger” cultural practices, as well as the popular modes of expressing black male defiance such as street literature, hip-hop music, and yardie fiction, are potentially viable avenues for establishing and expressing a common, if not unified, racial identity across the African diaspora.

Certainly, many sociologists and cultural critics have provided enough evidence to support the argument that inner city black communities are experiencing a social, economic, political, and even cultural crisis. Cornel West has said that black communities are increasingly finding themselves unable to quell self-inflicted acts of violence. Moreover, West believes economic disenfranchisement and political isolation insufficiently explain what he describes as a “culture of nihilism.” Instead, he points to an environment defined by “psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and

social despair” to more accurately explain the decaying of black America (12-13).

While West celebrates the resilience of “familial and communal networks of support” that are part of a long African American cultural tradition, he believes there is a continuing loss of black cultural institutions—churches, community centers, school programs and, most importantly, the black family (14). As such, West argues that, because of a hedonistic culture of consumption, historical traditions of black self-help, self-love and self-affirmation are disappearing (16). West also argues that the black institutions fail because younger generations are incapable of seeing the value of cultural institutions in a hyper-individualizing mainstream cultural landscape (17). According to West, the modern black community is suffering from a “disease of the soul” that “can never be completely cured” (18). A “culture of nihilism,” West complains, contributes to the annihilation of hope and love among an already downtrodden people.

Indeed, popular productions of black male culture such as gangsta rap and street literature substantiate West’s critical observations of the current situation in black America. Much of the popular images of black men, particularly the commercially successful “street nigger” hero that frequently appears in hip-hop music and literature, certainly reflect the deep sense of “hopelessness, lovelessness, and meaninglessness” that represents many traditional and historical aspects of the trope of the “bad nigger.” Fitting neatly into a historical trajectory of the “bad nigger” trope established by scholars such as Brearley, Genovese, Levine, and even Roberts, Spencer, and Bryant, the “street nigger” hero dangerously actualizes the mythologies, stereotypes, and preconceptions about many poor urban black males. Many gangsta rappers who vividly illustrate the

“heroics” of a “street nigger” culture, which relies on violence as a tool for self-empowerment and crime as a means of economic viability, popularize their own participation in criminal activities and market these narratives for the mainstream public as real life testimony of urban savagery.

However, while popular productions of “street nigger” culture—that is, contemporary illustrations and expressions of the “bad nigger” trope—depict black-on-black crime and seemingly celebrate amoral and nihilistic behavior, the totality of violent black youth culture and its message is far from consistent. In fact, the contradictory claims regarding cultures of nihilism illustrated in gangsta rap and street literature demonstrate a complexity and sociological ambivalence, which is historically rooted in the defiant and oppositional practices of the “bad nigger” figure of the antebellum and post-bellum period. Thus, West’s analysis is accurate to the extent to which he understands the dangerously nihilistic elements—fatalism, social depression, and the irrecoverable sense of loss—taking hold of a large portion of black America today. However, the picture West presents of a weakening black America is complicated by important affirmative and self-empowering qualities within those very same self-defeating cultural practices of black people fighting against a “nihilistic threat.”

*Writing on the Streets: Popular Literature and the Bad Black Hero* does not pretend that the struggles of poor black inner-city life are somehow romantic or cataclysmic. What this dissertation does do, however, is offer popular black male cultural productions as a new critical site for engaging the cultural politics of economic



power and racial oppression. Much of the scholarship on black male youth culture fails to engage popular texts that respond to black peoples' place in a mainstream and global society. The works that do engage popular expressions and cultural productions often underestimate the importance violence, defiance, and opposition play in the construction of a black male identity, not just for poor urban black male youths, but for men of color in general.

Thus, this dissertation intends to magnify the need for more critical inquiry into popular cultural productions such as "street literature" and rap music, both of which contain poetic as well as practical elements of community uplift and self-empowerment along with cultural nihilism and self-destruction. This project's focus on non-canonical texts follows bell hooks whose intellectual philosophy argues for "learning in relation to living regular life, of using everything we already know to know more. Merging critical thinking in everyday life with knowledge learned in books and through study has been the union of theory and practice that has informed my intellectual cultural work" (2). My hope, therefore, is that the readings I offer here will open the possibility for scholars and students of literature to consider more earnestly the importance of popular cultural productions in black communities. Furthermore, I write this dissertation in an effort to convince cultural and literary critics to concern themselves with the unique history and plight of poor urban black males confronting oppression and struggling in this criminal society.

CHAPTER II  
(RE)WRITING THE “STREET NIGGER” HERO

I live in the ghetto and have no desire to break its bonds, for I am after all  
a street nigger learning to write.

—Robert Beck, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*, 1971

Before he was known as Iceberg Slim or Robert Beck,<sup>9</sup> he was Robert Lee Maupin, born in Chicago on August 4, 1918. He would spend much of his childhood in working class neighborhoods in Milwaukee’s North Side and in Rockford, Illinois before returning to Chicago as a teen in 1930 (*Pimp* vi). Several years before his birth, Beck’s mother and father left Tennessee, like so many other southern black families, and arrived in Chicago—a city known for its economic opportunities and as a safe haven for thousands of southern blacks. Beck’s family arrived at the peak of an era of massive migration from the South, which increased the city’s black population by more than 100,000 between 1920 and 1930 (Drake and Cayton 8).

A number of blacks traveled North in an attempt to get away from social and political injustices supported by the South’s Jim Crow laws. The terrorism of “white justice” proved to be too much for blacks who refused to accept lynching at the hands of white mobs as a way of life. Others sought to escape their lives as tenant farmers and sharecroppers, which were, at times, no less demanding or demeaning than chattel

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Beck adopted his surname from his mother’s last husband. It was his tribute to the memory of his late mother. See Irvine Welsh’s introduction to *Pimp*.

slavery. Many blacks saw the industrialized North as an opportunity to gain both social and economic freedom. Mobility, both physical and social, became a way for many black men in particular to claim agency over their lives (Drake and Cayton 99-100).

Prosperity and freedom in the North during the first half of the twentieth century, however, would prove to be all but certain for most southern black migrants. In many northern cities, namely Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, and New York, the reality and onslaught of multiple migrant groups competing for a limited number of jobs and homes diminished the hopes of southern blacks. Not only were large numbers of blacks migrating to Midwest cities like Chicago, but an equally large number of European immigrants from countries like Germany, Ireland, and Scandinavia were looking to Chicago as a welcoming safe haven as well (Drake and Cayton 8).<sup>10</sup> These competing populations lead to animosity between the groups, eventually resulting in a number of race riots that would shatter any illusion blacks may have had about the North's immunity to racism (Drake and Cayton 104). Many poor blacks found themselves residing in Chicago's South Side communities, which housed the poorest neighborhoods in the city (Drake and Cayton 174).<sup>11</sup> It was in this environment of social isolation and economic depravity that Beck would endure as a child, and later flourish in as a cold and ruthless pimp. As the author of *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, Beck would reflect on his

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<sup>10</sup> According to Drake and Clayton, "the Germans, the Irish, and the Scandinavians had been arriving [in Chicago] by the thousands, encouraged by 'runners' in New York, who met the boats and persuaded immigrants to seek their fortunes in Midwest Metropolis" (Drake and Clayton 8).

<sup>11</sup> Chicago's South Side was referred to as the "Black Belt." While the geographical location of the Black Belt remained fixed throughout the early-twentieth century, an increasing number of blacks came to occupy and, soon, overcrowd this small community. Drake and Clayton note that while large numbers of black people would call the Black Belt "home" very few would have the opportunity to find residence in other areas of Chicago.

life in the Chicago slums during the Depression era through his depictions of poor black people he described as “street niggers and strugglers” living in a criminal society.

*Pimp* is Beck’s “semi-autobiographical novel” based on his experiences as Iceberg Slim, a pimp often struggling and sometimes thriving in Chicago’s underworld (*Pimp* viii). The structure and form of the novel reads like the script of a biopic. *Pimp* draws on the gritty realism of life for men who are constantly negotiating the murky politics of what Beck refers to as “the life”<sup>12</sup> on the streets of Chicago and in the city’s violent underworld. Beck weaves a loosely autobiographical tale that dramatizes the cultural performances in and around Chicago’s South Side neighborhoods. Ultimately, the triumphant highs and dramatic lows, which highlight the psychological and cultural chaos for black men looking for wealth in the ghetto, structure the novel. “The streets,” particularly the “street nigger” trope’s improvised negotiations of South Side Chicago, becomes the driving metaphor and structural design of *Pimp*. For example, Slim occupies more than two dozen dwellings throughout the novel: some are as extravagant as his Italian leather shoes and others are as tattered and depressing as his prison-issued brogans. These dramatic shifts in the novel not only mirror the changing nature of life in the underworld, but also signify the “street nigger” trope as a potentially and ultimately unstable representation of black masculinity. Nevertheless, *Pimp* is an uncompromising illustration of the environment that has come to produce the trope of the “street nigger”

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<sup>12</sup> While contemporary readings of the term “the life” frequently referrers to gay culture, Beck is signaling the experiences of individuals negotiating a culture of criminality.

hero, the literary and cultural antithesis of mainstream black and white society that persists today.

Many cultural critics and writers, however, continue to read *Pimp* as an example of “brutal misogyny” (*Pimp* 279); Beck’s illustrations of his life as Iceberg Slim represents what many have described in the past as an *amoral* “bad nigger” as opposed to a *moral* “bad nigger.” Indeed these assertions have merit and the problems often associated with the “street nigger” figure such as misogyny, homophobia and racial exploitation among others must be critiqued. My contention, however, is that the cultural and literary value lies in his complex, and most importantly, realistic representations of the politics and culture, as well as the potentiality and volatility of black male violence, resistance, defiance and opposition. Through his illustrations of Iceberg Slim, Beck introduces the “street nigger” hero as a way to collapse the *amoral* and *moral* prescriptive, two seemingly paradoxical social types that have historically defined the cultural and literary trope of the “bad nigger,” into one multi-dimensional complex interpretation of contemporary black masculinity.

In my analysis of *Pimp*, I unpack Beck’s use of the “street nigger” figure as a literary and cultural trope framed by the history of the “bad nigger” figure. I argue that *Pimp* emphasizes the primacy and pervasiveness of authenticity and death in order to construct black masculine identities and subjectivities that challenge hegemonic notions of black manhood and community during the 1960s Civil Rights era. I support my argument by examining the literary and historical trajectory leading up to *Pimp*, as well as highlighting Slim’s various interdependent layers, which center on the forces he

encounters in childhood. I then turn to an analysis of the “street nigger” trope by discussing how Slim’s performance of black manhood is rooted in Beck’s notion of authenticity. Finally, I analyze Slim’s negotiation of death and its impact on black male subjectivity, identity and empowerment. While much of this chapter is structured as an analysis of sociological scholarship, which views the oppositional and defiant cultural practices of poor black men as a result of systematic oppression, my goal is not to negate sociological trends. Rather, I intend to highlight the ways in which this particular formation of popular literary culture engages a larger orbit of racial discourse, such as the intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality and other axes of identity and subjectivity.

A number of questions guide this chapter, chief among them are the following: In what ways does the literary and cultural trope of the “street nigger” operate as a site of new knowledge and hegemonic struggle? To what extent does the “street nigger” trope empower or thwart cultural and political agency? How do African Americans use literature to articulate their relationships to systematic oppression? How do these literary responses to oppression enable and constrain subjectivity? These questions, although largely premised upon my definition of the “street nigger” trope outlined in this chapter and in the Introduction to this project, enable me to frame my reading of Beck’s “street nigger” hero as a popular cultural commodity, a site of public controversy, and a form of protest literature.

Beck’s earliest literary predecessors can be found among the members of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly those whose refusal to adhere to mainstream cultural

values disrupted Alain Locke's notion of the New Negro. In the 1920s and 1930s, writers such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay frequently turned to the "common man" to challenge cultural assimilation and the overly conciliatory attitudes of the African American middle-class and its intellectual elites. Their works run counter to those of Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois and other stewards of the Renaissance who call for the diminishment of "old" histories and traditions which often fuel mainstream stereotypes and misconceptions of African Americans, and the emergence of a Negro defined by "a new kind of consciousness." As Locke explains it in his important anthology, *The New Negro* (1925),

The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism. The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence. So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.

The New Negro has a renewed self-respect and self-dependence ... [T]he mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of

imitation and implied inferiority.... By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation ... able to express oneself in his poetry, his art, his education, and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and the greater certainty of knowing what it is all about. (4-5)

Locke's argument attempts to humanize African Americans for a mainstream community who views him as a simple caricature. The critic also wishes to view black culture with a level of sophistication that leaves very little room for the kinds of expressions and behavioral practices he believes to be inferior in terms defined by the white American mainstream. Works such as *Home to Harlem* (1928) by Claude McKay and Langston Hughes' essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) certainly challenge Locke's notion that "the [Old] Negro has been more of a formula than a human being." Certainly, *Home to Harlem* and the "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" were an attempt to put a human face on the "stock figure," making him more complex than a burden to be worried over.

Writers such as McKay and Hughes understood Locke's call for a "renewed self-respect" to signify a rejection of "ordinary" black life. Speaking of the ideological conflict between black artists and middle-class intellectuals in his 1926 article, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes suggested that

[t]he younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are



beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.

(59)

Hughes' argument is that African American writers should be free to engage and celebrate all aspects of black people and culture, be it positive recognition within mainstream white culture or national shame. The idea that black people comprised a complex, dynamic, and more importantly, heterogeneous culture was at odds with Locke's and Du Bois' ideological positions—their belief in a homogenous, self-righteous “blackness” and their elitist notion of a Talented Tenth. The fundamental differences with the New Negro philosophy Hughes articulates above foregrounds the antagonist ideological positions between street lit writers in the 1960s and seventies, and the leaders of the Civil Rights movement who argues for appeasement and cultural assimilation.

Another notable critique of cultural assimilation during the Harlem Renaissance is McKay's important novel *Home To Harlem* (1928), which depicts street life in a poor New York City neighborhood in the 1920s. McKay draws on the experiences of “ordinary” black Harlemites as a way to comment on black America's elites, a group whose members such as Du Bois and Locke are arguably the purveyors of the 1960s Civil Rights ideology. In *Fight for Freedom* for instance, Hughes discusses W. E. B. Du Bois' early involvement with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People (NAACP), which would lay the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement's ideological position that African Americans could and should assimilate into mainstream American society. McKay's bestselling novel provoked Du Bois' infamous dismissive statement, "after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath" (qtd. in Lowney 419). Du Bois' specific objection was to McKay's illustration of the black underclass in New York City's Harlem neighborhoods. *Home to Harlem* illustrates the lives of America's most underrepresented denizens; pimps, prostitutes, thieves, bootleggers and gamblers dominate his discussion about racial discrimination in the U. S. These tragic heroes express an experience that is fundamentally antithetical to the image and sophistication of the New Negro.

Du Bois' distaste is not surprising given his investment in the Talented Tenth as outlined in his 1934 publication, "On the Meaning of 'Segregation' and the Struggle for Afro-American Survival." Through his characters in their performances of the black underclass, McKay challenges the notion of the New Negro as the original, or the better man, who has not only the talent to breathe new life into the race but also the responsibility to lead the race. According to Locke and Du Bois, the New Negro defines a new image that challenges and subverts old stereotypes. McKay, on the other hand, takes those very stereotypes and recast them in new and empowering ways.

Just as Hughes refused be ashamed of the reality of African American life, and to cloak black poverty with silence, Beck too chooses to expose what is often ugly about the black experience. Moreover, like McKay's novel, Beck constructs *Pimp* as a critique and reexamination of the violent history of African Americans in Northern inner cities

and is unapologetically political in its demystification of mainstream American ideologies, both black and white. More specifically, for both McKay and Beck, the black inner city ghetto is an atmosphere of endemic violence. Men and women go at each other over sexual status, money, and respect. Like McKay, Beck sets out to challenge and take apart the mythical and idealized perception of the dominant society's strength, morality, values, and beliefs. *Pimp* not only analyzes many of the central issues that affect African American life within U.S. society such as race, class, and gender discrimination, but also destabilizes the normative triumphalism of the Civil Rights ideology in the 1960s. Furthermore, *Pimp* provides the literary parameters for contemporary audiences who continue to identify the style, attitudes, and actions of poor and urban black men as an alternative to mainstream masculinity.

Beck's decision to write about the lives of "ordinary" black people struggling in American ghettos as a way to examine mainstream U.S. ideologies, which systematically marginalized poor black people, can arguably be attributed to the works of African American authors who turned to realism and naturalism following the Harlem Renaissance. In the 1940s and 1950s, authors such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Chester Himes not only examined and illustrated the lives of poor urban blacks. Wright, Ellison, and Himes also used these experiences, the emancipatory acts of the U.S.'s ghetto denizens, to dismantle dominant and elitist ideological positions such as Du Bois' notion of a Talented Tenth, as well as to chart new ways in securing political agency following World War II.

Literary naturalism has its origins in Émile Zola's theory of naturalism, particularly in his belief that "the naturalist is a scientist manqué who describes human behavior as closely related to the demonstrable material factors which have conditioned it" (Pizer ix-x). Naturalism, in other words, is social realism "laced with the idea of determinism" or natural, controlling forces. The stark reality of the exploitation of the urban black masses and the devastating socio-political impact of urbanization and institutional racism, as well as World War II led to the triumph of "a new naturalistic vision in the African American novel between 1936 and 1952" (Bell 118). In the 1940s and 1950s, Wright, Ellison, Himes, and other black novelists saw realism and naturalism as an effective way to illustrate an American society on the verge of collapse. Many black naturalistic writers found inspiration in the exhaustive cultural research of sociologists such as St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr. For example, Wright, speaking as much for the writers of his generation as for himself, said in his introduction to Drake and Cayton's *Black Metropolis*: "it was from the scientific findings of [cultural researchers and social historians] like the late Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth that I drew the meanings for my documentary book *Twelve Million Black Voices*; for my novel, *Native Son*" (qtd. in Bell 118).<sup>13</sup> *Native Son* in particular bridges the gap between literary and sociological scholarship with its reliance on environmental determinants directing Bigger Thomas' life-choices.

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<sup>13</sup> Park, Redfield and Wirth worked as sociologists in Chicago and made new and important discoveries in areas of urban sociology and race relations with their studies on the impact of industrialization, urbanization and social discrimination in the lives of black people and other ethnic minorities (Bell 118).

For instance, in *Native Son*'s opening scene the reader is jolted by the “Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnng!” of Bigger’s alarm clock. The reader is locked into the protagonist’s perspective as he is rudely awoken by a cacophony of sounds from his clock, his mother, and his sister. Before Bigger is fully awake, he hears his mother and sister screaming at him to kill a rat occupying a corner of their small Chicago kitchenette. No sooner than he is able to kill the rat, Bigger is criticized for being unemployed. The effect is an unending barrage of stress and hostility from which neither Bigger nor the reader can find respite. Psychological and environmental disjuncture is indeed an intentional act for Wright. In his essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright insists his intention in writing *Native Son* was to render its horror even more unrelentingly than he had in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, to make it “so hard and so deep” that his readers “would have to face it without the consolation of tears” (454).

Much like Wright’s naturalist novel, *Native Son*, Beck’s first novel *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, illustrates a post-war-Chicago in the mid-twentieth century as a site of immense poverty, pain, and despair. Additionally, both Wright and Beck intended their work to serve as a protest against the U.S.’s racist structure of oppression by calling attention to the violent activities of young unemployed black men forced to live in an environment, which prevents them from living up to their abilities. Their novels explore the problem of a belief in freedom in an increasingly restrictive world through highly structured dramatizations of South Side Chicago during the Great Depression. In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” Wright observes:

It was not until I went to live in Chicago that I first thought seriously of writing of Bigger Thomas. Two items of my experience combined to make me aware of Bigger as a meaningful and prophetic symbol. First, being free of the daily pressure of the Dixie environment, I was able to come into possession of my own feelings. Second, my contact with the labor movement and its ideology made me see Bigger clearly and feel what he meant. (441)

Chicago during the Depression allowed Wright to discover that Bigger Thomas was not just a symbol of black rage, but represented the “muddied pool of human life in America,” the complex and vast struggle for human dignity all oppressed people face (441). Wright’s and Beck’s work emphasizes struggles with chronic unemployment, institutional racism and black male sexuality that make for a restriction of freedom while not rejecting the search for alternative values. Naturalist novels are not arguing that freedom is denied; rather, freedom is closely examined within a world that categorically restricts it. As Donald Pizer writes in *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism*, naturalist writers believed “America was a closed rather than open society and that life in this society was characterized by a struggle to survive materially rather than to prevail morally” (4).

Beck accomplishes a modified version of Ralph Ellison’s expectation of the black artist outlined in his essays compiled in *Shadow and Act*. Speaking of his involvement in early-1960s political activism, as well as his role as the acclaimed writer of *Invisible Man*, Ellison suggests black artists must depict “what really happened within

our areas of American life, putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values that give Negro American life its sense of wholeness and which render it bearable and human and, when measured by our terms, desirable” (21). As a teenager in the mid-1930s, Beck briefly attended the Tuskegee Institute. His spell was coterminous with that of Ellison. However, the two moved in different circles, each oblivious to the presence of the other (*Pimp* vii). It is also important to note that Ellison and Beck are something like kindred literary spirits. Both *The Invisible Man* and *Pimp* contain a critique of Washingtonian appeasement by illustrating an ideological confrontation between the protagonist and the president of Tuskegee University or, in Ellison’s case, an “Alabamian school.” Even though Ellison never discussed street literature, it is relevant to note that Beck’s focus on the “lower classes” of blacks in his novel is doing exactly what Ellison asks, “Putting down with *honesty* and without ideological expediencies” what is *true* of the complex realities of black life.

The most important naturalist writer for Beck is perhaps Himes, whose detective novels not only provided “new angles” for the genre by illustrating the continuing possibilities for social commentary, but also the rich contribution to popular American culture by the expression of an artist’s black experience (*Conversations with Chester Himes* 48). In his article “Chester Himes’ Harlem Tough Guys,” John M. Reilly argues, “In the manner of naturalism, Himes depicts characters as the product of social conditions, and from the standpoint of an outsider it provides a guide to the disorder of American civilization, making clear that the cause of it all is eventually located in the

practice of the dominant class” (58). Reilly goes on to say that Himes was a naturalistic author for more than a decade before he began writing stories about Harlem detectives. His first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) illustrated the psychological effects of pervasive racial discrimination for Bob Jones, a California shipyard worker who, despite his manual and intellectual skills, is just as tortured and alone as Bigger Thomas. *Lonely Crusade* was Himes’ 1947 protest novel, which explores the practice of labor unions and the political left. *Cast the First Stone* (1952) tells the story of a convict’s five year sentence for armed robbery (Reilly 59). Nonetheless, it would be the popularity of Himes’ detective novels, which recounted the lives of ordinary black Harlemites, that would shape the street literature genre.

Bryant highlights Himes influence on street literature from the 1960s and 1970s, which he calls “toast novels.” Bryant says,

The toast novelists dramatize this struggle [with economic depravity in the “ghetto world”], updating into the seventies the inner city described by Chester Himes, by Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and the rest of the bildungsroman novelists. They capture the images through which the ghetto player feels himself fulfilled, and in those images they create a kind of counter-system mythology. (123)

Himes made it possible for writers such as Beck to illustrate the most vicious violence between criminal and police officers, both black and white, as well as between the criminals themselves. Furthermore, Himes helps them explain how racial awareness and



social protest plays a part in highlights the reasons behind the violence, particularly the socio-economic practices of the dominant class (125).

While Beck was motivated creatively and politically to use literary realism and naturalism in *Pimp*, his literary style was not in keeping with mainstream African Americans novels in the 1960s. The previous decade—the period between 1952 and 1962—marked the movement away from literary naturalism and realism. Furthermore, while black characters continued to play an important role in African American literature, many black writers began looking beyond black male protagonists to express broad post-World War II American experiences (Bell 125). That is to say, by the time street literature emerged in the late 1960s and writers such as Beck, Claude Brown, Piri Thomas, and Donald Goines began using naturalism to illustrate what was at the root of contemporary black American experiences, most canonized African American novelists such as Willard Motley (*We Fished All Night*), Himes (*Cast the First Stone*), Ann Petry (*The Narrows*), Wright (*Savage Holiday*) and James Baldwin (*Giovanni's Room*) had long left the naturalist approach behind and began experimenting with nonracial themes and white protagonists.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, Beck, Brown, Thomas, and Goines saw realism

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<sup>14</sup> Although Beck continued to employ literary naturalism in his telling of “ghetto survival” throughout his career, he did experiment with both white and homosexual protagonists in his second and third novels. *Trick Baby* (1967), which becomes one of the first popular black novels made successful by a nearly exclusive African American readership, tells the story of a blonde, blue-eyed, “white-looking” street hustler who must constantly prove his “blackness.” In *Mama Black Widow* (1969), Beck attempts to illustrate inner-city life through the experiences of his narrator, Otis Tilson, a gay black man who describes how he was driven into homosexuality by a smothering mother and a father who loses his manhood when he cannot pay his bills and he is ridiculed by his wife. Indeed the glaringly problematic misreading of homosexuality in *Mama Black Widow* centers on Beck’s belief that men turn into homosexuals when they lack a male model and are subjected to female authority as children (Bryant 130). For more information on the popularity of street lit among black readers see Christina and Richard Millner’s *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (1973).

and naturalism as an effective way to examine what was at the center of the decision making process of young black people still living in poor communities across the United States; i.e. the psychological effects of cultural, social, economic and even political marginalization.

Consider, for example, Houston A. Baker's understanding of street lit authors and their use of literary naturalism. Discussing Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Baker describes the novel as

The struggle of one black male child to escape from the throes of a colonial system; Harlem, or the initial environment, is the colony whose codes and inimical effects the protagonist has to escape. The protagonist's struggle is defined in terms of various shifts in environment, and the reader emerges with a balanced view of his struggle due to the combination of romantic nostalgia and clinical realism in the narrator's technique of description. (53)

Here, Baker describes the inner-city environment as a "colony," a physical space that establishes its own rules with subsequent effects on the lives of its inhabitants. It is only through an understanding of the protagonist's often-violent escape, or attempt to escape the ghetto, that the reader can truly appreciate the struggles inherent in inner-city life, which for Baker is something akin to colonized subjectivity. Similar to Beck's work, *Manchild* tells the story of a young man coming of age amidst poverty and violence in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s. For Baker, the inner-city ghetto environment constitutes the defiant black man's oppositional practices and emancipatory acts. In

*Manchild* Brown writes, “All youngsters in Harlem are confused in their thinking. Their thinking is influenced by their environment, by external values—not their own, but the values of the community, the people around them” (395). The “various shifts in environment” determine the actions of street literature’s protagonists where chronic drug abuse and crime remedy unemployment—violent acts combat feelings of disempowerment and emasculation. Reinforcing the narrator’s estimation of Harlem in *Manchild*, John Henrik Clarke says: “In the raging battle for integration and equal job opportunities for Negroes, little is heard about the Negroes’ long fight to gain control of their community. A system of pure economic colonialism extends into politics, religion and every money-making endeavor that touches the life of a Harlem resident” (3). Again, the “street nigger” is defined in terms of colonization where the life of the subject is determined by the will of the environment. Furthermore, “the streets” function as the dominant metaphor in *Manchild*, where Brown’s character must negotiate Harlem’s labyrinth of avenues, back ally-ways and the cultural politics they engender. Thus, street crimes become the means in which disenfranchised black people reconfigure their relationship to the dominant class, reclaim power, and struggle for ascendancy within an unforgiving system.

At the risk of digression, it is important to point out that *Manchild* differs from *Pimp* in that Brown’s narrator and main character, Sonny, experiences a type of psychological and moral-growth that is left unresolved in Beck’s novel. That is to say, Brown’s bildungsroman defines black male growth as a rejection of the totality of ghetto life and the embrace of mainstream cultural values, particularly the patriarchal values

supported by members of the Civil Rights Movement. *Manchild* concludes with Sonny fleeing Harlem to live in Greenwich Village, and finding spiritual and philosophical solace in the teachings and guidance of Reverend James—a man described as the “patron saint” of Harlem who gave most of his salary to the poor, but had little tolerance for “weak” and “hopelessly lost” young men who turn to drugs (391-95). *Pimp*, on the other hand, ends with Iceberg Slim in a jail cell having virtually been forced out of the “pimp” game, not because he wants to end his career, but because his old age prevents him from continuing: “I had come to a decision in that awful cell. I was through with pimping and drugs ... Perhaps my age and loss of youth played their part. I had found that pimping is for young men” (266). Later in *Naked Soul*, the 1971 follow-up to *Pimp*, Beck describes Iceberg Slim as being unable to leave the “pimp game” despite the promise he made himself in that prison cell. Slim’s conclusion that “pimping is for young men” is confirmed only after having just acquired a new and very young prostitute, he finds himself unable to fulfill his “duties” as a pimp:

I lay sleepless in the stifling room watching her sleeping. Her magnificent body was nude except for wisps of whorehouse costume that seemed ready to burst against the buxom stress of her honey tones curves and fat jet bush gleaming through the peach gauze.

I remembered the fast stacks of greenbacks, the icy, goose-pimpling, hot-sweet torture of that freak [a prostitute] tongue, and the exquisite grab of that incredibly heavy-lipped cunt in the giddy beginning when her sick whore’s skull was bewitched by my poisonous pimp

charisma. My erection was sucker swift and rock hard, but as I started off the couch toward her, it collapsed. I suddenly realized that I had lost all power over her and therefore in her cold-blooded whore judgment I was just another customer, a chump john. I turned my face to the wall and worried until dawn about my moves and the wisdom of willfully blowing off a young freak whore with mileage galore left to hump away. (37)

This scene is important because in it Beck is attempting to not only illustrate the imperfection of black manhood as defined by the “street nigger,” he is also trying to demystify as well as expose the instability of street culture’s system of beliefs, values, and morals which are constituted by mainstream hetero normative, patriarchal ideals. Furthermore, Beck’s novel forces the reader to accept that the majority of people struggling in the ghetto, in fact, do not find their way out.

By creating a novel through the lens of realism and naturalism, and by attempting to represent members of poor communities, Beck is most successful in advancing a view of the Civil Rights Movement based on the politics of poor black people. Beck’s semi-autobiographical novel goes against the Civil Rights ideology’s opposition to violence as a reactionary source in the black community, its negotiation of mainstream white society, and its image of black manhood (Valocchi 127). More importantly, Beck’s new black hero disrupts the Civil Rights era’s stagnant performances intended to homogenize the black community. Beck’s characters, particularly his illustrations of Iceberg Slim, challenge the meaning of manhood and community established during the Civil Rights

era. For many African Americans—mostly middle-class blacks—the Civil Rights Movement rightfully sought to join mainstream American society.

According to Steve Valocchi, “the dominant ideology of the movement—the idea system that leaders used to frame grievances, devise strategies, and enumerate demands—started from the notion that blacks were denied the basic civil, political, and social freedoms accorded all other citizens and ended with the notion that these freedoms must be guaranteed by the federal government if the country was to move to a race-free society” (117). In *Racial Formations in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out that integration, political enfranchisement, and civil liberties were the ideological watchwords of the early movement. Members of the Civil Rights Movement promoted “civil” acts of resistance based on the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr., the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and others activists and organizations that promoted a conciliatory approach to white America (King 207-23). Contrary even to the radical 1960s Black Power movement, which advocated violent self-defense, *Pimp* presents alternative acts of resistance rooted in poor black communities where crime and racial exploitation offer successful, albeit problematic, approaches to social liberation. Beck’s novel provides an emblematic deep structure for theorizing black male subjectivities produced by such means.

*Pimp* illustrates a magnificent “street nigger” fulfilled by his ability to disrupt and resist mainstream America’s elitist system of social and economic oppression. Iceberg Slim in particular demonstrates the power, agency, and authenticity of the “street nigger” character and popularizes him for what Herbert H. Hines describes in “Black

Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights” as an African American community frustrated with the slow moving progress of the Civil Rights campaign in the late 1960s. It is no coincidence that the publication and subsequent popularity of *Pimp* coincides with the waning appeal of the Civil Rights movement among black youths and the increasing popularity of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. Television news coverage of emerging young black leaders such as Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, H. Rap Brown, and Stokely Carmichael gave a new face and sound to black male resistance in the United States. Carmichael, for instance, intrigued television journalists, because he had an interesting appearance and appealing speaking style, which fascinated audiences. His appearance and dress sharply contrasted leaders from the previous generation. Carmichael “exuded charisma with the young audience he spoke to most often. He was young, tall at six-foot-one, built like a basketball guard, handsome, and virile. SNCC associates dubbed him the ‘Magnificent Barbarian’” (Stewart 435). By the time Carmichael shouted “black power” during the 1966 march in Mississippi, generational lines between the old, more traditional, non-violent ideologies and the new, angrier face of black resistance had been drawn, largely around this issue of black authenticity, i.e. blackness as a representation of a new militant nationalism rather than cultural conciliation and social integration (Carmichael 470-76; C. Stewart 429-46).

However, while both Beck and the leaders of this new Black Nationalist movement sought to challenge and dismantle the Civil Rights ideology, their theories of social and political resistance were fundamentally at odds. In *Naked Soul*, Beck discusses his admiration for the Black Panther Party as well as his disappointment in

their rejection of him as a man who “kicked black women in the ass for bread” (153). Beck’s memoir recalls a conversation with Black Panther members after their dramatic standoff with Los Angeles police officers. Beck remembers visiting the Panthers’ disheveled headquarters to congratulate the young revolutionaries on taking a heroic stand against the “Establishment.” While discussing his own radical writings on black liberation, Beck notes having what he describes as

[t]he sobering realization that unlike the hundreds of non-Panther black youngsters who had recognized [him] on the street and admired [him] as a kind of folk hero, because of [his] lurid and sensational pimp background, the Panther youngsters were blind to [his] negative glamour and, in fact, expressed a polite disdain for [his] former profession and its phony flash of big cars, jewelry and clothes. Their only obsession seemed to be the freedom of black people. (*Naked Soul* 152-53)

For the young Black Panthers informed by Marxist teachings, Slim’s “negative glamor” is not just about being a pimp. The young Panthers despise the pimp’s reliance on material goods to define his worth, his reliance on the symbols of mainstream black and white society. Furthermore, the fact that the pimp turns black women into commodities is also problematic for them. Despite the “polite disdain” the Black Panther Party has for black men such as Iceberg Slim, who use brute force to exploit poor black communities, Beck continues to align his “street nigger” philosophy with that of the new black militancy as the “antithesis of the distorted image carried in the collective mind of America’s older, brainwashed blacks” (*Naked Soul* 154). In fact, Beck dedicates *The*



*Naked Soul* to “the heroic memory of Malcolm X, Jack Johnson, Melvin X, Jonathan Jackson; to Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seal, Ericka Huggins, George Jackson, Angela Davis; and to all street niggers and strugglers in and out of the joint.”

While Civil Rights activists in the 1960s such as Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, and others struggled to join the middle class and encouraged an escape to the straight life, Beck’s novel captures the sentiment of not only those left behind, but poor blacks who sought refuge in Chicago’s underworld.<sup>15</sup> Beck’s work focuses on the many poor African Americans making it in the ghetto using the “code of the streets.” Beck’s hero takes center stage as access to the middle class closes off. *Pimp*’s focus on alternative forms of masculinity such as fearlessness and machismo in the dangerous underworld, and its designation of these alternative forms as authentically black and male, is a critique and rejection of old forms of black manhood and old negotiations of new spaces such as the modern American ghetto. Furthermore, Beck’s new black man illuminates the ground on which I discuss the “street nigger” trope and identify the 1960s Civil Rights ideology as an expression of mainstream white culture, for it exposes the fact that Civil Rights ideology, in many respects, was not progressive at all. For instance, Civil Rights ideology calls for the emergence of a black masculinity defined by cultural integration and assimilation with mainstream white American values and morals rather than embracing a number of other competing ideologies such as revolutionary

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<sup>15</sup> In his 1958 address to the Richmond, Virginia chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Roy Wilkins said, “We do not excuse the bad behavior of some misguided and ill-prepared Negro citizens and teen-agers. We do not excuse crime in anyone ... We should attack crime ... We should attack the causes of crime ...” See Roy Wilkins address to the Richmond, Virginia chapter of the NAACP on February 27, 1958. <http://www.vahistorical.org/tah/wilkins.htm#doc> accessed April 29, 2012.

violence, anarchistic resistance, communism and Black Nationalism (Valocchi 117). Beck's "street nigger" hero and by extension the classes of black American denizens they represent run counter to the attitudes of members of the Civil Rights movement, particularly the "non-violent" activists such as King, Wilkins, Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, and other who saw themselves as representative of the best of the black community.

The 1960s was an important period in popular African American literature. A number of notable black writers such as Beck, Goines, Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Clarence Cooper Jr., Odie Hawkins, Nathan Heard, Charles Perry, George Jackson, Ronald S. Jefferson, Robert Deane Pharr, Gil Scott-Heron, Vern Smith, Earnest Tidyman, and even Malcolm X began exploring the "culture of criminality" in the street literature genre as a way to dismantle conception of black community and manhood as configured in the minds of mainstream black and white USA. Works by these street lit authors played a major role in establishing the culture of crime and criminal behavior as an emancipatory act among black male youths in the late-1960s and 1970s. Most street lit writers looked to the radical defiance of black male criminals as a salient site for social and political critique.

Thus, Beck's characters are the voices from Chicago's fringes and whose lives and expressions challenge the boundaries of representing black identity. For instance, *Pimp* challenges the Civil Rights' understanding of respectability: *Pimp* accepts and celebrates the black ghetto not in part but the whole, the urban space marked by legacies of American racial contact, economics, and conflict. Just as Wright intended his

audience to “face [the reality of *Native Son*] without the consolation of tears,” Beck too attempted to challenge respectability by forcing readers to deal with the life of a pimp and the black underclass in general. The novel’s narrator moves with skill and confidence into the streets, into the gambling dens, and into the bars of Chicago. He is neither intimidated by the physical or social challenges of this world, nor is he made to feel uncomfortable by its inhabitants. He is not ashamed of the ramifications and the manifestations of this knowledge; the ghetto is the source of his own personal powers and the confidence behind his negotiations both personal and political. He sees himself in the community, neither as a spectator nor part of the show, but a conductor, an innovator, and a maker of his own sensibilities, stories, and cultural habits.

To exist in Chicago in this manner, as a figure within the imagination and platform of the city, is what Beck sees as the ultimate representation of respectability, blackness, and manhood. While the Civil Rights ideology argues for an escape from the black world and an assimilated existence in the white world, Iceberg Slim revels in the fact that his mind is “straightjacked into the pimp game,” which signifies his allegiance to the underworld black community:

Back in the joint I had dreamed almost nightly [of the streets]. ... They were fantastic. I would see myself gigantic and powerful like God Almighty. My clothes would glow. My underwear would be rainbow-hued petting my skin. My shoes would be dazzling silver. The toes were as sharp as daggers. Beautiful whores with piteous eyes groveled at my feet. (55)

The tone of the passage is that of a “street nigger” superbly, robustly laughing and satisfied with the city not only because it is a familiar space, but also because the images he sees complement his social, cultural and personal character. Iceberg Slim’s ability to see himself “gigantic and powerful like God Almighty” within an oppressive system of race and class discrimination demystifies the concept of an all-powerful white masculinity framed by mainstream values and beliefs. While these descriptions are born from his observance and celebration of the place, they also are tied to his own self-indulgent masculine subjectivity. Beck’s illustration of the “street nigger” hero is deeply invested in paying homage to the culture and people from the inside, a culture and people who speak for the “truly disadvantaged.”<sup>16</sup> More importantly, an examination of *Pimp* through the lens of naturalism attempts to understand not only how Iceberg Slim sought social and economic liberation, but *why* he believes freedom can only be achieved through the economic, sexual and psychological exploitation of black women and their bodies.

In his introduction to *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*, Milton Van Sickle argues that *Pimp*’s use of naturalism effectively highlights a culture of predetermination:

A century ago, fifty years ago, twenty years ago, the Establishment line was, ‘Take it easy, don’t rock the boat. Justice will come—but it takes time.’ [That] is the same Establishment that murdered Bessie Smith ... Malcolm X and Melvin X—to say nothing of the nameless thousands every year in the collective ghetto of our nation—this is the same

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<sup>16</sup> The term stems from William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantage: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (1993).

Establishment of today—and it hasn't yielded an inch in all this time....  
His first book, *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, is essentially a modern and very much American version of *Crime and Punishment*. (*Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* 9-10)

By signaling Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866), a significant naturalist text, Sickle makes three important arguments in the passage above: Beck's book is an important naturalistic tale in which the character and history of man is determined by economic disenfranchisement and psychological turmoil; like the protagonist in Dostoevsky's seminal novel, in order to escape poverty Beck's "street nigger" hero is forced to make the kinds of difficult and potentially self-destructive decisions that are psychologically and economically constituted; and ghetto violence and the oppression of black people by mainstream white society are explicitly connected in *Pimp*.

Consider, for example, this scene in chapter fourteen of *Pimp* titled "The Mistake," in which Beck describes the "street nigger's" antagonistic attitude toward both the black and white middle class through his illustration of a conversation between Iceberg Slim and his father. Throughout the novel, Beck describes an intensely negative relationship between the two. In fact, Slim's most vivid memory of his father is one retold to him by his mother: "After my birth ... [my father] had the stupid gall to suggest to Mama that [because of financial hardships] I be put on a Catholic Church doorstep. Mama naturally refused so he hurled me against the wall in disgust. I survived and he left us" (2). I read the father's brutal reaction as a response to feelings of hopelessness brought on by poverty. More importantly, his actions explicitly

illustrate the link between ghetto violence and the dominant society's economic system of race and class marginalization. In other words, if Slim's father had access to the same stable jobs afforded his white counterparts, he may not have insisted on abandoning his young son, or attempted to kill the child in an effort to alleviate the pressures of poverty.

Later, in his early-twenties, Iceberg Slim spots his father on the streets of Chicago's South Side, the man he has not seen since infancy. His upwardly mobile father is now financially secure. He works as a chef in a hotel on Chicago's affluent North Side. When Slim's father sees his son more than twenty years later, he is impressed with his wealthy appearance. As such, Slim's father projects his middle-class notion of the American dream onto the South Side pimp, completely unaware of his son's brutal profession. In a heated argument, on the cold Chicago streets, Slim lashes out at his estranged father's middle class fantasies of legal employment and a family for his son. In his response Slim says,

Look Jack, I am Iceberg . . . I'm the greatest Nigger that ever came outta our family . . . I been to two prisons. I'm on my way to a third any day now. I shoot more scratch into that arm a day than you make in a week. I've come a long way . . . You ain't hip I'm important? Maybe one day I'll really make you proud. I'll croak a whore and make the Chair. (196)

Slim's ironic twist on the meaning of respectability is enveloped in the social mores of the ghetto that rejects mainstream values and beliefs, and stresses hyper-inflated manhood through verbal boasts, drugs, prisons, and a redefinition of liberation. Beck sets up this scene at the beginning of the novel when he says as a child Iceberg Slim lost

“page by page the fine rules of thought and deed” that comprise his father’s middle-class ideals (12). Beck’s rationalizations are in keeping with Pizer’s argument that naturalism intends to show that “the supernatural support of ethical systems was not only unproven but patently untrue” (87). In other words, the “fine rules of thought and deed” Slim learned as a Boy Scout in Rockford, Illinois, which he believes are rooted in mainstream middle-class values, beliefs, and “ethical systems,” are critiqued and ultimately disproved by his, albeit distorted and problematic, success as a pimp making him “the greatest Nigger that ever came outta [his] family.”

It is also significant that this private turmoil between Slim and his father played out in the public space of “the streets,” which is itself representative of the ambiguity and disruptive nature of the ghetto, the space “street niggers” occupy. The ghetto is in fact one that is simultaneously private and public and one that attracts and repels. In effect, this ambiguity signifies an aspect of the “street nigger’s” subjectivity; he is a vagabond.<sup>17</sup> The “street nigger” is a wandering, route/rootless person not because he lives recklessly or because he lives outside the rule of law, but because he contingently seeks to negotiate the places and spaces he inhabits. “Street nigger” culture is a way of life maintained by acts of resistance that go against the grain of social or cultural restrictions. He inhabits on his own terms the open, abandoned spaces as well as communally owned ones. More so, the “street nigger’s” vagabondage encroaches upon private, enclosed spaces and leaves behind disruption—the mark of its visitations in actual physical artifacts and psychological disturbances. This disturbance is illustrated

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<sup>17</sup> For more on African American literature and the black male vagabond see Chaney, 2005.

in the father's private grief played out in public: "I looked at my old man. He was sitting on the curb beside the lamp post. ... He had his head on his knees. ... The poor joker was bawling his ass off" (196). Distraught over the man his son has become, and likely lamenting his part in creating him, Slim's father is left crying on the street curb. More so than in an effort to contextualize the emotional confrontation between a father and son, Beck uses the ghetto environment—i.e. the symbolic and actual representation of the psychological effects of the U.S.'s economic structure and the trauma of chronic childhood neglect in poor black communities—to explain Slim's philosophical disjuncture with the dominant cultures system of morals, values and beliefs.

The source of Iceberg Slim's financial triumphs and psychological failings are the most compelling aspect of *Pimp*. Both seem to stem from Slim's relationship with the women in his life. Each of Slim's economic and psychological negotiations connects intrinsically to the trauma he suffered as a child. More specifically, Beck suggests Slim's first traumatic events as a toddler resulted from his mother's failed economic and romantic choices. As a result, Iceberg Slim develops a complicated psychosexual relationship with the women in his life. Despite expressing Iceberg Slim's avowed love for his mother throughout *Pimp*, Beck psychoanalyses the pimp figure saying,

The best pimps that I know, that is the career pimps, the ones who could do twenty, maybe thirty years as a pimp, were utterly ruthless and brutal, without compassion. They certainly had a basic hatred for women. My theory is, and I can't prove it, if we are to use the criteria of utter ruthlessness as a guide, that all of them hated their mothers. Perhaps



more accurately, I would say that they've never known love and affection, maternal love and affection. I've known several dozen in fact that were dumped into the trash bins when they were what?...only four or five days old. (qtd. in Koblin 1972)

The implicit rage some black men feel against black women is at the core of the pimp's sexual and economic psychology. Beck suggests that it all begins with the mother. Bryant makes the argument that in "toast novels" black women are allied with white men who mentally maim, cripple, and disempower black men (131). Thus, the pimp can only earn respect if he does not shrink in the presence of black women. According to Beck's "theory," "the best pimps" must maintain dominance through ritualized beatings and forced sex.

Beck's oedipal reading of the pimp figure is further complicated when examined through the lens of Marxist ideology. In other words, Iceberg Slim's psychosexual health, which constitutes the socio-economic forces around his life, is the source of his resistant and emancipatory acts. Speaking about the popular "pimp film" *Hustle and Flow*, Michael Eric Dyson poignantly connects the sexual psychology and economic impulses of the pimp to America's culture of capitalism:

The symbolism of the pimp in black American culture is tied up with notions of upward mobility, especially when the pimp is viewed as an escape hatch for the economically degraded working-class man .... In brutally direct fashion, the pimp seizes control of the female's [body] to make money and generate status for himself. Pimping, in certain ways,

both simulates and replicates chattel slavery, or the owning of bodies for generating wealth. Pimping is the plantation in motion. (*Know What I Mean?* 26)

Following Dyson's logic, Beck's pimp figure possesses a lustful appetite for crime and the material flamboyancies it makes possible. Indeed ostentation signifies to both black and white society that black men have achieved status in a world designed for them to fail. Iceberg Slim wants to be a pimp with "dazzling silver" shoes so that he can feel "powerful" and "beautiful" (*Pimp* 55). Although he recognizes he is "still black in the white man's world," Slim "hope[s] to be important and admired ... behind this black stockade." All he needs to realize his dream is the flashiness of cars, jewelry, cloths, and most importantly, style and reputation. Furthermore, Iceberg Slim believes the only way he can acquire these items is by having a "strong pimp hand"; that is to say, Slim must maintain unwavering, brutal control over the women in his life.

In the opening scene of *Pimp*, Beck ties Iceberg Slim's sexual health to economic instability in order to emphasize the (pre)determined life choices of his "street nigger" hero. *Pimp* describes the Depression Era in Chicago as a site of immense poverty, pain, and despair. The novel opens with a telling description of Iceberg Slim's first sexual encounter. At the age of three, young Slim, then simply referred to as Robert, was repeatedly raped by Maude, a young widow hired to babysit for fifty cents a day while his mother worked long hours in a hand laundry. Iceberg Slim refers to his rape as being "Georgied," a pimp term describing a male individual that performs sexual acts without financial compensation. This act of being "Georgied" constitutes Slim's tireless pursuit

of sexual and economic retribution from many, if not all, of the women he encounters. The turbulent and unhealthy atmosphere at home sets up the scene from which Slim will fail and succeed. It also explains why pimping becomes the specific survival technique and method Slim adopts in order to insure his economic and psychological freedom.

Early in the novel, Beck also constructs his “street nigger” hero as inextricably linked to an economic environment seemingly structured for his failure. Throughout *Pimp*, Beck suggests that the potential for growth among poor black men is evident; however, many fail to offer positive contributions to society because of the restrictive nature of poverty brought on by economic depravity and chronic unemployment. Remembering his early childhood in the first pages of *Pimp*, Beck recalls the emotional and physical strain of poverty and unemployment on his mother, and the way “the streets” provided the only opportunity for his economic liberation:

It was the beginning of winter. Mama packed pressing irons and waving combs into a small bag and wrapped me warmly in blankets and set out into the bleak, friendless city to ring doorbells. . . . Her pitch was something like this, “Madam, I can make your hair curly and beautiful. Please give me a chance. For fifty cents, that’s all, I will make your hair shine like new money.” She would slip the blanket aside to bare my wee big-eyed face. There were no jobs in Indianapolis for Mama and for six months we barely made it on meager savings. . . . I had seen too much, suffered too much. The jungle had started to embalm me with bitterness and hardness. I was losing page by page the fine rules of thought and

deed that I had learned in church, from Henry, from the Boy Scout Troop in Rockford. I was sopping up the poison of the street like a sponge. (2-12)

In this passage, Beck illustrates the importance economic stability plays on a young child's physical and emotional wellbeing. In his adolescents, Slim was jolted into poverty after his mother, having fallen for a "pretty-faced" pimp named Steve, abandoned her second husband, Henry, in Rockford, Illinois. Shortly after arriving in Indianapolis, Slim's mother began regretting her decision to leave with Steve who tried to control her with brutal "pimp tactics." Alone and desperate, Mama and her young son braved the cold winters and went door to door searching for work. At this early stage in Iceberg Slim's life, the significance of money was at every level of his psyche. The crucial role economic stability plays in the lives of poor black people is apparent in Mama's sales pitch, rich with pathos, as she asks for "a chance" to earn just fifty cents for the promise to make her client's hair "shine like new money." Slim's memory of his role in the sales pitch as Mama's "helpless baby boy" suggests that, at an early age, he is shaped by the U.S.'s contradictory economic values and practices. It is clear from the onset that Beck's sensibilities are being structured at a very crucial and influential stage in his psychological development.

Additionally, the passage above introduces the phrase "poison of the streets" which acts as a refrain throughout the novel to illustrate not only the danger pimps, hustlers, drug dealers, and thieves posed for the black community, but also the "street nigger's" self-destructive pursuit of economic wealth in an oppressive world; "the

individual seeking meaning in his own immediate experiences” (Pizer 87). For Slim, the image he sees in “the streets” is a reflection of his imperfect, human self. Major acts of resistance such as Slim’s decision to be a pimp and pursue a life in Chicago’s underworld can be read as the “street nigger” hero’s quest for stability in the disjointed urban ghetto. Beck’s characters exist in a politically marginalized, racially exploitative and culturally vile environment, which thus makes success within “the streets” a radical social phenomenon and emancipatory act. In other words, if one is capable of achieving some semblance of the American Dream, particularly where dreams are routinely and systematically deferred, that individual is capable of becoming a symbol of self-determination and self-empowerment.

In these early pages of *Pimp*, Beck also begins to associate the “street nigger’s” anger at white society with his life utterly destroyed by poverty—a result of structuralized disenfranchisement and chronic unemployment. The association of black economic instability within a white authoritarianism and a racist economic structure leads Slim to believe that freedom for blacks can only be achieved through status and material wealth, which, furthermore, can only be realized in “the street,”<sup>18</sup> an

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<sup>18</sup> This very argument is pervasive within contemporary cultures of black masculinity in which violence and criminal activity are excused as the only source of economic stability in an environment depleted of legitimate jobs. For example, Christopher “Notorious B.I.G.” Wallace famously stated, “Either you slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot” in his song “Things Done Changed” (this title begs the question: have things really changed?) as a way to describe the lack of options afforded to young black men in the ghetto. Since talent and ability are paramount to securing a place in highly competitive sports, drug dealing, with its more accessible skill sets (fearlessness, brashness, and bravado) becomes the more “practical” choice. In fact, Notorious B.I.G., a 300-plus pound rapper, is almost satirical when coupling these two career goals. He was certainly aware of his own limitation as an athlete; therefore, his implication that drug dealing is the *only* option for him and many other young black people living in an environment of immense poverty and chronic joblessness is that much more striking.

underworld that exists outside of mainstream black and white culture. It is easy to read Slim's decision to take up a capitalist ideology as an investment in mainstream American concepts of masculinity where manhood is proven by the amount of money one has and the ability to stand above poor people. However, such a reading overlooks the individual and trickster aspects of Slim's negotiation of American capitalism as well as Beck's attempts to establish for his "street nigger" hero a radical redefinition of citizenship by the insertion of his disruptive subjectivity into the makeup of citizenry.

The relationship between white authoritarianism and "pimping" as an emancipatory act converge, for example, in one scene from *Pimp* in which an older hustler named Glass Top tells the younger Iceberg Slim about the psychological and economic impulses of his mentor, Sweet Jones. As Top explains it, "[Sweet] sure hates white folks. He pimps awful tough on white whores. When he puts his foot in their asses he's really doing it to the white man. He says he's paying 'em back for what they done and are doing to black people. His brain is rotted with hate" (*Pimp* 107). In this passage, pimping, albeit a grotesquely problematic act, functions as an act of resistance and reclamation of power. Nonetheless, Sweet Jones' actions conjure memories of America's history of institutionalized racism. The act of rape is a reconfiguration of power; through the act of raping white women, and even black women who, as Bryant has argued, frequently stand in for white authoritarianism, Sweet Jones is symbolically "raping" white society back "for what they done and are doing to black people." In fact, Sweet Jones started pimping out of a personal hatred for whites acquired when, at a

young age, he witnessed a southern white mob gang rape his mother and lynch his father.

Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka make a similar argument with their “rape on principle” concept outlined in their works *Soul on Ice* and *Madheart*, respectively.<sup>19</sup> Both works uncompromisingly assert the need for black men to redeem the maligned conception of themselves and, indeed, their manhood as a revolutionary way to uplift the black community. In a defensive effort to reclaim black manhood, Cleaver and Baraka’s revolutionary convictions are fueled by the perception that, inextricably, black empowerment is tied to black male virility and sexual potency (Ellis 44). As Cleaver explains,

Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women—and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black women. I felt I was getting revenge. From the site of rape, consternation spreads outwardly in concentric circles. I wanted to send waves of consternation throughout the white race (14).

In his article “Reading *Soul on Ice*” Jared Sexton argues that Cleaver’s theory of rape on principle, and that of Baraka by extension, is a troubling line of reasoning in that it

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<sup>19</sup> Cleaver began writing *Soul on Ice* from behind bars in 1965 after being convicted of assault (rape) and attempted murder. *Madheart* was first performed at San Francisco State College in May 1967. It was published in *Black Ice* in 1968.

“situates white and black women as symbolic extensions of men” (34). In other words, black men exercise their frustrations with white male dominance on women’s bodies. Pointing out the irony in the “rape on principle” concept, Kimberly Nichele Brown notes that abusive black men “fail to see his abuse as parallel to that of white slave masters; he sees nothing wrong with demanding submission as a condition of their relationship” (233). Nonetheless, black male sexuality is inextricably bound to the dehumanizing portrait of black men as hypersexual rapists of black and white women and as aggressively nihilistic “brutes” and *Pimp* attempts to juxtapose black masculinity and sexual violence to symbolize an ironically empowering site for black male writers of the 1960s.

The use of sex and sexuality as a “cultural tool” for retribution and liberation segues directly into another aspect of Beck’s vision of “street nigger” identity: his sense of himself as a sexual being. In other words, Beck’s “street nigger” hero is not only determined by economic factors such as poverty and unemployment. Slim’s actions are also motivated by a subconscious response to his early sexual relationships with black women. In the following scenes, I show how Beck communicates Slim’s sexual neuroses as a product of deeply ingrained sexual trauma and ties the pimp’s sexual-psychology to his conditions in poverty.

Again, the brief but significant moment in the novel’s opening passage in which Iceberg Slim is raped by his babysitter introduces his early history of sexual trauma upon which all his sexual encounters pivot. He persistently seeks retribution for being “Georgied,” the sexual and economic violation he endured at the age of three when he



was repeatedly raped by his babysitter, Maude. In an exchange between Iceberg Slim and Phyllis, a conversation he routinely has upon first meeting a “prospect” or potential prostitute, the pimp’s merging of sexual and economic negotiations is quite telling: “Bitch, don’t put shit in the game. Business always comes before pleasure in my book. I’ll take my clothes off when I know I’m taking them off with my whore. I don’t sucker for the Georgia. Jar loose from respectable scratch [money], Bitch” (61). In this passage, Iceberg Slim is establishing both a sexual and economical relationship with his potential prostitute. The “pimp code” or rules of engagement between the panderer and the prostitute, suggest that in order to establish dominance, a pimp must require payment from a women before engaging in a sexual relationship. The pimp’s “business before pleasure” motto, or as Sweet Jones says, “only be as sweet as the scratch,” displays a masculine authority marked by a very important shift between sexual desire and economic survival.

A more telling example of the shift between sexual desire and economic survival may be in the relationship between Iceberg Slim and Melody, a “perfumed line-backer” with the face of “Olivia de Havilland ...only bigger and prettier” (115).<sup>20</sup> The two make plans for a romantic rendezvous at Melody’s home. At the moment Melody removes her clothes Slim quickly learns that the “beautiful white [woman]” is in fact a man in drag. Stunned, Iceberg Slim jumps back and scrambles for the door all the while insisting emphatically that he is “a pimp, not a faggot.” That evening Slim returns home to

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<sup>20</sup> Olivia de Havilland is an American actress who won the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1946 and 1949 for her films, *To Each His Own* and *The Heiress*, respectively.

Phyllis. Not telling her about his encounter with a man, he goes into the shower to “scrub the sissy taste out of my jib [mouth]” (123). It is clear, however, that Melody has left behind more than the taste of her kiss: “That beautiful sissy had buried a hot seed in my guts. The wild flower blossomed. I dreamily drifted into the runt [Phyllis]” (124). Clearly, for Slim, the “hot seed” is the thought of a homosexual encounter, and the blossoming “wild flower” is his desire to have sex with Melody. Slim’s hetero-normative impulse is to extinguish his desires by “drifting into the runt.” Beck does not return to Slim’s homosexual desires until they confront his economic plight. Later in the novel when, due to the inevitable ebb and flow of underworld success, Slim’s hedonistic empire begins to crumble and he becomes desperate to continue his life as a pimp. He thinks, “Maybe I was hasty to shut the door on Melody and his entasis [a metaphor Melody uses to describe her “flaw” or penis]. At this point I can get hip to anything except work. No one could know I was freaking [having sex] with a stud [man]” (*Pimp* 173). On the one hand, Slim’s remarks dismiss his homosexual desire and instead replace his sexuality with the logic of a business tactic, as if “freaking with a stud” is nothing more than a shift in target audiences. On the other hand, the line, “I can get hip to anything except work”—that is, Slim’s fear of getting a legit job, or as he would describe it, “squaring up” and “getting a slave” in a white man’s business—addresses the issue of power and the use of sex and sexuality as a “cultural tool” in the configuration of power. In other words, Slim’s sexuality has no bearing on his hetero-normative masculinity within the underworld context of economic power. As long as no one knows he is engaged in homosexual relationships, Slim is capable of maintaining his

hetero normative position as a pimp. Inherent in this description is the invocation of the kinds of negotiations Slim must enter in order to reach freedom. One such negotiation is the impossibility of romantic love associated with sex. Sex for Iceberg Slim is but “cultural equipment” in the configuration of power much like his childhood rapist, Maude, used sex with a child to empower herself.

Indeed, Slim’s sexual encounters throughout *Pimp* are only outward expressions of his sexual psychosis. Iceberg Slim’s sexual psychology is fully revealed to us during a dream sequence where his unconscious sexual desires converge with a latent oedipal complex to reveal his hatred for women, specifically his mother and other women who conjure images of his mother. During his life as the pimp, Iceberg Slim, Beck recalls a series of recurring dreams in which he would adorn “suits spun-gold shot through with precious stones” while “beautiful whores with piteous eyes groveled at [his] feet ... [begging him] not to murder them on ... sharp steel stakes” (55). In the same dream sequence, he would find himself whipping a woman across her back, bringing him to ecstasy. The dream would end with the woman turning her agonized face toward him: “It would be Mama” (56). This dream sequence represents the internal psychological turmoil, confusion, and instability Slim experiences with women throughout his life.

In this next scene, Iceberg Slim acts out the instability of romantic love in the life of a “street nigger” who is willing to sacrifice and exploit other poor black people, specifically black women, for his own financial success:

I twisted my key in the lock and stepped in. [She] was wide eyed ....

“Oh Daddy, I am so glad you’re back. I was worried...Where have you

been?” ... A heart-aching montage tornadoed through my skull. [As he stands at the door thinking, Iceberg Slim recalls the image of his stepfather Henry, and Mama.] The runt’s love con had resurrected sad old scenes.... I shuddered and punched the runt with all my might against her left temple.... She lay there breathing hard.... Then she said, “Why Daddy? What did I say to get my ass whipped? Are you high or what?” I said, “Bitch, if I have you a hundred years don’t ever ask me where I been. Don’t ever try to play that bullshit love con on me.” ... Fifteen minutes [after the slash on the side of her head stopped leaking] I lay there [in bed] silently. She crawled in beside me. She nibbled my ear.... I was trying to figure out the real reason why I slugged her. I couldn’t find the answer. My thoughts were ham strung by the razor-edge of conscious. (84-86)

At the bottom of Slim’s rough control over Phyllis is the fear of being softened by her love, which will prevent him from economically exploiting her body. This fear leads him to avoid all emotional commitments. However, at the core of this scene is Beck’s attempt to reveal the psychology of the unspoken rage the pimp feels against women, and his fear of being dominated by her. Slim believes that, because of his life choices, he cannot find true happiness with one of his prostitutes. Happiness is only possible by conquering Chicago’s underworld, which for Slim, is symbolized by black women and their bodies. Indeed, only as a pimp with “beautiful whores” groveling at his feet could Slim see himself “gigantic and powerful like God Almighty” (*Pimp* 55). Beck’s

opposition to white middle class values and dismantlement of mainstream society's idea of a powerful masculinity illustrates the "street nigger" as a new model of black manhood. Although Beck's approach to his "street nigger" hero's sexuality is overwrought with (mis)readings of black homosexuality, misogyny, and racial exploitation, he is, nonetheless, determined to increase the visibility of his "street nigger" hero and thereby reject the silence on black sexuality and gender imposed by the Civil Rights ideology.

In addition to its emphasis on economic exploitation, marginalization, and sexual trauma, *Pimp* highlights the primacy and pervasiveness of authenticity and death in the construction of black masculine identities and subjectivities. Perhaps the most poignant and pervasive contribution Beck's "autobiographical novel" *Pimp* has offered pop-cultural productions of black masculinity—particularly what we find in the articulations of other street lit writers, hip hop rappers and "ghetto" novelists—was his appeal to and call for authenticity in both the way black people live and how they articulate their lives. Beck's version of authenticity presents the problem of trying to define an essential blackness. As Regina Bendix explains in *In Search of Authenticity* (1997), "the notion of [authentic blackness] implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic" (9). In other words, blackness is contextual; it depends on the political, cultural, and historical circumstances of its invention. Thus, this reading of Beck's meaning of authenticity does not reinforce a duality and is, as E. Patrick Johnson says, "cognizant of the arbitrariness of authenticity, the ways in which it carries with it the danger of foreclosing

the possibilities of cultural exchanges and understanding” (3). This reading of Beck’s authenticating discourse intends to open the discussion about marginalized people countering oppressive representations of themselves reflected in “the numerous ways blackness is defined within and outside an African American culture conditioned by a historical moment and ever-changing subject positions” (Johnson 3).

The “street nigger’s” “realness”—the language, behavior, oppositionality, and other “stylings” of poor inner-city black men—is frequently theorized as “coolness.” In their book, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Manhood in America* (1992), Richard Majors and Janet Billson suggest that coolness or, as they call it, the “cool pose” captures the essence of young black men’s expressive and performative culture. The authors understand the “cool pose” to be an adaptive strategy for coping with the institutionalized racism and the systematic isolation of black males from the rest of American society. “Cool pose,” the authors argue, “is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (4). While *Pimp* illustrates examples of “pride, strength, and control” through the “realness” of the “street nigger” hero, Beck’s search is problematic in that his version of “coolness” and authenticity essentializes blackness and forecloses the possibility of other interpretations of black identity.

Nonetheless, the popularity of “street nigger” authenticity in poor black communities during the 1960s and well after arguably can be attributed to pop-cultural heroes like Iceberg Slim whose literary character connects “coolness” to the expression

and performance of ghetto culture, a culture that Beck designates as the site of authentic blackness and black masculinity. In his book *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*, Ron Suskind argues that the ghetto, despite its squalor and violence, held a certain kind of glamour and romance; it is the “imprimatur of coolness.” In other words, “coolness” is defined by and within the black urban ghetto. Bruce Jackson highlights the complex ideals surrounding the coolness of ghetto culture where crime and violence signify black manhood in his introduction to *Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: African American Narrative Poetry from the Oral Tradition* (1974). Jackson recounts an interview between Susan Fawcett and her student Joe. When asked, “What are the subjects of most of the toasts you heard?” Joe says,

People who are in the fast life or underground, you know. Or it be somebody that’s super strength, you know...doing something as far as pimping or hustling or shooting up some people, being a gangster or something. Or it’s about some other kind of dealing, all dealing in an illegal thing. Usually if he’s not a pimp he’s a hustler, if he’s not a hustler, it might be a jive bartender, or it just might be a guy that think he bad, that throw his weight around....Usually at the time I heard them, when I was young, that was like an insight on being big personally. Say, “Yeah I like that. Wow, he was bad!” ... Seemed like everybody would like to be whoever that guy was. (9)

Not only has Fawcett's interviewee poignantly illustrated the paradoxical relationship between the "street nigger" and mainstream black communities—i.e. the "street nigger hero" is admired and feared, race conscious and nihilistic—he also performs the culture of "cool" through his language which utilizes slang, improvisation, and black vernacular for impact and effect as well as in a way to stylize black masculinity.

The publication of *Pimp* inaugurates and establishes Beck's notion of "street nigger" authenticity. And like the young man in the passage above who admires the "super strength" of pimps, hustlers, and jive bartenders, Beck's designation of the "street nigger" as a hero in poor communities empowers black people who function within the culture of the ghetto—a culture that often turns to violence and crime as a way to resist systematic oppression as well as to find strength and liberation. Beck presents poor urban communities or "the streets" as cultural capital and a place for the gathering of the *realist* and toughest black men. The lure of "the streets" for Beck's characters is the "push and pull": the push to remove themselves from the state of powerlessness embodied by the urban ghetto, and the pull to build within the ghetto—a space that is outside or on the edge of mainstream society—a community whose culture is defined by physical and psychological survival. Removing oneself from the state of powerlessness while seeking to establish a new non-slave self, constitutes the "street nigger's" "realness," which is based in finding, expressing and performing the "idea" of a true self—a self that is not oppressed. Adopting this "realness" means the black male subject is making a claim about his manhood that he is willing to redeem if questioned by the cultural mainstream.



Beck described authenticity as *being* “real” in every possible way ranging from how one dresses and talks, to the way one negotiates the politics of race, gender, and sexuality. In recent years, one’s “realness” manifests itself into the performance of “swag,” “swagger,” or “coolness.” On one level, the “street nigger” is the subject of desire for “everybody,” both male and female, black and white. On another level, Beck’s representation of Iceberg Slim is a meditation on his legacy as a “street nigger.” Slim’s popularity is born from his experience as a cosmopolitan man whose experiences in prison and in the ghetto have served to give his masculine performance currency on “the streets.” Beck uses this experience or “cultural equipment” to bolster the “street nigger’s” charm and desirability among black people looking for forms of resistance that go against the indoctrinated ideologies established during the Civil Rights era. Black masculinity, according to Beck’s depiction of Slim’s movement through the underworld’s various borders, demand new ways of interpreting race and identity. Interpretations that affirm crime, violence, and cultural nihilism as political acts are in direct response to economic marginalization and racial terror.

Beck defines “street nigger” authenticity as the ability to overcome adversities within the urban ghetto while maintaining a resilient and uncompromising connection to poor black people and the impoverished communities from which they come. In *Pimp*, Beck illustrates Iceberg Slim’s authentic or “true” self by emphasizing his style of dress, the car he drives, and most importantly, the language he uses within a highly politicized ghetto space. In my reading of *Pimp*, I conclude that the “street nigger” subject considers his actions normatively legitimate, and if questioned by mainstream society, is

prepared to defend them. In *Pimp*, Iceberg Slim constructs a specific identity based in the “code of the streets” in an effort to project and protect his *true* self at all cost. In the following scene in which Iceberg Slim defends his manhood, Slim’s reliance on “street nigger” authenticity forces him to symbolically devise the kinds of adaptations necessary for his survival—adaptations to otherwise adverse economic and social environments.

Iceberg Slim says,

Look Preston, I got lots of heart. I’m not a pussy. I been to the joint twice. I did tough bits, but I didn’t fall apart ... I won’t give up no matter what happens. If I go stone blind, I’m still going to pimp. If my props [legs] get cut off I’ll wheel myself on a wagon looking for a whore. I’m going to pimp or die. I’m not going to be a flunky in this white man’s world. (78)

The 18-year-old Iceberg Slim (then known as Young Blood) tries to convince Pretty Preston, an old “washed-up ex-pimp,” that he has what it takes to become a “boss pimp” on Chicago’s “fast track.” The linguistic performance of Chicago’s underworld condensed in the pledge “pimp or die”—the “street nigger’s” take on John Stark’s famous quotation<sup>21</sup>—is typical of Slim’s recognition of the inner city as always-already a “street nigger” space while simultaneously framing it in his own image. The phrase “I got lots of heart” and “I’m not a pussy,” is also typical of the linguistic self-aggrandizement and deception of black male sensibility and it points to how allegiance

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<sup>21</sup> In 1803, the famous American Revolutionary War soldier, General John Stark, wrote the toast, “Live free or die. Death is not the worst of evils.” <http://www.nh.gov/nhinfo/emblem.html> accessed April 29, 2012.

to self-making, to black authenticity, is the “street nigger’s” most urgent priority: “I’m not going to be a flunky in this white man’s world.” The passage also signals the popular image of “the pimp” as authentically black and masculine. In fact, the phrase “pimp or die” which signifies fearlessness, determination, and perseverance is a contemporary pop-cultural term frequently used by gangsta rap artists such as Father MC, Mack 10, and Jay-Z to signal black male authenticity.<sup>22</sup>

In the winter of his life, Beck discussed the creative and ideological process involved in writing *Pimp* in his episodic memoir, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim: Robert Beck’s Real Story*. In an open letter published in the book, Beck addresses one of his many young black male fans, who is also an aspiring writer, just returned from the Vietnam War. Having “virtually memorized” Beck’s first three books, the young soldier decides to seek Beck out and “pull his coat” in the same way Beck sought out the veteran pimp Sweet Jones for advice in 1938 (213). The concern the young man shows for his “black brothers and sisters,” and his desire to use writing as a way to liberate them, just as *Pimp* had helped liberate him, allows Beck to set the parameters for “street nigger” authenticity which has since served as a touchstone for gauging masculinity in black urban literature as well as in ghetto culture and popular black youth culture. More specifically, Beck’s missive reveals how the term “street nigger” functions in the politics of race and authenticates black masculinity:

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<sup>22</sup> In the song, “Soon You’ll Understand,” from *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia*, Jay-Z says, “Take your time when you liking a guy. Cause if he sense that your feelings [are] too intense. It’s pimp or die” to reference the instability of romantic love in black communities. In a very significant way, this line evokes Cornel West’s argument in *Race Matters* (1993) that “lovelessness” is a fundamental threat to black communities.

Brother, I live in the ghetto and have no desire to break its bonds, for I am after all a street nigger learning to write. . . I view the ghetto as a savagely familiar place of spiritual warmth rich in the writer's treasure of pathos, conflict and struggle. I am convinced that for me it was the only place where I could discover and keep an awareness of who I *really* am and where I could find my purpose as a writer and a nigger in this criminal society. Once long ago . . . I did time in the showplace dungeon of a foxy black socialite located in an exclusive interracial compound in the East. Dear, Brother, the week I served with that gushy manic depressive phony and her interracial horde of Ivory Tower rectums seemed longer and tougher than any bit I ever served in a real joint. I know that only in some black ghetto can my street nigger soul soar, stay proud and pure and unfucked-over (216-218).

In this passage Beck points to the “street nigger” as a marker of “realness,” which has been articulated in more recent years as “’bout it, ‘bout it,” “keepin’ it real,” “staying true,” and most recently as being “a thoroughbred” or “keeping it 100.”<sup>23</sup> Leaving aside for the moment the “street” aspect of this demarcation, Beck’s use of the word “nigger” alone functions as an important authenticator worth discussing.

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<sup>23</sup> The phrase “being a thoroughbred” is to suggest that the “street nigger’s” reputation—be it for bravery, loyalty, sexual prowess, etc., all of which is crucial to his existence—is like the unadulterated blood pumping through the veins of a Triple Crown colt. “Keeping it 100,” that is 100%, carries the same connotation as the previous term.

In the above passage, we see Beck refer to himself as a “nigger in this criminal society.” Beck then semantically contrasts his position outside the integrated mainstream by referring to his female companion as a “foxy black socialite,” seemingly denying her the authenticating signifier “nigger.”<sup>24</sup> Beck drives home the differences between “street nigger” and black middle-class authenticities by designating his “street nigger soul” as “pure” and the “interracial hoard of Ivory Tower rectums” as “gushy manic depressive *phonies*.” It is problematic that Beck’s use of the term “nigger” as an authenticator denotes a political agenda that excludes more voices than it includes. It is also worth noting that Beck’s articulation of “real niggers” in the 1960s and 1970s calls attention to the antagonistic historical, social, and political moment in which a younger generation of blacks sought to define themselves against the previous generation’s Civil Rights ideology.

In his article “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity” Ronald Judy discusses “nigga”<sup>25</sup> as a pervasive and symbolic term of authenticity in black male popular

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<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that in his differentiating between “niggers” and “blacks” when discussing the “foxy socialite,” Beck not only denies the black women inclusion in his version of “blackness.” He also unreflectively genders “authentic blackness.” Furthermore, Beck’s position unwittingly denies the possibility of a female “street nigger.” While this paper does not allow for the interpretation of the female “street nigger,” it does raise interesting questions regarding the so-called “gangsta bitch” trope often illustrated in popular production of young and urban black females: i.e. rap artists Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Nicki Minaj; and hip-hop novels *Flyy Girl* (1993), *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), and *Picture Me Rollin’* (2005)

<sup>25</sup> While there has been much controversy over the meaning of the “N word” based on various spellings, particularly the differences between “nigger” and “nigga,” this debate is beyond the scope of my dissertation. Therefore, I do not distinguish between the two and read Robert Beck’s spelling, “nigger,” in the same way I read Judy’s “nigga.” For further elaboration see Jabari Asim’s *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn’t and Why* (2007).

culture.<sup>26</sup> His argument is that the “nigga” as represented in the cultural productions of black masculinity, particularly gangsta rap, is an oppositional cultural movement that is thoroughly symbolic in the face of political and social domination. In other words, authentic behavior does not derive from morality based in behavior best suited to fulfill government policies such as the assimilationist theories of the Civil Rights era rooted in white middle class ideologies. In fact, Judy proclaims that white middle-class morality, in many ways, contradicts black authenticity. Phillip Brian Harper is also suspicious of the equivocation of white middle-class morality with authenticity. In his book *Are We Not Men*, Harper offers a scathing critique of blackness based in black middle class anxieties about poor black youth behavior which threatens community progress—i.e. acceptance into mainstream white culture—for African Americans; behavior which is most visible and explicit in the language of street culture espoused by writers of street lit, gangsta rap, and other predominantly black male cultural productions.<sup>27</sup> The very

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<sup>26</sup> Judy makes the argument that, unlike the blues, which represents a collective response to political domination, rap is a return to the “existentialist preoccupation with subjectivity” (Judy 229). In other words, rap raises the question of being and existence or reality in general, not solely in relationship to one community or another. The rapper may often represent ideas contrary to the community, both black and mainstream, particularly when those actions disrupt the moral fabric of the community; however, they are no less political in their approach to structural oppression. In an interview with the Notorious B.I.G. which appeared in the documentary *Bigger Than Life*, the rapper confesses that he sold drugs to and stole from the people in his community, and understood that the “community wasn’t by [his] side.” As Biggie put it, he had “to eat” no matter what “the community felt about it.” Biggie’s need “to eat” can also be read as a gesture towards his death-bound-subjectivity. In *The Death-Bound-Subject*, Abdul JanMohamed suggests that Wright’s autobiography *American Hunger* connects death to hunger in that “death comes to permeate [Richard’s] mind and body in the form of hunger. Wright turns hunger into a pervasive metaphor for the condition of social-death” (143).

<sup>27</sup> In his book, *Are We Not Men*, Harper offers a critique of Arrested Development’s song “People Everyday” to reveal how the group was unsuccessful in changing ideas about “keeping it real” during the 1990s gangsta rap era. In their song, Arrested Development defined authenticity in the context of Afrocentric discourses and gangsta rap describing “niggas” as undesirable members of the “real” African American community. It is painfully obvious which definition of authenticity prevailed in light of the deep void in Afrocentric discourses in mainstream rap music today.

presence of such a disruptive, exploitative community is the basis to understand the manner in which Beck seeks to introduce a new dynamic and a new kind of being in order to broaden the perspectives and the discourses surrounding black masculinity.

In the passage above Beck also suggests that as a “street nigger” his blackness and manhood is authenticated or “made pure” by the “ghetto” or what Brown called “the street” in *Manchild in the Promise Land* and Thomas’ “barrio” in *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). Beck considers the ghetto as “the only place where [he] could discover and keep an awareness of who [he] *really* [is] and where [he] could find...purpose as a writer” (*Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*, 216, my emphasis). The “street nigger” dismantles the meaning of nation state and citizenship because he is clear that Chicago, not America, is the home space he imagines and feels he belongs. Gangsta rapper Jay-Z makes a similar argument in *Decoded* when he says, “Bed-Stuy was my country, Brooklyn my planet” (4).<sup>28</sup> Under such interpretations of the ghetto space, the inner city becomes so confining or all-encompassing that it is the “whole world.” “Neighborhood politics” are also invoked in that “pride in place” positions one community against another in an effort to establish some semblance of power in their state of marginalization. Perhaps such an interpretation of the ghetto space is also a reflection of being marginalized—a sort of Black Nationalism where there is a need to call a part of the United States home. Indeed, the power of the ghetto space is what constitutes the “street nigger’s” desire. The pull of “the streets” in Chicago underscores the power

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<sup>28</sup> The slogan “Harlem World” was also popularized in hip-hop culture by gangsta rap artists Mason “Ma\$e” Betha and Sean “Puffy” Combs.

inherent in the environment's physical and cultural forces to shape and condition Slim's masculine performance as a daring production of his experimental life. "The streets" feeds Slim's inventive acts in mainstream black and white America.

According to Beck, "the streets" is also the only place where he can cultivate his creative and imaginative voice, and the only space in which his cultural acts can be fully understood and appreciated. In this way the ghetto, which symbolizes poverty and blackness and specifically pushes out the middle class and whites, is seen as the "real" America where "real" examples of survival in the face of harsh opposition take place. The ghetto, then, functions as the scene in which authentic blackness is conceived and presented in masculine terms. This sentiment is often expressed in the lyrics of contemporary gangsta rap artists as well. For many gangsta rappers, an association with the ghetto is important in maintaining the intersectionality of authenticities, i.e. gender, class, race, and sexuality. In 1994, for instance, the importance of being connection to the streets prompted rap artist Notorious B.I.G. to tell his listeners in the song "Juicy," the first single off his debut album, to "call the crib, same number, same hood. It's all good." And as recently as 2010 rapper Jay-Z, who reportedly earned 63 million dollars in 2009 wrote "I had Oprah chillin' in the projects, Had her out in Bed-Stuy, chillin' on the steps, drinkin' quarter waters, I gotta be the best." Whether Iceberg Slim, Biggie Smalls, or Jay-Z it is "the streets" which functions as a hallmark for the blackest and the baddest. "The streets" qualifies and affirms black masculinity and provides a space in which black men confront issues with women, white society, and a middle class, which constantly threatens to weaken blackness, specifically black manhood. Certainly, the



popularity of artists like Kanye West and Drake who grew up in largely middle class communities complicates this argument to a degree. But one wonders if West's and Drake's association with professed "street niggers" Jay-Z and Lil' Wayne, respectively, had much to do with *authenticating* them for the public.

"The streets" is a prismatic space where Iceberg Slim and other "street niggers" are able to perform a range of masculine subjectivities that elaborate their social and cultural position as a black male subject. "The streets" sings Slim's blues, and as a blues atmosphere, where melancholia is mixed with uninhibited carnal pleasures, "the life" for Slim provokes the various ways in which his blackness, his masculine performance and his humanity can find value with other black men and women who share this blues experience. The lyrics to Billie Holiday's "Fine and Mellow," for instance, frequently appear in *Pimp* and works as a refrain that dramatizes the sexually violent relationship between Iceberg Slim and his first prostitute Phyllis. The blues, which flourished in Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s, can be described as a kind of music of early "street nigger" culture in the same way gangsta rap underscores contemporary "street nigger" life. Developed on plantations as psychological resistance to unbearable suffering, the blues negotiated the space between suffering and violence by producing itself as an aesthetic response (Baraka, *Blues People* 61). The spectacular beauty of the music with its haunting and sensual melodies speaks to covert means of survival and resistance. "Chicago blues" music, which is a fixture in the background of *Pimp*'s dialogue, unifies the many variations of black expressive culture and life, and belongs to a tradition of resistance that signifies upon spirituals, work songs, field hollers, shouts and chants

performed on slave plantations to suspend and lighten the dehumanizing conditions of slavery (Oakley 181-83).

As stated above, *Pimp* draws on the tradition of confidence inherent in the resistant acts present on slave plantations in the American South. Beck's "street nigger" hero is a confidant man, a trickster even, who carries himself with a certain dignity. Indeed, Slim uses confidence to negotiate new worlds with greater ease, not because he is living as a free spirit, but because as a "real" black man he is never frightened by the risks involved in negotiating mainstream culture, whether it is prison or death on the streets. More specifically, Beck's neo slave-narrative structure<sup>29</sup> and naturalistic perspective works to reveal an important characteristic of the "street nigger" hero: the threat or actuality of death, or what Abdul JanMohamed calls "death-bound-subjectivity," influences the decision-making of the "street nigger." However, the "street nigger's" exploitation of black women's bodies, as outlined in Sweet Jones' "unwritten book," highlights and complicates JanMohamed's theory of "familial" or "communal circuits of death."

In his book, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (2005), JanMohamed focuses his attention on the political role of death as well as the

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<sup>29</sup> While term "neo-slave narrative" describe accounts of chattel slavery written in contemporary times, I use the term in relation to the works of Beck as a way to emphasis contemporary illustrations of dominant themes presented in slave narratives, i.e. a strong autobiographical motif, illustrations of individuals "held against their will," tales of redemption and progress, and a personal narrative rich with pathos to inform readers who may be unaware of the conditions their fellow citizens suffer under. Furthermore, Beck's illustration of the "street nigger's" refusal to accept the notion of difference and separation based in the bifurcated black/white world offer new possibilities for identifying and interpreting neo-slave narratives. For example, although Iceberg Slim yearns for freedom, he does not identify freedom with his escape from the ghetto nor does he associate the concept of freedom to the world beyond the ghetto. What he is and who he can become results from his daily struggle to construct an identity wherever his circumstances places him. Like the best slave narratives, Beck's narratives asked profound questions about the meaning of life.

threat of death in the lives of characters living in the Jim Crow South illustrated in the works of Wright. With the help of Orlando Robinson's theory of "social death"<sup>30</sup> outlined in his book *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), along with Wright's novels and autobiography, JanMohamed defines the "death-bound-subject" as a black person living in the Jim Crow era who is formed, from infancy on, "by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (2). His reading of death in Wright's work examines the political value of life and death for blacks relegated to the margins of Jim Crow society. JanMohamed historicizes "social death" in terms of Jim Crow society's reliance on the threat and actuality of death through lynching and other forms of terror to ensure African Americans' position as second-class citizens, as well as to maintain their powerless existence.

While JanMohamed's definition of the "death-bound-subject" focuses on the threat of death imposed by white authoritarianism during the Jim Crow era, my reading of *Pimp* offers an expansion of the "death-bound-subject's" theoretical frame. Beck's illustration of the "street nigger" is that of a tragic hero who, because of his decision to "make it" on the streets of Chicago, carries with him the danger of the loss of life. Thus, his decision to join the underworld is a profound act of rebellion in so far as it enacts a heroic challenge to the racial system that marginalizes him and threatens to destroy him. Iceberg Slim's authenticity in both the black community and the further marginalized underworld is integral in demystifying mainstream black and white male identity as

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<sup>30</sup> JanMohamed offers a reframing of Patterson's antebellum concept of "social death" which is to say that the slave is socially dead—a purgatorial figure deprived of community and honor. See Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) for more elaboration.

citizen, hero and leader. In other words, Iceberg Slim's authenticity is tied to his embrace of "social death." Furthermore, Beck does not only illustrate the threat of death in the life of a "street nigger" imposed by whites. He also discusses the threat of death imposed by other poor black men of similar circumstances thereby reproducing patriarchal acts rooted in white supremacy and authoritarianism. Indeed, Beck's unique take on the "death-bound-subject" expands JanMohamed's discourse on "familial/communal circuits of death."

*Pimp* offers a number of textual examples that validate the claim that black people's "death-bound-subjectivity" are rooted in the Jim Crow South. Partly through a series of deliberate decisions, but partly through sharp intuitive choices, Beck develops a theory of the "street nigger" as a "death-bound-subject" whose psycho-political construct is penetrated by an unpredictable threat imposed by politically and socially powerful whites. JanMohamed's argument that "death-bound-subjectivity" is rooted in the Jim Crow South is most evident in Beck's illustration of the Wisconsin Green Bay reformatory, a facility that, while situated in the Midwest, operates much like the Old South. In fact, Beck suggests that the threat of death imposed by whites in the Jim Crow South is foundational to the U.S. justice system. For instance, at his sentencing for pandering—the first of five convictions over a 20 year period—Slim recalls being "lead to the slaughter" by Williams, his "Deep South Nigger" lawyer who appeared to be so "shook up by the stern face and voice of the white hawk-faced judge that he forgot to ask for leniency." He goes on: "That awful fear the white folks put into him down South was still painfully alive in him" (26). Here Beck not only ties "death-bound-

subjectivity” to a fear of death at the hands of powerful whites, he situates the origin of this subjectivity in the Jim Crow South. For Beck, the history of Jim Crow society’s overwhelming reliance on the threat of death to control African Americans in the Southern states constitutes Williams’ fear of the white judge. The reader soon learns that Iceberg Slim also relies on and manipulates that very same history in order to survive his first of many prison sentences.

Upon Slim’s arrival at the Wisconsin Green Bay reformatory, Beck metaphorically connects the facility to white supremacy and the threat of death. He begins by describing the structure as, “Three casket-gray cell houses [which] stood like mute mourners beneath the bleak sunless sky” (28). When ushered before the warden, a “silver-maned, profane, huge, white-bull,” Slim is told that the two results for “fucking up” is either a period in a stripped cell *buried* “twenty feet below ground” or “out that North gate in a box.” Slim recalls that “the only thing [he] said before [he] eased out of there was, ‘Yes Sir, Boss Man,’ and [he] was grinning like a Mississippi rape suspect turned loose by the mob” (32). In his not so subtle allusion to lynching, Slim’s “death-bound-subjectivity” produced by the Wisconsin Green Bay reformatory, an institution framed by a history of white authoritarianism in the Jim Crow South, is similar in certain fundamental ways to antebellum society. Relying on Patterson’s theory of “social death” among slaves, JanMohamed notes that “the slave was effectively controlled by the fact that he lived under a conditionally commuted death sentence” (5). Using JanMohamed’s theory of “death-bound-subjectivity” by way of Patterson, I again read

the “street nigger” as aligned with his slave ancestry further authenticating him and establishing *Pimp* as a kind of neo-slave narrative.

Beck’s illustration of the tragic conflict between his cellmate Oscar, a “rock-ribbed square” who was sentenced to a year at the reformatory for having a forbidden relationship with a young white girl, and “the dummy,” a mute Alabamian prison guard with a dangerous lead-loaded cane and a deep hatred for blacks, is the most dramatic example of what JanMohamed describes as death’s pervasive unpredictability in the lives of black people. On their first night in the reformatory, Slim and Oscar are told that “the dummy” is the cruelest of all the prison guards, having killed two white cons and four blacks. They are also told that the muted prison guard lost his voice after his wife, frustrated by his verbal and physical abuse, committed infanticide and suicide. In this illustration of Slim’s first prison stint, Beck uses “silence” as an extended metaphor to emphasize the unpredictable threat of death. Instead of allowing “the dummy” to speak, Beck gives him a cane with which he purposefully directs the prisoners under his guard. Beck writes that Slim’s time in the reformatory was a “rough battle of wits” that centered on “staying out of sight and trouble with the dummy.” He goes on to say, “[the dummy] walked on the balls of his feet and could read a con’s mind.... He didn’t pass out an instruction leaflet running down the lingo of that cane. If you misunderstood what *it* said, the dummy would crack the leaded shaft of it against your skull” (32 my emphasis). At the reformatory, the young black inmates’ “death-bound-subjectivity” is conditioned by “the dummy’s” silent threat. Even more so, the young cons must learn to listen to and understand the cane, which is more “vocal” than “the dummy.”

Through the process of learning the unfamiliar language of “silence,” Beck’s illustration of “death-bound-subjectivity” constitutes JanMohamed’s concept of death’s ability to “unbind” and “rebind” psychologically. In other words, the threat of death “unbinds” or disjoins the life of the subject from his own set of beliefs and values, from his understanding of himself and the world around him. The threat of death then “rebinds” or fixes the individual “around his fear of death” (JanMohamed 25). The process of “unbinding” and “rebinding” conditioned by the muted guard’s silent threats of death, however, go unheard, as it were, by Oscar. While Oscar was certainly “unbound” by “the dummy’s” wrath, he sought to “rebind” himself to Christianity instead. Slim attempts to help Oscar understand that, in order to live in the reformatory—a physical manifestation of the Jim Crow South—he must exist under and manipulate the historic fear of death at the hands of powerful whites. Slim tells Oscar, “it’s driving the dummy off his rocker to see you reading that Bible. Pal, why in the Hell don’t you stop reading it for your own good?” Oscar replies, “I appreciate your advice, but . . . Jesus will protect me” (33). Unable to convince his friend that only a fear of death could protect them from actual death, it is simply a matter of time before “the dummy put one over on Jesus and busted Oscar” (35).

While mopping the flag of the reformatory, a cell-house runner brings Slim two wieners from a pal in the kitchen. Slim gives one to Oscar, who gingerly puts it in his shirt pocket, and hurriedly eats the other out of fear not wanting to be found with contraband food. Slim remembers Oscar nibbling slowly on his wiener in a supply closet “like he was at the Last Supper” (34). Suddenly “the dummy” appears and before

Oscar can protect himself, the prison guard cuts a slice of bloody flesh from the side of the young boy's head with his cane and leaves him to die on the flag.

Illustrative of a finding JanMohamed points out in his discussion of Wright, Beck's graphic illustration of the "thread of flesh dangling like an awful earring near the tip of his ear lobe" eerily foreshadows Hortense Spillers' use of the term "flesh" to define the absolute powerlessness of slaves in her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987). In her analysis of the terror endured by the captive slave who exists at the "frontiers of survival," Spillers insists on this telling distinction:

I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. (67)

While Slim's insistence on "rebinding" to the "the dummy's" threat of death reinforces his "captive subject-position," Oscar's transformation from "flesh" to "body" under the weight of the mute guard's lead cane demonstrates an ironic anti-Hegelian view of the master-slave struggle. Oscar's refusal to "take it" or live under the constant threat of death can be read as an active pursuit of death rather than the continued conditions of inhumanity on which the reformatory depends.

The threat of white terrorism plays a pivotal role in structuring black life throughout Beck's novel, and characters are keenly aware of the power white authority has over their lives. Because their lives are constantly threatened by death and because



the characters continually struggle with the racist use of violence, their lives are highly traumatic and frequently catastrophic. However, Beck's novel reveals a more dynamic observation of the "street nigger" as a "death-bound-subject." On the one hand, the "street nigger" functions in the *traditional* role of the "death-bound-subject" outlined by JanMohamed; that is, the "street nigger's" "death-bound-subjectivity" is rooted in the threat and actuality of death wielded by Jim Crow society and, specifically, white men who reinforce institutions of racial inequality. On the other hand, the "street nigger" character actively participates in the terrorization of other poor black people, particularly black women, as a coercive agent of white patriarchal ideals. The "street nigger's" embrace of social death, then, becomes a form of authenticity. That is to say, while structuralized racism through various circuits of Jim Crow terror continue to ensure a degree of disempowerment for black characters in *Pimp*, the threat of death inflicted upon black people by other poor black people opens up a more comprehensive and complex reading the political implications embedded in nihilistic behavior among poor black men, particularly when seen through the lens of JanMohamed's "familial/communal circuits of death."

JanMohamed says "familial circuits of death" are a "direct or indirect product of Jim Crow society's deployment of death as a mode of coercion" (140). "Death-bound-subjects," like all other forms of subjectivity, have a tendency to preserve their status based on the logic that they are conditioned to reproduce the relations of production that produced them in the first place. "In certain specific ways," JanMohamed says, "there is a direct connection; for instance, one can argue that in her use of violence to discipline

[Richard] for fighting white boys, his mother, Ella, functions as a coercive agent of the white racist society” (140). However, JanMohamed insists that given the limited autobiographical and biographical evidence for Wright, it would be “impossible” to speculate beyond “indirect and partial” connections between familial and social Jim Crow circuits of death in the formation of Wright’s own “death-bound-subjectivity.”

Nevertheless, JanMohamed deduces from Wright’s works that the author is formed as a “death-bound-subject” first within the family circuit and then later within Jim Crow society’s “apparatus for producing black boys.” *Pimp*, however, complicates the relationship between “familial circuits of death” and Jim Crow circuits of death. Through a close reading of Iceberg Slim, I contend that although the “street nigger” is formed as a *traditional* “death-bound-subject” within the judicial and prison systems, a recreation of Jim Crow society, he is not produced as a *traditional* “death-bound subject” within the family circuit, or in Slim’s case, the community circuit. (I make this distinction between “family” and “community” because, as stated above in the section on authenticity, the “street nigger” is aligned with the community or “the streets” more so than the black family.) Instead, Iceberg Slim functions as a coercive agent of death inflicting terror upon poor black people, particularly upon black women’s “flesh,” not with the intent to (re)empower white masculinity or to (re)established institutions of racial inequality, but to empower the black male subject apart from and outside Jim Crow society.

In his explanation of Wright’s relationship to familial/communal circuits and Jim Crow circuits of death, JanMohamed argues that because both circuits insist on

producing Wright as a death-bound-subject, he is never in a position to seek refuge from one circuit in the domain of the other; he is doubly produced as a “death-bound-subject” by the synergistic action of both circuits (142). Furthermore, JanMohamed defines his theory of “familial circuits of death” as a “product of Jim Crow society’s deployment of death as a mode of coercion” (140). In other words, JanMohamed’s theory of “familial circuits of death” functions within the context of a black community at odds Jim Crow society. However, *Pimp* asks the question, “How do ‘communal circuits of death’ function within a culture that is outside the mainstream black community, which is produced by Jim Crow circuits of death?” That is to say, Wright is unable to seek refuge from Jim Crow society in the mainstream black community because it is always-already produced by that very same racist power structure. The “street nigger,” however, exists in the underworld, a counter-community that resists mainstream white values and morals, as well as the black cultures it produces. Therefore, the underworld is capable of functioning as a refuge for Iceberg Slim and other “street niggers” wishing to recreate themselves not as *traditional* “death-bound-subjects,” but under new postmodern subjectivities as agents of death.

The most vivid and yet fundamentally problematic example of the “street nigger” as a producer of death-bound-subjectivities is perhaps found in Beck’s illustration of the “street nigger’s” relationship to black women. Iceberg Slim’s position as an agent of death is overwrote with vile, grotesque misogyny. Just as powerful whites living in the Jim Crow South used dramatic acts of terror such as whippings, mutilations, and lynching to ensure the powerlessness of African Americans, “street nigger’s” too

threaten to, and often do, inflict physically harm to black women who refuse to submit their physical, social, mental, political, economic, absolute power. Thus, Beck's black men ironically (re)enact patriarchal elements of the master/slave dialectic as a way to assert the kinds of power relationships that are nearly impossible for them in mainstream society. Furthermore, because Iceberg Slim "enjoyed" certain kinds of freedom that his "stable" of women did not, and because, in spite of this relative freedom, he *felt* as if he were disempowered, he constitutes the perfect "witness" to "death-bound-subjectivity," someone who is simultaneously within and outside the experience of "death-bound-subjectivity."

Slim's first experience as an agent of death and, more specifically, as a producer of "death-bound-subjectivities" takes shape in the relationship between himself and his first prostitute, Phyllis. Shortly after leaving his job as a grocery store clerk in Milwaukee to "make it" as a pimp among thieves in Chicago's underworld, Iceberg Slim quickly learns the rules to "pimping." As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Slim finds a valuable mentor in the seasoned "boss pimp" Sweet Jones. In an exchange similar to the likely conversations between slave owners frustrated with the insurrection of "bad nigger" slaves, Jones and Slim hash out a plan to "break [his] whore" (166). Sweet Jones tells Slim the most important thing a pimp must do is to create "death-bound-subjects" out of the women he controls. According to Sweet Jones, the only pimps with respect are the ones who can administer enough brutal force upon a black woman's body that she submits it to him: "You gotta have strict rules for a whore. She's gotta respect

you to hump her heart out in the streets ... Put your foot in her ass hard. If that don't work, take a wire coat hanger and twist it into a whip"<sup>31</sup> (*Pimp* 166).

Before he administers Jones cruel advice, Slim begins the process of “unbinding” saying to Phyllis, “Bitch, I already passed the death sentence on you. It’s good you had your last meal. I’m gonna send your dead ass to your daughter, Gay. Take off that gown and lie on your belly, bitch” (168). Having whipped Phyllis to the point that the white bed sheets “looked like a red zebra had lain down and his stripes faded on it,” she “rebinds” to a fear of death and says to Slim, “I don’t need any more whipping. I give, Daddy. You’re the boss. I was a dumb bitch. It looks like you got a whore now” (169). Ironically touched by Phyllis’ words, or perhaps by his empowering metamorphosis from a “death-bound-subject” into an agent of death, Slim tells the reader, “I felt a tear roll down my cheeks. Maybe I was crying in joy that I broke her spirit” (170-71). Unlike JanMohamed’s theory of “communal circuits of death,” which suggests that black people function as coercive agents of death in order to reproduce subjectivities already produced under Jim Crow society, Iceberg Slim becomes a coercive agent of death to produce new subjectivities: an individual who is “unbound” by the threat of death and who then “rebinds,” not to white supremacy, but to a powerful black masculinity. Although the “street nigger” produces a “death-bound-subject” that mimics American slavery and Jim Crow society’s creation of the “death-bound-subject,” it is in

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<sup>31</sup> Today the “business of pimping” continues to thrive in the U.S. underworld. Many instances of prostitution can be found in American gangs. Some of the tactics used to punish women illustrated in *Pimp* have generated colloquial terms such as “pimp stick” or “pimp cane” which refers to a wire-hanger whip similar to the one used to beat Phyllis. Another tactic now referred to as “trunk” or “trunking” means locking a “difficult” prostitute in a small space. In chapter 15, Sweet Jones “trunks” two young women in a small hallway bathroom. For more on “pimping” see Mickey Royal’s *The Pimp Game: Instructional Guide* (1998).

affirmation of black male subjectivity a kind of “underworld” subjectivity where white men have no power over black men, or at the very least, white men must compete with black men for power.

Thus, Beck’s detailed and gritty semi-autobiography allows for an exploration of the threat of death, and more specifically, violence as a tool for self-empowerment in a way Wright’s work is incapable of doing. As JanMohamed explains, “*Black Boy* seems unable or unwilling to connect, in a conscious, exegetic manner, the productive relations between the two circuits [familial and Jim Crow], preferring instead to present the familial circuit as a diegetic explosion of death acted out and the Jim Crow circuit via a carefully considered exegetic analysis” (140). Beck’s decision to depict “street niggers” as they appear in everyday life is critical in *Pimp*’s ability to establish new and radical black realities as well as to offer alternative forms of liberation, which counter the Civil Rights ideology. In a very real sense, the neo-slave narrative form and naturalist vision of Beck’s novel speaks to this new interpretation of black reality in a way that the purveyors of African American and American literary canonicity could not have anticipated.

Beck’s literary legacy plays a pivotal role in defining the “street nigger” for black youths who claim him as part of the hip-hop generation. For example, rappers who are arguable the voice of the hip-hop generation not only recast Beck’s literary style, theoretical perspective, and cultural sensibility, but also mimic his role as the misogynistic “sex-god,” the criminal-as-victim, and the “ghetto superstar.” Iceberg Slim represents, to a large degree, the stereotypical image of black male sexual and criminal

deviants. As a pimp in real life, Beck preyed on poor black people, especially black women's bodies, for money and status. However, Beck also suggests that the "street nigger" hero embodies the defiant nature black people frequently espouse against structural oppression. In many ways, Iceberg Slim represents the enigmatic coupling of self-destruction and introspection, nihilism and racial progress.

The "street nigger" hero is, essentially, Beck's cultural and literary legacy. Gangsta rappers in particular have been influenced, either explicitly or implicitly, by Beck's notion of authenticity, "coolness," death and (pre)determinism, which, I argue, make up the most important features of the "street nigger" trope as well as undergirds what West has described as a "culture of nihilism." Gangsta rappers routinely mimic and (re)perform Beck's illustrations of the "street nigger" hero—be it the misogynistic criminal-artist, the revolutionary "ghetto superstar" or a hybridized version of both—as a counter-narrative to mainstream masculinity.

Perhaps Beck's most powerful contribution to popular African American literary culture is that he reminds us the glamour of "the streets" is neither heroic nor romantic. His novels are important because he does not sensationalize "street life" nor does he leave his reader believing in untarnished heroism. Without diminishing the courage of his characters, he shows us the other side, projecting the struggle between magnificently violent men in total control, and the despair of ghetto brutality. To be sure, street lit writers love to complicate images of black manhood. They illustrate their heroes' fearlessness partly through their violent opposition cultivated in "the streets." As mentioned above, Beck's novels experienced newfound popularity among the hip-hop

community who were familiar with themes that often center on violence and crime. As the implication goes, the tendency for violence emerges from frustration with social and economic injustices. However, through the brutality of Iceberg Slim, Beck emerges and reminds us that “the life” is not romantic and violent behavior is more complicated than simply a display of displaced rage. Urban fiction, whether street lit, rap, hip-hop novels or yardie fiction, forces its audience to become voyeurs in the display of gruesome brutality. However, the glory is not in the gilded treasures of the streets, but in the hero’s ability to transcend that ruthlessness and redeem themselves as bringers of new, more productive forms of resistance.



### CHAPTER III

#### “D-BOYS” TO MEN OF INDUSTRY

Street dreams are made of these

Niggers push Bimmers and 300 E’s

A drug dealer’s destiny is reaching a [kilo]

Everybody’s looking for something

—Nasir “Nas” Jones, “Street Dreams,” 1996

It’s some boys in the ‘hood [that will] sell anything for profit

Five in the morning on the corner clockin’

Yeah we wrong but dare a nigger try to stop it

And you can get it, anywhere, anybody

Them boys got work, them boys got yay

Them boys got purp, them boys got haze

Them boys got glocks, them boys got K’s

Them boys got blocks, them boys getting paid

—Boyz N Da Hood, “Dem Boyz,” 2005<sup>32</sup>

When Robert Beck died in 1992 much of the cultural politics he engaged in between 1940 and 1970, such as economic disparities among inner-city African

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<sup>32</sup> Slang terms defined: “clocking” or selling illegal narcotics; “work” or illegal drug products; “yey” or “yeyo” is a misspelling of the Spanish word, “llello,” which is slang for cocaine; “purp” or “purple” is a very high potent marijuana leaf; “haze” is an abbreviation of “purple haze,” another term for high potent marijuana; “glocks” and “K’s,” or AK-57s, are high power semi-automatic weapons; “blocks” refer to the economically controlled physical sites of drug transactions.

Americans and reactionary violence, remained relatively unchanged. In his hometown of Chicago, the South Side's "Black Belt" still housed some of the poorest black communities in the city. Many of the South Side's young and unemployed residents continued to view violence as empowering and crime as a viable escape from economic disenfranchisement. However, at the time of his death—the post-Civil Rights era, when the socio-economic fruits of the previous generation's political labor began to bloom—more African Americans were living in poverty and turning to crime and violence than ever before.<sup>33</sup> To make matters worse, the "crack epidemic"—a period lasting between 1984 and 1993—injected unprecedented wealth into the hands of many poor black men fueling what Cornel West describes as a "culture of nihilism," i.e. a "hedonistic" culture of consumption that reflects a deep sense of "hopelessness, lovelessness, and meaninglessness" (16). One of the most notable literary responses to this new environment of exploitative capitalism and cultural nihilism has been the poetics of "crack rap," which commercializes and popularizes the criminal practices by inner-city drug dealers. Crack rap is a musical and thematic style within the gangsta rap genre. Crack rap is gangsta rap that features "crack culture," i.e. drug distribution and abuse, as its dominant theme. While the genre appears as early as 1994, the term does not enter hip-hop's lexicon until the first years of the twenty-first century. No one is credited with coining the term; however, it was used most notably in the hip-hop monthly, *XXL Magazine*, which featured the article "Crack Rap is King" in 2009. For nearly two decades, the poetics of crack rap has developed a deeply complex and metaphorical

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<sup>33</sup> See W. J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy*.

interpretation of both the crack/cocaine economy, and the practice of black male violence. More than any other literary figure, Shawn Carter, better known by his cultural persona Jay-Z,<sup>34</sup> stands alone as the most successful “d-boy”—meaning “dope boy” or young drug dealer—to leave the drug infested streets of Brooklyn, New York and become the most recognized figure in crack rap music.

Crack rap operates within a broader historical context of racial and economic oppression. In this chapter, I examine the way crack rap helps young black men to understand the economic and political structures that operate around them. In other words, this chapter uses the underlying principles of historical materialism and cultural studies to map the ways crack rap circulates hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses of socio-political and economic marginalization. Historical materialism looks to a society’s economic structure as the underlying cause of human activity. In the U.S., for example, the system of capitalism is thought to determine the means by which humans collectively produce the necessities of life. The crack/cocaine economy, then, becomes a valuable site for examining the particular cultural practices of young black men in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as today, who engage in drug violence and crime to secure their physical and psychological survival. The non-economic features of the crack/cocaine economy such as its cultural stylizations, ideologies and beliefs are an outgrowth of its economic structure.

In this chapter, I ask a number of salient questions: How does a relationship between racism and the crack/cocaine economy reflect the U.S.’s exploitative capitalist

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<sup>34</sup> Shawn Carter has written under a number of pennames including Jay-Z, Jay-Hova, Hov, Jigga Man, Jigga and S. Carter among others.

system? How does a literary analysis of the “street nigger” hero within the crack/cocaine economy engage discourses of racialized criminality? How do rap lyricists use crack rap to construct distinct fantasies through various appropriations and inscriptions of the drug dealer? Understanding how society represents the “culture of crack” not only uncovers how mainstream culture responds to poor, young black men, but also provides insight into the complex reconfiguration of power and social antagonisms that underlie all of contemporary American society. Crack rap functions as a metaphor for racial and class exploitation in the United States.

Thus, my analysis of a number works by Shawn Carter between 1996 and 2011 unpacks the rapper’s influences in crack rap and his use and manipulation of the drug dealer inspired “street nigger” hero. Carter not only continues the street literature tradition of illustrating inner-city black male culture—i.e. the lives of young black people defined by poverty, crime and violence—as a counter-narrative to mainstream U.S. culture. He also accomplishes a potentially successful, albeit paradoxical and problematic, example of “street nigger” economic praxis intended to shape the identity of contemporary black and poor inner-city youths. On the one hand, Carter uses crack rap and his illustrations of Jay-Z as an antagonistic and metaphorical critique of the U.S. capitalist system as racially imbalanced and exploitative. On the other hand, Carter positions himself as an actual “street nigger” entrepreneur or business executive in the face of, and in line with, mainstream U.S. capitalism. Furthermore, Carter is celebrated within popular culture for his socio-economic location.<sup>35</sup>

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Additionally, I examine the historical and thematic contexts leading up to Carter's works, particularly the commercial popularity of Jay-Z who, in effect, becomes the benchmark for "street nigger" heroics in crack rap music. I begin in the 1970s with rap's earliest references to crack cocaine in particular and drug culture in general. Next, I discuss the emergence, and ultimate commercial dominance, of early-1990s "gangsta rap"—a precursor to crack rap—as well as the genre's critique and rejection of hip-hop's role as a continuing voice for the previous generation's mainstream middle-class and cultural assimilationist aspirations. Early gangsta rap consists of competing ideals within the market place marked by conceptual conflicts between what I call "black nationalist" gangsta rap, such as Public Enemy who uses violence, crime, and profane lyrics to combat pervasive cultural decay, and "nihilistic" gangsta rap such as N. W. A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) who, although highly political, seek to profit from the commercial exploitation of criminal and violent behavior. I then move to an analysis of the lives and works of Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace between 1992 and 1996 to highlight further the dramatic conceptual and thematic shift between "black nationalist" and "nihilistic" gangsta rap. More importantly, this period points to the role of the gangsta rapper as an organic intellectual, and the early emergence of crack rap. Thus, Shakur and Wallace stand as the key transitional figures in the pop-cultural discussion of postmodern blackness and black cultural nihilism at the end of the twentieth century.

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<sup>35</sup> For example, on the record "So Ghetto," Carter and "Jay-Z" converge in a moment when "street nigger" authenticity is questioned in the face of mainstream capitalist pursuits: "So I'm cruising in the car with this bougie<sup>35</sup> broad. She said, 'Jigga-Man you rich, take the doo-rag off.'<sup>35</sup> Hit a U-turn: 'ma, I'm dropping you back off.' [She asks] 'Jigga why you do that for?' Thug nigga until the end, tell a friend bitch. Won't change for no paper plus I been rich."

By mapping this history, I am able to provide the social, political, cultural, economic, and commercial market contexts that constitute Carter’s work, and point out his influences in determining the types of oppositional and defiant acts that have come to define much of the popular productions of black male youth culture in the twenty-first century. This chapter pivots on my understanding of how “late capitalism,” particularly the cultural and political implications of neoliberal consumerism, frames a discussion of popular productions of black male violence and oppositional resistance.<sup>36</sup> In other words, this chapter reveals the way Carter and other artists and writers working in the tradition of street literature use the 1980s and early-1990s “crack epidemic” (while the U. S. Department of Justice has the epidemic lasting, “officially,” between 1984 and 1993, its effects continue to be felt well into this twenty-first century) to frame black male cultures of violence, opposition, defiance, and resistance as a complex and valuable site for social, economic, political, and cultural intervention. Furthermore, Carter’s specific negotiation of the 1980s and 1990s crack/cocaine economy, both metaphorically and as a real oppositional practice, provides an opportunity to not only review but affirm and empower cultures of resistance, defiance, and even violence. In this way, Carter/Jay-Z functions as a kind of twenty-first-century organic intellectual—a contemporary social actor who, as the constitution of subject positions, enables oppressed and exploited people to identify with his “street nigger” heroics as a way to challenge late-capitalism’s regimes of power that do not necessarily represent their

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<sup>36</sup> Economic theorist David Harvey defines neoliberalism as, “A theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best advance by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2).

interests. That is to say, Shawn Carter/Jay-Z establishes a kind of fantasy of “street nigger” heroics that, despite its reliance on mainstream capitalist modes of exploitation, many young black men identify with, and ultimately celebrate as a kind of counter-narrative to mainstream capitalism.

Jay-Z’s “street nigger” heroics are problematized by Carter’s actual modes of exploitation, defined by a late capitalist, neoliberal economics ideology, which allow him to profit, *visa-vi* Jay-Z, on the identity and subjectivity of poor black men. Thus, Carter/Jay-Z signifies an important *caveat lector* (the “street nigger” trope is a conceptual paradox that both supports and demystifies dominant stereotypes of black masculinity, as well as mainstream capitalist systems that tend to marginalize on the basis of class and race) that must first be interrogated if we are to understand the political implications of crack rap, as well as its emancipatory potentiality and limitations in the construction of class and racial identities and subjectivities. As such, we will find that Carter’s work, while pivotal to my discussion of “street nigger” poetics and praxis later in the chapter, is as equally important in grounding the conceptual inconsistencies of crack rap in a historical materialist critique. In other words, the discourses surrounding historical materialism are particularly important for understanding how the poetics and practices of black male cultures of defiance and opposition both enable and disable the structural relationships that constitutes postmodern U. S. capitalism.

Fredric Jameson is best known perhaps for his Marxist critique of postmodernism. He argues that conditions of late capitalism have resulted in the

fragmentation of culture and the intersectionality of identities and subjectivities. In his landmark account of postmodernity in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson argues that Western societies have undergone several transitions during the epoch of capitalism: (1) the early system of market capital from the 1840s to the 1890s; (2) the modern system of monopoly capitalism and imperialism covering the decades between the 1890s and the 1940s; and (3) the “postmodern” system of multinational and consumer capitalism in the age of technology starting in the 1950s and continuing into the present. Crack rap’s illustration of poor, inner-city black life, particularly the injection of unprecedented wealth brought on by the crack/cocaine economy, as well as the gangsta rapper’s successful exploitation of the 1980s and 1990s epidemic in the commercial market, emerges alongside neoliberalism, late capitalism’s new and singular feature concerning its modes and conceptualizations of representation, space, culture, subjectivity, style, and tradition. Hip-hop cultural critic Tricia Rose highlights the relationship between black urban culture and economic expansion when she writes:

The growth of multinational telecommunications networks, global economic competition, a major technological revolution, the formation of new international divisions of labor, the increasing power of finance relative to production and new migration patterns from Third World industrializing nations have all contributed to the economic and social restructuring of urban America. (27)



Rose understands that these changes in the global economy have come to define black communities in the late twentieth, and now, twenty-first century. Furthermore, Rose's argument allows a connection to be made between the large-scale, transnational shifts that define late capitalism, and the local effects on the urban American experience specifically illustrated in rap music. Further still, Rose allows for the argument that crack rap, and by extension the "street nigger" trope, illustrates the effects of massive global economic changes—particularly the implementation of a neoliberal ideology which emphasizes open markets in order to promote expansion—in both mainstream and underworld inner-city African American markets, namely commercial black music and the crack/cocaine economy, respectively. As Rose explains, "[it is important to locate] hip-hop culture within the context of deindustrialization" because the "postindustrial conditions in urban centers across America reflect a complex set of global forces that continue to shape the contemporary urban metropolis" (27). Therefore, it is necessary to examine hip-hop cultural production, both its hegemonic and counter-hegemonic impulses, in tandem to the evolution of the global economic system it so closely parallels.

Economic theorist, David Harvey, is particularly attuned to this relationship between late-capitalism and social inequality, which has altered dramatically the defiant and oppositional practices of poor young black men today. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey writes, "Redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project" (16). As Harvey defines it, neoliberalism "seeks to bring

all human action into the domain of the market” through ruthlessly efficient and all-encompassing tactics, such as free trade and free markets with very little, if any, regulation or oversight (16). The result has been what is commonly referred to as the era of Reganomics, which emphasizes free market activity, corporate expansion, and an extreme reduction of government involvement in social welfare. Jeff Chang has characterized the Reagan, post-industrial era as an ideological mandate that promotes “politics of abandonment” (*Total Chaos* x). The initiation of “trickle-down” economic policies, welfare-reform, and other misguided social programs in the 1980s has invariably condemned a generation of young people to a life of poverty. The neoliberal economic ideology, which persists to this day, is tied closely to the origin of hip-hop in general, and crack rap in particular. Changes in global capital (such as the deindustrialization of urban communities and the outsourcing of jobs) and the resulting transformation of U. S. inner-cities (such as urban decay and social neglect) constitute the unique political, economic, social, and cultural conditions that define crack rap music, and opens up the possibilities for an expression of new autonomous identities and subjectivities.

Throughout this chapter, I borrow from historical materialists, such as Dana Cloud, who believe that rhetorical strategies of class identification do not solely defined by the economic structures that contextualize them. For Cloud, it is the classical rhetorical concept of *kairos*—the opportune moment in which political action must be pushed through by social actors if successful reconfigurations of power are to be achieved—that “actually changes the nature of the class, from an inert relationship to a

group marked by identification and purpose” (“The Matrix and Critical Theory’s Desertion of the Real” 342).<sup>37</sup> The question that underwrites Cloud’s essay “The Materialist Dialectic as a Site of *Kairos*: Theorizing Rhetorical Intervention in Material Social Relations” concerns the possibility of rhetorical agency among oppressed and defeated peoples, and the possibilities of resistance and social change. Thus, Cloud allows me to argue that crack rap music is a unique site of class identification, such as its illustrations of “street nigger” culture that use “ghetto life” to unite poor, young black people and to affirm violent, criminal behavior. Under such a conceptualization, crack rap’s emergence during the era of late capitalism constitutes a timely rhetorical intervention that “not only mediate[s] the tensions between economic contradictions and ideological mystifications,” but, more importantly, animate the performance of a localized and situated intelligence that “opens up space for a potentially revolutionary class agency” (Biesecker 11).<sup>38</sup> In other words, crack rap not only locates defiant black male identity and subjectivity within specific symbolic and economic relations (e.g. economic discrimination in relation to class, nationality, race, and gender), but also within a particular historical moment (i.e. post-Civil Rights, the 1980s and 1990s “War on Drugs” campaign, the era of “late capitalism”). Furthermore, crack rap’s “street nigger” heroes not only function as social actors or “organic intellectuals” who examine

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<sup>37</sup> Ekaterina V. Haskins makes a distinction between *kairos* and *genre* in that the former refers to situated judgment, opportunity, and timing of the social actor to enact change “at the right moment,” while the latter emphasizes a formal moment, such as a political campaign, a legal proceeding or a ceremony, that constitutes an audience’s expectation of a situation rather than give flexibility to the *kairotic* (57).

<sup>38</sup> For more on Cloud’s historical materialist perspective, see Cloud, Macek, and Aune 2006. Also see Cloud 2006; Condit 2008; Artz, Macek, and Cloud 2006.

black masculinity in the context of social relationships specific to capitalism's way of organizing and exploiting black male subjectivities and identities; these "crack rappers" are also culturally recognized and rewarded for their negotiation of political decisions through rhetorical speech and literary continuity in the consumer-based environment inherent to late capitalism.

The organic intellectual is a concept that develops out of Antonio Gramsci's understanding of the "thinking and organizing" members of the ruling class who have been charged with the responsibility of maintaining the dominant social order (Heir 42). These intellectuals develop within the dominant class and, thus, maintain hegemonic relations. The *revolutionary* organic intellectual, so to speak, or what Gramsci describes as the "permanent persuader," develops in the subordinate class(es) and is not defined by the kinds of formal education, social status, or cultural distinction that characterize intellectuals within the ruling class. Gramsci argues that this counter-hegemonic intellectual aligns closely with "practical (organic) activity" and is able to generate revolutionary passions within subjugated groups (Heir 42). The challenge for the "permanent persuader," Gramsci suggests, is not only to control dominant ideas, but also to convince people to identify with a world in which they *wish* to live.

When compared with Harold Cruse's understanding of the African American intellectual, Gramsci's "organic intellectual" takes on a new dynamic specifically shaped by U. S. systems of economic and cultural domination. In his book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Cruse is specific about the role of the black intellectual:

The special function of the Negro intellectual is a cultural one. He should take to the rostrum and assail the stultifying blight of the commercially depraved white middle-class who has poisoned the structural roots of the American ethos and transformed the American people into a nation of intellectual dolts. He should explain the economic and institutional causes of this American cultural depravity. He should tell black America how and why Negroes are trapped in this cultural degeneracy, and how it has dehumanized their essential identity, squeezed the lifeblood of their cultural ingredients out of them, and then relegated them to the cultural slums. They should tell this brainwashed white America, this “nation of sheep,” this overfed, overdeveloped, overprivileged (but culturally pauperized) federation of unassimilated European remnants that their days of grace are numbered. (455-56)

Indeed, Cruse’s plea for black intellectuals to generate the kinds of “revolutionary passions” Gramsci argues are exemplary of the organic intellectual who grows from the subordinate class. Framed by the anti-assimilationist and black cultural preservationist impulses that define the late 1960s and 1970s, Cruse’s Black Nationalist rhetoric is underwritten by a historical materialist critique of mainstream cultural and economic domination. That is to say, the “Negro intellectual” is responsible for identifying the “economic and institutional causes of this American cultural depravity” for the poor black populous.

Cruse also offers a description of the black intellectual that supports Gramsci's primary definition of the organic intellectual as a "thinking and organizing" element specific to the establishment or reestablishment of hegemonic systems. In his argument that integration is a hegemonic system that encourages the assimilation of black culture into white culture, but says nothing of cultural reciprocity, Cruse explains that black intellectuals who are accepted by the dominate class present a conceptual quagmire:

The tentative acceptance the Negro intellectual finds in the predominantly white intellectual world, allows him the illusion that integration is real—a functional reality for himself, and a possibility for *all* Negroes. Even if a Negro intellectual does not wholly believe this, he must give lip service to the aims of racial integration, if only to rationalize his own status in society.

This integrated status is not threatened or challenged; it is even championed, just as long as the black world is on the move in the struggle for integration. (453)

Cruse, who rejected the fundamental principles of integration, was understandably cautious of the role of black "thinkers and organizers" in the late-1960s and 1970s, particularly when some of the most influential members of the black intelligentsia such as Angela Davis, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez were being courted by white universities. Cruse, who himself taught at the University of Michigan for nearly two decades, was effectively defining a manifesto for himself and other black intellectuals in the late 1960s.

Cruse, who died in 2005, lived long enough to see that the so-called assimilationists, both black and white, have won the hard fought battle against integration. Nonetheless, the clash between class-prescribed, organic intellectualisms rages on in new arenas of socio-economic class politics, values, and beliefs, namely popular culture and its many institutions of cultural production. The twenty-first century's most influential organic intellectuals, I believe, occupy the popular music and literary culture of black youths. The rappers are the "thinkers and organizers" of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideals. Under such a conceptualization, crack rap, and thus the "crack rapper," becomes a paradox of dominant and subordinate class impulses embedded within the contentious environment of crime, gender, race, and class. In other words, crack rap highlights the "street nigger" hero's potential for not only facilitating emancipatory acts against exploitative and oppressive social arrangements, but also his propensity for reinforcing many of those very same relationships.

For example, crack rap not only illustrates the U. S.'s crack/cocaine economy as functioning within dominant capitalist systems of exploitation. Crack rap also illustrates a counter-hegemonic culture that resists those very same exploitative systems by empowering poor African American men and facilitating radically new and successful, albeit problematic, forms of economic and cultural autonomy. Consider an argument that emerges in Carter's documentary film, *Fade to Black* (2004), in which the rapper discusses the constraints on agency within the crack rap genre specifically and the hip-hop music industrial complex as a whole. One of Carter's fellow rappers admits that he

no longer wants to write about murder and drugs, but knows the buying public wants nothing else, and more importantly, the music industry complex refuses to support artists who shun commercially popular themes of sex, violence, and crime. Carter then turns to the camera and says, “See what y’all did to rappers? They’re scared to be themselves” (Paulson and Warren, *Fade to Black*). Certainly, the “y’all” Carter is singling out are both the capitalists who control the rap artists and black music production as well as mainstream consumers who have the financial backing to demand these illustrations of cultural nihilism. In this sense, rappers, too, are victims of *exploitation*.

However, Carter’s creative work seems to combat his argument outlined above by intuitively calling upon what Stuart Hall describes as language-use’s potentiality within a framework of power, institutions, politics, and economics. In other words, Hall understands people to be producers and consumers of culture at the same time, where popular culture is a “critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled” (Procter 2). For Carter, and a few other artists who share his autonomous position, hip-hop music and culture is a “critical site” where dominant relationships of power are examined, re-established and, sometimes, dismantled. For example, in the lyrics to “Moment of Clarity” (2003), Carter again addresses the issue of rap music’s counter-cultural capabilities, this time with the nuanced political perspective of an organic intellectual:

Music business hate me ‘cause the industry ain’t make me. Hustlers and boosters embrace me and the music I be makin’. I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars. They criticized me for it yet they all yell



“Holla!” [a verbal show of respect]. If skills sold, truth be told, I’d probably be lyrically, Talib Kweli. Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense. But I did five mill[ion] [and] I ain’t been rhymin’ like Common since. When your cents got that much in common, and you been hustlin’ since, your inception is fuck perception go with what makes sense. Since I know what I’m up against, we as rappers must decide what’s most important, and I can’t help the poor if I’m one of them. So I got rich and gave back. To me that’s the win/win. So next time you see the homey and his rims spin, just know my mind is workin’ [spinning] just like them [rims]. (*The Black Album* 2003)

Initially Carter positions himself against the capitalist system in which he functions, arguing that he enters this space through unconventional means; he enters through the kinds of radical practices (Carter financially supported his first album with “drug money”) that resonate with other “hustlers and boosters” who embrace his illustrations of “street nigger” heroics. Carter’s music celebrates violence and crime as emancipatory acts as well as his ascendancy from an underground drug dealer to a mainstream hip-hop mogul. Next, Carter addresses what I believe he understands to be a second audience, one entirely different than the “hustlers and boosters” who embrace him. This audience represents an economically empowered class that may not necessarily value “skills” or lyrical ability, but rather, may be drawn to explicit displays of opulence and violence forcing him to “dumb down” his music in order to “double [his] dollars.” Carter admits to wanting to “rhyme like Common Sense,” a relatively unknown rapper to mainstream

consumers who is highly respected among “hip-hop heads” that value cultural aesthetic over commercial trends.<sup>39</sup> Such a reading suggests that Carter’s lyrics comprise a kind of twoness or internal double-consciousness. On its surface, Carter’s music resonates with suburban kids (read: cultural voyeurs), of all races, and across the globe, who are far removed from ghetto violence and quite possibly associate crack rap’s illustration of crime with the latest Hollywood action film. At its core, however, the very same illustrations of the crack/cocaine economy may provide a powerful political message for the “hustlers and boosters” who have a closer relationship to the stories about crime and violence. It is quite possible that this audience sees Carter’s lyrics not as ghetto romanticism or the dramatic retelling of the most sensationalist aspects of “ghetto life,” but rather, cultural realism.

What we are left with is Carter’s argument that while crack rap certainly changes young and poor black male’s station in life, and sometimes status as well, it also doubles down on stereotypical representations of black manhood as configured in the minds of mainstream USA. Many artists such as Carter who have struggled with economic instability in the past are reluctant to challenge the status quo for fear of descending back into the margins despite the cultural ramifications their art may have on black communities, particularly those that re-inscribing ruling class interests. Furthermore, what Carter describes as “dumbing down” his lyrics, in fact, can be read as a self-

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<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that while Common has gained some mainstream recognition in the years since Carter recorded “Moment of Clarity,” likely due to his involvement in mainstream films, in 2003, Common was considered as not having “blown up,” or become as commercially popular as Carter.

imposed appropriation of black male stereotypes and, further still, a willful exploitation of poor black communities.

However, Carter is keenly aware of crack rap's ability (as well as that of the crack/cocaine economy) to provide a space for corrective organization, and more importantly, to produce social actors, working-class intellectuals, who become recognized for their subversive critique, dismantlement and demystification of mainstream capitalist systems. Moreover, Carter appears to be unafraid to share the inherent contradictions of not only mainstream economic systems, but reflects on his own self-indulgent, capitalist inconsistencies in the hopes of creating new racial and class-consciousnesses and identities. In other words, illustrations of Jay-Z, the quintessential twenty-first century "street nigger" hero, have made Shawn Carter extremely wealthy, as well as his mostly white, economically, socially and, likely, politically empowered business partners. As such, Carter is able to reveal these kinds of dysfunctional socio-economic relationships other artists, who have not achieved his level of security, are unwilling to expose. In turn, young and poor black fans of Jay-Z are able to experience, if only temporarily, the kinds of social and economic benefits he represents. For Carter, at least, "that's a win/win."

As the performer of a racial identity and class subjectivity specific to inner city culture in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Carter assumes the role of social actor and cultural intellectual in the context of creating a counter hegemony. Gramsci documented the role of culture in justifying confrontational and antagonistic social relations and the subsequent *hegemonic struggle* over competing interests between the

proletariat and bourgeoisie. Gramsci's reading of *hegemonic struggle* is important for establishing a foundational understanding of the often-conflicting political implications of popular productions of black male opposition. Expanding on the idea of *hegemonic struggle*, Stuart Hall's post-Gramscian stance—in which he argues that meaning is not fixed or determined by a ruling class, dominant class messages are never transparent, and audiences are not passive recipients of meaning—helps support further the idea that crack rap plays an important role in both sustaining and challenging dominant social structures.

Crack rap illustrates the crack/cocaine economy as a site of contestation in which working-class people have the opportunity to mobilize strategically in an effort to overthrow the ruling class and demystify ruling-class interests. The illegal sale of drugs is indeed a radical, anti-mainstream capitalist practice that allows young black men to earn money within an economic system seemingly structured to keep them on the outside. The “culture of crack” also raises questions concerning the social value attached to materialist accumulation, the mainstream capitalist symbol of success and achievement. However, crack rap illustrations of the “street nigger” trope's fervent desire to be a part of the ruling class, complicates this argument to a degree. It is easy to read, for example, Carter's decision to take up a capitalist ideology as an investment in mainstream American concepts of masculinity where manhood is proven by the amount of money one has and the ability to stand above poor people. However, such a reading overlooks the individual and trickster aspects of the “street nigger's” negotiation of late capitalism as well as his attempt to establish a radical redefinition of citizenship by the

insertion of his disruptive subjectivity into the makeup of mainstream perceptions and beliefs concerning masculinity.

Consider, for example, how Shawn Carter addresses crack rap's conceptual inconsistencies in the second verse of his underground hit, "Public Announcement." Carter admits writing the verse in response to music critic Elizabeth Mendez Berry who, after seeing a Jay-Z performance in which the rapper donned an Ernesto "Che" Guevara<sup>40</sup> t-shirt along with a platinum "Jesus piece" draped around his neck, wrote:

On "Dope Man" he calls himself, "the soul of Mumia" in this modern-day time. I don't think so ... Jay-Z is convincing. When he raps, "I'm representing for the seat where Rosa Parks sat/ where Malcolm X was shot/ where Martin Luther was popped" on "The Ruler's Back," you almost believe him. When he rocks his Guevara shirt and a do-rag, squint and you see a revolutionary. But open your eyes to the platinum chain around his neck: Jay-Z is a hustler. (*Decoded* 23)

Initially unaware of the political implications in wearing the image of Che, Carter writes in *Decoded*, "It's a T-shirt. You're buggin" (23). Nevertheless, Carter was "fascinated by [Berry's] piece and thought some more about what she was saying." After reading about Guevara, Carter says he "discovered similarities in [their] lives," and was prompted to write:

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<sup>40</sup> Che Guevara was an Argentine Marxist revolutionary who was instrumental during the Cuban Revolution during the 1950s.

I'm like Che Guevara with bling on; I'm complex. I never claimed to have wings on nigga; I get my 'by any means' on whenever there's a drought ... that's when I brainstorm ... I ain't invent the game. I just rolled the dice, trying to get some change ... I could blame my environment, but there ain't no reason why I be buyin expensive chains ... Don't think users are the only abusers ... still the vibe is in my veins. I got a hustler's spirit, nigga period. Man, you was who you was [before] you got here. Either love me, or leave me alone. ("Public Service Announcement" 2003)

Here we see that Carter now understands his wearing of a t-shirt emblazoned with the image of Che Guevara as "game recognizing game." The line, "I get my 'by any means' on," brings Malcolm X into the fray and amplifies the connection between revolutionaries and hustlers. It is as if, when Berry says "Jay-Z is a Hustler," Carter is rhetorically asking, "What's wrong with that?" Playing the part of a trickster who simultaneously demystifies and inserts himself into the capitalist system, Jay-Z reminds his listeners "I got a hustler's spirit," again recalling Malcolm X who said, "The ghetto people knew I never left the ghetto in spirit" (*Decoded* 31). Carter is more forthright when he says, "there ain't no reason why I be buying expensive chains." To be sure, this is where most of the "street nigger" trope's "complex" economic politics emerges because there are, to be sure, reasons why Jay-Z, as well as other young black men "be buying expensive chains." To reason, however, that Jay-Z is simply Carter's illustration of a black capitalist is overly simple. Jay-Z represents, on some level, a consciousness

defined by poverty among black men living in American ghettos. He reflects late capitalism's tendency to marginalize poor black people. Thus, "expensive chains" become emblematic of perseverance, self-esteem, and even the ironies and contradictions of late capitalism.

Furthermore, the passage suggests that poor black males living in the twenty-first century American ghetto did not "invent the game;" the larger drug economy, of which crack/cocaine is but a part, existed long before the emergence of crack rap or the gangsta rap genre. Beck talks about becoming addicted to heroin and cocaine shortly after the Great Depression. With drugs came massive drug suppliers, gun merchants, even corrupt public officials who were actively pursuing new economic markets; markets built on the destruction of already oppressed peoples. Moreover, the "street nigger" did not invent the poverty and hopelessness that drove a generation of desperate kids to start selling drugs in the first place. However, Carter is conscious of the fact that in many ways he is not only hustling out of desperation to survive or simply to resist the status quo. He illustrates Jay-Z as being enticed by greed and the spoils of "the game." Again, Carter's self-reflectivity serves as an ideological and value-based critique of the system of late capitalism in which the crack/cocaine economy functions.<sup>41</sup>

An understanding of the crack/cocaine economy as a *kirotic* moment, along with a reading of Carter's reflectiveness as well as his illustrations of the "street nigger" hero, speak to Gramsci's argument that the working class must generate interest among

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<sup>41</sup> Carter's introspection also conjures Amié Césaire's anticolonial argument that imperialism was as detrimental to the ruling class as it was to subjected peoples. I take up a postcolonial reading of popular productions of black male culture in the following chapter.

intellectuals in order to give their cause “homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (Gramsci 5). This position is important for Gramsci because, he argues, those who support the ruling-class are pushing back against the working class’ counter-hegemonic forces with more sophisticated resources in order to sustain their hegemonic interests. Thus, the role of the social actor who uses dominant class mechanisms such as global media in the interest of the working class enables oppressed people to challenge ruling-class domination. Gramsci was not speaking of academics, but rather, an intellectual produced out of the working-class. In *Notebooks*, Gramsci is quite clear that “all men [and presumably women] are intellectuals ... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (41). In other words, intellect is not something confined to the ruling class but something grounded in everyday life. Gramsci writes, “the mode of being on the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence ... but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (Gramsci 1972, 10). Indeed crack rap as a site of *kairos* in poor, urban black communities during this era of late capitalism provide an opportune moment for the “street nigger” hero to emerge as an important factor in the defining of a postmodern blackness and class identities.

Before there was “crack rap,” “hard core rap” and “gangsta rap,” or “conscious rap” and “hipster-hop,” there was simply rap, one of the “four pillars of hip-hop”



alongside “break dancing,” “dj-ing,” and graffiti art.<sup>42</sup> Hip-hop is a youth culture movement that began in the impoverished black and Latino neighborhoods of the South Bronx in the late 1970s. Errol A. Henderson says, “[Hip-hop] was the urban waste land that was the South Bronx” (Henderson 311). The art form quickly spread from the “Boogie Down”<sup>43</sup> to the remaining New York City boroughs and other poor urban neighborhoods like North Philadelphia and in cities like Newark, New Jersey. Despite rap’s humble beginnings, the music rarely reflected the pain and despair from which it came. In 1979, for instance, the rap group The Sugarhill Gang<sup>44</sup> inaugurated hip-hop’s recorded history with the commercial hit “Rapper’s Delight.”<sup>45</sup> By the mid-1980s, rap

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<sup>42</sup> Many hip-hop scholars, such as Gelsey Bell, Jessica Pabón, and others, have taken up the challenge of establishing “beatboxing”—the making of musical and rhythmic sound with one’s mouth—as a so-called “fifth element” of hip-hop culture.

<sup>43</sup> Nickname for The Bronx, New York.

<sup>44</sup> The group took their name from the famed Sugar Hill neighborhood in Harlem, New York. The neighborhood received its name in the 1920s when it was known to house some of the wealthiest African Americans in the city. Life in this particular neighborhood was said to be as “sweet as sugar.” Its famed residence included W.E.B. Dubois, Thurgood Marshall, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Duke Ellington. Interestingly, “sugar hill” is also a common hip-hop term used to describe areas where drug distribution, typically cocaine, is widespread. See Anthony Cruz’ “Sugar Hill.”

<sup>45</sup> The success of the song, with its rhythmic word play and lighthearted lyrical content, would provide the thematic and sonic formula for commercial rap music for nearly a decade. However, the liberties the producers and artists took in recording and distributing “Rapper’s Delight” would set a number of legal as well as cultural standards for the production of black male culture that persists to this day. For instance, the producers of “Rapper’s Delight” and the rap group, The Sugarhill Gang, would spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars negotiating publishing rights and future royalties because of two hip-hop cultural influences known as “sampling” and “ghost writing.” “Sampling” is when a hip-hop music producer uses or reworks a portion of an existing musical or audio work in a new musical production. Because of “sampling’s” pervasiveness in rap music, and rapper’s habitual use of music from other artists in the recording of early rap records, a number of legal precedence has been established for determining ownership and compensation. Interestingly, sampling figures in to Fredric Jameson’s postmodernist notion of “simulacra” or the reproduction of old images, stereotypes, or events. “Ghost writing” is when as artist, usually another rapper, writes the lyrics for another rap artist to perform. The ghostwriter is typically never revealed due to the hip-hop listener’s expectation for creative authenticity. The song “Rapper’s Delight” samples “Good Times” by Chic and features lyrics ghost written by Curtis “Grandmaster Caz” Fisher. (“Big Bank Hank,” a member if the Sugar Hill Gang, can be heard saying, “I’m the c-a-s-an the o-v-a,” spelling out the name Casanova, Grandmaster Caz’s full hip-hop alias.

music emerged as the dominant voice of a black youth movement giving dimension to the dangerously acrobatic dance moves, rebellious street paintings and thumping break beats that framed their culture. In his book *Ruminations* (2003), hip-hop artist and cultural activist Lawrence Parker remarks, “Rap was the final conclusion of a generation of creative people oppressed with the reality of lack” (Parker 217). Rap is an expressive cultural language for black youths frustrated with social and economic disenfranchisement. Rap was the first opportunity for the *post soul* generation<sup>46</sup> to engage critically their post-Civil Rights era: a cultural period in which many American inner cities like New York City, Los Angeles and Miami were suffering from the effects of late capitalism and defined by poverty, drugs and crime. Furthermore, many poor black men were described as nihilistic representations of the “crack generation.”<sup>47</sup> These “post soul babies,” as Mark Anthony Neal calls them, were witnesses to the massive redistribution of wealth and immediate deindustrialization of black urban communities in the early 1980s.

The 1980s had a major impact on the way the hip-hop generation viewed and spoke about their lives. Shawn Carter routinely addresses the era of late capitalism and the crack/cocaine epidemic as *kairotic*: “I’m a 80s baby, mastered Reaganomics ...

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<sup>46</sup> In his book *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post Soul Aesthetic*, Mark Anthony Neal uses the term *post soul* to describe the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements (Neal 3).

<sup>47</sup> The “crack generation” is an unofficial term used by pop-cultural critics Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner to describe a generation of youths coming of age during the U.S.’s 1980s crack/cocaine epidemic. The term was also used in the documentary film *Planet Rock: The Story of Hip-Hop and the Crack Generation*.

School of Hard Knocks, every day is college.”<sup>48</sup> Many young black men such as Carter use the crack/cocaine economy as a point of entry into the discourse of late capitalism. Furthermore, rappers recognize the economic and political possibilities in illustrating these experiences. Thus, themes such as economic isolation and racial exploitation, as well as nationalism and free enterprise were firmly established early in the formation of a hip-hop aesthetic. Owing much of its inspiration to the Black Arts Movement, as well as the entire African American literary tradition, rap’s roots are in the historical struggle over social, political, and economic freedom.

Nevertheless, rap in the early 1980s, arguably known as the “Golden Era,” gained commercial recognition for its mostly party raps about dancing and the freedom to have fun. These themes can be found in successful 1980s rap hits like “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, and “(You Gotta) Fight for your Right (To Party!)” by the Beastie Boys. The more gritty sounds and violent themes of rap lyrics like “P. S. K. [Park Side Killas] What Does It Mean?,” “Get ‘n’ Paid,” and “It’s Crack” by Philadelphia rapper Jesse “Schoolly D” Weaver,<sup>49</sup> which depicted the 1980s inner city drug culture and may be considered early “crack rap songs,” went largely unnoticed among the dominant disco and funk sounds of the early-1980s commercial rap market.

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<sup>48</sup> Quotation taken from a Shawn Carter verse in “Go Crazy (Remix)” from the album *Let’s Get It: Thug Motivation 101* (2005) by Jay “Young Jeezy” Jenkins. While there is little consensus on a definition for “80s baby,” I understand the term to describe young people who use the political, social and cultural experiences of the 1980s to shape their worldview. The title sometimes identifies young people born between 1980 and 1989, however, this paper is more concerned with young black people coming of age in the 1980s; a decade of Reaganomics, crack cocaine, and rising poverty and crime.

<sup>49</sup> Jesse Weaver, better known as “Schoolly D,” is thought to be the first “hard-core gangster rapper.” “P.K.S What Does It Mean?” appears on the album *Schoolly D* (1986). “Get ‘n’ Paid” and “It’s Crack” appear on the album *Saturday Night Live-The Album* (1987).

Themes of violence, crime, and most importantly, the crack/cocaine economy were an underground phenomenon heard almost exclusively at black and Latino neighborhood parties and gatherings. Artists like Afrika Bambaataa and the Beastie Boys, on the other hand, could pack large mainstream nightclubs with people eager to hear their hit recordings. Both groups' popularity likely came from a consumer base attracted to the glamour and freedom of middle-class rebellion.<sup>50</sup>

Nonetheless, rap songs that turned their attention toward the economic and political plight of black people and their struggles with drugs and drug abuse gained some mainstream attention in the 1980s. The 1980s saw rap acts such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 5, N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) and Public Enemy reach the Billboard's top ten with lyrics that depicted the political, social, and economic struggles in black America. For instance, in 1982, just two years before the "official" start of the crack epidemic, Grandmaster Flash & The Furious 5 released, "The Message," which begins with Melvin "Melle Mel" Glover saying:

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under. Broken glass everywhere, people pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care. I can't take the smell, can't take the noise, got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice. Rats in the front room, roaches in the back, junkies [drug addicts] in the alley with a baseball bat.

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<sup>50</sup> The Beastie Boys have the added distinction of being the first all-white rap trio to commodify successfully black youth culture for a commercial audience. Hip-hop culture's early association with punk culture, a rebellious sub-cultural white-middle-class movement that began in London and in the U.S. in the mid-1970s, helped contextualize the Beasties Boy's brand of rap for their predominantly white audience. Hip-hopper Fred "Fab Five Freddy" Brathwaite had some of the most successful collaborations with punk groups Blondie and The Clash in the late 1970s.

I tried to get away but I couldn't get far because a man with a tow truck repossessed my car. Don't push me 'cuz I'm close to the edge. I'm trying not to lose my head. ("The Message")

"The Message" was the first nationally recognized "progressive"<sup>51</sup> rap statement on the condition of black America. Moreover, while this recording is not a crack rap song, one can begin to see the influences of "drug culture," which links specifically oppression and hopelessness to drug abuse. Indeed, for many young and poor black people being "close to the edge" was the very real possibility of abusing drugs in order to get out of the "jungle," if only psychologically. Unlike much of the rap that dominated the American mainstream during the 1980s, Grandmaster Flash & The Furious 5 articulated the post-civil rights generation's alternative responses to police brutality, drug violence, poverty, and other race and economic inequalities of postindustrial U.S. society. However, despite the popularity of rap lyrics like "The Message," "Fuck Tha Police" by N. W. A. and "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy, mainstream hip-hop music would maintain its soft edges throughout much of the decade.

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<sup>51</sup> The term "progressive" or "conscious" rap has received much controversy over the years. It generally means rap that identifies the plight of black people and offers solutions for the uplift of the black community. Cultural critic William Eric Perkins suggests "conscious rap" is, "African centered, neo-nationalist, or Islamic dominated by the eclectic Five Percent faction of Muslim blacks." Perkins argues that these "political rappers emerged in pointed contrast to the macho bravado and fashion excesses on hip-hop's first wave" (Perkins 1996 20-24). This term generally applies to artists like A Tribe Called Quest, Black Star and De La Soul who present a decidedly Afrocentric point of view in their music. I, like many "gangster" and "hard core" rap artists—the supposed antithesis of a "conscious" rapper—argue that gangsta rap's take on struggle and liberation is just as "conscious" as progressive rap. For more on "conscious" rap see *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. by William Eric Perkins, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. Also, see "50 cent Interviews Talib Kweli" in the August 2003 issue of *XXL Magazine* (pp. 102-108) for a conversation between artists about "conscious" rap.

By the end of the 1980s, however, mainstream rap was enthralled in a conflict over the commercial identity of hip-hop. Rappers represented an eclectic community of artists ranging from the Afrocentrism of the Native Tongues—a click of rap soloists and groups such as Dana “Queen Latifah” Owens, Simone “Monie Love” Riscoe, De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest, among others—to the profane rebellion of “hard core” East coast and “gangsta” West coast emcees like Eric B. and Rakim, Richard “Slick Rick” Walters, N.W.A. and Tracy “Ice-T” Marrow. Their names alone demarcate the deep creative and philosophical divide in the identity of hip-hop culture and rap music in the late 1980s. For instance, between 1988 and 1989 mainstream audiences could hear anything from De La Soul’s restrained self-assuredness in “Me, Myself and I” (“Glory Glory Hallelujah/Glory for Plug One and Two/But that glory’s been denied/By condescending dookie eyes/People think they diss my person/By stating I’m darkly packed/I know this so I point at Q-Tip/And he states, ‘Yo, Black is Black’”) to N.W.A.’s ultra-profane, violent and, ironically, self-empowering “Fuck Tha Police” (Fuck the police comin’ straight from the underground/A young nigga got it bad cause I’m brown/And not the other color so police think/They have the authority to kill a minority/Fuck that shit, cause I ain’t the one/For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun/To be beatin’ on, and thrown in jail/We can go toe to toe in the middle of a cell”).

Still on the heels of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, “Me, Myself and I” as well as “Fuck Tha Police” addressed the issue of self-esteem and self-determination, albeit in remarkably different ways. De La Soul’s brand of rap, for instance, consists of a strong awareness of the history of black struggle and relies heavily

on Afrocentric images such as the map of Africa and her continental colors as well as black cultural leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton and others. These artists did not intend to shock or frighten their listeners, but rather, offer warnings and solutions when addressing major issues that plague poor black communities. However, artists like N.W.A. were not concerned if their listeners were shocked or afraid; in fact, they encouraged fear. While N.W.A.'s brand of rap also relied on the history of oppression in black America, they focused on illustrating what actually happens in inner cities across the country as a result of economic, social and political isolation. Their cautionary tales were altogether different from artists like De La Soul. They were warning mainstream America that young black men have been using crime and violence to solve their problems with cultural marginalization. In a sense, N.W.A. represented Wright's "native sons" coming home to roost.

This short yet important period in mainstream rap music points to an internal and external battle within and outside the hip-hop community, and the antagonistic relationship between minority and mainstream communities waged during the last few years of the 1980s and at the very beginning of the 1990s. Internally, rappers and listeners of rap (who at the time were largely black and Latino) were struggling over both the potential and problems with using either an exclusively "conscious" or "hard core/gangsta" lyrical style. "Conscious" artists like De La Soul earned respect as legitimate *artists* who appreciated the aesthetics of music as well as the political power hip-hop wielded. However, these groups also got the reputation of being cultural assimilationists and too appealing to mainstream American interests and sensibilities.

Brian Harper's critique of Arrested Development, a group similar to De La Soul, suggests that older generations of mainstream black and white Americans were more comfortable with the middle-class ideologies inscribed in "conscious rap" music. In contrast, artists like N.W.A. were celebrated among the youth as counter-hegemonic rebels with the power to offend one's racial, sexual, and cultural politics. Nonetheless, they were often labeled nihilists and a threat to black communities.

Externally, more mainstream Americans began listening to rap in the early 1990s than ever before. Some young black men in inner cities across the U.S. saw rap music's budding commercial potential and sought to take full advantage by carefully crafting a lyrical style and rap persona that would appeal to large audiences. As a result, record companies began paying attention to artists that received the most commercial attention. Because of the demand for sexually explicit and violent lyrics among both black and white youths, artists like N.W.A. thrived while "conscious" emcees struggled to remain commercially relevant. Consequently, gangsta rappers emerged as the dominant voice of hip-hop culture. Mainstream consumers had a lot to do with the commercial success of gangsta rap. However, it would be disingenuous to suggest that consumer culture is the primary force driving popular productions of violent and oppositional black male culture. Such a conclusion negates the possibility for understanding "nihilistic" gangsta rap, as well as its crack rap offshoot as an autonomous political response to the racist and classist implications of late capitalism.

For example, at the moment N.W.A. emerges as a pop-cultural phenomenon in rap's production of black masculinity, and a cultural force for a budding hip-hop



generation, the U.S. experiences a shift in its economic trajectory, which would have catastrophic effects on poor black and minority communities. In 1989, unemployment among African Americans jumped more than fifty percent in a decade (*The Truly Disadvantaged* 87). Moreover, Reagan capitalists began concentrating on global ventures while grossly neglecting communities that once supplied the labor force for the now defunct industrial markets (Tonry 103). These issues of economic neglect proved to have a real effect on the young black men creating this new resistant sound and movement. In fact, Hosea “Ice Cube” Jackson, the standout member of N.W.A., witnessed his father lose a well-paying job as a machinist only to accept a low-paying position with UCLA’s grounds-keeping service (Quinn 43). Others did not fare as well as Jackson. Like naturalist street literature writers of the 1970s such as Beck, Brown, and Thomas who described the plight of young black men who struggle with unemployment, and whose lives are determined by economic and social misfortune, Jackson along with other members of N.W.A., as well as Public Enemy and a host of other young black rappers, began documenting their economic struggles in hip-hop’s new genre, “hard-core gangsta rap.”<sup>52</sup> Also like their street lit predecessors, 1990s gangsta rap artists generated enormous commercial interest for their unique and antagonistic cultural perspectives and responses.

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<sup>52</sup> Initially “hard-core” and “gangsta” rap were seen as the east and west coast’s take on aggressive, often profane lyrics, respectively. Soon, any rapper known to recite profane lyrics of violent resistance and/or sexual lewdness was seen as a “hard core gangsta M.C.” Today audiences universally refer to these artists as simply “gangsta rappers.” For the purpose of this paper the terms “hard core” and “gangsta” should be read as one in the same. For more information on differences between “hard-core” and “gangsta” rap see Russell A Potter’s *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995).

As demonstrated by the mainstream popularity of rap acts like N.W.A. and Public Enemy, and the growing popularity of artists like Nasir “Nas” Jones, Calvin “Snoop Doggy Dogg” Broadus,<sup>53</sup> Christopher “The Notorious B.I.G” Wallace, and Tupac “2Pac” Shakur in black communities, the early 1990s foreshadowed the dominance of hard-core gangsta rap as the sound of hip-hop culture. The dramatic waning of rap acts such as De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest showed that hip-hop consumers, along with the producers of these black male images, were making a crucial decision about the direction of mainstream rap music, and the types of cultural identities they wished to entertain. In short, they wanted “gangsta rap.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, tales of violence and survival on the relentless streets in poor and urban black communities across the U. S., often wrapped in unforgivingly profane and sexist language, became the primary thematic and stylistic choice for rappers and their young black and white listeners.<sup>55</sup>

Gangsta rap music, with its hard-edged realism, dominated the expressive culture of

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<sup>53</sup> The artist whose real name is Calvin Broadus was known as “Snoop Doggy Dogg” until 1998 when he dropped “Doggy” and began calling himself “Snoop Dogg.”

<sup>54</sup> The gangsta rap era signals the emergence and subsequent popularity of the gangsta/hard core subgenre in hip-hop music in the mid-1990s. Gangsta rap attempts to reflect the real life experiences of poor young black people living in a violent and oppressive environment. According to Eithne Quinn gangsta rap “reflects and exacerbates a dire and depressing underclass reality. Gangsta rap is seen to both reflect and to be constitutive of the worsening problems facing African American communities and especially young black men. Gangsta rap reflects a tradition of authentic and heightened black radicalism. Gangsta [rap] is [social realism], politically oppositional [in] form, documenting the perilous predicaments of an oppressed community. Gangsta [rap] is not an accurate reflection of life; therefore it can be damaging and fake, usually predicated on the normative assumption that black culture should be ‘noncommercial’ and should speak for ‘the black experience.’” (*Nothin’ but a “G” Thang* 19-20)

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that while statistics indicate that young white males are the primary consumers of rap music, the data does not account for the numerous ways young black people receive rap music or how rap music circulates in black communities, e.g. “bootlegs” (illegally purchased music not recorded by Sound Scan), “mixtapes” (“unofficial” albums released by major artist without the consent or promotion of their record labels), and albums “dubbed” or re-recorded onto cassette tapes (Rose 1994). Also, the argument that white male listener make up the majority of gangsta rap’s audience does not preclude poor black men as the primary creative force directing hip-hop’s “next big thing.”

black youths in the 1990s and continues today. By the end of the decade, not only had hard-core gangsta rap usurped all genres of black music including R&B, funk, soul, jazz, blues and gospel as the most desired sound among young black people, but the hard-core gangsta rapper replaced black singers, musicians, “spoken word” poets, and militant writers as well as politicians, public intellectuals, and preachers of the past as the political and ideological tenor for black youth culture, thus setting the stage for gangsta rappers to become the new social actors representing poor urban black communities.<sup>56</sup>

In her book, *Prophets of the Hood*, Imani Perry argues that “gangsta rap personas” such as N.W.A. and Public Enemy represent an important element of rap’s political potential when she writes, “While it is true that some hip-hop romanticizes violence or crime, far more of it *explains* it and makes a case for listeners to evaluate” (Perry 110). At the height of their notoriety, members of the group N.W.A. described themselves as “underground street reporters” who represented the realities of black urban life in the United States; and Public Enemy’s outspoken front man Carlton “Chuck D” Ridenhour famously described gangsta rap as the “CNN of the hood.”<sup>57</sup> However, while both Public Enemy and N. W. A. saw themselves as social actors who stood in for

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that while gangsta rap began to increase its mainstream presence in the 1990s, the field of black cultural studies was undergoing a major ideological shift. In Britain, Stuart Hall announced the end of “the essential black subject,” and the new struggle around “strategic positionalities.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, this chapter pivots on the findings of critics in British cultural studies, such as Hall and Paul Gilroy, whose framework of culturalism and historical materialism enabled scholars to explore systems that frame and produce meaning, insist on self-determination and individual agency, and ground their theory in the material conditions of inequality and oppression. And if the works of Craig Watkins, Robin Kelly, Tricia Rose and Henry Louis Gates figure more directly in this chapter, it should be noted that these scholars have all acknowledged British cultural studies’ influential insights and rely on many of the same historical, sociological and theoretical traditions.

<sup>57</sup> See David Mills’ article “Guns and Poses; Rap Music and Violence: Glorifying Gangsterism or Reflecting Reality?” published in *The Washington Times* on August 17, 1989.

oppressed people struggling to confront the socio-economic politics of late capitalism, the two groups have decidedly different agendas in their deployment of gangsta rap as well as their use of media for propaganda purposes. For instance, Public Enemy fashioned themselves as black political activists saddled with the responsibility to (re)inform young black America about their “black past” as well as the “culture of nihilism” that threatens to destroy their communities. In his article “Postindustrial Soul: Black Popular Music at the Crossroads,” Mark Anthony Neal remarks that hard-core gangsta rapper “Chuck D’s call for truth, justice and a black nationalist way of life was perhaps the most potent of any political narratives that had appeared on a black recording. Public Enemy very consciously attempted to have hip hop serve the revolutionary vanguard, the way soul did in the 1960s” (375). Conversely, however, N. W. A. proclaim themselves as, frankly, “crazy motherfuckers” who refuse to accept the conditions of racial and economic marginality, and threatened to *take* the necessities of life, even if by force.<sup>58</sup> They were not as concerned with past injustices as much as they were determined to change their current oppressed circumstances.

Public Enemy’s 1989 hit recording “Fight the Power,” along with its accompanying video, solidified the group’s anti-assimilationist message for mainstream America. For instance, the video for “Fight the Power” begins with historic footage from the 1963 “March on Washington” followed by Chuck D proclaiming the event

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<sup>58</sup> In the 1989 hit song, “Straight Outta Compton,” Ice Cube begins the track with what has now become a classic line in hip-hop music: “Straight outta Compton, a crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube, from a gang called Niggas Wit Attitudes.” Throughout the song group members express a disregard for mainstream cultural norms, and instead encourage an anarchist approach to economic and social retribution.

“nonsense.” Chuck D continues, “We ain’t rolling like that no more ... we rolling this way young black America ... straight-up press conferences and straight-up rallies.” Chuck D acts as the leader of “young black America,” shaping a new racial identity. At the same time, Public Enemy is attempting to distance their message from the Civil Rights ideology—i.e. racial integration and cultural assimilation—a clear ideological influence from the 1970s street literature movement. However, Public Enemy are decidedly “black nationalists” in their approach by situating their rhetoric in the Black Power politics of the 1960s and 1970s, which does not discourage “necessary” violence, but does attempt to find other methods of resistance. The video continues with live footage of Public Enemy hosting a “stop the violence” rally with young black people holding poster images of Black Panther Party members such as Angela Davis and Huey Newton, while Chuck D chants, “We got to fight the powers that be.” As Public Enemy’s front man, Chuck D clearly argues for a specific kind of racial identity, and hopes black youths will adopt his cultural perspective. In this *kairotic* situation, however, Chuck D and Public Enemy had to compete with an alternative, hyper-radical articulation of racial and class identity.

In stark contrast to “Fight the Power,” we are confronted with N. W. A.’s video and message for “Straight Outta Compton,” also released in 1989. (It would not be unreasonable to believe that these two videos occasionally appeared back-to-back on hip-hop television programs like “Yo! MTV Raps” or BET’s “Rap City.”) N. W. A.’s video begins with a small group of black men huddled together in what appears to be an ally. Here we see that the group’s idea of community is decidedly different from that of

Public Enemy who attempts to include most, if not all of the black community. N. W. A. on the other hand considers themselves a “gang” who must resist both black and white authoritarianism. (This view of gangsta rap brings up the *moral/amoral* dichotomy prevalent in early readings of the “bad nigger” trope during and after slavery.) Dr. Dre, the production genius behind the group’s music, begins the video with, “You are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge.” Thus, N. W. A. situates “the streets” on the American periphery; and in turn, the “street knowledge” they possess consists of radical and alternative interpretations of U. S. as well as black American history not illustrated by groups like Public Enemy. The video continues with contemporary images of the current state of black America: white police officers harassing young black men, black-on-black gun violence, urban decay, and the prison industrial complex. These two videos can be read as the beginning of gangsta rap’s fracturing of the hip-hop audience, a fracture that becomes even more pronounced in the late 1990s as the commercialization of gangsta rap grows and new audiences enter the conversation. N. W. A.’s listeners are perceived to be different from Public Enemy’s “young black America.” Or, at the very least, “young black America” seeks out N. W. A. for entirely different perspectives on the state of race and class relations in the U. S.

Songs such as “Straight Outta Compton,” and “Express Yourself,” draw clear distinctions between N. W. A.’s brand of political resistance and that of Public Enemy.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> On the song, “Express Yourself,” N. W. A.’s producer/rapper Dr. Dre says, “Ruthless if the way to go/Others say rhymes which refuse to be original ... [they] forget about the ghetto and rap for the pop charts. Some musicians cuss at home, but scares to use profanity when upon the microphone ... They want reality, but you will hear none ... some say no to drugs and take a stand, but after the show, they looking for the dopeman.” Indeed, N. W.A. intends to point out the hypocrisy in “black nationalist”

For instance, N. W. A.'s version of gangsta rap begins the process of establishing black communal relationships that collapses the larger black community into smaller group dynamics. While Public Enemy promotes a "nation of millions," N. W. A. only intends to strengthen a gang of just a few members who share an ideology. Thus, as gangsta rap grows in the commercial market, we begin to see fewer references to community activism, and more examples of consolidated "crews," "posses" and "squads."

While the economic, political, and social "powers that be" the dominant classes, who use capitalism's system of racial and class exploitation, was and continues to be an important issue in gangsta rap, the contrasting images between the two videos speak to the origin of thought and action, as well as the differences in racial/class politics and cultural perspectives among "black nationalist" gangsta rappers like Public Enemy and "nihilistic" gangsta rappers like N. W. A. The internal antagonism within gangsta rap in the mid-1990s determines the types of political messages and emancipatory practices we are confronted with today.

Mark Anthony Neal argues that "Public Enemy's 1988 release of *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (Def Jam, 1988) may have comprised the apex of [black nationalist] gangsta rap" (*What the Music Said* 375). Neal suggests that in 1988 commercial consumers of rap began to move away from gangsta rap's "black nationalist" discourses, as well as the "black nationalist" gangsta rapper as an accurate reflection of inner-city concerns and emancipatory practices. Placing the milestone

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gangsta rap, and separate themselves as "being real," or honest and original in their articulations of black American racial politics.

further down the road, I believe the appeal for “black nationalist” gangsta rap noticeably begins to wane in the years between 1992 and 1996. That is to say, by the mid- to late 1990s gangsta rap’s overt “black nationalist” messages had all but disappeared. Instead artists began infusing “black nationalist” politics with more commercially popular “nihilistic” gangsta rap lyrics, illustrating complex and shifting concepts of social, economic, and political confrontation for the purpose of justice and retribution. Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace, for example, illustrate the self-determination, empowerment and pride of black people by rejecting oppression and disenfranchisement from authority figures, and present ironic, complex and paradoxical images of economic success and black male cultural aesthetics, albeit with notable differences. While both artists’ body of work reflect a range of cultural sensibilities, what follows will focus on Shakur’s public image as a “nihilistic/black nationalist” gangsta emcee and later on Wallace’s paradoxical politicizing of the “crack epidemic” and commercial commodification of the drug dealing “street nigger” hero.

The relationship between Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace is typically marked by the highly commercialized personal conflict between the two artists. However, I am less concerned with the personal disputes between Shakur and Wallace than I am with how the popularization of both as rap artists signal a movement away from traditional forms of protest and resistance rooted in 1950s, 1960s and 1970s Civil Rights and Black Power rhetoric, toward the affirmation of post-civil rights emancipatory acts in the era of late capitalism such as violent robberies (i.e. “car-jacking”), drug dealing and other crimes linked to economic insecurities. That is to say,



the period between 1992 and 1996 defines the modern role of the gangsta rapper as an organic intellectual, particularly when examined through the lens of Shakur's "Thug Life" philosophy. Furthermore, this epoch in gangsta rap highlights the rapper's renewed interest in "drug culture," namely the "crack epidemic," as a viable political as well as economical point of entry in the discussion of mainstream U. S. capitalism. Through illustrations by Wallace, the 1980s and 1990s "crack epidemic" can further be understood as a *kairotic* situation in which the gangsta rapper creates distinct racial identities based on a contradiction between black male experiences and the dominant capitalist ideology. In other words, gangsta rap's illustrations of the "crack epidemic" signals a shift in the cultural articulation of the drug-dealing "street nigger" hero to now reflect the economic and sociological changes young and poor black people witnessed in their communities throughout the decade.<sup>60</sup> Shakur and Wallace comprise the most important contemporary influences on Carter's construction of the cultural persona, Jay-Z.

It is nearly impossible to discuss popular productions of black masculinity such as "Jay-Z" in the late twentieth century without discussing "2pac" Shakur. Murray Forman notes that Shakur has received, more than any other rapper, unprecedented attention from mainstream media and hip-hop scholars. Many hip-hop scholars and

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<sup>60</sup> To be sure, I am not arguing that young black males collectively decided to become drug-dealers as a way to combat exploitative and exclusionary economic arrangements, although many of them did. I am, however, suggesting that crack rap allows for the inner-city drug dealer's oppositional practices to be viewed as, at the very least, a symbolic deconstruction of mainstream capitalism's culture of racial and class exploitation by illustrating oppressed population accessing cultural and economic agency through radical forms of self-empowerment. Thus, "crack rap's" drug-dealing "street nigger" hero becomes the "nihilist of the quarters" who is dramatically saying "No!"

authors such as Nikki Giovanni, Kevin Powell, Michael Eric Dyson, Ethine Quinn, Todd Boyd, Black Artemis, and others have written illuminating studies on the life and music of the rapper most people know simply as 2Pac, or even Makaveli. In 2001, for instance, Dyson published *Holla If You Hear Me*, which became one of his bestselling books in which he discusses Shakur's cultural legacy. In 2003 the documentary film *Tupac: Resurrection*, which archives both well-known and previously unseen video footage of Shakur, was nominated for an Academy Award and is one of the highest grossing American documentaries of all time. Black Artemis' *Picture Me Rollin'* offers a riveting imagined encounter between the novel's protagonist and Shakur's "spirit" where the two discuss, among other things, the rapper's contradictory and often misogynistic ideals about black women.

However, very few have paid close attention to the political implications of Shakur's carefully crafted "Thug Life" philosophy, a unique rhetorical balance between Black Nationalist rhetoric and black cultural nihilism, which intended to shape a radically new class-consciousness and racial identity. Furthermore, very few have tracked Shakur's influences on later rappers, such as Carter, Kanye West, Nasir Jones, and others who attempt to fill the political void left after his death.

What is most striking about Shakur is not so much his use of the gangsta rap genre to illustrate his racial and class politics. Rather, it is his *living* the "Thug Life"—the public displays of cultural and economic frustration away from the microphone—that speaks to the emergence of the "gangsta intellectual" striking the cultural tenor for poor and inner-city black youths. Shakur, who was killed in dramatic fashion in 1996, is most

remembered for his projection of the “street nigger” hero in interviews, on stage and in other venues outside “the booth”<sup>61</sup> where his “Thug Life” mantra took shape. Eithne Quinn defines Shakur’s public persona, as well as that of gangsta rappers in general, as a salient site for scholars wishing to examine the tensions that define poor black male culture at the height of economic expansion. She writes,

Tupac, perhaps more than any other individual in this [gangsta rap] story, captures the deep and dramatic conflict between...new possibilities opened up for independent black culture workers in the information age, and...the broader context of inequalities in wealth and opportunities that, in many ways, defined the gangsta genre. (180)

In other words, Quinn recognizes the global force of gangsta rap music in the context of rapidly expanding information technologies. Young disenfranchised people in communities outside of the U. S. have the opportunity to hear other examples of injustice and strategies for socio-economic change. Quinn also understands that the image of black male opposition specific to the U. S. and via Shakur is being coopted by a global audience. To be sure, Shakur exploits the public’s intrigue by articulating a “Thug Life” philosophy on living, surviving, and getting out of a ghetto contextualized

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<sup>61</sup> Shakur was a notorious recorder of rap lyrics; so much so that his estate was able to release a staggering ten albums posthumously. Additionally, fans of the late rapper continue to hear his voice on hundreds of previously recorded collaborations with other hip-hop artist such as the Outlawz, UGK (Underground Kings), Snoop Dogg, and Spice just to name a few. Shakur’s tireless work ethic has indeed left a kind of recording legacy that permeates the rap community. Today, many artists such as Lil’ Wayne, Young Jeezy, 50 Cent and others claim to have recorded hundreds of unreleased work. No doubt these rappers are aware of the success Shakur’s estate has experienced following his death in 1995.

by socio-economic isolation and cultural neglect. More importantly, Shakur was able to articulate his philosophy in front of an audience more than willing to listen.

As such, Shakur constructs what I argue to be hip-hop's most influential organic intellectual who engages issues, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality confronting poor black America today. Certainly, artists such as Chuck D and KRS-One were and continue to be major political figures in popular black youth culture. However, neither has the charisma Tupac Shakur exuded, nor do they seem so tortured by their past as Shakur, or seem to allow personal histories to determine their actions. Furthermore, while Shakur's "Thug Life" philosophy contains more latent contradictions than Public Enemy's or KRS-One's straightforward "stop the violence" campaign in the late 1980s, it's very inconsistencies reflects the clearest articulation of contemporary black male youth culture, particularly when examined through the politics of nihilism and revolutionary violence. More importantly, Shakur, unlike Chuck D or KRS-One, understood his life, more so than his music, to be an affirmation of radical politics and emancipatory acts, particularly the issue of violence and crime as successful, albeit problematic, black male cultural practices. For Shakur, his time in prison,<sup>62</sup> along with clashes with authority figures, like Vice President Dan Quayle,<sup>63</sup> and the law was proof

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<sup>62</sup> In 1995, Shakur served eleven months of a 1-4 year sentence for sexual abuse. Despite his conviction, the rapper proclaimed his innocence until his death in 1996.

<sup>63</sup> In 1992, Former Vice President Dan Quayle blamed Tupac Shakur for the shooting death of a Texas police officer by a young black male. While Shakur was not present at the time of the shooting, the young man charged with the murder stated in court documents that he was listening to Shakur's music at the time and, subsequently influenced to kill the officer. The Vice President suggested on numerous occasions that the officer's life might have been saved had Shakur never released *2Pacalypse Now*. Shakur would later release a number of rap records attaching Quayle's comments.

that he was more than just a rebel on a record; his very existence represented U.S. injustices, and in turn, he intended to destabilize mainstream society as a whole.

In 1971, Tupac Amaru Shakur was born to Afeni Shakur who, at the time, was an active member of the Black Panther Party just released from a New York prison. As Shakur recalls in an interview, “My embryo was in prison” (*Tupac: Resurrection*). Shakur was born in the dialectical context of black radical, nationalist politics and mainstream economic expansion. Struggling to find work, Shakur’s mother moved him and his siblings to Baltimore, Maryland and then to Marin City, California. Unable to cope with the pressures of poverty, Afeni became addicted to crack cocaine in the late 1980s. In an early interview with Shakur, who was only seventeen at the time and had not yet begun a rap career, the young man comments on his experiences with poverty and how crack became a way for many black people, including his mother, to deal with America’s oppressive social structures (*Tupac: Resurrection*). Typically demonized in the media, Shakur represented the sons and daughters of “crackheads” or drug addicts, and attempted to humanize victims of the epidemic for a public who only perceived them as social pariahs. Indeed, Shakur recognizes himself as part of the “crack generation.” Moreover, while the rapper never released a crack rap album, or a decidedly crack rap song, he did discuss the contradictions of drug dealing and crack abuse in songs like “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” and “Dear Mama.”

Shortly after the Shakur family moved to California, West Coast gangsta rap began to thrive, transforming popular music and raising contentious debates over the state of black youth culture. Attracted by the gritty sounds and political possibilities of

gangsta rap, Shakur sought to make a name for himself in hip-hop. In 1991, he landed a record deal with Interscope Records and began work on *2Pacalypse Now*, which would become one of the most striking gangsta rap albums to skirt the line between “black nationalist” thinking and nihilistic impulses successfully. Hip-hop scholar Kevin Powell wrote in 1994,

I think of Tupac’s [early] music: It’s a cross between Public Enemy and N.W.A., between Black Power ideology and “Fuck tha Police!” realism. When he raps, Tupac is part screaming, part preaching, part talking shit. The music is dense and, at times, so loud it drowns out the lyrics. You cannot dance to it. Perhaps that is intentional. (“This Thug’s Life” 29)

As Powell explains, Tupac Shakur’s early work and public image not only illustrates the issues plaguing young black men living in inner-city America, he uses their struggle as a political tool intended to motivate young men into action. More so, Shakur’s public persona became an opportunity for him to define sharply what he meant when he shouted “Thug Life!”

Shakur imagined “Thug Life” as “a new kind of Black Power” (*Tupac: Resurrection*.) Speaking at the Indiana Black Expo in 1993, Shakur polemically declared,

These white folks see us as thugs, I don’t care what y’all think. I don’t care if you think you’re a lawyer, if you a man, if you an “African American,” if you whatever the fuck you think you are. We thugs and niggers to these motherfuckers! You know? And until we own some shit,

I'm gonna call it like it is... We thugs and we niggers until we set this  
shit right! (*Tupac: Resurrection.*)

“Black nationalist” gangsta rap’s call for solidarity beyond class is echoed by Shakur when he says, “whatever ... you think you are... We thugs and niggers” in the mainstream consciousness. The pronoun “we” also invokes the familiar “nations of millions” that inspired artists who saw themselves as a part of a larger racial and class-consciousness. Quinn argues that in many respects Shakur saw himself “like the iconographic ... armed Black Panthers” (175). As a member of the politicized Shakur family,<sup>64</sup> Tupac was seemingly taking his rightful place in the long line of radical political activists who helped raise him as a child. However, one also recognizes the “nihilistic” gangsta rapper’s willingness to embrace the “crazy motherfucker” who refuses to stand for systematic racial and class inequality, and intends to “set right” the oppressive nature of U. S. capitalism.

In this sense, Shakur defines “Thug Life” as a kind of organized chaos: organized in the sense that its members are identifiably poor, black and frequently male; chaotic in that its philosophy encouraged thoughtful anarchy, or the willingness to disrupt established social and cultural ideals. Furthermore, Shakur’s use of the word “thugs” in tandem with the term “nigger” (“We thugs and niggers to these motherfuckers!”) is nothing less than intentional. In fact, Shakur develops an acronym for “Thug Life” — “the hate you gave little infants fucks everyone”—to articulate specifically the

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<sup>64</sup> Apart from having two parents involved with the Black Panther Party, Shakur was also the stepson of political activist Mutulu Shakur, and step-nephew of activist Assata Shakur.

motivations behind violent black rage and the search for retribution (Dyson, *Holler if You Hear Me* 115.) These terms intend to persuade his young black listeners to claim the stereotypical images of black males as criminals and drug dealers, and use them as a source of empowerment and agency in their emancipatory practices. Such a reading of Shakur's take on black male cultural nihilism can be tied to crack rap's later illustration of "street nigger" heroics and its affirmation of violent opposition, particularly found in lyrics by Shawn Carter.

In this early stage of his career, Shakur developed his "Thug Life" ideology as a way to tap into the collective yearnings of a poor, young, black, and primarily male populace. Indeed, Shakur understood "Thug Life" to be a potential messianic gesture in the genre of gangsta rap, with emancipatory potential. Shakur had the phrase tattooed across his belly in a radical act of allegiance to "street culture" as well as in a dramatic form of cultural authenticity, powerfully demonstrating Stuart Hall's idea of the black "body as canvas." Hall is referring specifically to Rotimi Fani-Kayode's photographic work, which focuses on the black male body, particularly the phallus, as a way to demystify stereotypical depictions of black men as hyper-sexualized. Hall suggests that in Fani-Kayode's work the black male body becomes a point of entry for the interrogation and subversion of stereotypes (*Representation* 274-77). While Hall's theory is a reading of the black body as a site of postcolonial struggle—the notion of reclaiming an embodied black subjectivity—I understand the "body as canvas," particularly Shakur's conflation of the black male body, language, and power, as "linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylizations of the body" intended to poetically and



practically situate himself outside and against mainstream cultural norms (“What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” 27-28)<sup>65</sup> In other words, “Thug Life” inscribed on Shakur’s abdomen literally moves from a political philosophy to a decolonizing text.

“Thug Life” was a contentious issue among critics of “nihilistic” gangsta rappers, such as Cornel West and C. Deloris Tucker, who felt their often-nihilistic tone was a threat to black communities. Addressing his critics, Shakur argued,

I don’t understand why America doesn’t understand “Thug Life.”  
America *is* “Thug Life”! What makes me saying, “I don’t give a fuck”  
different than Patrick Henry saying, “Give me liberty or give me death”?  
What makes my freedom less worth fighting for than Bosnians or  
whoever they want to fight for this year? (*Tupac: Resurrection.*)

As Shakur explains in the above passage, “Thug Life” is invested in calling attention to the culture and behaviors of black men that frightened mainstream America and argued emphatically that they were no less patriotic than the dominant society that claimed similar emancipatory passions. “Thug Life,” in other words, hoped to highlight the hypocrisy at the core of America’s political economy of racial and class exploitation.

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<sup>65</sup> Tupac’s “Thug Life” tattoo is arguably the most famous tattoo in hip-hop culture. (Following Shakur’s death in 1996, Nikki Giovanni famously had the words “Thug Life” tattooed on her left arm in homage to the fallen rapper.) Many artists since have tried to capture the level of intrigue Shakur generated among hip-hop audiences through body art. Nasir Jones famously had “God’s Son” tattooed across his belly in the same fashion as Shakur after filming his controversial music video for “Hate Me Now” in which “Nas” was depicted on a cross wearing a crown of thorns. Dewayne “Lil Wayne” Carter is also well known for his many tattoos. Although no single tattoo stands out, D. Carter understands his body art to signify his rebellious spirit: “I tattooed my whole body, I don’t give a motherfuck.” And finally, Atlanta-based, underground-rap sensation Gucci Mane generated enormous interest on social media after having his face tattooed. Indeed, the politics of body art in hip-hop culture deserves serious attention. Questions regarding the diminishing visual economy of race being replaced by tattooing, as well as the relationship between tattoos and authentic blackness are, indeed, salient issues for other potential hip-hop scholars.

Thus, Shakur's response to mainstream criticisms provides the frame in which crack rap functions. In other words, the "street nigger" figure's presence is both an affirmation and dismantlement of American capitalism. Shakur prophetically explains it with the colorful language of his generation saying, "The message is that we comin'. All the people you threw away—the dope dealers, the criminals—they will be legit sitting next to you in first class thanks to your boy" (*Tupac: Resurrection*). Interestingly, the many former drug dealers now heading major record labels such as Shawn Carter, Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson, Brian "Birdman" Williams and his brother Ronald "Slim" Williams can certainly attribute their successes to Shakur. In fact, the aforementioned executives also developed slogans such as "Roc Nation," "G-Unit," and "Young Money,"<sup>66</sup> which mimic Shakur's promotion of a socio-economic/political philosophy connected to the black community. (It is worth mentioning that while these new philosophies indeed contain political undertones, it would be disingenuous to ignore the commercial marketability driving the creation of these slogans.) "Thug Life" demystifies mainstream beliefs in the U. S. capitalist system's ability to marginalize effectively groups based on class and race, as well as (re)inscribes racial stereotypes in the hopes of achieving economic empowerment through black capital accumulation.

While Shakur was spreading his "Thug Life" message, mainstream media gravitated towards his highly visible displays of black nihilism. Politicized lyrics, violent skirmishes with law enforcers, and ideological battles with key Republicans<sup>67</sup>, all

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<sup>66</sup> While these names indicate each artist's record label, it also serves as a slogan they as well as their fans shout on records and at concerts.

of which intended to galvanize the black community into a collective resistance, contributed to Shakur's commercial popularity. At the same time, other rappers were paying attention, not only to the platform Shakur occupied in voicing whatever political messages that were important to him, but also to the enormous commercial attention his radical public behavior garnered.<sup>68</sup> As Jeffrey Ogbar notes, committing crimes and spending time in prison became the primary source of the rap artists' cultural capital: authenticity (139). The rap artists' ethos is inextricably bound to an antagonistic relationship with mainstream America, ironically, through his relentless pursuit of the American dream under his own terms: fidelity to the "hood," hyper-masculinity and sexuality, violent tendencies, and, in many cases, actual encounters with violence and law enforcement (Ogbar 42-43).

By the time Shakur releases his first album, *2Pacalypse Now*, his audience is keenly aware of his public persona, which drives album sales among his predominantly black male audience.<sup>69</sup> (*2Pacalypse Now* sold just 500,000 copies in its first few years

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<sup>67</sup> "In 1991, then Vice President Dan Quayle proclaimed that Tupac had 'no place in our society,' after a teenager in a Texas court claimed *2Pacalypse Now* had inspired him to murder a state trooper" (Quinn 176).

<sup>68</sup> To this day rappers use Tupac Shakur as a cultural and commercial benchmark. The most recent reference comes from the underground hit "I'm So Special" (2011) by New York native French Montana's who, in an effort to distinguish himself from his less than worth hip-hop contemporaries says, "You ain't 'Pac, you ain't Fif', you ain't Jay-Z, You ain't Y'ay', you ain't French, you ain't wavy [cool]." Indeed, Montana establishes a totemic list of success and authenticity with Shakur occupying its highest position. To be on this list is to be both a cultural and economic force to be reckoned with.

<sup>69</sup> To establish further the perception of Tupac Shakur as an organic intellectual, consider the relationship between the release of his debut collection of rap lyrics, *2Pacalypse Now* in November of 1991, the video footage of the Rodney King beating, and the dramatic L.A. Riots in 1992. On April 29, 1992, Los Angeles, California erupted into what would be known as the most severe act of civil unrest in the city's history. Widespread arson and vandalism along with numerous assaults and murders resulted in 53 deaths, thousands of injuries and nearly a billion dollars in property damage. (Along with the devastating property damage, twenty-five African Americans, sixteen Latinos, nine whites, two Asian Americans, and

leading many to believe that black consumers initially supported the album. It has since sold over 2 million records.) That is to say, when Shakur insists “if I die tonight, I’m dying in a gun fight” and “what’s next, I don’t know and don’t care, one thing’s for sure, tomorrow I won’t be here,” not only are his listeners prone to believe him, they

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one “Middle-Eastern” man were either shot, stabbed, beaten or burned to death over the six days of rioting in Los Angeles. See Jim Crogan’s “L.A. 53” published in *LA Weekly* on April 24, 2002 for further elaboration.) The 1992 L.A. Riot was ignited by the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers—3 white, 1 Latino—accused in the violent beating of black motorist Rodney King. For six days thousands of people rioted in the streets inspiring similar acts of unrest in other cities such as Las Vegas and Tampa. On the third day of rioting, President George H.W. Bush spoke from The Oval Office to address the nation on the civil disturbance in Los Angeles. Bush’s speech attempted to calm white fears and mitigate black frustrations by calling attention to the neglected state of race relations in the country. For the cynical listener, Bush’s speech ignored the underlying issues with race that continued to plague the United States. In effect, Bush’s address deepened the ideological disconnection between black and white Americans and provided the conservative right an opportunity to issue new terms in the debate over the nation’s urban crisis. (In a memorandum printed in the Heritage Foundation Reports, conservative activist Stuart Butler issued this statement following Bush’s 1992 Oval Office address: “Bush next must address the anger and hopelessness that created the environment for the violence ... Vast new public housing projects, even more generous welfare benefits for single mothers and another army of social welfare administrators will do nothing to improve America’s cities. Indeed it is such programs, which underpinned the Great Society and continue to be the basis of today’s “anti-poverty” strategy, that are the root cause of the problem.” For further elaboration see Stuart Butler, “The Urban Policy America Needs,” Heritage Foundation Reports, Executive Memorandum No. 330, May 5, 1992.) Primarily, Bush’s address located the issues surrounding the L.A. Riots squarely on the problem of mob brutality sparked by the Rodney King verdict, “pure and simple.” And in no way did Bush connect this outpouring of anger to any legitimate civil rights issue. Indeed, the root cause of the ‘92 L.A. Riot was the acquittal of the four officers accused of using excessive force to subdue an unarmed man. Footage of the brutal beating was captured by an L.A. resident<sup>69</sup> and broadcast across the country in the months leading up to the trial. Many African Americans were convinced that, for once, a victim of police brutality would receive justice. When a jury consisting of ten whites, one Asian American and one Latino returned with a verdict of not guilty, African Americans living in L.A. and across the country were outraged. Many saw the majority white jury’s decision to acquit these officers as a direct affront to the African American community. Missing his opportunity to show empathy for poor and frustrated blacks, Bush’s speech added insult to injury. His address ignored other issues important to black Los Angelinos who felt their humanity was being disregarded. Issues such as an unemployment rate among blacks that outpaced the national average, immense poverty in South Central neighborhoods, a lack of quality education and the feeling of segregation from mainstream America seemed to underlie the emotions of rioters across the city.

While specific references to Rodney King in *2Pacalypse Now* indicate that the 1991 beating had a major impact on Shakur while recording his lyrics, the general perception of police brutality that permeated the inner-city streets of Los Angeles was at the forefront when he recorded songs such as “Violent,” “Trapped,” “Soulja’s Story,” “I Don’t Give a Fuck,” and “Crooked Ass Nigga.” By penning rap lyrics that tackled the representational politics, formal complexity and deep social, economic and political relations confronting poor blacks living in the United States, Shakur began his career by establishing his role as a black-nationalist-gangsta rapper that would manifest itself in 1992’s civil disturbance. In fact, Shakur described his inaugural recording effort as “the story of the young black male” in the 1990s (Lazin 2003.)

understand the context: the complex reality of black cultural nihilism, and the unifying quality of what Imani Perry calls “the glorious outlaw” and the liberation of finding empowerment in fearlessness and in the code of the street. In fact, before Shakur died from injuries he received in an actual gunfight on the Las Vegas strip, he had the word “outlaw” tattooed across his forearm in another physical gesture, which shows his allegiance to fringe cultural groups.

In her discussion of outlaw culture, Monica Evans understands “outlaw” to mean:

[Existing] outside the purview of mainstream law, that is, outside of the law’s regard and protection. The state of being on the outside is both a matter of fact—imposed by dominant legal discourses that silence, marginalize and construct black life as dangerous and deviant—and a matter of choice, in the sense that black communities often place themselves in deliberate opposition to mainstream cultural and legal norms when those norms ill serve such communities. “Outlaw culture” refers to a network of shared institutions, values and practices through which subordinate groups, elaborate an autonomous, oppositional consciousness. (503)

Evans first defines the outlaw as an “imposed” state of marginalization. Shakur’s intentions, then, is to suggest the whole of the black community are outlawed because of mainstream political, social, and economic isolation. Next, Evans explains how the outlaw is someone who “chooses” to exist outside of mainstream society where they find

or develop a sense of freedom and liberation, much like the outlaw ideology that defined the Black Panthers in the 1960s as well as the outlaw cultural environment of the crack/cocaine economy. Indeed, Shakur's "black nationalism" is underwritten by his Black Panther lineage, as well as his affirmation of a "street nigger" culture defined by crime and violence. The nihilistic racial politics as well as the community-based philosophy of "Thug Life" defines Shakur's debut album where he angrily illustrates the difficulties of growing up black and poor in the post-civil rights era.

Shakur's second album, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, reinforces the balance between Black Nationalism and nihilism that dominates his early music, and solidifies "Thug Life" as a revolutionary life style. For example, "Holla if You Hear Me" samples several previously recorded Public Enemy songs in order to highlight his populace sensibility, but also relies on West Coast gangsta rap themes such as violent resistance popularized by N. W. A.: "Will I quit, will I quit?/They claim that I'm violent, but still I keep/Representin', never give up, on a good thing/Wouldn't stop it if we could it's a hood thing/And now I'm like a major threat/Cause I remind you of the things you were made to forget [my italics]" (*Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*). Shakur recognizes that critics of his music use many of the same arguments to discredit the Black Power Movement in the 1960s; he argues that his "niggas" must remember that their location within a system of racial and economic oppression is historical in its context and relatively unchanged.

However, towards the end of Tupac Shakur's short solo career in 1996 when he died in a drive by shooting, his "Thug Life" philosophy became laden with contradictions and shortcomings. Ultimately, "Thug Life" was subsumed and engulfed

by a music industry grounded in late capitalism's neoliberal ideology. The political content of Shakur's philosophy was distorted by the music industry and subordinated in the interests of musical commerce. His earlier albums were representative of the galvanizing politico-activist rap still prevalent at the time by rap acts like Ice Cube and Public Enemy.<sup>70</sup> By the time he was 25 years old, however, Shakur evolved away from the fusion-like "black nationalist" nihilistic thematic style he helped establish in the early 1990s. His lyrics turned toward the exorbitant culture of new and often dangerously acquired wealth.

Shakur's new materialism along with his investment in the highly commercial East Coast/West Coast feud can be read as an important factor in the rapper's later lyrical voice, which transformed "Thug Life" into a discourse of capitalist rivalries that contradicted, or at the very least dismantled its initial emancipatory principles. His work took on an almost paranoid hyper-individuality. Eithne Quinn points out that although introspective themes still run through Tupac's next few albums, the thematic shift in album titles signaled this psychological as well as philosophical change. For example, *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, his second album released in 1993, is an ironic call for a black brotherhood while *Me Against the World* (1995) and *All Eyez on Me* (1996) indicate his withdrawal from the black community (Quinn 177). Most importantly, however, Shakur's stylistic and thematic shift traces the changing realities circulating gangsta rap's commodified images of violent black male culture and hedonistic practices

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<sup>70</sup> Echoing the explosive urgency of *2Pacalypse Now*, Public Enemy's collection of rap recordings in the same year, *Apocalypse '91: The Enemy Strikes Black* (1991), also illustrated the immediate social emergency at hand and sought to encourage the black community to respond actively to systematic oppression.

in the late 1990s. For instance, *2Pacalypse Now*, arguably Tupac's most political collection of rap lyrics sold just 500,000 copies in 1991, while *All Eyez on Me* (1996), with its unapologetically raunchy single "How Do You Want It?," sold over nine million copies. The two albums, and thus the two "versions" of 2Pac, appeal to two very different audiences: one consisting of the "boosters and hustlers" Carter alludes to in "Moment of Clarity," the other comprising a group of economically empowered, middle-class youths of all different races. As such, young and often poor black people—the primary producers of rap music to this day in the U. S.—began to see that the commercial commodification of a hyper-individualist, capitalistic "street nigger" trope offered a viable opportunity for social and economic change. Furthermore, if they intended to "spit" politics, they had to learn how to do so covertly.

Nonetheless, "Thug Life" represents the most potent articulation of class identity in the era of late capitalism, and held the most potential to re-imagine class-consciousness as a force for social change. Even the most degraded variations of "Thug Life" represent a resistant practice toward dominant ideologies of racial and class marginalization. "Thug Life" provided the opportunity for artists like Shawn Carter to theorize and ultimately affirm the drug dealer's very radical emancipatory practices. Christopher Wallace, however, gives "crack" the "floss" and commercial polish necessary to make it economically viable and lucrative for mainstream American consumption. Wallace made rapping about drug dealing a way for many eager young black males to become a part of the global expansion of popular black male cultural productions. The tightrope act no longer consisted of the ability to balance between



“black nationalist” rhetoric and expressions of cultural nihilism. Shakur’s dramatic and artistic shift was a testament to the end of “black nationalist” gangsta rap as a popular commercial commodity. Artists such as Wallace, Carter, and others were now interested in “setting shit right” on the economic front. Racial politics would have to “play the back,” or at the very least become so buried under dense metaphors and behind ideological subversions that the music inevitably creates two very different listening audiences: one group to validate these cultural experiences and another literally to buy what these “crack rappers” are selling.

Music critic Keith Negus gives us, perhaps, the best opportunity to understand late 1990s gangsta rap’s tendency to appeal to two distinct audiences. In his article “The Business of Rap” Negus says, “In the struggle against racism and economic marginalization, and in an attempt to ‘live the American dream,’ rap ... has been created as a self-conscious business activity as well as a cultural form and aesthetic practice” (Forman 526). In other word, while rap artists attempt to make hip-hop accessible to mainstream consumers, they also see themselves as working within an art form whose cultural and aesthetic tradition relies on an engagement with both racial and class politics. Therefore, gangsta rappers are left with the question of how commercially to exploit “white fear” while at the same time “keeping it real.”

Consider the popular hip-hop production team Bad Boy (the name alone ironically raises the image of the “bad nigger” from the antebellum period) and their most popular members, Brooklyn-born rap lyricist Christopher “The Notorious B.I.G.” Wallace and Harlem rapper/producer Sean “Puffy” Combs who, on *Ready to Die* (1994)

and *Life After Death* (1997), rework the first-person storytelling themes in early gangsta rap music and commodified the drug dealer for a massive listening audience. Their formula consisted of shifting from early gangsta rap's reliance on street-gang scenarios, towards organized crime imagery already popular with mainstream American consumers. While N. W. A. and other early gangsta rappers filmed music videos where they guzzled 40oz bottles of malt liquor and partied in dilapidated inner-city homes, Wallace and Combs sipped champagne and danced in the mixed race clubs of downtown Manhattan. Wallace and Combs' formula also consisted of a kind of "bad cop/good cop" dynamic between the two. On the one hand, Wallace's role was to theorize his proximity to the streets and to the "culture of crack" through creative lyrics ("If I wasn't in the rap game/ I'd probably be knee-deep in the crack game," he raps on "Things Done Changed"). On the other hand, Combs fashions himself as a middle-class entrepreneur who fully expects acceptance as a "major player" in the music business, an economic system controlled by wealthy capitalists who reinforce dominant class interests. Combs' early career involved elaborate parties, which had guests from famed homemaker Martha Stewart to the Duchess of York.<sup>71</sup> With Christopher Wallace and Sean Combs at the forefront of this new era in gangsta rap, the Mafia imagery of the corporate/criminal business proliferated afresh.<sup>72</sup> In this way, Combs and Wallace's commodification of

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<sup>71</sup> In 2005, Sean Combs made Forbes Magazines "World's Hottest Parties." ([http://www.forbes.com/2005/09/08/parties-luxurytravel-lifestyle-cx\\_sb\\_0908feat\\_ls.html](http://www.forbes.com/2005/09/08/parties-luxurytravel-lifestyle-cx_sb_0908feat_ls.html), accessed February 8, 2012)

<sup>72</sup> Another notable example of an early crack rap paring in Shawn Carter and Damon Dash, the artist and entrepreneurial front men of Roc-A-Fella Records in the early 1990s, respectively. While this chapter spends considerable time discussing Carter's conflation of the two roles, it is important to note that the early crack rap marketing formula consisted of a "rapper-producer" team. To highlight further Tupac

the “culture of crack” is a classic case of what Marx called *alienation*: when something human—such as the emotional and physical toil of poverty, or the natural desire for security and stability—is taken from society and is returned in the form of a commodity (Neal 504). In other words, the two Bad Boy front men simultaneously affirm radical emancipatory acts within the crack/cocaine economy by poignantly illustrating the struggles young black men routinely face, and then reframe the very same “culture of crack” by playing to mainstream consumers’ fascination with the violence, glamor and decadence that comes along with this criminal culture.

Christopher Wallace may have illustrated the lack of options for young black men best when he said, “either you selling crack rock or you’ve got a wicked jump shot.”<sup>73</sup> In the spirit of Tupac Shakur, and through a kind of political subversion, Wallace wittingly describes hip-hop as yet another avenue for young black people wishing to escape the economically and socially marginalized worlds from which they come. In the lyrics to “Juicy,” Wallace’s first mainstream commercial rap recording which recalls Shakur’s “Thug Life” aesthetic when the rapper says, “This [recording]<sup>74</sup> is dedicated to all the teachers that told me I’d never amount to nothing. To all the people that lived above the buildings that I [sold drugs] in front of, that called the police

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Shakur’s inevitable movement toward the crack rap genre, it should also be noted that late in his career he formed a “rapper-producer” team with Shug Knight, the former L.A. drug dealer who now heads Death Row Records.

<sup>73</sup> From the song “Things Done Changed” on the album *Ready to Die*, 1994.

<sup>74</sup> I have replaced Wallace’s use of the word “album” with my own use of the word “recording” to emphasize the relationship between technology and text. As mentioned in an earlier footnote, rap is defined in this chapter as literature utilizing all of the poetic devices including form, rhythm and imagery. As a literary genre taking shape in the midst of a technological boom, rap’s popularity in the late twentieth century has forced many of us to revisit our definition of literary texts.

on me when I was just trying to make some money to feed my daughter. And all the niggers in the struggle...” This dedication page, something akin to Beck’s dedication of *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* to the “street niggers and strugglers living in this criminal society,” ironically pays homage to the perseverance and work ethic of the drug dealer as well as celebrates hip-hop’s commercial viability in the face of mainstream discouragement. Here Wallace suggest that in spite of the “teacher who told [him he’d] never amount to nothing” young black people have found in both hip-hop culture and the “culture of crack” innovative and lucrative means of escape from social and economic poverty.

“Juicy,” with its catchy beat pulsating beneath Wallace’s rhythmic word play, is the rapper’s *ars poetica* on his conflicting love for and desperate escape from the “crack game,” and the use of rap music as a path to social and economic liberation. For example, Wallace begins “Juicy” thus,

It was all a dream. I used to read Word Up magazine. Salt and Pepa and Heavy D up in the limousine. Hanging pictures on my wall. Every Saturday “Rap Attack,” Mr. Magic, Marley Marl. I let my tape rock until my tape popped. Smoking weed and bamboo, sipping on private stock. Way back, when I had the red and black lumberjack with the hat to match. Remember Rapping Duke, duh-ha, duh-ha? You never thought that hip-hop would take it this far. Now I’m in the limelight ‘cause I rhyme tight. Time to get paid, blow up like the World Trade. Born sinner, the opposite of a winner. [I] remember when I used to eat sardines

for dinner. Peace to Ron G, Brucey B, Kid Capri, Funkmaster Flex, [and] Lovebug Starsky. I'm blowing up like you thought I would. Call the crib, same number same hood. It's all good. ("Juicy")

Here Wallace associates the "American dream" with rap stardom, thus (re)appropriating a mainstream cultural ideal rooted in the U.S.'s capitalist social structure, and assigns it new meaning by locating it in the urban ghetto, the "same hood" he struggled in for decades. The line, "call the crib, same number, same hood," that closes the first stanza recalls Beck's understanding of the "street nigger" hero as always connected to the black community and the "code of the streets." That is, economic and social liberation does not identify an escape from the ghetto nor is it associated with the world beyond the ghetto.

The passage also uses the first person accounts of poverty popular in 1960s and 1970s street literature, which had a decidedly naturalistic approach. Wallace's line that says, "born sinner," is similar to Beck's "born loser" motif in *Pimp* in which the protagonist, Iceberg Slim, was threatened with abandonment at just three months of age. In fact, *Ready to Die* the album on which "Juicy" appears, begins with a recorded skit in which Wallace recounts his birth into a highly dysfunctional family, eventually leading him to "sop up the poison of the streets like a sponge" (*Pimp* 27). The title of the album itself indicates Wallace's belief in the "street nigger" trope's "death-bound-subjectivity" similar to Beck's protagonist as outlined in the previous chapter. Just as naturalism did in the late 1960s, this narrative style resonates with African American audiences who in the 1980s and 1990s were struggling with devastating statistics of extraordinarily high

dropout rates and the consequently high unemployment rates among poor urban black males. In *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* Robin D. G. Kelly asserts that many young black men who turn to crime for survival do this largely under circumstances not of their own choosing (Kelly 194). By pointing to a shared struggle, in the opening sequence of “Juicy”—that is Wallace’s identification with other “niggers in the struggle”—Wallace is aligning himself with his community much like Shakur and others who adopted a “black nationalist” gangsta rap style. However, Wallace abandonment of this idea early in the song in favor of an individualized perspective speaks to the braggadocios and self-absorbed nature of not only his music, but the conceptual frame that will later define “crack rap” music: “*I’m blowing up like you thought I would.*” Many other recordings on *Ready to Die* such as “Gimme the Loot,” “Warning,” and “Who Shot Ya” are examples of the hyper-paranoid, anti-communal consciousness that dominates his work and also comes to characterize the crack rap genre.

Nonetheless, “Juicy,” with its popular sound, “radio friendly” lyrics and catchy refrain is important in understanding “crack rap’s” take on U.S. capitalism not only because of its thematic content, but in its material construction and commercial reception as well. Thematically “Juicy” discusses the appropriation of symbols of wealth, which in 1990s “street culture” is associated with the crack/cocaine economy such as financial security, leisure, and materialism:

Living life without care. Putting five carats in my baby girl’s ear...Moët  
and Alizé keeps me pissy...Fifty-inch screen, money green, leather sofa.

I got two rides, a limousine with a chauffeur. Phone bill about two [grand] flat. No need to worry, my accountant handles that. And my whole crew is lounging. Celebrating every day, no more public housing. (“Juicy”)

Wallace recognizes that for his own self and for his audience of mostly poor black men, these symbols of wealth, and subsequently the “American dream,” are largely unattainable for poor African Americans working outside the crack/cocaine economy. “Juicy” however, with its emphasis on material accumulation among poor, inner-city black youths—a group who, for all intents and purposes, should not be able to access these symbols of wealth—offers an alternative view of success and a re-imagining of objects that function as dominant class symbols. “Juicy” uses the aspirations of drug-dealers to essentially turn capitalist accumulation on its ear.

For instance, M. Elizabeth Blair points to Mark Gottdiener’s article, “Hegemony and Mass Culture” to argue that producers, which largely consist of wealthy capitalists with dominant class interests, “produce objects for their exchange value, whereas purchasers of these objects [the working class] desire them for their use value” (Neal 500). Blair argues that the link between the producers and consumers, or the dominant class and the working class, occurs when the producers communicate an image for the product, usually through advertisement, which frequently structures a product’s value along class lines (Neal 501). As Gottdiener describes it, “products are surrounded with a web of social significance from the outset through advertising as a further inducement to purchase, creating value above and beyond the basic utility of the product” (Gottdiener

577). For example, smoking a cigar is no longer just a method of consuming tobacco, a car is not just a mode of transportation and a television is more than a device for media. They are also social symbols, promising the owner a powerful aura, making him look like a “man of power” or whatever else the imaginative variations of the advertising experts on the theme of cigars, cars and televisions might be (Neal 500; Wicke 78-79). Crack rap illustrates successful reconfigurations of power by altering the exchange value and desirable use-value status of symbolic capitalist accumulations, which reinforce class structures that benefit dominant interests into (re)appropriated symbols that come to symbolize inner city black male success, or “ghetto fabulousness.” Rappers hope to capitalize on the reconfiguration of cultural symbols by presenting new readings of these symbols for a mass audience who wish to purchase alternative narratives of wealth and value (Forman 214). While the most successful manufactures of exotic cars, clothing and electronics are certainly technologically advanced, stylish and prestigious, they did not intentionally market these products to appeal to the rap subculture. However, their products were subsequently adopted and reappropriated by this group, becoming part of its identifiable look and political consciousness (Neal 501). While many of these young black males may have bought into the capitalist system, it does not negate the fact that they, in effect, demystify the dominant class’s isolationist materiality.

Additionally, “Juicy’s” construction under the guidance of Sean Combs reveals his understanding of the importance and economic viability of producing black male culture for a large commercial audience. Using the formula that popularized street literature and the “street nigger” trope for commercial audiences in the 1960s and 1970s,



as well as by gauging the success of hip-hop's most popular rappers, Combs understands that rap music needs to generate two things in the mind of the consumer in order to become economically successful: black male authenticity and massive commercial interest. Like the most successful street lit authors of the past, Combs associates black male authenticity with street culture. In 1994, Combs structures his Bad Boy record label around two artists, Christopher Wallace and the more subdued, less profane Craig Mack. While Mack found success with the song "Flavor in Your Ear," which was more about lyrical style than street culture, he never measured up commercially to Wallace who propelled to the forefront of gangsta rap's new, grittier sound. Thus, Combs constructs his own authenticity and that of Bad Boy Entertainment around Christopher Wallace's illustration of his life as "Biggie Smalls" or "The Notorious B.I.G.,"<sup>75</sup> a talented reformed drug dealer whose primary thematic frame consisted of illustrations of ghetto life in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant housing project. Wallace's ability to convince his audience that his version of black masculinity is based largely in real life experiences authenticates him for a public intent on consuming the "realist" marginal experiences of their fellow U.S. citizens.

Having secured an authentic representation of black masculinity in Wallace's rendering of the "street nigger" hero, despite its inherent silencing of other masculine black identities, as well as its misogynistic overtones, Combs attempts to gain massive commercial interest in this new brand of gangsta rap by using what the Marxist writer

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<sup>75</sup> Christopher Wallace also wrote under the name "The Black Frank White," a racial and cultural manipulation of a character from the 1990 crime film *King of New York*. In the film, the protagonist Frank White is a wealthy and powerful drug dealer who dies in a dramatic shootout with New York police officers.

Adorno called part-interchangeability or pseudo-individualization, two methods of capitalist production (Goodwin 76). The hip-hop musical technique known as “sampling,” or the musician’s use of someone else’s musical composition, embodies these two Marxist concepts. M. Elizabeth Blair’s article “Commercialization of Rap Music Youth Subculture” is helpful in examining the political implications of hip-hop musical production. Blair defines “part-interchangeability” as when mass-produced parts from one product line are used in another “different” product. For example, part-interchangeability takes place in the song “Juicy” when, as the songs producer, Combs retools a popular old recording, “Juicy Fruit,” by the funk/soul group Mtume, by amplifying and intensifying the drum break to form a new instrumental popular in hip-hop musical composition. Pseudo-individualization occurs when the “same” products are made to seem different by, in this case, adding new background vocals and riffs that are characteristic of Christopher Wallace’s drug dealing past (“You know very well who you are. Don’t let them hold you down; reach for the stars.)

Combs and Wallace’s reliance on the trope of the drug dealer is rooted in young black people’s frustration with the deindustrialization of urban communities, the economic marginalization of inner city communities, and the lack of options available in reaching the American dream of economic and social freedom. However, the commodification of the drug dealer and the theme of crack/cocaine in rap have to do with both black and white America’s growing fascination with and consumption of the black underworld culture, a subculture first made popular and commercially viable in the late 1960s and 1970s by authors such as Beck, Goines and others. This dichotomy raises

interesting questions about crack rap as a real interpretation of black life, and the commodified image of the “street nigger.

Thus, the question remains, is crack rap an honest depiction of black men living in poor communities across the U.S., or is it a false projection of black male culture as configured in the minds of a mainstream black and white consumer base generated, not for cultural dialogue, but for enormous capital, which ultimately reinforces ruling class ideology? He is representative, I believe, of both actual emancipatory and, sometimes, nihilistic behaviors. He is also symbolic of the dominant society’s mythical expectations of young black men, exploited by many of the very same young black men for the purposes of economic and social advancement. However, while it is important to tackle these issues, it is more important to avoid a bifurcated analysis of the “street nigger” trope in gangsta rap. He is neither all good nor entirely bad. He is a representation of everyday experiences in poor black communities as well as a shadowing act mimicking mainstream racial stereotypes.

Nonetheless, crack rap’s “street nigger” trope continues to be valuable for commenting on mainstream American cultural values and morals, as well as an important site for examining young black men’s negotiation of U.S. capitalism. Eric King Watts describes the larger gangsta rap genre as “spectacular consumption,” arguing that the violent, often sexist, images in rap lyrics function at the nexus between street authenticity and market demands (Watts 2004). Describing what he understands to be the central consumerist dynamic of gangsta rap, Watts writes, “As street codes get explosively commodified and artists get juiced beyond their maddest dreams, they are

compelled to maintain their celebrity status by ‘authenticating’ their self-presentations in increasingly grittier street terms” (Watts 2004, 601). For Watts, gangsta rappers partake in the commodification of ghetto subjectivity. The genre is also, I argue, in the business of commodifying criminal behavior among African American men. However, Watts would also reject the impulse to dismiss gangsta rap’s commercialization of black crime as a general example of crass commercialism. In his analysis of the Harlem Renaissance—a cultural and literary forbearer to hip-hop—Watts argues that critics must trouble “the norms and premises that authorize or demoralize public speech” in order to open “the inventional possibilities of contemporary rhetorical culture” (Watts 2001, 198). I agree with Watts that we must avoid the temptation to distinguish between “pure” and “impure” art and, instead, consider how even the most unsettling forms of vernacular expression might “imagine and express alternative and previously unseen ideals of social justice” (Watts 2001, 197).

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the commercial popularity of the community based, “stop the violence” campaign in rap begins to wane in the years following the release of Boogie Down Production’s self-help hit “Self-Destruction” (1989) in which more than a dozen of the “golden era’s” best rappers warned their young black listeners of the danger violence and street crimes pose for the black community. Until the mid-1990s, clear links existed between Black Nationalism and nihilistic gangsta rap. After 1995, less overtly nationalist gangsta rap and the illustration of the U.S.’s crack/cocaine economy became a mainstream commercial success. Themes that explored the intricacies of the “culture of crack” became more appealing to young poor black men—

and intriguing to mainstream consumers. More importantly, the thematic transition in gangsta rap music also signaled a rise in black men from impoverished backgrounds reconfiguring the business dynamics of popular black music. Consequently, crack rap becomes both a metaphorical critique of mainstream capitalism as well as very real opportunity for young black men to enter mainstream economic spaces. For the producers of this version of black male culture, crack rap affords them the opportunity to change dramatically their social and economic location. Consider the popular Brooklyn-born rapper Carter and his cultural persona Jay-Z, which has become the archetype for the marriage of gangsta rap poetics and “street nigger” praxis. More importantly Carter’s actual life along with his particular stylization of black manhood in crack rap music allows for an examination of the material forces that create the conditions for the crack/cocaine economy, and the conditions that allow for the commercialization of a “street nigger” trope specific to this era of late capitalism.

Carter was born on December 4, 1969, and spent most of his adolescents in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the community referred to simply as Bed-Stuy had been known for its economic depravity and social dislocation. The Bed-Stuy community of Carter’s youth also witnessed an unprecedented increase in violence, crime, and drug use that rivaled other poor inner-city neighborhoods in New York, as well as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Miami. These economic and social forces created the conditions for familial dysfunction and dislocation. For instance, at age twelve, Carter experienced a personal trauma when his father abandoned him and his three siblings, leaving his mother to

struggle alone in Marcy Projects, one of Bed-Stuy's poorest public housing complexes. However, his father's abandonment was not unique to Carter or other members of his family. The 1980s saw more single-mother-headed households among inner city families than ever before. Moreover, like many black men of Carter's generation— young boys saddled with the responsibility of financially and emotionally supporting a large family with little parental help—crack cocaine became both an economic and psychological alternative to the racial and social oppression they faced daily. While the high rates of absent fathers are indeed a symptom of economic disenfranchisement, these statistics, undoubtedly, account for many young black men such as Carter who have chosen to take on a life of crime as a way to establish and define their manhood. Carter would spend decades engrossed in the U.S.'s crack/cocaine economy, all the while generating a litany of philosophical and practical tools he would later use in "crack rap," a popular literary critique of American capitalism.

For nearly twenty years, Carter would spend his time either crafting poetic lyrics that illustrate the violent business of crack/cocaine, or functioning in this drug economy as a successful drug dealer in cities across the U.S.'s east coast. In his unofficial memoir *Decoded*, the rapper explains that in his early years he never fully committing to one "craft" or the other. It was not until 1992 that Carter left the "crack game" and earnestly decided to concentrate his efforts on his abilities as a rap lyricist. Using much of the money he collected as a drug dealer, along with loans from investors with whom he would later collaborate, Carter wrote and recorded *Reasonable Doubt*, one of the first and possibly most significant crack rap albums produced for a large commercial

audience. To be sure, rap recordings that illustrated the “culture of crack” are found as early as 1986 with Jesse B. Weaver’s “It’s Crack” and “P.S.K. What Does It Mean?” and Lawrence Parker’s “9mm Goes Bang” and “The P Is Free,” and well into the mid-1990s with Corey Woods’ *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx...* (1994) and Anthony Cruz’ *Doe or Die* (1995). However, Carter’s creative take on the U.S. crack/cocaine economy beginning in 1996 illustrates the “street nigger” hero in a dramatically new light. Instead of focusing on “the come up,” or the struggle to conquer “the streets” and the crack/cocaine economy from the ground up—the quintessential “rags to riches” theme—Carter positions his “street nigger” hero as always already economically, politically and socially empowered. In this way, Carter’s “street nigger” trope is engaged in a dialogic with “street nigger” figures in the past. In other words, Carter’s “Jay-Z” figure is informed not only by the “street nigger” practices of the 1960s and 1970s as illustrated in works such as *Pimp*, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and *Down These Mean Streets* (and more likely in films such as *Super Fly* in 1972, *The Mack* in 1973, *Scarface* in 1983, *Colors* in 1988, and *New Jack City* in 1992). Carter’s character learns from the mistakes of former gangstas, pimps and hustlers negotiating previous spaces and their respective street politics.<sup>76</sup> More importantly, by bypassing the “rags to riches” theme prevalent not just in the “crack rap” genre but in rap generally, Carter is able to engage

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<sup>76</sup> A popular theme in rap is providing listeners with advice on negotiating street culture from the bottom up. Carter’s most notable recording on this theme is “Coming of Age” which I examine in detail in this chapter. Another popular cautionary rap tale is Christopher Wallace’s “Ten Crack Commandments” in which the rapper enumerates important “street codes” for individuals with “enough heart” to tackle the “crack game.” An aspect to these cautionary themes is the idea that the rapper has learned these lessons from past mistakes. While these are sometimes personal mistakes, they often are lessons learned from someone else, frequently an older or former “street nigger.”

avenues towards socio-economic liberation and cultural agency specific to the era of late capitalism not previously examined, such as the negotiation of commercial markets, corporate enterprise, and mainstream cultural commodification and consumerism.

Over several crack rap albums and across a 20-year period, Shawn Carter explores the relationship between the literary and cultural trope of the “street nigger” hero and the *actual* “street nigger,” or drug-dealer turned executive, negotiating the changing racial and class politics of mainstream U.S. capitalism. By the time Carter records the lyrics for his album *American Gangster* in 2007,<sup>77</sup> the famed rapper transitioned from solely illustrating crack as a literary metaphor to practicing “street nigger” tactics within a rapidly expanding economic context.

In his first collection of rap lyrics titled *Reasonable Doubt*, Carter establishes the persona of a successful, smart and fearless drug dealer simply known as Jay-Z. Just as Robert Beck’s illustration of Iceberg Slim in his semi-autobiographical novel *Pimp* loosely recounts his life as a ruthless pimp in Chicago, Carter marries his real life experiences as a New York City drug dealer with cultural fiction, the fantasy of being a leader in a highly profitable criminal organization. Cultural fictions are thematically coherent assemblages of inscriptions that enable subjects to articulate their relationship to the dominant culture. More importantly, cultural fictions do not necessarily denote entirely false illustrations of social reality. Rather, to the extent that literary discourse is at all capable of sufficiently representing a historical and political context, cultural

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<sup>77</sup> Although Carter’s tenth studio album shares the same name, and was inspired by the feature film *American Gangster* (2007), it is not the official soundtrack for the movie. The *American Gangster* soundtrack features songs recorded in the 1960s and seventies by artists such as The Staple Singers, John Lee Hooker, and Curtis Mayfield.



fictions may or may not be wholesale distortions of the real (Hartnett 2002). Crack rap, gangsta rap, and other popular black male cultural discourses of resistance, defiance and opposition, then, are in the business of symbolic reversal, or structuring alternative—and not always beneficial—fictions of race, violence, and crime. Thus, Carter takes the organized crime motif popularized by Combs and Wallace, and pushes it to the forefront of his illustrations of “street nigger” heroics, and the negotiation of U.S. capitalism and the crack/cocaine economy.

In the 1996 recordings, “Coming of Age,” Carter presents himself as Jay-Z, a veteran drug dealer who is unashamedly proud of his successful negotiations of the crack/cocaine economy. At the same time, “Coming of Age” uses the crack/cocaine economy as a metaphor for his negotiation of the black music business. Additionally, “Coming of Age” uses the relationship between established drug dealers and the hungry young hustlers who idolize them and aspire to be just like them as an allusion for the struggles of up and coming rap superstars. In a 1998 interview with *Vibe Magazine*’s Dream Hampton, Carter merges the paternal relationships between veteran and newly recruited drug dealers with well-established and rookie rappers. What Carter refers to as “the life” of a drug dealer can be read as a metaphor for his experiences as an entrepreneurial hustler who, like other eager young black males, “improvis[ed] their way into expansion, past federal laws, and in between bullets.” Carter admits: “I live with it. With this whole thing, you don’t recruit; people come to you, wanting to work, begging to be put on” (Hampton 124).

Through his use of the cultural persona Jay-Z, “Coming of Age” thus illustrates the rite of passage from d-boys to men of industry and from disempowerment to total autonomy in a world defined by crack/cocaine. For example, Malik “Memphis Bleek” Cox, who plays the part of the young recruit, is in fact an artist on Shawn Carter/Jay-Z’s Roc-A-Fella record label. While a surface reading of the song indicates a relationship between a drug lord and a “d-boy,” the underlying meaning offer an alternative understanding of the mainstream music business, which suggests that black men have been able to successfully amend and then recast their experiences and philosophies developed in the crack/cocaine economy. As Jay-Z describes it:

Come experience life as we know it, as some of you should know it.

Place: Marcy, Brooklyn. Actions: well, y’all know the actions. I got this [young boy] on my block always [watching] my [diamonds]. He likes the style and profile. I think he wants to mock. He likes the way I walk. He sees my money talk, [and] the [girls stare]. I’m the hottest nigger in New York. I see his hunger pains. I know his blood boils. He wants to run with me. I know this kid will be loyal. I watched him make a [little money] to [buy] his little sneakers and [cloths]...I see myself in his eyes. That’s just the natural cycle...We out here trying to make hard white [cocaine] into cold green [money]. I can help [get this young boy involved in the crack/cocaine economy].

In this rap narrative, Carter plays the part of a successful drug dealer called Jay-Z who singles out a young black male denizen struggling to survive in an economically

marginalized community. Like many young black men in poor communities across the U.S., the recruit views selling drugs (or rapping) for a living as a viable route out of poverty and into the *glamorous* “life” where “money [is] talkin’ [and] honeys’ [are] hawkin’.” In other words, the crack/cocaine economy, as well as the “rap game,” represents the goals of a large number of poor black men who attempt to make sense of the racially and economically alienating yet attractive nature of materialism and capitalistic excess in contemporary mainstream American culture. Notwithstanding the severe racial exploitation that capitalist relations have imposed upon the black community, the crack/cocaine economy produces all of the political, cultural, and social dynamics, which have sustained an environment of inconsistency and uncertainty concerning black community and liberation.

Carter’s “Coming of Age” is an example of the “street nigger,” whether veteran “baller” or young hustler, fully engaging the circular nature of the crack/cocaine economy in particular and U.S. capitalism in general. Carter’s “street nigger” hero also adheres to the long-standing historical tradition of the so-called nihilistic “bad nigger”: “I’m out here slingin’, bringin’ the *drama*” and “I’m out here servin’, *disturbin’ the peace*.” More importantly, particularly when discussing “crack rap’s” emancipatory impulses, Carter understands the crack/cocaine economy as simply a means to an end, which is signified by the pursuit of and access to economic wealth and an imagined “lap of luxury:” “Life could be better like my man reclined in plush leather seat.” Moreover, the “street nigger’s” willingness to be exploited in the hopes of achieving economic wealth (“And sellin’ weight, I’m sellin’ eight ... balls/ Sixteen, tryin’ to graduate to

quarters y'all," "I'm tired of being out here 'round the clock and breaking day/ And chasing crackheads up the block for my pay," and "I'm tryin' to step up to the next level") reflect an ironic sense of duty, work ethic, and a new sense of responsibility and determination.

Carter explains the act of "livin' the life" in his *Vibe Magazine* interview:

It starts off as one thing ... Then it becomes another. In the beginning it's, I gotta take care of my family, but you can't keep saying that, because in your first month, you've changed their whole situation around. Once you start living "the life" it's just no stopping ... It's like making money, the sound of the money machine clicking—for some people the sensation of the coke under their nails, like dirt for construction workers—the constant hustle, everything from the living to [the] work.  
(Hampton 122)

Carter's insistence that "living the life" is just as thrilling and empowering as "the work" itself captures an ambivalent dimension of the cultural practices of the "street nigger" oftentimes obscured by moralistic, conservative cultural and political commentators. We must interrogate this visceral need for "work" if we, as cultural and literary critics, are to both learn from and inform the lives of dislocated black urban youths. That is to say, to understand the complexity of this oppositional, largely black male culture one perhaps should, as Carter asserts at the introduction to "Coming of Age," "come experience life as [he] know[s] it/ As some of you should know it."

Like most early crack rap recordings, *Reasonable Doubt* is filled with the kinds of fantasies that will likely remain as cultural fiction. At the time, most reformed drug dealers who entered the world of hip-hop could not seamlessly enter the “legitimate” practices of American capitalism using the strategies they acquired on “the streets.” However, in a little over a decade, Carter is able to do just that. By 2007 Carter not only becomes the most well know and successful rap lyricist, he is able to position himself as a successful entrepreneur, not only in the music business, but as a restaurateur, a minority owner of a national sports team, and an important political contributor and advocate with a major hand in generating interest among young African American voters during the 2008 presidential campaign as well.

In the 2007 release of *American Gangster* his twelfth studio album, Carter begins the process of transitioning from “crack rap” poetic to “street nigger” practice. In the song titled, “Pray,” Carter raps,

[My] mind state [is] of a gangster from the 40’s meets the business mind of Motown’s Berry Gordy. Turned crack rock into a chain of 40/40’s [sports bar restaurants]. Sorry my jewelry is so gaudy. Slid into the party with my new pair of Mauri’s. America, meet the gangster Shawn Corey [Carter]. Hey young world, wanna hear a story? Close your eyes and you can pretend you’re me. I’m cut from the cloth of the Kennedy’s. [I’m] Frank Sinatra, having dinner with the Genovese. This is the genesis of a nemesis “Mother America’s” not witnessed since the Harlem Renaissance birthed black businesses. This is the tale of lost innocence.

Drug dealer in the BM[W] with the top down as the girls start to giggle. I ask, “Why you laugh?” They say, “You’re too little. One day you’ll understand when you become a man, about things you have to get.” Fast forward: freeze frame on my pistol, fistful of dollars. Ignorance is so blissful. I ain’t choose this life, this life chose me. Around here it’s the shit that you just do.

Anywhere there’s oppression the drug profession flourishes like beverages, refreshing. Sweet taste of sin. Everything I seen, made me everything I am. Bad drug dealer or victim, I beg what came first? I’m trying to beat life ‘cause I can’t cheat death. Treat shame with shamelessness.

Unlike “Coming of Age,” which plays on the fantasies of young black men living in poor inner cities dreaming of an opportunity to escape their circumstances, often using the crack/cocaine economy as a means to an end, “Pray” offers a less fantastic look at success and illustrates not Jay-Z’s drug dealing empire but Shawn [Corey] Carter’s very real and very legitimate (read: mainstream) business activities. Not only does Carter explain how his success as a drug dealer inspired his work ethic, he also explains how he actually used the resources and profits from the illegal business to start legitimate business ventures: “Turned crack rock into a chain of 40/40’s [sports bars].” Carter also explains how the “street nigger” persona of the drug dealer proliferates in his real life. The excess commonly associated with drug dealers and the “culture of crack” is present when Carter—or is it Jay-Z?—enters the mainstream capitalist system: “Sorry my

jewelry is so gaudy. Slid into the party with my new pair of Mauri's. America, meet the gangster Shawn Corey [Carter]." More importantly, Carter calls attention to the ironies of American capitalism and political culture by associating himself with the legitimacies of Kennedy and Frank Sinatra, two beloved figures in mainstream American culture and the U.S. fascination with the Mafia: "I'm cut from the cloth of the Kennedy's. [I'm] Frank Sinatra, having dinner with the Genovese." Carter offers a critique of mainstream America's opposition to black leadership and capitalism by referencing the Harlem Renaissance and calling it a "nemesis 'Mother America'" has historically combatted. Finally, Carter returns to his childhood, before the creation of Jay-Z, to discuss the real effects of poverty on black youths. Like the street lit writers of the past, Carter insists that the circumstances he found himself were predetermined by poverty with little opportunity for escape: "I ain't choose this life, this life chose me" and "Anywhere there's oppression the drug profession flourishes." Clearly, Carter is beginning the process of leaving fiction behind and dealing with reality.

The negotiation of a crack/cocaine economy is in itself an act of political agency. As historian Peter Linebaugh states plainly in his study of political economy and crime in eighteenth century England, "In short, people became so poor that they stole to live, and their misappropriating led to manifold innovations in civil society" (Linebaugh xxi). If political struggle is in fact a struggle to survive, than the "street nigger's" decision to risk his life in the "crack game" can certainly be understood as a political act. Although the practices of a "street nigger" or a gangsta rapper will not be as politically conscious or beneficial as those of a political activist or a public intellectual, they are nonetheless

inextricably tied to the social antagonisms that give dimension to political and cultural subjectivity.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the genre of crack rap has not diminished, but rather it has flourished and taken on new often-disturbing dynamics. Some of the biggest names in rap music have taken the genre in potentially dangerous directions. For instance, a notable characteristic in early crack rap by artist such as Carter, Woods and Cruz was the issue of remorse whether genuine or faint. Much like Beck and other street lit authors of the past, “street nigger” rhetoric’s primary purpose was to, as Beck says in the epigraph to *Pimp*, “purge myself,” and later as Carter say it, “[I’m] is back, life stories told through rap/Niggaz actin like I sold you crack/Like I told you sell drugs; no, Hov did that so hopefully you won’t have to go through that.” However, with the rise of artists like Dewayne “Lil Wayne” Carter, the remorseful edge to crack rap is disappearing and many young people are not being told of the consequences that go along with a life of crime: “I know it’s crazy but I can’t get enough baby. I love it. I fuckin love it. I’m a self-made millionaire fuck the public.” (“Money on My Mind,” *Carter II* 2005).

Another aspect of crack rap in particular and gangsta rap in general is the slow detrition of Beck’s notion of authenticity. That is, the theme in Beck, Carter and others who not only depict the lives of “street nigger” but recount their own experiences with street culture is slowly giving way to artist who not only discuss the “street nigger” but position themselves as actual members of the “street nigger” culture when, in fact, they have never experienced this life for themselves. Take the artist William “Rick Ross” Roberts who is one of the most popular crack rap artists to enter the hip-hop industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Roberts, a graduate from Albany State University and former Florida corrections officer adopted the name and persona “Rick Ross” from the legendary California drug kingpin “Freeway” Ricky Ross. In 2010 Ricky Ross filed a lawsuit against Roberts arguing that the rapper never entered the American justice system on drug related charges prior to becoming a rapper, and used his name and persona for financial gain.<sup>78</sup> Roberts repeatedly claimed that his life as a drug dealer was an accurate portrayal. He even denied having served in law enforcement until the watchdog group *The Smoking Gun* published payroll records and a photo to substantiate Robert’s employment with the Florida department of corrections. Nonetheless, Roberts continues to produce crack rap records and continues to be one of the most successful “crack rappers” in the business.

Finally, the hip hop collective known as Odd Future who’s most popular artists Frank Ocean, an New Orleans transplant living in Los Angeles, and Natassia “Kreayshawn” Zolot, a third-generation Russian American, have changed the meaning and trajectory of crack rap in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For Frank Ocean, his work explores the “culture of crack” from the vantage point of a drug abuser. Unlike most crack rap which depicts “crackheads,” as drug users are frequently called, as disheveled pariahs within the culture of crack, Ocean romanticizes his use of cocaine in his underground hit “Novocain:” “Sink full of dishes, pacing in the kitchen, cocaine for breakfast, yikes! This is some visionary shit. Novocain, Novocain, Novocain, Novocain, Novocain. Numb the pain, numb the pain, numb the pain, numb the pain, numb the pain.” On the other hand, his band mate, Zolot, decides to take the “culture of crack” which in the 1980s was solidified in the American conscious as a distinctively poor urban black male phenomenon, into the suburbs. While Zolot does not claim to sell crack cocaine, she does use the same methods to push her suburban “work:” “Gnarly, radical, *on the block* I’m magical. See me at your college campus baggie full of Adderall. You know I keep that *work* in my trunk. Got my hand on the pump if you wanna press your luck” [emphasis added]. All of these new voices in the crack rap genre are certainly changing the meaning and trajectory of gangsta rap’s resistant and emancipatory acts.

Despite these new complications in understanding gangsta rap music, crack rap continues to be indispensable in accessing the crucial, if unsettling, political character of the “street nigger” because it enlists the discourses of violence, accumulation, sexuality, and place so often used to justify the economic marginalization and social dislocation of poor African American communities, in order to insure black agency and acquiring substantial monetary profits in the process (Quinn 2005.). To be sure, crack rap is decidedly misogynistic, homophobic, obscene, divisive, and sensationalistic. It can be damaging to the



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lives of the very inner city youths to which it proclaims its loyalty. Many gangsta rap artists not only reify the very criminal acts and discourses that result in high levels of incarceration, but also espouse worldviews that are deeply harmful to women, gays and lesbians, and a host of other minority and marginalized groups. The genre is also notoriously vulnerable to appropriation by white audiences, many of whom turn to gangsta rap's portrayal of black men to support racial stereotypes (LaGrone 2000). Thus, to say that the crack/cocaine economy—whether literal or rhetorical—constitutes political practice is not to say that it is *good* political practice. Yet, it is equally important to resist the temptation to dismiss crack rap based on its problematic characteristics. We should, rather, adhere to the advice of historian Robin D.G. Kelley:

[It] would be a mistake to dismiss gangsta rap and other genres of hip-hop as useless creations of the marketplace. If we want to know the political climate among urban youth, we should still listen to the music and, most importantly, to the young people who fill the deadened, congested spaces of the city with these sonic forces. (Kelley 1994, 225. Kelley, Robin D.G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.)

Similarly, I believe that if we are truly to understand the literary responses to racial and economic exploitation in the United States, we must interrogate the numerous dichotomies of crack rap which has positioned race and class at the center of American capitalism. In doing so, we may just learn what valuable emancipatory acts lie within the criminal act and its accompanying literary expressions, and begin asking how we might articulate such potential to a broader emancipatory project that can confront not only racial and economic exploitation, but the very social structures that enable them.

## CHAPTER IV

### “YARDIE,” OR THE POSTCOLONIAL “STREET NIGGER” IDENTITY

It is not a far-reaching claim to insist that the trope of the “street nigger” in African American literature and culture—the popular depictions of young black men engaged in violence and criminal acts as a way to survive, both physically and emotionally—in fact is the expression of a postcolonial existence. Street literature, rap music, and hip-hop culture are predominantly African American, urban phenomena specific to racial and economic oppression in the U.S. However, both popular African American literature and culture are tied inextricably to the history of current African diasporic practices in terms of their postcolonial elements. For example, depictions of violent resistance in popular African American culture have important connections to contemporary decolonizing texts throughout the African diaspora, particularly with the expressions coming from postcolonial spaces such as Jamaican dancehall and British “yardie fiction,”<sup>79</sup> both of which have become popular sites of black male opposition and defiance for some of the most disenfranchised communities. Therefore, I argue that the “street nigger” hero is particularly valuable to scholars wishing to examine the interconnectivity of the many postcolonial and emancipatory acts, especially those of young and violent black men living throughout the African diaspora. Furthermore, I

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<sup>79</sup> The “yardie novel” is a gritty narrative about a black youth culture that originated in the “yards” or ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica’s Trench Town neighborhoods and spread across the British metropolis. The pace of the novel is set to the rhythms of Jamaica’s dancehall culture, American gangsta rap lyrics, and London’s underground “grime” set which is a fast-paced fusion of hip-hop, jungle and heavy-base music. More importantly, writers of yardie fiction set out to offer a window into the lives of the African diaspora’s most contemporary postcolonial subjects.

argue that popular black literatures, specifically those that address issues of crime and violence among black male youths, highlight common defiant and oppositional practices among postcolonial subjects. I read these common practices as the formation of an African diasporic identity. Thus, this chapter will examine those connections through a comparative reading of American “street nigger” culture and British yardie culture. In this chapter, I also present Victor Headley’s *Yardie* as a case study of a popular cultural text that relies on expressions common among not only poor and young African Americans, but among expatriated Jamaican men, and a variety of other minority populations living in England as well.

A number of important questions guide this chapter. Chief among them are the following: What are the connections between popular cultural expressions of black male violence—such as street literature, yardie fiction, rap music, and dancehall—the African diaspora and postcolonialism? How are we to understand popular productions of violent black male cultures as a common and/or unifying aspect of the African diaspora? Might the popularity of violent black male identities such as the “street nigger” trope and the yardie trope be considered a form of revolutionary postcolonial intervention? That is to say, are both of these popular literary and cultural tropes actively engaged in the discussion of decolonization and resistance to forms of imperialism that affect every sector of the globe? Thus, the crux of this chapter pivots on a relationship between defiant-black-male-youth cultures, postcolonial theory and a theory of the African diaspora.

I begin with a comparative reading of hip-hop and dancehall culture, two popular cultural productions used to reconfigure relationships of power among black male youths in Jamaica, England, and the United States. Next, I explore the diasporic implication of a black identity based in yardie and street culture. By interrogating the African diaspora's tendency to both affirm and disrupt a unified black identity, I explain how popular black male culture forms transnational alliances built around a common relationship with and resistance to ideologies based in racial and class discrimination. Next, I situate my discussion of popular black male cultural productions in postcolonial discourses on the issue of subjectivity and representation as a way both to highlight the field's tendency to silence oppressed groups, and to address the resilience of marginalized voices. Finally, I conclude with a reading of the novel *Yardie*, by Victor Headley. I argue that *Yardie* not only points out similarities and differences between oppositional acts among young black men living in Jamaica, the U. K., and the U. S. *Yardie* also presents black youth culture, particularly criminal acts among Jamaican immigrants in London and the U. S., as an important site for postcolonial critique. In other words, I show how *Yardie*'s narrative of postcolonial migrations, working class life, and underworld crime in London illustrate the intersection between popular and postcolonial culture as a way to address issues of identity, subjectivity, and representation. As a popular work, written with the intent to reach a large and underrepresented readership, Headley complicates notions about popular fiction and challenges established literary representations of West Indian immigrants. *Yardie* focuses on the realities of a subculture that mainstream society does not know very well,

or worst, ignores completely. As a postcolonial text, *Yardie* challenges conceptions about Jamaican immigrant identity seen through the prism of mainstream cultural institutions such as the criminal justice system and media. Headley disarticulates postcolonial subjectivity by illustrating the determination of Jamaica's criminal underclass in search of material wealth in metropolis London.

In *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, Russell A. Potter discusses the historical links between the popular cultural productions of black male defiance and opposition in American ghettos and similar cultural productions that define yardie culture in Jamaica and in inner-city England. "Yardie" is a term generally referring to Jamaican immigrants living in England who routinely commit violent crimes. The term originated in the West Kingston, Jamaican "government yards" of Trenchtown. Trenchtown is known for its high levels of poverty, crime, and gang violence. Due in large part to its use by the British media, "yardie culture" came to describe the escalation of violent and criminal behavior in and around London's black neighborhoods, particularly black communities in Brixton, Harlesden, Stonbridge, Hackney and Tottenham. In the United States, particularly in areas of New York City and Miami where there is a large Caribbean immigrant population, yardies describe any member of the English-speaking Caribbean community (Howe 14).

In both yardie and "street nigger" cultures, music—namely hip-hop and dancehall—plays an important role for young and poor black men to comment on the injustices of economic and racial marginalization. For instance, Potter argues that,

What is less often noted is the strong similarity between the rhetorical and narrative conventions of ska and reggae [both precursors to dancehall] with those of hip-hop. Of particular significance is the early ‘rude boy’ style, which glorified the angry, young, tough-living kids of West Kingston; there are striking similarities both cultural and musical between the ‘rude boy’ of ska and the ‘gangstas’ of hip-hop (38).

In an earlier work, Dick Hebdige notes the dynamics that shape Jamaican reggae music and Rastafarian culture, both of which heavily influences oppositional expressions associated with “street nigger” culture in the U. S. and yardie youth culture in London, England. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* Hebdige explains:

Reggae, and the forms which had [preceded] it, had always alluded to these problems [of racial and class discrimination] obliquely.

Oppositional values had been mediated through a range of rebel archetypes: the rude boy, the gunfighter, the trickster, etc.—that remained firmly tied to the *particular* and tended to celebrate the *individual* status of revolt. With dub and heavy reggae, this rebellion was given a much wider currency: it was generalized and theorized. (37)

In this study, Hebdige describes how they stylizations of the “rude boy” were immortalized in ska and dancehall, as well as how Jamaican music and its celebration of the rebel was popularized by newly arrived migrants in London. Thus, violent Jamaican youths are either mimicked or supplanted in poor British communities. Black British youths are drawn to dancehall’s celebration of revolt, Rastafarian principles and an

ideology of radical resistance. Young black Britons' appeal for the yardie culture as a way to combat their relationship to oppression is similar to the political stylizations of "street nigger" heroics in the U. S.

It is worth noting that young Jamaican immigrants in England started to change reggae's message from narratives of lone rebel heroes to more community-based stories of collective-violent rebellion (Hebdige 39). As described in the previous chapter, hip-hop culture experiences an opposite trend—an initial group-oriented approach that changes, at least in the gangsta and "crack rap" genres, to reflect the lone rebel or small "gang" archetype. In the late 1990s, for instance, popular rap music moved away from an initial commitment to community-based lyrics, stories, and themes towards hyper-individualized narratives of criminal and sometimes nihilistic behavior.

Nonetheless, both the musical and cultural influences of yardie and "street nigger" figures share narratives of resistance through lyrics that are frequently violent and confrontational. Furthermore, the literature of "street nigger" and yardie culture—namely American street lit and the popular Black British genre known as "yardie fiction"—offer yet another fictional narrative of revolt by portraying both individual and collective violence with which their largely young, black inner-city audiences can identify and sympathize. Within these popular productions of black male culture, there is an obsession with both the individual and racially constructed national identities that attempt to define the self and a people in the postcolonial terms of race, nation, culture, and history. As discussed in works by Bryant (*Born in a Mighty Bad Land*) and Grand Farred ("The Postcolonial Chickens Come Home to Roost: How Yardie Has Created a

New Postcolonial Subaltern”), both cultural forms engage the postcolonial themes of individual subjectivity as well as collective racial identity. As such, both the “street nigger” and the yardie tropes raise the question of how an emphasis on and the popularity of cultures of black male opposition and revolutionary violence reveals both a postcolonial and diasporic consciousness.

When considering popular cultural productions of black male opposition as a postcolonial phenomenon, it becomes evident that a history of popular cultural practices, in varying degrees, addresses the lived conditions of the colonial and postcolonial experience. In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Paul Gilroy outlines colonial and postcolonial history as it plays out in the popular music and youth cultures of Jamaica, England, and the United States. Gilroy argues that the Jamaican dancehalls, which originated in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the popular youth culture that surrounds and infiltrates this space, are sites of anticolonial resistance and represents an active search for a national as well as diasporic identity. In his book, *Caribbean Folklore: A Handbook*, Donald R. Hill defines the Jamaican dancehall as “a space for the cultural creation and dissemination of symbols and ideologies that reflect the lived realities of its adherents, particularly those from the inner cities of Jamaica” (71). In other words, the dancehall culture provides a physical space for dancehall deejays and their audiences to become the agents of their own cultural, social, and political representation, and radically reconfigure relationships of power.<sup>80</sup> Jamaican disc

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<sup>80</sup> For more on Jamaican dancehall culture see Hope 2004, 2006, 2009, 2010; Stewart 2002; and Stanley-Niaah 2007.



jockeys who organize dance parties around their bass-thumping sound systems frequently use improvised and spontaneous oral deliveries to compliment the music, and thus create a highly valued sense of intimacy with their audience giving these partygoers as well as themselves an opportunity for social, cultural, and political autonomy. The Jamaican dancehall culture interweaves religious principles with economic advancement; it emphasizes the public validation of the body; there is also an emphasis on not being mainstream or standardized, as well as on personal adaptability and fluidity (Stewart 17-28). The cultural concepts of the dancehall speak to a generation of Jamaican youths who systematically are cut off from the political, economic, and social forces that circulate, infiltrate, and determine their lives. Additionally, spontaneous oral performances are an important part of the dancehall culture. The dancehall deejay makes it possible for his or her audience to claim the mostly imported popular musical recordings as their own.

The idea that oral performances, particularly the deejays' rhythmic rhyming styles, are an important part of the musical experience is certainly on display in hip-hop, where rap vocalists are as important as the deejay, if not more so (*There Ain't No Black* 192-193). In fact, Tricia Rose's seminal 1994 work, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, offers an account of hip-hop's transnational beginnings in the Bronx borough of New York City. Rose describes how Clive "DJ Kool Here" Campbell, a young Jamaican immigrant who is belied to have started hip-hop's musical culture, set up massive audio speakers he dubbed "the herculords" on 1520 Sedgwick Avenue for his Bronx community. Campbell brought over dancehall

deejay techniques from Jamaica, such as spinning records backwards to repeat specific beats and created a foundational musical style in hip-hop known as the “breakbeat.” Campbell’s turntables were as crucial to the music as the musicians who originally composed these songs. More importantly, however, Campbell introduces hip-hop culture as a new form of cultural opposition and defiance that speaks to many poor and young American blacks in much the same way dancehall culture resonates with poor Jamaicans and black Londoners. By way of Jamaican-youth-music culture, the hip-hop generation was born (Rose 34-41).

Speaking about both U. S. and Jamaican popular youth culture and music, Gilroy argues that “public performance of recorded music is primary in both reggae and soul variants of the culture. In both, records become raw material for spontaneous performances of cultural creation in which the DJ and the MC or toaster who introduces each disc or sequence of discs, emerge as the principal agents in dialogic rituals of active and celebratory consumption” (*There Ain’t No Black* 164). In this sense, the dancehall culture allows for the DJ or MC to function as a kind of social actor, just as the gangsta rapper functions as an organic intellectual for the hip-hop community. Jamaica’s expressive dancehall culture is similar to hip-hop culture in that both represent a moment in which social actors articulate an alternative space of active cultural production, where mainly poor black people project and perform a distinct identity in both national and global contexts. In such a cultural space as the dancehall, or “the streets” in hip-hop culture, poor urban youths struggle to articulate their experiences with poverty, racism, and violence, creating transnational sites of communication that have the potential to

disrupt mainstream societies prevailing hegemonic structures and to create new alliances among disenfranchised groups across the globe (Stolzoff 14-15).

Gilroy's description of popular black youth culture and music across the diaspora comprises a kind of cultural map of communication between Jamaica, England, and the U. S. that proves beneficial for this postcolonial and diasporic reading of "street nigger" identity formations in popular yardie culture and literature. Clearly, however, the cultural and historical context of Jamaica, England, and the U. S. dramatically determines the types of popular expressions and forms that are specific to each location's respective histories and each group's unique experiences with oppression. Furthermore, this paper does not suppose that other disenfranchised groups from histories and traditions outside of the African diaspora are not engaged in cultural expressions of violence, resistance and opposition. However, out of Gilroy's popular cultural and musical map of the African diaspora emerges a clearly evident and common aesthetic—both rhetorical and expressive—of radical resistance and emancipatory acts, which speak to the forms of oppression specific to people of African descent, and imposed by economic and cultural imperialism across the globe.

For example, throughout the African diaspora, young black people routinely turn to popular music as a way to address colonial subjectivity, postcolonial subjectivity, economic, and political oppression, social/racial marginalization, and other subjugated experiences. Furthermore, black youths see the manipulation of both music aesthetics and musical technology as a symbolic and practical reconfiguration of power. (Indeed, jazz and blues musicians were some of the first modern artists to manipulated sounds

with the “blue note,” as well as when they “plugged in” their instruments to amplifiers and synthesizers in the 1930s and then again in the 1950s and 1960s. The tradition of “musical politics” continues with reggae, dancehall, hip-hop, and “grime.”) Moreover, popular black youth expressions in Jamaica, the U. S., and England often depicts violence and crime, not as celebratory nihilism, but as metaphors for emancipatory and political practices. By highlighting the contemporary history of black Jamaican, British, and American youth music, Gilroy frames the postcolonial context of popular cultural practices among black men living in the West. Through popular productions of black masculinity, violent youth culture becomes a point of encounter where “street niggers,” yardies, and other displaced and disenfranchised African descendants collaborate and exchange ideas on race, class, and gender within an organized, relatable, and understandable framework. These sometimes explicit, but more often intuitive, transnational alliances constitute a diaspora in practice. That is to say, Gilroy’s transnational mapping of black youth musical practices and his triangular matrix of cultural forms allows for the linking of similar decolonizing narratives that address the basic need for autonomy and agency in constructing collective as well as individual subjectivities and identities in black communities.

The overlapping worldviews in both “street nigger” and “yardie” culture is clearly reflected in young and poor black people’s expressive responses to life in an often racially antagonist mainstream metropolis. The previous chapter outlined American “street nigger” cultural practices during the last decades of the twentieth century when urban centers such as New York and Los Angeles experienced systematic

economic neglect and political disenfranchisement. During this same period, poor black communities in England also experienced a form of urban neglect, although they grappled with a unique and historical set of adversities, such as immigration and labor reform that constitute their oppression. Nevertheless, both groups use, for example, the 1990s crack/cocaine economy, not only as an important component in young black men's radical resistance, but also as an opportunity to intervene in the politics of race, class, and gender.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the public perception of British national identity defined as a diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic *mélange*. The most contemporary rhetoric surrounding Britain's national identity, which celebrated a multicultural admixture of cosmopolitan people, was undoubtedly a counter-response to blatantly racist, anti-immigration, political rhetoric, and public policies enacted during Margaret Thatcher's tenure as England's Prime Minister. This new definition of Britain's national identity was also a condemnation of Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech, which emboldened the far right's mission to curtail the rise of black and Asian immigrant populations (Ian R. G. Spencer 143). More importantly, a growing, upwardly-mobile black middle class, as well as a generation of young people, both minorities and whites who were determined to establish a more progressive definition of "Englishness," began to dramatically impact and alter public policies, economic markets, and the general makeup of racial/social relationships.

Nonetheless, young and poor black British men, much like their African American counterparts, continue to represent a cultural pariahdom, particularly when

influential white conservatives such as John Brown and even black liberal-minded critics like Darcus Howe<sup>81</sup> castigate “yardies” as black nihilists when discussing issues concerning race, class, gender, and national belonging (Hall et al. 245). For example, cultural critics such as Hall, Gilroy, and Horace Campbell all refer to Brown whose 1977 police report *Shades of Grey* documents the link between the rise in muggings and the growing influence of Rastafarian culture (which translates into “yardie culture”) among black youth in poor working class neighborhoods. Campbell notes that Brown’s exposé describes how police officers unaccustomed to Rasta attire might recognize the red, green, and gold clothes, “woolen hats,” and dreadlocked hair of potential muggers (Campbell 192). *Shades of Grey*, in effect, stigmatizes black youth culture and demarcates any cultural stylizations of the yardie as a mark of criminality. Also addressing the issue of yardies and criminality, Howe publicly reprimands the directors of X-Press, which is responsible for publishing two top-selling yardie novels, *Yardie* and *Cop Killer*. On an episode of his television show *Devil’s Advocate*, which aired on October 8, 1994, Howe attacked his two guests, Dotun Adebayo and Steve Pope, for what he describes as poorly written novels that damage the black community by perpetuating stereotypes of youth criminality. In the show’s opening, Howe says “In South London last year there were over five hundred gun crimes, many of them drug-

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<sup>81</sup> In his 1999 article, “The Yardie was Invented by White Journalists,” social critic and journalist Darcus Howe takes on the issue of race, crime, and the “invention” of an epidemic of black male violence in the British metropolis. In his article, Howe argues that yardies are “a figment of white journalists’ imagination.” His aim is to detach the term Yardie from acts of violence by black youths, insisting that such demarcations should only be ascribed to Jamaican immigrants who commit crimes. Howe downplays the significance “yardie culture” has in the lives of young black people who are attracted to these violent acts of rebellion. As such, Howe misreads the yardie as a creation born from the fears of mainstream society rather than an autonomous force prescribed by the kinds of racial and class oppression people face across ethnic classes.

related and most involving young black men both as perpetrators and as victims.... The black community is currently struggling to deal with the conflicting emotions they feel about this deadly situation” (Loretta Collins 70). By aligning his dismay over the state of nihilism in inner-city black London with his repudiation of “yardie fiction,” Howe blurs the line between lived and fictional events, indicting X-Press for constructing and popularizing a cognitive map of the British metropolis as an embattled zone in which amoral Jamaican posse soldiers and their fictional counterparts pose equal menace to national security.

The influx of drugs into British inner-cities during the late 1980s and 1990s (much like the crack cocaine epidemic that struck U. S. cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami during the same period) perpetuated by the rise in Jamaican drug trade gang members entering the country certainly heightened the national attention and moral panic surrounding the image of the violent black yardie. As Howe notes in his broadcast however, many poor black observers of the yardie’s often-nihilistic rebellion, see this “postcolonial street nigger” as an intriguing dichotomy much like what the “gangsta” rapper presents for young urban African American youths. On the one hand, the perception of yardies as a deviant who can virtually be any or all black men seems to engulf an entire generation of young people and stigmatize them with a mark of criminality. Yardies, although consistently identified as Jamaican-descended men, have a strong politicized sense of the general history of Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian immigration in postwar Britain. As such, many of the yardie’s cultural practices rely on a multicultural history with imperial Britain. On the other hand, many young black

people, particularly British-born blacks, see the “yardie culture’s” obsession with accumulating wealth and material goods “by any means necessary” as justifiably striking back at hegemonic global capitalist structures. In other words, many young black men see that yardies effectively operate autonomous, powerful, internationalized economic networks, and systems of self-reliance (Loretta Collins 77). The latter perception of “yardie culture” certainly has its appeal for a community routinely blocked from economic, social, and political opportunities. In fact, according to cultural commentators Geoff Small and John Davison, the chief concern for British authorities is the possibility that “yardie culture” will entice large numbers of black inner-city youth who, because of economic deprivation, are “vulnerable to the contaminating moral influences of the ruthless, lawless Jamaicans” (Loretta Collins 76-77)<sup>82</sup>. As contemporary criminal superstars, yardies find power in their position as, even if only symbolically, the most deadly, mysterious, and sinister elements facing off with the police, public official, authority figures, and other agents of mainstream ruling class interests.

The most influential force in popularizing contemporary cultures of black male violence for disenfranchised black youths in Britain is popular cultural productions such as dancehall, rap music, and popular fiction that dramatize the image of the yardie already heightened in the mainstream consciousness. Much like the “street nigger” in the imagination of mainstream black and white Americans across the U. S., the yardie

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<sup>82</sup> See John Davison’s *Gangsta: The Sinister Spread of Yardie Gun Culture* and Geoff Small’s *Ruthless: The Global Rise of the Yardies*.



functions as a cultural trope through which mainstream anxieties about the instability of racial, gendered, and class restrictions are realized. However, while the music and literature that either reflects, or reinforces the radical politics of “street niggers” and yardies share a frame of reference, it is important to address the differences between the popular cultural productions of yardies and “street niggers.” These differences are most vivid when examining the relationship between American street lit and Britain’s yardie fiction.

While the “streets” comprise the physical and metaphorical space in which American street lit writers illustrate young black men’s confrontation with mainstream U. S. society, the dancehall plays an important role in yardie fiction and serves as the troubled site where Black British youths intervene in the discourse on black male representation and criminality. The Jamaican dancehall, transplanted to the London ghettos, allows Black British youths access to a public forum where they can express the global reality of racial and economic marginalization. As Victor Headley explains, dancehalls fulfill an important function for black people. In *Yardie* he writes, “They were by and large, the only news medium available to the masses ... [Sound] systems kept everyone informed of the latest developments both on the national and international scene” (51). Dancehall music and culture does not simply promote crime and violence as a means of economic and social liberation. Relying heavily on reggae and rocksteady traditions from the 1960s and 1970s that focus on a “rude boy” heroic figure, dancehall culture’s underlying dialectic is the conflict between radical acts of liberation and messages that mourn fratricidal gun violence (Loretta Collins 71-72). In yardie fiction,

the Jamaican dancehall culture signifies young black men's resistance to the forces of state authority and the police, as well as their complicated relationship to other poor black people and the black community as a whole.

For Black British writers such as Headley, Donald Gorgon (*Cop Killer*), Laurie Gunst (*Born Fi' Dead*), Courttia Newland (*The Scholar*) and Diran Adebayo (*Some Kind of Black*), the dancehall is where young black men construct their response to the pressures of global imperialism, urban England, poverty, ghetto survival, and violence as well as to the sociological and economic impact of the transnational politics of the drug trade. However, yardie novels are not confined to a single geographic location in that the experiences of young black people reach far beyond the cityscape of England's black neighborhoods. As the Caribbean, Canada and parts of the U. S. figure significantly in the underground economies of global capital, yardie novels such as Headley's *Yardie* and Gunst's *Born Fi' Dead* attempt to capture these transnational circuits of illegal trafficking. In the aforementioned novels for instance, the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica, is positioned geographically as a point of exchange for South American drug traffickers and their North America and European consumers. For the yardie living in England, Jamaica is positioned uniquely in discourses not only about drug trades and about gangs, but national-belonging and racial identity. These young black men's economic as well as cultural and historical relationship to the island figures prominently in many popular literary productions where the dancehall stands in for the transnational rhythms of "yardie culture."

A vastly popular musical form in Britain, dancehall culture is appreciated by an audience far removed from the ghettos of West Kingston, the geographical site where dancehall culture derives its narratives, meaning and dynamics. Yardie fiction borrows from dancehall culture as a way to engage critically the history of Caribbean and sometimes African and Asian immigration to England. Yardie fiction, in which the trope of the yardie embodies or manifests the conflicting messages of dancehall culture and music (such as the paradox in which socio-cultural liberation coexist with misogyny or homophobia) offers insightful analyses on race relations and societal transformations. Yardie fiction's ability to analyze effectively social, economic and racial inequality is a credit to writers observing and illustrating dancehall culture. However, the lived experiences of poor black people in Britain also relies on a literary tradition that springs from anticolonial and postcolonial literature, all of which is immersed in both American Black Nationalism as well as Rastafarian culture and Jamaican popular music, from heavy reggae to ragga and jungle (Loretta Collins 73). Furthermore, popular literary productions of violent black male cultures in Britain have a clearly defined lineage that begins with the thematic concerns of early post-Empire Windrush Black British writers, such as Sam Selvon and George Lamming, who are staples of black Caribbean and British writing (Petithomme 35).

Selvon and Lamming published *Lonely Londoners* and *The Emigrants*, respectively, a few years after the Empire Windrush's historic docking in 1948. Both early Caribbean authors took up the task of articulating the daily struggles of the postwar, pre-independence generation. Cultural, political, and economic marginalization

from the center of metropolis life, resourcefulness, economic resilience, and a sometimes antagonistic, but more often comforting sense of community was the thematic landscape for early black British writing. Additionally, the work of Selvon and Lamming focuses on the early Caribbean immigrant's ambivalent longing for "home"—a place to which the author's protagonists cannot retreat and from which they cannot completely distance themselves psychologically (Farred 293). However, while Lamming, Selvon, and Andrew Salkey, whose novel *The Adventures of Catullus Kelly* dealt with the first wave of Caribbean immigration in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, record the experiences of loneliness in exile, immigration backlash, and the formation of intraracial groups and ethnic divides among the various Caribbean identities, yardie novels address a generation of youths whose parents remember and pass down their experiences as immigrants to their children who in turn interpret and recast those histories for themselves (Loretta Collins 74). For yardie novels, which represents the second and third generations of Caribbean immigrants who have resolved to make England their home despite persistent elements of racism and antagonisms from the British mainstream, themes such as loneliness and exile remain an important part of constructing the experiences of poor immigrant groups. Nonetheless, yardie fiction illustrates this new generation's desire to succeed in England, rather than the longing for home, which is a dominant theme in earlier black British literature.

Mirroring the antagonistic relationship between poor urban black men and the U. S. mainstream, late 1990s Britain was not necessarily hospitable to black immigrant youth culture. However, Stuart Hall points out, black Britons have "turned marginality

into a very creative art form—a life form” (qtd. in Gates, “Black London” 196). Contemporary black British authors such as Caryl Phillips and Joan Riley—both of whom are recognized by mainstream literary critics and consequently write for a readership very different from yardie fiction’s literary audience—and first-generation intellectuals such as Hall have dealt with issues of marginality. However, yardie fiction writers approach these issues in relationship to Gilroy’s triangular map of communication. That is to say, yardie fiction recognizes how blacks expatriated to England always negotiate and mediate their lives via their relationship to other poor black people living in Kingston, Jamaica, or in Miami, Florida, or the Bronx, New York. Yardie fiction recognizes that, “while the cargo is distinctly different,” the cost in human life is not so dissimilar from that of other marginalized communities (Farred 294).

Part of what is at stake in yardie fiction is revealing the similarities in urban territory, economic viability, and the freedom of cultural expression across the globe. Indeed, Gilroy’s transnational mapping of black youth musical practices and his triangular matrix of cultural forms allows for the linking of similar anticolonial and decolonizing narratives such as popular black fiction’s illustrations of reactionary violence, cultural nihilism, Black Nationalism and corrective organizations which, too, address black communities’ basic need for autonomy and agency in the construction of collective as well as individual subjectivities and identities. Popular cultural productions across the African diaspora such as gangsta rap music and popular-fiction comprise the most important sites for cultural critique among poor and disenfranchised black people, not just in the U. S. but in many other parts of the globe as well. Such a claim requires a

brief theoretical digression in order to situate popular black literature within discourses surrounding the African diaspora, as well as literary postcolonial studies.

The term *diaspora* originated in historical and cultural contexts outside the continent of Africa. Jewish and Greek historians were the first to utilize the term. *Diaspora* is the Greek word for “dispersal,” and its most common usage has been to describe the movements of Jewish people throughout the West. While scholars began discussing the dispersal of Africans throughout the West in the early twentieth-century, the term “African diaspora” clearly emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. The dispersal of African people has historically served as both a political and analytical paradigm in scholarly debates. Scholars such as George Shepperson, Edward Blyden, Aubrey Bennett, and G. L. Watson discuss dispersal within a political frame as a way to emphasize the resilience of African cultural traits that have stood against the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. Scholars such as Jacob Drachler, St. Clair Drake, W. E. B. Du Bois, John P. Henderson and Harry A. Reed, Martin L. Kilson and Robert I. Rotberg, Vincent Thompson, and Robert Weisbord talk about dispersal analytically when addressing black communities across national boundaries.<sup>83</sup> Much of this scholarship examines the displacement of people of African descent, their role in the transformation and creation of new cultures, institutions, and ideas outside of Africa, and the problems of building pan-African movements across the globe (Patterson & Kelly 14). While their work emphasizes dispersal and African cultural “survivals” in the West—the

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<sup>83</sup> Shepperson 1982; W. W. Brown 1876; Blyden 1967, 1971; Bennett & Watson 1989; Drachler 1975; Drake 1987, 1990; Du Bois 1947; Henderson & Reed 1989; Kilson & Rotberg 1976; Thompson 1987; Weisbord 1973.

retention of African cultural forms such as language, religious practices and music despite efforts by Western imperialist to eradicate these cultural expressions—my diasporic reading of popular black male cultures of violence highlights the creation and reproduction of a particular black male diasporic identity. In other words, the use of defiance and opposition might be understood as a universal response to the oppression of black people around the globe. While I use “street nigger” and yardie cultures to contextualize historically a specific diasporic identity, I recognize the vast differences between nations as well as the different relationships black people have to the African diaspora. Nonetheless, James Clifford’s reading of the African diaspora offers a useful observation regarding popular productions of defiant black male cultures as a consistent diasporic response to racial oppression. Specifically, Clifford’s argument that the African diaspora highlights a common culture with particular historical roots despite differences in languages, cultures, and histories allows me to show how black male cultures of defiant opposition can be read not as remnants of a tradition brought over from Africa, but as a universal condition created out of the trauma of African/New World contact (249-51).

The earliest explorations of the African diaspora attempted to show that much of African culture, particular the cultures of West and Central Africa, remained intact despite the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. For instance, Sir Harry Johnston’s anthropological book, *The Negro in the New World*, explored African influences in the lives of New World black peoples. In 1916, Fernando Ortíz documented the profound impact of Africa on Cuban culture with a particular focus on music, dance, and religious

practices. Johnston, Ortíz and the many scholars that followed emphasized continuity in their study of the African diaspora. Conversely, their works were challenged by scholars such as Sidney Mintz, Richard Price, and others who highlighted discontinuity within the African diaspora, arguing that the transatlantic slave trade created a process of forced cultural continuity shaped by the context of “cultural contact.” They rejected the notion of a singular African culture and placed greater emphasis on the emergence of new and distinct black cultures (Patterson & Kelly 15-16). The dialectic between unity and disjuncture constitutes the major debate circulating discourses on the African diaspora. For example, anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits’ work helped to shape how African Americans in the United States were viewed and how they viewed themselves. In the 1930s, he challenged the idea that black American culture was a pathological version of mainstream white American culture, and claimed that elements of African culture, in fact, had survived in the Americas. His work supported the New Negro Movement and the emergence of pan-African identity. During this same period, E. Franklin Frazier released *The Negro Family in the United States*, which is a comprehensive study of the family life of African Americans beginning with colonial-era slavery, extending through the years of slavery and emancipation, the impact of Jim Crow and migrations to both southern and northern cities in the twentieth century. While Frazier discusses many themes including matriarchy and patriarchy, the impact of slavery on family solidarity and personal identity, the impact of long-term poverty and lack of access to education, migration and rootlessness, and the relationship between family and community, his primary argument is that the characteristics of the black family are not shaped by race, as



Herskovits suggests, but rather, by social conditions, which, in effect, challenges the pursuit of a Pan-African identity.

The idea of a unified global black culture continues to be, or at least complicated, by a number of contemporary scholars such as Brent Hayes Edwards who read the African diaspora as a site of cultural hybridity and difference. These scholars stress an anti-essentialist reading of the African diaspora, such as the notion of African “survivals,” and argue that an emphasis on similarities and cultural continuities threatens to ignore the various ways different cultures respond to similar historical conditions based in specific traditions and cultural hybridity. More specifically, these scholars argue that the African diaspora highlights the various ways people of African descent respond to issues such as global imperialism and colonization. Such an approach to the African diaspora raises a number of questions concerning the ability to read popular cultures of defiance and opposition as a relatively consistent response to oppression across the African diaspora. In particular, Edwards’ book *The Practice of Diaspora*, in which he emphasizes discontinuity through his “translation” of transatlantic conversation between francophone and Anglophone intellectuals as well as their inability to form a coherent “black internationalism,” provides a valuable entry into the discussion of popular culture and the African diaspora.

*The Practice of Diaspora* is an exhaustive study that stakes out the “‘silenced’ genealogy of Négritude through the transnational intellectual circuits of African American and Caribbean women” between the first and second World Wars (Edwards 122). More specifically, *The Practice of Diaspora* is a study of conversations and

correspondents between francophone intellectuals in the Caribbean and Africa, such as Paulette and Jane Nardal, Rene Maran, Tiemeko Garan Kouyate, and Koyo Tovalou Houenon, and leading African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, and James Weldon Johnson. Edwards also notes the contributions of Anglophone Caribbean figures such as author Claude McKay and political activist Marcus Garvey. Edwards' "practice of diaspora" is a literal and theoretical translation of these transatlantic conversations and literatures. Through an excavation of these encounters, Edwards defines "diaspora" as a paradox of unity and disjuncture. *The Practice of Diaspora* echoes a number of concerns Edwards presented in his earlier article "The Uses of Diaspora," which examines the history of "diaspora's" emergence within black scholarly discourse, making connections and disconnections between the Pan-Africanist movement and Négritude. Edwards also examines the term's use in contemporary Black British cultural studies as well as its future implications of theorizing the diaspora in black scholarship. At the center of Edwards' argument is the notion of difference that is integral to the formation of the African diaspora and, at the same time, its most productive analytical potential. Furthermore, Edwards argues that the dynamic of difference that constitutes the diaspora's most relevant feature can only be understood through translation. Translation is symptomatic of necessary divergences, as well as points of linkage, contestation, and communication that construct any relation that might be articulated as diasporic. As Edwards contends,

If a discourse of diaspora articulates difference, then one must consider the status of that difference—not just linguistic differences but, more

broadly, the traces or the residue, perhaps of what resists translation or what sometimes cannot help refusing translations across the boundaries of language, class, gender, sexuality, religion, the nation-state. (*Practice of Diaspora* 13)

Here, Edwards argues that a translation of diasporic literatures reveals a difference that disarticulates any notion of an uncontested unified culture of blackness. Edwards suggests that the black intellectuals at the center of his study shared many diasporic experiences such as African ancestry, slavery and continuing racial oppression. However, the difficulties these Francophone and Anglophone intellectuals encountered when communicating their different historical and cultural experiences with racial oppression proved to be insurmountable. Thus, Edwards' "practice of diaspora" is a disarticulation of blackness that creates what he describes as "artificial" racial solidarities (14).

In *Practice of Diaspora*, "translation" functions as a literal practice for Edwards, who examines the multilingual terrain between Harlem and Paris:

The cultures of black internationalism can be seen only *in translation*. It is not possible to take up the question of "diaspora" without taking account of the fact that the great majority of peoples of African descent do not speak or write in English. . . . [O]ne can approach such a project only by attending to the ways that discourses of internationalism *travel*, the ways they are translated, disseminated, reformulated, and debated in transnational contexts marked by difference. (7)

For Edwards the African diaspora is always already in a state of instability. The diaspora is compiled of multicultural histories, subjectivities and identities.<sup>84</sup> More importantly, he finds that those histories, subjectivities and identities are complicated by a basic difference in language and meaning. Edwards argues that a unified African diaspora is forestalled because “blackness” is nearly impossible to translate. In other words, meaning is not only lost, but also made in translation. From Edwards’ argument, one could infer that “blackness,” even when spoken in the same language, resists and depends on translation because it is based in specific subjectivities and defined by a particular history and tradition.

What is particularly useful about the concept of diaspora that emerges in Edwards’ works is a provocative notion of diaspora as *décalage* that he develops in the final pages of his essay and revisits in the prologue of his book. Borrowing from Négritude poet Leopold Senghor, Edwards employs *décalage* to engage differences among and between black communities as a necessary and inevitable negotiation of a kind of “gap” or “discrepancy” between them. Edwards argues for an analysis of diaspora that considers difference as always involving inherently complex moments of *décalage* that structure relations among communities in diaspora. He concludes,

[D]écalage is the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water. It is a changing core of difference; it is the work of

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<sup>84</sup> Edwards’ previous work, “The Uses of Diaspora” (2001), sets the stage for his desire in this book to intervene in contemporary discussions of diaspora in black studies by asserting the historical intractability of differences among and within various African-descended intellectual and cultural communities.

“differences within unity.” ... [*D*]écalage is proper to the structure of diasporic “racial” formation, and its return in the form of *disarticulation*—the points of misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation—must be considered a necessary haunting.... [P]aradoxically, it is exactly such a haunting gap or discrepancy that allows the African diaspora to “step” and “move” in various articulations. (*Practice of Diaspora* 14)

*Décalage* helps me explain what happens when we align the cultural and literary trope of “street nigger” against that of the “yardie.” Edwards’ theory allows, for example, a re-reading of the relationship between poor urban black men and the crack/cocaine economy. While functioning as an ironic critique of capitalism among African American men, drug crimes function as sites of postcolonial intervention among Caribbean immigrant men who must exist in multiple countries and negotiate two or more underworlds. While contemporary illustrations of the “street nigger” trope describe characters interacting with “the Cubans” or “the Columbians,” these relationships are primarily transactional rather than trans-cultural. Contrarily, the trope of the yardie frequently illustrates having to physically occupy, “learn,” and survive in spaces outside the “home.” Thus, the “home” becomes a metaphor for the yardie’s more difficult past and, possibly, his future return as a successful “don” or drug lord. Thus, *décalage* allows me to discuss what is disabled or enabled when examining popular productions of violent black male culture as a potentially unified response to global oppression.

Stuart Hall's influential essay "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980), presents a useful interpretation of "articulation" that supports Edwards' understanding of the way *décalage* functions within the African diaspora. For Hall, articulation not only reveals differences within identities, but also expresses how these differences intersect with other identities in a larger structure of racial, national and class unity (Stephens 105). Hall describes "articulation" as follows:

The scientific analysis of any social formation depends on the correct grasping of its principle of articulation: the "fits" between different instances, different periods and epochs, indeed different periodicities, e.g., times, histories. The same principle is applied, not only synchronically, between instances and periodizations within any "moment" of a structure, but also, diachronically, between different "moments." ("Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance" 326)

By relying on both Edwards' articulation of *décalage* and Hall's understanding of articulation, I read popular productions of black male violence as a single emancipatory act across time and space as well as within a particular historical moment. Furthermore, Edwards and Hall allow me to argue that literary illustrations of the "street nigger" trope, whether in the U. S., the Caribbean, or England, are part of an ongoing discourse of liberation within the African diaspora.

My presumption that the various popular cultural productions of black male violence—namely "street nigger" culture in inner-cities across the U. S. and yardie

culture in Jamaica and England—share a common expression of an often messy and nihilistic vision of anti-imperialism and racial freedom is largely based in each culture’s use of poor black youth’s creative and expressive responses to their subjugated positionality. While keeping in mind that diasporic and postcolonial identities and subjectivities are culturally and historically determined, produced and reproduced, and that any sense of a collective identity among black people in the U. S., Jamaica, and England is conditional and oscillating, it is precisely out of the historical struggle to resist domination across the globe that a concept of a unified or collective black consciousness or identity emerges alongside, or even in the face of discourses about difference and discontinuity (Patterson & Kelly 19). In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” Hall writes about this paradoxical conception of diasporic identity:

The first position defines cultural identity in terms of, shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self,” hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves,” which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect their common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people,” with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. (223)

Hall goes on to argue the importance of addressing similarities within the African diaspora when engaged in anticolonial and pan-Africanist projects. Thus, “imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the

history of all enforced diasporas” is fundamentally counterhegemonic to the imperial project of diaspora (Hall 1989, 224). In an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, Hall again revisits his concept of “articulations,” which further helps us understand the underlying connection between communities that may experience oppression in distinctly different ways:

An articulation is thus the form of connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called “unit” of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary “belongingness.” The “unit” which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. (Grossberg 141).

From the perspective of Hall’s articulation theory, my “practice of diaspora” links previously un-articulated and separate identities in order to develop a unity via the articulation of a racial identity in the context of contemporary defiance practices in the face of imperialism. Thus, in the process of articulating black masculinity in the context of opposition to political, social and economic oppression—i.e. the struggle for political, social and economic autonomy through violent revolution—racial identity is culturally agreed on in an ongoing process of disarticulation and re-articulation. I understand



identities to mean social practices, ideological positions, discursive statements, or social groups. Therefore, the trope of the “street nigger” or yardie is also a functioning, common, and potentially unifying ideological position, social practice, or social group.

Nevertheless, we must remember that as the articulation theory examines acts of defiant opposition as a means for subjugated peoples to gain power, it also serves as a mechanism for making explicit the areas of contention between competing discourses. In the process of defining blackness, there is often a debate between the overlapping areas of the two practices of racial identity. However, as Lisa Brock has powerfully argued, “If we shape our thinking about Africa Diaspora as but one international circle with a history and map of consciousness ... that overlap and coexist with other circles and worldviews ... we begin to better understand today’s world and the concomitant consciousness evolved among peoples commonly drawn into it” (10). Popular cultures of black male violence poignantly draw out these overlapping circles and worldviews, and offer an opportunity to observe radically new, and under-examined, cultural and emancipatory alliances, as well as common acts of decolonization.

Victor Headley’s novel *Yardie* offers the first and, perhaps, most provocative use of the “street nigger” trope in British literature. Using the expressive culture of inner city black youths from Jamaica, the U. S., and London, Headley complicates the notion of representation and offers a different view of the postcolonial black experience. *Yardie* shows how the determination of its protagonist, Don “D,” a British immigrant from the Kingston “yards” of Jamaica, presents a new racial identity and postcolonial subjectivity. Headley frames his characters with the violent, “rude boy” stylizations of

the yardie in order to speak for, engage, and give a public voice and face to a new, often-ignored generation of black youths. Indeed, *Yardie* represents a crucial literary breakthrough as it illustrates the difficult economic experiences of young black people living in metropolis London. More importantly, Headley's novel is an important attempt at invoking Spivak's concern for subaltern voices. Influenced by the changing nature of identity and subjectivity in the context of global expansion and information technology, as well as the growth of consumer culture, *Yardie* not only changes the landscape for popular literature, it also compels an investigation of issues such as representation, deracination, drugs and violence, and oppositional practices.

Kingston-born author, Headley published his first novel, *Yardie*, in 1992 with the help of his two partners, Steve Pope and Dotun Adebayo. Reportedly, the three men printed and distributed the book for less than \$3000 through a small publishing house they established called X Press. Their primary intent in publishing *Yardie*, as well as the other yardie novels that followed, was to represent a new kind of postcolonial black male identity, frequently seen through the prism of mainstream society as threatening to both black and white British ways of life (Farred 292). Thus, *Yardie* attempts to define, often in romantic terms, contemporary postcolonial subjectivity as young, poor and confrontational black men engaged in crime, violence, and cultural nihilism as a way to survive in the West.

Headley and his partners also wanted "yardie fiction," as it is now called, to (re)shape the black reading public in Britain by investing in the types of characters

young and poor inner city black Britons would recognize. Describing the literary implications of *Yardie* among working-class consumers, Gary Younge argues that

The main strength of Headley's writing is that it is accessible to the bulk of its readership: the young, black, urban working class. It refers to the music they listen to, and to places Londoners, at least, visit, and much of the dialogue is in Jamaican patios—a language that many of them speak. For a community whose experience is either undervalued, or documented only by white people for the consumption of other white people, the attraction of this cannot be underestimated. (Younge T8)

It is precisely because the yardie's profile is so recognizable that *Yardie* leaped to the top of the bestsellers list in 1992. Although the yardie's roots are in the overcrowded Jamaican shanties of the 1960s, its association to defiant black men in general exploded between the late-1980s and early-2000s due to the British media's obsession with calling any black gang related crime as "yardie" related, despite the fact that most of the reports were about British born blacks. Thus, readers who sympathize with defiant acts of opposition are inclined to celebrate "yardie culture." *Yardie* capitalizes on the yardie's recognition as a global figure marked by the onslaught of crack in inner cities across London in the 1980s and nineties, much like gangsta rap in the 1990s.

Like gangsta rap, yardie fiction's most reductive and problematic instances allow critics such as Darcus Howe, Ivan Dunne, and Mike Phillips to argue that *Yardie* simply embraces mainstream stereotypes of black masculinity, and worst, is simply bad writing. As Howe argues in his article, "The Yardie has been Invented by White Journalists"

(1999), “They dress in the very latest designer wear; they drive top-of-the-range vehicles; champagne is the favorite drink. Their lifestyle is not afforded by a nine-to-five job. The gun is the earner ... [Therefore] the inner city has to be transformed into a hive of creative activity, drawing the youth into a different social arena” (Howe 14). Dunne also condemns X-Press for what he calls its shameful and insensitive commercialization and even promotion of the kinds of violent cultural practices that have caused so many deaths in London inner cities, including the death of his own brother (Collins 71). Phillips’ scathing critique of Headley argues that the novel is based on the “pretense of authenticity.” For Howe, Dunn and Phillips, there is a real concern that yardie narratives such as Headley’s, which focus on everything from domestic violence to drug trafficking, only reinforce longstanding negative stereotypes of black immigrant populations in England. Through Headley’s illustrations of black youths who are quickly transmuted from petty, knife-carrying drug dealers into metropolitan, gun-toting drug lords—a metamorphosis Howe describes as a “change in technology”—*Yardie*’s black men seem to justify these more conservative viewpoints.

Headley admits that *Yardie* was originally conceived as what S. Craig Watkins has described as a “ghetto action film,” which accounts for the novel’s short, sharp scenes. It is this attention to visual detail as much as the portrayal of a marginal world of violence, which has attracted attention to *Yardie* (Petithomme 41). As such, the reader comes to know yardie organizations, gang culture, international drug dealing networks, and the London underworld through characters that are thinly drawn. Unlike later yardie novels such as *Cop Killer* (1994) by Donald Gorgon, *The Scholar* (1997) by Courtia

Newland and *Some Kind of Black* (1997) by Diran Adebayo, *Yardie*'s protagonist experiences very little, if any, philosophical development or moral growth throughout the novel. For example, *The Scholar*'s main character, Corey, a tough-spirited, second-generation-Jamaican-immigrant, and self-proclaimed yardie ultimately rejects a life of drugs, violent crime, and easy wealth for his pursuit of education and familial stability. In *Some Kind of Black*, Adebayo's protagonist, Dele, is a young, street-smart black man who, although an Oxford University graduate, shifts and switches between his middle-class background and London's yardie underworld of drugs and sexual exploitation. Finally, Gorgon's *Cop Killer* dramatizes the very real and antagonist relationship between yardies and the police frequently played out on television and in the press during the 1990s. Gorgon attempts to justify the criminal motivations of his main character, Lloyd Baker, by contextualizing his murderous killing spree as an act of revenge for the wrongful death of his mother after police inspectors mistakenly raid her home expecting to find drugs. In each instance, the reader is able to divorce each protagonist from the trope of the yardie as configured in the minds of mainstream society. In other words, Corey, Dele and Lloyd are ultimately antithetical to the perpetual criminality of yardie culture. Furthermore, Newland, Adebayo and Gorgon seem to be more frank than Headley in their rejection of the yardies' radical acts of defiance. However, *Yardie*'s shallow portrayal of the yardie's psychological motivations not only serves to make for an even more chilling account of inner city violence, it also functions as a commentary on a generation of young and poor people whose identities are frequently conceived at the periphery of mainstream society. For

example, Headley illustrates the antagonistic relationship between underworld yardie competitors as completely amoral and indicative of the culture's increasingly nihilistic behavior:

The high proportion of newly arrived Jamaican youths in the area had adversely affected the local hustlers; the competition was now tougher. Furthermore, the newcomers didn't operate by the same principles as their UK counterparts. They were totally ruthless; they didn't respect the established hierarchy, and were not prepared to allow anything like friendship or allegiances stand in their way. They were hungry, and wanted money. Lots of it, and now. As a result, in the last five years, the atmosphere in the area had become more tense, even more volatile, than before. The use of violence in settling "trade" disputes had now become common practice. (27)

Headley illustrates many of the same motivations influencing the decision-making process for young and poor black males struggling in American inner-city ghettos. Even the language is familiar: "They were hungry, and wanted money. Lots of it, and now." Indeed, popular "crack rapper" Dewayne "Lil Wayne" Carter makes a similar claim on his underground hit "Tha Mobb" (2005) when he said, "I'm hungry like I didn't eat. I want it like I didn't see a mill[ion] before seventeen." However, unlike underworld economies in the U. S. where the ebb and flow of violence is less determined by foreign competition than by local attempts at monopolization, the yardie who travels to England for a better life dramatically alters an already "tense" and "volatile" black underclass

community. In other words, the novel functions as both an illustration of mainstream stereotypes, as well as a point of entrée to a larger debate about violence, drugs and the devastation of the periphery and the metropolitan inner city. *Yardie* seemingly plays upon mainstream society's lack of attention to black people in poverty, while simultaneously correcting the condition of critical neglect and underrepresentation.

In its keenest instantiation, *Yardie* turns on the issue of representation. That is to say, yardie fiction is concerned with the rights of yardies to “represent” themselves fully and accurately. Headley's novel moves beyond an initial concern with black nihilism, juvenile delinquents, and gun-toting drug dealers. Instead, it is concerned with rethinking the several consequences—cultural, economic, political, and otherwise—of this unrepresented postcolonial underworld. While it would certainly be accurate to translate yardies as “gangsters” in the Black American youth cultural sense of the term, that would miss the very postcolonial point. In other words, *Yardie* compels an investigation of drugs and violence in the context of deracination, which raises questions about the subaltern's place in a postcolonial world by refusing to sentimentalize or emolliate illicit aspects of black London. Furthermore, *Yardie* explains the global implication of why young black men become drug dealers not by condemning their lifestyle, but by investigating the narrow economic opportunities available to them. In a sense, Headley's characters, which border on poorly imagined ciphers, are not indicative of the author's concern with the individual character of the yardie as with his attention to the yardie's career choice, and the personal and social costs of the profession.

*Yardie* tells the story of “D”—shorten from Don—a tough, drug-dealing illegal immigrant from Kingston, Jamaica who sets out to conquer London’s underground criminal society. The reader is first introduced to D as he arrives at Heathrow Airport acting as a courier for a drug syndicate. In this sense, *Yardie* recasts, more or less, the same tale of West Indian immigrants arriving and settling in Britain. D’s arrival is a modern take on the theme of “arrival” played out in many Black British narratives.<sup>85</sup> More specifically, Headley’s opening passage recalls the first scene in Sam Selvon’s *Lonely Londoners* (1956) when the latter’s protagonist Moses, a Trinidadian living in one of London’s poor and isolated Caribbean-immigrant communities, promises to meet a newly arrived immigrant at Waterloo, a port for ships carrying immigrant from the West Indies. The ship port is a site of mixed emotions for London’s immigrant community: “For the old Waterloo is a place of arrival and departure, is a place where you see people crying goodbye and kissing welcome ...” (Selvon 4). Selvon goes on to illustrate the “arriving” West Indian immigrants as a group ill prepared for a life of struggle and uncertainty in the cold and lonely metropolis: “the test [or newly arrived immigrant] have on a old grey tropical suit and a pair of watchekong and no overcoat or muffler or gloves or anything for the cold ...” (12). *The Lonely Londoners* ultimately

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<sup>85</sup> We see the theme of arrival throughout Black British writing. Most writers are struck by the sharp contrasts between England and their “home” in the Caribbean, Africa or Asia. For the Caribbean writing about “arrival,” they often illustrate characters that are taken off guard by England’s cold weather, the “bigness” of the metropolis space, and the absence of their former ways of life and leisure. For more examples of Black British authors writing about arrival, see poems by John Lyons (“Passage Home”), Amryl Johnson (“Fear of Knowledge”), Merle Collins (“Tottenham”), P. Vincent Magombe (“Caged.../Indifference”), or fiction by Véronique Tadjo (*Images of Exile*), and Patrick Wilmot (*The Train to Walthamsrow*).



illustrates an early Caribbean immigrant community, loosely tethered together by their struggle to overcome, more or less, Britain's cold and isolating urban environment.

Headley novel sets out to modernize the theme of "arrival" and the struggle to survive by giving his protagonist a plan more clearly defined than that of early Caribbean migrants looking for work in London.

Like in *The Lonely Londoners*, total strangers who have been instructed to greet him upon his arrival meet D. However, the two novels are strikingly different in every other aspect of the concept of "arrival." For example, while Selvon describes West Indian immigrants as ill prepared for metropolis life, D arrives in London with a kilo of cocaine strapped to his abdomen and a plan to escape with at least half the cargo.

Shortly after the members of the Jamaican/U. S. /London drug syndicate D works for welcome him at the airport, he is swept away in a blue Mercedes Benz. Not only is D propelled into the materialist culture of the crack/cocaine economic system, he is also entering the country illegally using false documents. Perhaps unwittingly, Headley's illustration of D's arrival highlights the yardie smuggler's manipulation of liberal arguments over immigration rules. In his book, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (2003), Sukhdev Sandhu references the Jamaican yardie's method of obtaining a U. K. passport in order to circumvent the U. S.'s restrictive border controls and enter the country. In the novel D's activities are part of a network that stretches from London back to Jamaica via New York and Miami. Shortly after his arrival, D manages to slip away with half the consignment and sets himself up in business as a cocaine and crack wholesaler around London. The gang he has cheated

have put out a contract on his life and among scenes of drug dealing and consuming, rape, knife fights and shoot outs, D rises to become a top “yardie” on the London scene.

What sets *Yardie* apart from its predecessors such as *The Lonely Londoners*, or perhaps earlier works like *Voyage in the Dark* by Jean Rhys, and *The Emigrants* by George Lamming, is that while the novel notes the culture and traditions that Caribbean immigrants brought with them to the U. K. in the 1950s and sixties, those experiences are dramatically remodeled by the next generation whose circumstances have been changed by global/economic exploitation, drug trafficking, and the increase in violent crimes, all of which seem to be either ignored or not fully addressed by mainstream society. As England began to rebuild after the destruction of the Second World War, many British companies began to exploit the nations unrestricted immigration policies for former colonized peoples, taking full advantage of the influx of cheap labor to satisfy a growing number of jobs in certain sectors of the economy. Between 1950 and 1965, the West Indian population increased to 850,000, accounting for 2% of the total population. By 1992, the year *Yardie* was published, 45% of the non-white population was born in Britain and 33% of these numbers were under the age of 16. It is in this environment of generational change that Headley attempts to illustrate the economic and social reality for young and poor black people living in Britain. *Yardie* reflects the four decades that separate Headley’s novel from Lamming, Naipaul and Selvon, and represents a period of drastic economic and social change not only in Britain but also for the rest of the world.

In the first chapter of the novel, D is described as a dreamer who, since childhood, has wished to escape the economic and socially repressive environment of downtown Kingston. *Yardie* describes black migrants from the Caribbean diaspora who demonstrate a deep desire to be somewhere other than where they are. Unlike post-Empire Windrush Afro-Saxon writing, where the “home” is the thematic backdrop for deracination and its discontents in black Caribbean fiction, *Yardie* recasts the Jamaican ghetto as a space that is not only physically dangerous and socially depleting but also physically uninhabitable as well. This is the postcolonial that black Jamaicans want to leave behind. More importantly, Headley reveals that for many young Jamaican men suffering in Kingston’s ghettos, an escape to Britain, Canada or the U. S. is their best, if not only, opportunity for prosperity: “From school days in the poverty-stricken areas of downtown, dreaming of the big life he heard about from those who managed to reach America, Canada, or England. He had waited for his break for years. The break out of the dusty, hungry streets and into the bright lights of big cities with their flashy cars and large houses” (6). Just as Christopher Wallace illustrates the American Dream as overcoming ghetto poverty in the song “Juicy,” Headley too associates the “yardie’s” desire to escape ghetto poverty to a “dream” of prosperity forged in the Western metropolis. For a young and poor Jamaican boy, the U. S., Canada and England symbolize social and economic liberation. More importantly, however, Headley is describing a life defined by materialistic wealth.

The readers most drawn to *Yardie* and yardie fiction are of a generation where consumer culture drives capitalists’ earnings. Thus, they may be more able to recognize

and are more accepting of the motivations driving D than previous generations whose racial identity and subjectivity constitutes the complicated and historical relation between postcolonial independence and the nation-state. Contrarily, yardies—a new generation of black youths born after independence—does not feel the same indebtedness to the metropolis. According to Headley, this generation’s only concern is for the consumption of material wealth like expensive cloths, cars and jewelry, all of which distinguishes them from their parents who represent a poor and struggling immigrant class.

When seen through the prism of American “street nigger” culture, Headley’s articulations of black male identity and subjectivity forged by materialism involves a slight *décalage* in the lives of young and poor inner-city blacks across the globe. Clearly, the yardie and American “street nigger” tropes share similar examples of radical practices that suggest crime, particularly black men’s involvement in the crack/cocaine economy, constitutes a potentially successful opportunity to improve their lives. However, the “street nigger” and yardie figures reach a point of divergence when examining the spatial site of these radical emancipatory acts. For example, inner-city housing, which is frequently lamented in street literature and American rap music, is not such a bad place to live in D’s opinion: “The dwellings didn’t look new and the stairways and corridors were far from clean, but it was a long way from certain areas of West Kingston. This is what peoples called ‘a poor area’ in England, D reflected. It wasn’t that bad” (20). “For anyone coming from a poor background in Kingston’s

tenements, England, no matter how tight things were getting, was still a more comfortable environment to live in” (27).<sup>86</sup>

Despite these unique postcolonial dynamics, it does not take long for D to acquire the flashy symbols of financial success after he reaches England. The speed at which D is able to rise in the ranks of local drug lords mimics the fast-paced dancehall culture and hip-hop music to which he frequently listens. One could also argue that the Headley, Adebayo and Pope developed their company name, X-Press, to pay homage to the fast-paced culture of inner city black youths. Indeed, the yardie figure is portrayed as a product of black youth music culture and thus, roots reggae, ragga and even hip-hop have, for decades, foreshadowed the preeminence of poor black people willing to use any means necessary to survive. Yardies are a cultural nod toward the “street nigger’s” commitment to “livin’ large.” D drives a Mercedes Benzes and wears expensive cloths while the most insidious ragga and rap songs thump from his car stereo, all of which serve as the soundtrack to his very identity: “The lyrics coming from D’s cassette were rooted in . . . basic topics. The connection to the present state of the ghetto social, or rather anti-social, life, the violence and the drugs, wasn’t hard to make. MCs . . . carried the swing [rhythm] and the substance of their lyrics had fast become the dogmas all dancehall ravers lived by” (52). The “basic topics” of crime and violence are all too

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<sup>86</sup> Additionally for the American “street nigger” figure, social and economic autonomy can be achieved within his own community, in the inner-city ghetto where he lives and seemingly knows well. Beck has said “I view the [American] ghetto as a savagely familiar place . . . I am convinced that for me it was the only place where I could discover and keep an awareness of who I really am and where I could find my purpose as a . . . nigger in this criminal society” (Beck 1971, 217). The “street nigger” has the ability to see the “bright lights” outside his own window. The “yardie,” however, must negotiate new and unfamiliar spaces, such as metropolis England, the U.S., or Canada, in order to prosper. Such negotiation certainly requires a level of radical improvisation that heightens the tense relationship between these newly arrived young black men and the already established codes of the metropolis underworld.

familiar, not only to D, but to a generation of black men fighting to leave the ghetto. The music reinforces their existing emotional state, and provides the incentive to “keep it moving.”

Similar to the death-bound-subjectivity of the American “street nigger” who must face the threat of death within his own community, D is a postcolonial, or even postmodern, businessperson who is fully aware of the risks he takes and the potentially brutal fates that await him. Just as journalists, such as Howe, and police reports, such as Brown’s “Shades of Grey,” have stressed the yardie’s preference for instant wealth and the stylish clothes and cars that come along with it, Headley’s almost stereotypical illustration of yardie culture emphasizes the reasons why D is posturing, costuming, acquiring and displaying the visibility of material successes that a mainstream corporate executive might be able to afford, as well as the speed at which he is able to attain these items:

As a prosperous businessman, D had invested in his image and bought himself an almost new green Mercedes coupe. Several tailor-made suits, silk shirts, trousers, and expensive soft-leather shoes completed his style and made him one of the sharpest dressers in town. As a final compulsory touch, he had completed his look with an extensive range of expensive gold jewelry. *For a newly arrived immigrant, he looked like a million dollars.* Understandably, he had become an *instant* celebrity in his new area, as much for his style as for his seemingly endless supply of crack. He had acquired a considerable following amongst the ghetto youth,

eager to work for this new don and reap rich rewards [my emphasis].

(44)

This passage indicates that D establishes his business as a high visible, celebratory, status-forming enterprise, which reclaims and reassigns the material trappings of middle class corporate success as the trophies of the poor black underclass. While Headley's illustration of D is largely one-dimensional, leaving very little opportunity to gauge the psychological motivations behind the yardie's desire for material access, one could certainly align this passage with similar descriptions in Beck's *Pimp* in which Iceberg Slim associates his stylizations of the "street nigger" trope with personal empowerment: "I would see myself gigantic and powerful like God Almighty. My cloths would glow. My suits were spun-gold shot through with precious stones. My shoes would be dazzling silver ... Beautiful whores with piteous eyes groveled at my feet" (*Pimp* 55). Like Beck, Headley's portrait certainly suggests the powerful lure that these signs offer, validating the fear expressed in police documents and newspapers that Jamaican yardies will recruit large numbers of ghetto youth to join their call for a radical redistribution of wealth and reconfiguration of power. More importantly, however, I read the yardie's pursuit for material wealth as a way to establish a new racial identity and autonomous representations.

However, representation and identity are different narrative constructs. As Stuart Hall has argued, "Identity is a narrative of the self; it's the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are" while representation, according to Said, is something that can never be exactly realistic (Hall, 1989 16; Said 21). In other words, while D struggles

to maintain a sense of his true identity under the immense pressures of poverty and despair, he is forced to conform in several ways to the sensationalist representations of yardie criminals produced in public discourse such as hip-hop music and dancehall culture. The cultural and historical contexts that constitute the yardie's identity emerge in a series of flashbacks about D's brother, conversations the protagonist has with the elder Rasta, Jah-Piper, as well as his morally upright girlfriend Donna. In these instances, Headley reveals the disjuncture between how the "yardie" performs the persona of the drug-dealing "street nigger," how others perceive him, and how his own sense of identity has been shaped by his historical relationship to race, class and gender issues. The yardie's consciousness is decidedly different from what Loretta Collins describes as a "ragamuffin consciousness," which functions as the "mediating force" between the self-destructive yardie and the oppressive authoritarian class. In her definition of the "ragamuffin," Collins argues that,

[They are] in their late twenties to early thirties (men or women), educated, informed and opinionated about the experiences of Caribbeans in Britain, aware of class division and economic issues, knowledgeable about historically black boroughs, urban renewal and conflicts with the state or police, and sometimes involved in community improvement or youth groups. Ragamuffins hang out in the dance halls and may smoke a little mind-clearing *sensi*; however, they are adamantly not involved in the drug trade and voice heavy criticism against the detrimental social impact of cocaine. (87)



Like most street literature, *Yardie* illustrates characters such as Jah-Jerry, Donna and Jah-Piper, whose specific roles are to present a counter-narrative in order to combat, not only the black communities imbalance relationship to mainstream society, but also the persistent nature of materialism, violence and cultural nihilism. Although this portrayal of the depressing and vicious madness of ghetto life is attended by a stark moral silence on the part of the author, there are counterweights within the story. In American street literature, these roles are often embodied in the illustrations of parents struggling to keep their families together, minister acting as stewards of a deteriorating community, or even pimps wishing to maintain the “ethics” of the underworld, as we see with Sweet Jones in Beck’s *Pimp*. For Headley, Rastafarians are positioned as wise spiritual leaders who serve as the conscious and self-actualizing mentors to a generation of young and often angry black men.<sup>87</sup> In *Yardie*, these characters are either killed by drug dealers who feel the Rasta’s presence disrupts their volatile illegal operations (Headley’s Rastafarians are constantly attempting to stop drug activities from ruining the communities in which they live) or simply ignored by a younger generation who has become disillusioned by their religious rhetoric, or frustrated by the lack of social change they frequently promise.

Rastafarianism’s sacramental use of marijuana, its socially conscious and self-empowering reggae music, as well as the philosophical hope for social change through

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<sup>87</sup> Rastafari is a denomination of the Christian religion that arose in Jamaica during the 1930s. There are a number of important tenets to Rastafarian philosophy: the rejection of western society often referred to as “Babylon”; the proclamation that Africa is the original birthplace of humankind; and repatriation to Africa. Rastafarians also embrace a Pan-African social and political philosophy, and rely on the teachings and writing of Marcus Garvey who is frequently viewed as a prophet. The spread of the Rastafarian movement across the globe can be attributed, in large part, to the commercial popularity of reggae music which employs Rasta ideas as a major theme. For more on the Rastafarian religion and philosophy see Joseph Owens’ *Dread, The Rastafarians of Jamaica* (1974).

spiritual redemption has been thwarted by the “crack generation’s” recreational use of “harder drugs,” the rebellious message of dancehall and hip-hop music culture, and radical acts of violent rebellion. Headley believes that since the 1990s young people have been more influenced by dancehall and hip-hop music’s violent lyrics than by the prior generation’s reggae music: “The Rasta movement was the dominant influence in the life of the island and every song that came out of the leading studies of the era expounded on the Bible, African history, or Black consciousness. But times had changed” (52). The implication here is that if young black men wish to escape poverty and the cycle of crime and violence, they will need to turn to Rastafarianism’s message of values, spirituality, self-improvement through training and education.

Rastafarianism provided a better role model for D’s brother, Jerry, who had “turned away from a future as a ranks and become a Rasta” when he was eighteen (38). Jerry, who was once an aspiring “yardie” in Jamaica’s Trench Town ghettos, attempted to break poverty’s hold on him by adopting the life and philosophy of the kind, conscious, socially committed Rasta brethren. He reasoned with other Rastafarian elders in his community, took a legit job as a mechanic, relocated to quiet neighborhood in Kingston away from the drug activity, to live with his wife and new baby daughter. Jerry also changed his approach to the community. As a young “yardie,” D’s brother was a ruthless as the any young man doing what was needed for fast wealth. However, as a beloved Rasta, Jerry assisted elderly neighbors, fed the hungry, and mentored the youths in his community by sponsoring woodwork, painting, and auto-mechanic workshops (Headley 37). He repeated the Pan-Africanist philosophies of Marcus Garvey

and often spoke about the achievements of black people throughout history, and he encouraged the youths who patronized his home to be intelligent and use their potential. As a young man not yet “poisoned,” as Beck would describe, by the life of a “yardie,” D adored his brother and might have been saved from the path he had chosen if his brother had lived. However, Jerry’s objection to drug activities of the “Spicer Posse” dealers who threatened to invade his quiet community would prove fatal. In the following passage, D recalls the consequences of Jerry’s commitment to Rastafarian principles:

True to his new life, Jerry was firmly opposed to the drug trafficking that had started to swamp Jamaica. Situated as it is between South America the producer and the United States the consumer, the island had quickly become a transit point for the cocaine trade. The Bahamas, the original stop-over, were too exposed by then, and covered by the US Drug Enforcement Agency. Cocaine offered the means of making big money, and a sure route to a better life in the States for thousands of Jamaican youths. Almost overnight, it became as readily available as the locally produced ganja.

To a God-loving, clean-living Rastaman like Jah Jerry, cocaine was a devilish invention, manufactured by the white man to maintain Black People in a state of mental slavery. It brought nothing but suffering and death. (96)

Jerry’s criticism of Jamaica’s role as the crack/cocaine “middle passage,” as it were, in an international drug marketplace, the effects cocaine addiction, and the violence of the

rapid emergence of the crack/cocaine economy in his community, particularly the effects drug dealing would have on ghetto youths, resulted in his violent death when he attempted to stop the Spicer Posse from invading his neighborhood. Headley uses Jerry to symbolize the Rastafarian religion's fledgling presence among Jamaican youths, as well as to contextualize the crack/cocaine economy's social conditioning of neocolonial Jamaica.

D's identity has been shaped not only by his status as a yardie drug lord, but also by his brother's Rastafarian idealism. The memory of his brother allows Piper, an older Rastafarian D meets when he arrives in England, to mentor the young "yardie" despite the extent to which he is involved in the crack/cocaine economy and influenced by material wealth. Like Jerry, Piper has contributed in many positive ways to his community while living in England, and has attempted to persuade an entire generation of young people to resist the urge for "yardie's" flash and glamor:

Piper was well known around town. He was old enough to be D's father. He had been in England for years . . . Piper had worked in the community for a long time, setting up projects to train young people in various crafts, teaching drumming and coaching football teams. He was loved and respected by all in the community as a man of deep faith and education. It was said that he had graduated from university many years before, and that his boundless knowledge extended to numerous disciplines. Piper had witnessed the development of the black community

over the last twenty years, being one of the first Dreads to come to England.

He mourns the senseless killings of young people, “Is like dem cyan wait fe kill someone. Any lickle t’ing, dem lick shot.” Piper blames the needless deaths of so many on vanity, “gold, money, drugs, even woman. Truly, man worse than beast.” (56-57)

Society is also to blame for enticing the youth with desires for superficial material wealth without teaching the value of love and hard work:

Me seh society spoil dem, because it show dem dat money is all dat matters. Yet at the same time, education is set up a way dat mek dem feel it is of no value to dem. Imagine, a youth see a man who have a criss car, jewellery, and nice clothes and him know seh is not work and education the man get it t’rough. You nah feel seh the youth will want to do the same t’ing dat man do fe get money? (58)

Piper rebukes D for his explanations of the need to turn to crime for profit. When D reminds Piper, “T’ings rough out deh, you know, Rasta,” Piper replies with the Biblical saying commonly heard in Rastafari philosophies and reggae music, “What good is it if a man gains the whole world and lose his own soul?” Although D does not heed the wisdom of the Rasta elder’s words, Piper’s commentary and Jerry’s analyses perform a social critique of neocolonial Jamaican and British society, the values promoted by global capitalism and popular culture, and the yardie or “street nigger” alternative for survival (Collins 80-86).

Headley contextualizes the violent and oppositional practices of youth culture by characterizing yardie in opposition not just to the previous generation of “elders,” but to black women as well. True to the nature of most street literature, the actions of black men are frequently measured against those of black women. In the case of *Yardie*, D is dismissive of the efforts his girlfriend, Donna, makes, urging the young man to “live by the book.” After fleeing with the drugs at the beginning of the novel D finds refuge with a former girlfriend after deciding not to turn to another friend because it would have been too obvious and too dangerous. She is a single mother who just barely makes ends meet by working two jobs:

You’re not hearing what I’m saying, D. Money don’t mean that much to me, I’ve been al’right up to now.

Doing al’right? D. smirked. You doing al’right, yes, but you have to get up at six every morning and do two jobs to earn enough. You can live better than that Donna, and without slaving. (46)

Just as Beck unreflectively gendered the “street nigger” in offering a patriarchal definition of “authentic blackness,” Headley articulates the lawless “yardie’s” masculinity against the women who serve as their cultural foils by representing the “model citizen.” From the “yardie’s” point of view, there is no way out of the ghetto other than the criminal path D stakes out. The men are not, as Donna suggests, economically attuned to the mode of employment in which the women are engaged. The women, of course, are left to raise the children as the promiscuous men lead dangerous lives, facing violent death or imprisonment on a daily basis. The men’s potentially fatal

jobs means that the women, patriarchally cast as working “homemakers,” have to fulfill the “law-abiding citizen” public transcript; the men can indulge their economic and cultural braggadocio because the women can be relied upon to maintain the domestic space. Brimming with machismo, cohabiting with a number of women simultaneously, men such as D reject any form of mundane labor as “slavery,” a term that remains heavily freighted in the Black British, Caribbean, and African American imaginary. D refuses to participate in the formal economy because this method of wage earning offers no hope for advancement or material acquisitions and luxuries; it is, for “yardies,” little more than indentured servitude, mindless labor that exploits an impoverished black community. The informal drug economy offers the best chance for employment, even though the fringe benefits are nonexistent, the working conditions are hazardous, and the life expectancy is low.

Certainly, D’s interactions with the Rasta figures and Donna, the only stable female figure in his life, suggests that Headley understands the yardie as something much like the American “street nigger.”<sup>88</sup> That is to say, the American “street nigger’s” identity, too, is complicated by how he identifies himself, how he wishes to be perceived by others, and how he is actually viewed or understood in mainstream society. Headley complicates the “yardie” lifestyle through condemnation while simultaneously validating popular cultures of black male violence by highlighting the systemic injustices black men face in metropolis society, and the damaging effects of global consumer networks

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<sup>88</sup> For more information, revisit my discussion of the “street nigger’s” *performative stance* outlined in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

on poor, inner city black communities. To be sure, Headley does not attempt to romanticize “yardie” culture; however, the international societies “yardies” invade clearly participate in a system of political, economic and cultural marginalization that encourages these “postcolonial chickens come *home* to roost” in the wealthiest metropolitan spaces, to borrow a phrase from Grant Farred.

*Yardie* outlines a biting honest explanation of why young black men living in neglected postcolonial spaces such as Kingston, Jamaica (for Headley, Jamaica stands in as the stigmatized symbol of unwanted black populations from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia living in England) are more eager than usual to take risks in order to secure their future (Farred 296). D’s decision to risk his life by becoming a “yardie” is shaped by his experiences in the Jamaican ghetto and the violence inflicted upon his family at a young age, particularly the death of his older brother, Jerry, a peace-loving Rastafarian. Just as Robert Beck points to economic and psychological determinism to explain Iceberg Slim’s nihilistic behavior, Headley describes D’ courage, not as a matter of principle, but as a result of economic and personal factors from childhood. The Jamaican slums is, from D’s point-of-view, a place where “you grow up poor . . . with no education, drugs is the only t’ing that will take you out of the trap” (7). As such, D must “invade” a mainstream metropolis location that offers the right opportunities not just for the economic and social stability he missed as a child, but profitability as well. Again, Headley’s yardies are described as “totally ruthless.” They are young angry black men who do not “respect the established hierarchy, and [are] not prepared to allow anything



like friendship or allegiance to stand in their way. They [are] hungry, and [want] money. Lots of it, and now” (27).

It is interesting to contextualize the arrival of the Yardie in British literature in terms of the contemporary status of Jamaicans in British society, public policy and policing, media representations, and popular culture. *Yardie*'s author, who seems highly aware of British press reportage of yardie criminal activities and Yardie Squad policing tactics, certainly employs some of the tropes of Jamaican criminality circulating in Britain and even in the U. S. at the time.<sup>89</sup> Although he portrays D as a ruthless drug lord, torturer, murderer and rapist, he does not glorify the life of a drug-dealing “yardie” for a young readership or criminalize black British society in general. The novel functions as a Rastafarian-influenced warning to Caribbean society, black Britons and the British society at large about the violent transformations in store for societies that do not find appropriate ways to fully enfranchise the youths of the current and future generations. D, in particular, represents the portion of young black men who face the struggle of economic and social isolation as well as the inescapable consequences of their radical actions. After decades of immigrant backlash and moderate social reform in England, the “yardie” is a new postcolonial subject who completely resists cultural assimilation and mainstream morals and values. Instead, the “yardie” attempts to import his culture of violence to England's metropolis. A product of neocolonial economic oppression, political disenfranchisement, and an imported consumer and gun culture,

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<sup>89</sup> In 1998 the film *Belly*, which featured American hip-hop artists in the lead roles as well as Jamaican dancehall artists in many supporting roles, was released to rave reviews by its hip-hop and dancehall audience. However, the film was largely panned or ignored by mainstream critics following a tradition of neglecting the marginal voices of black youth culture.

*Yardie* epitomize the popularity of black male deviance frequently exploited by television media outlets, music companies, and Hollywood.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

As I have demonstrated in the chapters that make up this dissertation, black male cultural practices of violent resistance can and should be understood as popular expressions of socio-economic politics. Popular black literature and music by writers and artists such as Robert Beck, Donald Goines, Shawn Carter, Tupac Shakur, Christopher Wallace, Courttia Newland, and Victor Headley demonstrate revolutionary violence's potential for successful social progression as well as problematic pitfalls in the struggle for political autonomy and cultural agency. Indeed, these writers and artists illustrate a community defined by a history of oppression, isolation, and marginalization in hopes of articulating the humanity of a generation of young black men who have been demarcated as criminal, dysfunctional, violent and self-destructive. Their recognition of the dynamics that surround the struggle over power and agency as articulated in the cultural practices and expressions of young and urban black men has become politically viable in the discussion of revolutionary violence. Indeed, popular productions of black male defiance have raised the question of how cultural representations of violence and defiant practices are emblematic of an oppositional politics that is compatible with social uplift in contemporary Black America.

Perhaps the answers can be found, as I have suggested, in considering the popularity and viability of the literary and cultural trope of the "street nigger" among poor urban black male youths. In the late 1960s and seventies, the "street nigger" hero

appears in the street novel that provided an opportunity for young black people to define themselves against the Civil Rights Movement's mainstream ideology that called for racial integration and cultural assimilation in hopes of achieving racial equality.

Borrowing from the rhetoric of the Black Power Movement, this new generation of black youths understood the "street nigger" trope as a refusal to accept dominant ideals that suggested they had to submit to an authoritarian society that refused to acknowledge the contributions of African Americans to American culture. Indeed, the 1960s street novel served as the manifesto for black men in particular who acted out their frustration with economic, racial and political terror in violent and highly visible ways. In light of the increased marginalization of black communities forced into urban isolations, 1960s and seventies street literature sought to illustrate a bleak future for black America by shedding a critical light on the social problems of their time. Characters like Iceberg Slim stood in for classes of people who struggle with particular forms of socio-political and economic inequality. He magnified disparities and inconsistencies in social class structures, racial and political ideologies and dominant cultural beliefs.

In the decades that followed the publications of street literature, violent and nihilistic narratives of gangsta rap music emerged, which borrowed from 1960s street literature in both style and substance. Street literature's dominant themes of death, crime, poverty and violence used to examine the politics of race, class, gender and sexuality are common to hip hop artists and audiences alike who are familiar with the way social and economic injustices inform black male identities and subjectivities. As I have argued, the street novel, namely Robert Beck's semi-autobiographical works *Pimp*

(1969) and *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (1971), has influenced either explicitly or implicitly the creative and ideological direction for gangsta rappers as evident in their use of the “street nigger” trope as a way to intervene in and comment on the condition of black communities. As economic disparities widen, urban communities continue to suffer decay, social programs become even more misguided, police supervision heightens, and incarceration rates increase, black youths of the hip-hop generation become the scapegoats for mainstream fears that fuel dominant racial stereotypes. Such circumstances create a moment where new systems of political discourse are formed and young black people begin articulating a shared racial and class identity, as well as a common relationships to social structures where new means of economic autonomy and political agency are realized. Thus, the gangsta rapper’s articulation of violent resistance and defiant opposition in the assertion of an authentic racial identity and masculinity specific to urban life saturates popular representation of young and poor black men. Such articulations have become tied intrinsically to popular cultural articulations and perceptions of black men.

By partaking in resistant politics of what I have called “street nigger” culture, producers of popular black culture create rhetorical strategies that are potentially emancipatory while simultaneously embedded within the commercial and consumerist logic of late capitalism. Thus, while the trope of the “street nigger” may fall short of providing the kinds of palpable means for a totalizing socio-economic change, it nonetheless employs a political strategy that is relevant to broader struggles for social, economic and political justice. That is, although the “street nigger” trope’s resistant

gestures are certainly conditioned by dominant racial stereotypes and hegemonic structures, it also allows for opposition and defiance to play a role in creating new class identifications and racial subjectivities. Such an observation suggests that black male resistance is something more than a manifestation of dominant racial discourses, but rather, a valuable tool in the reconfiguration of power.

Indeed, this study suggests that there is value in identifying agency and self-empowerment in popular expressions of revolutionary violence, opposition and defiance among poor urban black male youths. More specifically this dissertation's underlying arguments is that through the trope of the "street nigger," poor urban youths of color in general have the possibility of articulating a collective racial and class identity in order to produce and influence empowering political outcomes. In effect, the ultimate goal of this study is to urge scholars to reconsider the broad and expansive legacy of the "street nigger" trope in contemporary black popular culture, which stems back not only to Richard Wright's *Native Son* but also to the blues tradition as well as the heroic folk tales of the antebellum South. To be sure, the "street nigger" trope is an acknowledgment of the fundamental relationship between defiance and self-empowerment. Furthermore, this dissertation demonstrates the multiple ways in which constructions of cultures of revolutionary violence by black male writers and artists ultimately function as a vital dimension to identity and subjectivity.

While oppositional and defiant black male cultural practices are most often understood by social scientists and cultural critics as a rationale for rigid social control, the critical response embedded in the narratives presented in this study have the capacity

to influence social change. Rather than see revolutionary violence as simply self-destructive and dysfunctional, we need to examine more closely the context of racial and economic terror, which produces the kinds of defiant acts among poor urban black men, to understand their anger as an attempt to define a social consciousness and encourage action. The emancipatory impulses, which undergird these acts of resistance, might be understood as an organized and clearly defined struggle for freedom.

A new world will not be ushered in by the violent illustrations of popular artists and writers; however, recognizing such unsettling discourses connects an array of identities and subjectivities and may provide the foundation for a radically engaged criticism and viable emancipatory project. Thus, as we recall the legacy of the “street nigger” hero and look ahead to the future of the hip-hop generation, we would be wise not to dismiss the often nihilistic, hyper-masculine expression found in the popular texts of angry black youths; but rather celebrate and recognize within such fantasies a righteous indignation born of centuries of racial and economic oppression.

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