

**Biggie and Tupac: the battle for Thug king and the performance of thug-ness**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the ways in which rap music functions as a political platform for addressing racialized social structures within the United States. I examine how rap music can be seen a mechanism or means by which rappers, The Notorious B.I.G and Tupac, create ‘imagined’ kingdoms, using notions of family, rootedness, masculinity and space to assert themselves as authentic leaders. I identify the communal structure I refer to as the “Thug Nation,” and trace the ways it seeks to naturalize itself within the greater American nation. Following close readings of lyrics and interviews from both rappers, I trace the terms of an alternative political space in rap where the two men use cultural spaces and places to battle for ruler of the Thug Nation, while performing a specific form of masculinity I refer to as “thug-ness.”

The findings of the analysis conclude this political space within mainstream hip-hop is no longer a viable platform for marginalized people to create alternative political spaces where they can shed light on often racialized social and structural issues within the American inner cities.

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## **Introduction**

### **1.1. Why rap music?**

Rap music, situated in a hip-hop context, is a useful medium to illuminate the struggles and issues plaguing marginalized people. In the case of this examination, hip-hop is explored as a forum or mechanism for offering an alternative political space and the processes for asserting authenticity within a hip-hop context. I will explore how rap music is used as a mechanism or means through which a specific group of black, low income, inner city American (men) articulate a politics and assert themselves as imagined authentic leaders or kings of the “Thug Nation.” By looking at interviews and lyrics from the two rappers, The Notorious B.I.G, also known as Biggie, and 2pac, also referred to as Tupac, I will survey how rap functioned as a platform for establishing a sphere of leadership and authority that is articulated through spatial imagery. For Biggie and Tupac, the most well known contenders in the East Coast/West Coast hip-hop battle of the mid-1990’s, rap allowed for the creation of “imagined” kingdoms, kinship, territories, and naturalized leaders. This became a cultural space in which black men battled for primacy over the entire Thug Nation. By tracing this alternative political space, I hope to expose how these two rappers legitimated themselves as rightful rulers of the Thug Kingdom through themes of kinship, territory, and a particular performance of masculinity I call “thug-ness.”

## 1.2. Structure of the paper

After situating this research within the field of hip-hop studies, I will provide a brief overview of rap music and its relationship to hip-hop culture and afford a condensed version of how the East Coast/West Coast hip-hop battle began. I will not go in depth with this because the entire battle, even today, remains a “they said” vs. “they said” conundrum. The reason I chose to look specifically at Biggie and Tupac is because of their unprecedented associations as leaders of their respectful coasts. Biggie represented the East Coast, and Tupac the West Coast.

First I will align the Thug Nation with the notion of an “imagined community,” demonstrating how it is both sovereign and limited and dig further into the ideals of belonging in regards to location in specific spaces. I will argue the trope of the family, including the naturalization of its roles and hierarchies, is necessary in order for the Thug Nation to be articulated intelligibly and question current social structures. Then, I will provide close readings of lyrics and interviews to demonstrate the ways Biggie and Tupac lay claims to roots within their spaces to authenticate their standing as ruler. Also, I will compare their battle for leader of the Thug Nation with that of democratic presidential campaigns, to show how they aim to gain support in terms of “crews” to allow them to battle for territory and ultimately, ruler of the throne.

### 1.3. What scholars are saying about rap music in relation to space

The two most influential contributors to the study of hip-hop and its relationship to space are Tricia Rose and Murray Forman. Both locate hip-hop within specific urban locales and display the ways these spaces aid in shaping the identity of hip-hop. Tricia Rose provides great insight and research to the field of Hip-Hop Studies, providing extensive background on the roots of hip-hop culture and rap music and their political implications. She highlights rap's spatial ties to the 'postindustrial city,' "which provided the context for creative development among hip-hop's earliest innovators, shaping their cultural terrain, access to space, materials and education (1994, pg.34). She also tackled the tough question of what is *really* being said when mainstream media and public discourse on hip-hop is more often than not, essentializing and reflecting negatively on inner city, black communities (Rose, 2008). She recognizes the state of hip-hop is in crisis and starts a discussion of how that crisis can be eradicated.

Murray Forman, also contributes to the notion of space and place in rap music, highlighting the important role space plays "in organizing principles of value, meaning, and practice within hip hop culture." He explores "the prioritization of spatial practices and spatial discourses that form a basis of hip-hop culture"... offering "a means through which to view both the *ways* that spaces and places are constructed and the *kinds* of spaces or places that are constructed" (Forman 2000, pg. 66). Taking it one step further than Rose, Forman did not only identify the spatial saturation in hip-hop, but he discussed the specific kinds of spaces being constructed. He traced the gradual shift in the late



1980's in hip-hop that became more concerned with representing specific, moral local spaces ” (Forman 2000, pg. 66).

Both Rose and Forman provide critical research to the history of hip-hop and its relationship with space. What this analysis seeks to do however, is trace the specific rap battle of Biggie and Tupac, providing close readings of their lyrics and interviews, in order to understand *how* these two men made claims to space, which allowed them the opportunity to authenticate their masculine gender performance, in order to be considered ruler or leader of their spaces. This hip-hop platform steeped in ties to space, provided the men a means for offering an alternative political space for addressing the experiences of life lived in specific, urban settings. Also, I will highlight the political benefits of using the trope of the family in relation to the formation of the “Thug Nation,” a construction of black, inner city community aimed at naturalizing itself in positioning to its spatial ties.

#### **1.4. Where rap got its roots**

First emerging from the Bronx, in New York City, in the 1970's, rap music began as an expression of black youth culture located in American inner cities. Combining lyrical rhymes, spoken word, and electronic beats, “rap music as articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America” (Rose, 1994, pg. 2). Speaking with a voice of personal experience, rappers often maintain the role of a narrator or observer, often speaking from the “perspective of a young man who want

social status in a meaningful way” (Rose, 1994, pg. 2). The language, phrases and slang used in rap music are belonging to a hip-hop culture.

### **1.5 Biggie & Tupac**

From a generic view, the lives and careers of Biggie and Tupac could be interpreted as similar. Both men, both black, were born into inner city homes where their fathers had little to no presence in their lives. Both men, through their lyrics, paint a picture of the hardships they faced early on in life, with common themes including: growing up on the streets, selling drugs, and the difficulties of fighting to survive in the tough inner city. Both men rapped of similar experiences once they “made it in the game,” or became successful in the rap music industry: money and clothing, cars and guns, and sex and status. Both men even died the same way, killed by drive by shootings within 6 months of each other. So, why is then that these two rappers, which seem to have similar life experiences, construct their identities differently? Their coastal ties and spatial positioning serve as the distinct difference between both rappers life experiences and consequently, the ways they assert their leadership in regards to the Thug Nation. Biggie was a representative of the East coast, Bad Boy Entertainment (the label to which he was signed), and more specifically, Brooklyn, New York. Tupac on the other hand, was the symbol of the West coast, Death Row Records (his signing label) and Southern California, more precisely, the city of Compton. These ties to space, as the analysis will show, are crucial in authenticating their belonging to the Thug Nation and thus asserting their leadership within it.

## 1.6. The Battle Begins

The first signs of any East coast/ West coast rap feud can be traced back to 1991 when an East coast, Bronx rapper, Tim Dog, released *Fuck Compton*, a song referring to the N.W.A (Niggas with Attitude), a Compton, Los Angeles based rap group, dissing their street credibility by claiming they are not “tough.” In a 1991 interview, Dog said, “They’re [N.W.A] the typically manufactured gangsters that the industry throws out and blows up” (Bauder, 1991). John Shecter, one of the original editors of *Source*, one of the most popular rap magazines, said in 1991, that New York had been replaced as raps foreground by the West coast, more specifically, Los Angeles (Bauder, 1991). This ‘up rootedness’ of rap’s mecca can be understood as the launch of the coastal rap battle. However, nearly two decades later, the main contenders and competitors of this battle are remembered to be Biggie representing the East coast and Tupac the West.

After being shot while coming out of a New York City club in 1994, Tupac expressed his dissatisfaction with Biggie, claiming the New York rapper knew something about the shooting and did not inform him beforehand. In what is believed to be retaliation to the comments made by Tupac, although never confirmed by Biggie or Bad Boy, is Biggie’s song *Who Shot Ya?* from his 1994 album *Ready to Die*.

In the song, Biggie raps,

Who shot ya?

Seperate the weak from the ob-solete

Hard to creep them Brooklyn streets

...

Slaughter, electrical tape around your daughter

Fuckin with B.I.G. it ain't safe

I make your skin chafe, rashes on the masses

...

Big Poppa smash fools, bash fools

Niggaz mad because I know that Cash Rules

...

And I'm, Crooklyn's finest

You rewind this, Bad Boy's behind this

...

East coast motherfuckers

Bad Boy motherfuckers

The Notorious B.I.G, *Who Shot Ya?*, 1995, Bad Boy Records

Even today, Tupac's 1994 New York City shooter has not been identified within the media or police reports. Biggie asking, *Who shot ya?* can be seen as snip to Tupac, asking a question Biggie may already knows the answer to. Since Tupac was shot in New York City, "hard to creep them Brooklyn streets" can be interpreted as a warning to Tupac while on East coast territory. Biggie reinforces his claimed territory by referring to the East coast and Bad Boy multiple times throughout the song.

The release of *Who Shot Ya?* was the retribution for Tupac's 1996 song *Hit Em Up*. In the song, Tupac explicitly attacks Biggie, denying his 'player' status, which can also be understood in terms of 'hood' credibility and threatens to kill Biggie and anyone associated with him, his record label, and his crew.

West Side

Bad Boy Killers (Take Money)

You know who the realist is

...

First off, fuck your bitch

And the clique you claim

West side when we ride

Come equipped with game

You claim to be a player

But I fucked your wife

We bust on Bad Boys

Niggas fuck for Life

...

Biggie Smalls and Junior Mafia

Some mark ass bitches

...

Who shot me,

But your punks didn't finish

Now you 'bout to feel the wrath of a menace

...

We're gonna kill all you mother fuckers.

Now when I came out, I told you it was just about biggie.

Then everybody had to open their mouth with a mother fucking opinion

Well this is how we gonna' do this:

Fuck Biggie,

Fuck Bad Boy as a staff, record label, and as a mother fucking crew.

And if you want to be down with Bad Boy,

Then fuck you too.

Tupac, *Hit Em Up*, 1996, Death Row Records

As in military wars and battles, claim to land and territories are quite often central to the cause. The rap battle between Biggie and Tupac is no different. These claims to territory frequently involve women as things to be won (Yuval-Davis, 1997), which is what Tupac attempted to do more than once throughout the song by alluding to the notion he had sex with Biggie's wife and his rumored girlfriend, fellow New York rapper, Lil' Kim. Continuing with the battle theme, Tupac threatens death to anyone who is support of the East coast and Bad Boy Entertainment, further deepening the boundaries between the East and West coast. Claiming to be 'the realist,' Tupac reinforces the common theme of authenticity within the rap scene.

As the analysis will explore, space paid a crucial role in rooting the rappers to specific spaces, thus asserting their authenticity as potential leaders for the Thug Nation.

## Chapter 1. Creating community within the hood

Constructs of community, home, and family all intersect to form varying structures or assemblies that stand for the building blocks of the inner workings of specific groups of people based on spatial locality. While the age-old question of nature vs. nurture may never be put to rest, it can not be disputed that our positioning(s)<sup>1</sup> in the world, including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and locale, aid in shaping our identities and help us make sense of the social networks we are all entangled in and with. In regards to Biggie and Tupac, it was the coasts they represented, the cities they grew up in, the neighborhoods where they were educated,<sup>2</sup> and the streets they ran, which saturated their lyrics and interviews with spatiality and sense of community, sculpting their lived experiences. Their ties to space, their local communities, and their lived experiences as young, inner city black men, provided them the means needed to position themselves to be in the running for the ‘King of the Rap Game’<sup>3</sup>. The opportunity to (authentically) represent themselves and their communities, to speak on behalf of the ‘Thug Nation,’ using hip hop as an alternative political space, brought attention to the lived social conditions of many of America’s post-industrial, inner city, black citizens. They are differentiating themselves, constructing their identity as members of a specific America; one different for them as compared the white, upper-middle class America. For

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<sup>1</sup> I add the “s” as so because of the intersectional aspect of identity. We do not have simply one position in life that forms our identity, making us who we are. Rather, it is the culmination of various positioning which comprise identity.

<sup>2</sup> I say neighborhoods they were educated in, meaning the “alternative” education both rappers claimed to receive. For them, they did not see public schooling in the traditional sense as a means to receive knowledge and thus, better your life with an “education.” For them, the education they needed to survive in the places they lived entailed schooling on the streets- insights from older ‘hustlers’ or men on the street committing crimes or involved with the selling of drugs.

<sup>3</sup> To be crowned king of the rap game would entail a recognition of power, leadership, and skill in mapping and conquering hip-hop culture.

them, the people they represented were all citizens of the ‘Thug Nation,’ seen as “the only place where thugs get in free, and you gotta be a G.”<sup>4</sup> Thug Nation was *their* nation, *their* heritage, *their* national interests that needed to be governed and fought for, by *them*.

### 1.1. Home is Where the ‘Hood is

According to Benedict Anderson (1991), a nation “is a political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). In this sense, Anderson explains the community as being limited because the very nature of community is built upon the demarcation from other communities. That is, there are boundaries, barriers in place, enacted and defended, in order to maintain the specific community practices and ultimately maintain the state of the nation. There are innumerable rules, regulations, practices and traditions in varying nations and access to these inner workings are not made available to everyone. To be a member of the nation, there has to be a common space or place where social interactions play out in different meaningful ways. The nation is sovereign in that it is self-governing; the intramural structures are determined and enforced by internal power structures.

In this regard, we can understand the “Thug Nation” as that which is limited; not seeking to include citizens who are not belonging ‘naturally’ to the nation. I will go further in depth on the naturalizing discourse used concerning national belonging later in

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<sup>4</sup> Lyrics taken from Tupac’s song “Thug Mansion” from his 2002 post-humous album *Better Dayz*. A common theme throughout both Tupac and Biggie’s works include their acknowledging of the extra struggles and prices they have to pay in life simply because of their born social positioning. A ‘G’ refers to a ‘gangsta’ or a man who has proved himself authentic in regards to obtaining credibility on the streets, whether it is obtained by acts of violence to show power and dominance, selling drugs, or other, mostly illegal, thug associated activities.



the chapter. Also, the “Thug Nation” is sovereign, even though this nation exists within the larger context of the American nation. That is because, as I will show with lyrics from both rappers, the “Thug Nation” has its own set of “laws” or codes of conduct, different from those of the overarching American nation. As a result, internal policing is done within the “Thug Nation” to ensure its citizen’s act accordingly and in benefit to the nation. So then, Biggie and Tupac’s acquisition of “Thug Nation” citizen status depended on the communities they came from, the ‘hoods<sup>5</sup>’ they grew up in. In order for either of them to be able to become contenders for the battle of Rap King, they had to first build upon connections with and representation of the hoods they came from, which is seen in many of their rap narratives.

Forman (1991) explains,

Lyrics and rhythms must achieve success on the home front first, where the flow, subject matter, style and image must resonate meaningfully among those who share common bonds to place, to the posse and to the ‘hood’.... the ‘hood’ is, however, regularly constructed within the discursive framework of the ‘home,’ and the dual process of ‘turning the ‘hood out’ or ‘representing’ (which involves creating a broader profile for the home territory and its inhabitants while showing respect for the nurture it provides) is now a required practice among hard core rap acts (72-73).

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<sup>5</sup> “Hood” refers to neighborhood, or the specific section of a city or town one came from or considers to be home.

So then, in order for Biggie and Tupac to be considered adequate representatives of their communities, they had to connect with the people of their communities, showing they too know what it is like to be from the hood. Both men had to be ready to assert their leadership, represent their communities, protect them, and have the authority to make decisions for and about them, while keeping the best interest of the community, the nation, in mind. This tactic is in opposition to most of the institutional structures in American society which seem to keep these low income, inner city citizens in subordinated and disadvantaged position. Both Biggie and Tupac recognize this structural issue and openly address the urgent need for changes within the American social system.

As real as it seems the American Dream  
Ain't nothing but another calculated schemes  
To get us locked up shot up back in chains  
To deny us of the future rob our names too  
Kept my history of mystery but now I see  
The American Dream wasn't meant for me  
Cause lady liberty is a hypocrite she lied to me  
Promised me freedom, education, equality  
Never gave me nothing but slavery  
And now look at how dangerous you made me  
Calling me a mad man cause I'm strong and bold  
With this dump full of knowledge of the lies you told  
Promise me emancipation indispute nation

All you gave my people was our patience  
Fathers of our country never cared for me  
They kept my answer shackled up in slavery  
And Uncle Sam never did a dam thing for me  
Except lie about the facts in my history  
So now I'm sitting hear mad cause I'm unemployed  
But the government's glad cause they enjoyed  
When my people are down so they can screw us around  
Time to change the government now

Tupac, "Panther Power" 1988-1991, Koch

In this song, Tupac recognizes the American dream that is more often than not, discussed in American culture as being something everyone has the opportunity and ability to achieve. There is an implied notion that if someone really wants to obtain this American dream, that is working hard to make a comfortable living and enjoy a safe and financially secure life, all they have to do is want it bad enough and work hard enough to achieve it. This line of thought, which is a common discourse among the upper middle class, places all the responsibility on the individual involved. Therefore, if this American dream ideal is not realized, it is something the person striving to obtain it did wrong, it was by their doing. By following this logic, there is not room to question or critique the greater social structures that place people in more privileged positions than others, whether that relates to their gender, ethnicity, or age. Tricia Rose (2008) writes

Over the last three decades, the public conversation has decidedly moved toward an easy acceptance of black ghetto existence and the belief that black people themselves are responsible for creating ghettos and for choosing to live in them, thus absolving the most powerful segments of society from any responsibility in the creation and maintenance of them. Those who deny the legacy of systematic racism or refuse to connect the worst of what hip hop expresses to this history and its devastating effects on black community are leveling unacceptable and racist attacks on black people (9-10).

Tupac recognizes these social inequalities and power structures, and brings the topic up for discussion. He talks about the false promises made to him and people of his community, of freedom, equality, and education, which are interwoven in the American fabric as supposed rights to all its citizens. Tupac is creating a call for action to change the current governmental structures in place which keep him and the people in his community, the ghetto, the hood- plagued down with obstacles not all Americans must face. Obstacles that only certain Americans, located in specific locales, tend to encounter. These Americans are citizens of the Thug Nation.

This Thug Nation is nation-wide in that it stretches all over the United States, from coast to coast, city to city. The spatial commonality of this nation, however, is its

location in American cities, in various ghettos and hoods. Denton and Massey (1993) provide further detail on the creation and concept of ghetto<sup>6</sup>:

The ghetto is a part and parcel of modern American society; it was manufactured by whites earlier in the century to isolate and control growing urban black populations, and it is maintained today by a set of institutions, attitudes, and practices that are deeply embedded in the structure of American life. Indeed, as conditions in the ghetto have worsened and as poor blacks have adapted socially and culturally to this deteriorating environment, the ghetto has assumed even greater importance as an institutional tool for isolating the by-product of racial oppression: crime, drugs, violence, illiteracy, poverty, despair, and their growing social and economic costs (217).

So then, by focusing on their everyday lived experiences in the ghetto or hood, Biggie and Tupac were able to construct narratives about life in these locations. They understood the structural inequalities imposed upon them and others living in the ghetto, knowing violence, drugs, poverty, and limited education opportunities are all results of such racialized structures. They never tried to deny these taboos or downplay their presence in their community. They recognized these various traits that accompany life in the ghetto and did not apologize for them. Instead, through their lyrics, Biggie and Tupac used these typically negative characteristics of the ghetto, including drugs and violence, and brought them into the discussion as issues they have to deal with, not issues they actively seek out. As Tupac says in his song Still Ballin,' "Now ever since a nigga was a

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<sup>6</sup> Ghetto and hood can be conflated, both representing the stricken inner city.

seed, only thing promised to me was the penitentiary.” Tupac is suggesting that society does not provide an equal starting point for all, nor does it want. Societal structures function to keep certain people in certain positions. Both rappers, in songs and interviews, allude to the fact that life in the ghetto is not idyllic and they do not advocate it. They were not writing songs about why they love the hood and the great things that come along with. They were not rapping about shooting people for personal enjoyment. What they did do was attempt to justify violent actions and criminality by explaining they are simply aspects that come along with life in the hood; it is the way life is systematized in these locales. Since both men were born in this social stratosphere, they were given certain circumstances to work with, within it. Compared to other Americans with a higher economic standing, who can make choices between going to university or starting a new business, for example, the option for such choices are not (as) readily available to those of a lower socioeconomic status, and even slimmer for those from the hood.

In his song, *Things Done Changed*, Biggie airs the limited career choices for men born to the hood.

If I wasn't in the rap game  
 I'd probably have a key knee deep in the crack game  
 Because the streets is a short stop  
 Either you're slingin crack rock or you got a wicked jumpshot  
 Shit, it's hard being young from the slums

The Notorious B.I.G, *Things Done Changed*, 1994, Bad Boy Records

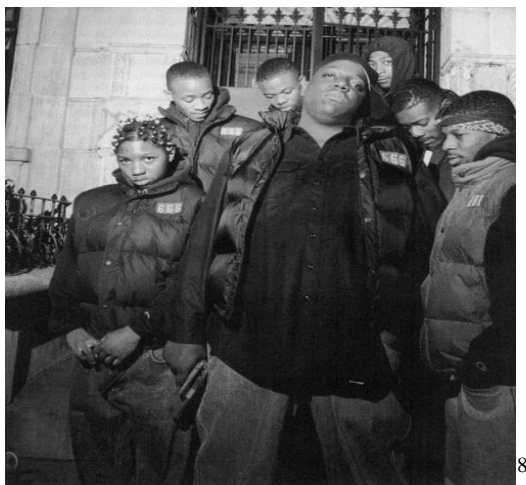
The possible career options Biggie lays out include rapping, selling drugs, or playing basketball. The possibility of being able to “make it” in the rap game or to play basketball professionally are not as likely as having to resort to selling drugs for a living. By claiming the streets are a short stop, Biggie is drawing attention to the fact that life in hood is limiting before it even begins. To be born in this community, as a citizen of the Thug Nation, means to be born in an environment where social structures are already against you. For other Americans, two steps forward does not lead to the same place as two steps taken by a person born in the hood.

## Chapter 2. The Thug Family



My family tree, consists of drug dealers, thugs and killers

Tupac, "Blasphemy" 1996, Death Row, Interscope



B.I.G. down with "O.G.B."

"Old Gold Brothers" for the others that missed me

The crew stay deep on Bedford and Quincy

The Notorious B.I.G., "Microphone Murderer," Bad Boy Records

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<sup>7</sup> Tupac (pictured right) along with Suge Knight (bottom front), Snoop Dogg (left) and Dr. Dre (top center)

<sup>8</sup> The Notorious B.I.G and the Junior M.A.F.I.A. Crew



Crew, clique, clan, posse, peeps, nigga(s), broth(a)er(s)- all these terms share the same familial connotation within a hip-hop setting. In hip-hop culture, the epitome of success is not even possible without your “family,” or the ones who come from the same place you do, the ones who educated you, supported you, all the while helping you remember where you came from; what “made you”<sup>9</sup>. The “Thug Family” is the guiding social structure or backbone if you will, to the entire Thug Nation. The roles constructed and performed within this thug family reflect the internal power structures and social practices of the “Thug Nation.”

In regards to the development of the Thug Nation, Hill Collins (1998) further explains the benefits of using language related to the family,

Sociologist Paul Gilroy (1993) notes that the “trope of kinship” permeates Black understandings of culture and community to the point that African-Americans largely accept the notion of race as family and work within it. In Black-influenced projects, families are seen as building blocks of the nation. The Afrocentric yearning for a homeland for the Black racial family and the construction of a mythical Africa to serve this purpose speaks to the use of this construct (77-78).

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<sup>9</sup> This idea of “what made you” refers to the notion of being a product of your environment and the people within that location, shaping who you are.

The ideology of the family, including its necessity in social structures, permeates throughout many American social systems, policies and beliefs. Community and national belonging can be rendered intelligible through discourse concerning and referencing “the family.” Family is seen as a guiding force, schooling, for instilling the morals, customs, traditions, and beliefs for people belonging to a certain community or nation. “In the United States, understandings of social institutions and social policies are often constructed through family rhetoric” (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 63).

Using the construct of family in their conceptualization of the Thug Nation, Biggie, Tupac, and other hip-hop artists adopted language regarding their communities in a discourse similar to the widely used and commonly understood notion of the traditional family. There is great power of discourse concerning the traditional family ideal interwoven into the American ideological framework; maintaining a dual function as an ideological construction and a “fundamental principle” of social organization (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 63). So then, for the rappers, using the rhetoric of family allowed them the platform to intellectualize the social structures and constructed ideologies of the Thug Nation, differentiating them from the traditional<sup>10</sup> American nation. According to Hill Collins (1998),

Family occupies such a prominent place in the language of public discourse in the United States that rejecting it outright might be counterproductive for groups aiming to challenge hierarchies. Because the family functions as a

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<sup>10</sup> “Traditional,” meaning hegemonic, white-centric American nation.

privileged exemplar of intersectionality in structuring hierarchy, it potentially can serve a similar function in challenging that hierarchy” (77).

The concept and associations of family were beneficial to Biggie and Tupac and the Thug Nation they envisioned since it aided them in challenging oppressive social systems directed towards inner city blacks. However, hierarchies and oppression within their own nation were also being enacted. Although they did challenge traditional family roles in the greater American context, the roles, relations and expectations of the Thug Family were naturalized and ingrained into the Thug Nation. Hill Collins (1998) discusses the model of equality the traditional family idea attempts to project, where everyone in the family is an equal and contributes to the family membership according to their best capabilities. However, this idealized notion of equality within the family does not support the fact that “actual families remain organized around varying patterns of hierarchy” (64).

While many songs from both Biggie and Tupac brought attention to the inequalities within the American social systems, they continued to reinforce other hierarchies and inequalities plaguing their own community. “Hierarchies of gender, age, and sexuality that exist within different racial groups (whose alleged family tries to lead to a commonality of interest) mirrors the hierarchy characterizing relationships among groups” (Hill Collins, 1998, p. 66).

Returning to Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined communities, we can begin to understand why these inequalities and hierarchies are being reproduced within a nation who seeks to call attention to inequalities and social hierarchies. The Thug Nation is an imagined community because while they envision themselves as having a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (6), these social hierarchies still exist.

## **2.1. The Thug Family Tree**

As in the traditional family, certain roles and expectations are assigned to the varying members of the family. The ideal is that if these roles and rules are enacted appropriately, the family and ultimately, the nation, will then be able to function properly. Different citizens are assigned different familial roles within the nation. These roles seek to be naturalized and therefore, not questioned. The same remains true for the Thug Nation and the assigned roles within the Thug Family. There is the belief each person has their part to play in order to keep the internal workings of the nation functioning well. For it is within the structure of the family where one (should) be taught the appropriate expectations of their performance as a citizen of the nation. Hill Collins (1998) elaborates,

Families are expected to socialize their members into an appropriate set of "family values" that simultaneously reinforce the hierarchy within the assumed unity of interests symbolized by the family and lay the foundation for many social hierarchies. In particular, hierarchies of gender, wealth, age, and

sexuality within actual family units correlate with comparable hierarchies in U.S. society. Individuals typically learn their assigned place in hierarchies of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and social class in their families of origin. At the same time, they learn to view such hierarchies as natural social arrangements, as compared to socially constructed ones. Hierarchy in this sense becomes “naturalized” because it is associated with seemingly “natural” processes of the family (64).

I will contextualize and analyze some of the roles present in the thug family that aids in constructing a masculinity that serves to authenticate and legitimize both Biggie and Tupac as thugs. While there are many roles to the family, in both the traditional structural sense, in the case of the thug family, I will focus on the roles of men and women. While all roles in the family are integral intersections of the Thug Nation, I will focus a more in depth analysis on the role of men and the construct of “thug-ness,” a term I will later define, because one of the main focuses of this analysis is concerning the specific masculinity being produced and reproduced within the Thug Nation.

### **2.1.1. Men aka Thugs**

To say authenticity is a common theme in hip-hop would be an understatement. Hip-hop is authenticity; authenticity is hip-hop. One is not possible without the other in a hip-hop context. Claims to being the “realest,” the “illest,” “the don,” the “truest,” are

just a few examples of phrases used to signify authenticity and superior positioning within the rap game. Hip-hop seeks to create a space for discourse concerning life in the hood and notions of authenticity are crucial to this because this discourse must be accurate and true. Biggie, Tupac and countless other rappers make these claims for themselves and their crews. There is a constant us vs. them mentality embedded in their rhetoric, both lyrical and spoken. Establishing authenticity in the hip-hop world also entails making it know how other rappers and their crews are “frontin” or “trippin,” which can be understood as not being “real” or authentic. The logic used by rappers to explain why other rappers are lacking authenticity is because they are “bitches” or “weak,” ultimately feminizing others while systematically reinforcing their own masculinity. This specific masculinity, which I will refer to as thug-ness, is steeped in notions of traditional hegemonic masculinity. This masculinity is often times violent and aggressive, although there are a few occasions where both Biggie and Tupac were more emotional and sentimental than usual<sup>11</sup>. This masculinity also includes regulations of men’s duties to their families and the nation, involving earning money for the family and willingness to battle and potentially die for the nation. To not follow these “naturalized” notions of what it is to be a thug results in being “called out” or exposed by other rappers as not being authentic. To not perform thug-ness according to the standards of what it means to be a thug, is to not be a thug (man).

According to Butler, “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (1988, p. 520). In other words, gender is nothing

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<sup>11</sup> Both rappers have songs talking about their mothers and their fears of life in the rap game. This is not common because to show any kind of “weakness,” constructed in the context of emotion, is regarded as not being “real” or authentic since you are not displaying a hyper-masculinity.

more than a performance, providing false promises of unity and authenticity within the gender group. These gender performances impose norms and perceptions of what it means to properly, or not properly, be performing gender (thug-ness). Not adhering to the societal standards inflicted in gender performance can result in punishment, further regulating social ideologies and hierarchies. All the while, these systems of punishment reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy by illustrating them as being ‘pre-cultural’ and ‘pre-political.’ “(O)ne way in which this system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions” (Butler, 1988, p. 524)<sup>12</sup>. The naturalization of these systems of punishment bolster a sort of ‘internal essence’ which is meant to maintain the ‘natural’ differences between what is means to be a man or a woman.

In looking at Biggie, Tupac and the Thug Nation, gender and thug-ness can be explored as one in the same, for they are so intertwined it would be impossible to view them as separate entities. Like concepts of gender, being a “thug” is also a performative act. Not performing ‘thug’ in regards to its naturalizing, socially constituted ideals, as in gender, results in punishment. These punishments can consist of being “dissed<sup>13</sup>,” called out, or result in violence or even death. Consequently, these systems of punishment are incessantly reinforcing hierarchies and heterosexuality with aims to naturalize them, making them seem intrinsic to gender.

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<sup>13</sup> To “diss” someone means to dismiss them, or not consider them as authentic.

Both rappers are using their lyrics to position themselves in the rap game, to demonstrate they are performing their thug-ness appropriately and in adherence to the (naturalized) 'rules.' For either Biggie or Tupac to be considered as contenders in hip-hops battle of the throne, they need to ensure they perform their masculinity, their thug-ness, in such a manner. Butler (1988) spoke of 'performing the rule book' and the actual performances which are incessantly reinforcing the rules. Biggie and Tupac's performances seek to naturalize what it means to be a 'thug' and the systems that go along with it. In his 1994 song 10 Crack Commandments, Biggie explains the ten basic rules for being a successful while selling drugs, another "right of passage" or necessary experience for "true" thugs. Though the song blatantly states the rules, there are other meanings the lyrics display that reinforces various hierarchies and hegemonic masculinity without overtly saying so, thus naturalizing the performance.

I been in this game for years, it made me an animal  
 It's rules to this shit, I wrote me a manual  
 A step by step booklet for you to get  
 your game on track, not your wig pushed back...  
 Number two: never let em know your next move  
 Don't you know Bad Boys move in silence or violence  
 Take it from your highness...  
 Money and blood don't mix like two dicks and no bitch...  
 Heard she suck a good dick, and can hook a steak up

The Notorious B.I.G, 1994, Bad Boy



It can be inferred that if Biggie has been in the game for years, then he has the knowledge and expertise of the ins and outs of the game. As with many ideologies of the traditional family, age plays a role in the earning of respect. To have been in the game for years, Biggie, who was only 21 at the time this song was released, is expressing his dedication and loyalty for the game, showing he has served his time. In order to validate himself and show his credibility as a thug, he has to let it be understood that he has the experience and expertise when it comes to the rap game. Further authenticating himself, Biggie claims the game has made him an animal. In this context, being in the game for so long has given Biggie a taste, a hunger for it. Like animals hunt prey, Biggie is hunting the game with aims to consume it all. Asserting his authority, Biggie explains there are rules to the game and he is so knowledgeable on them, he had the necessary experience and resources to be able to write a manual for others to follow his already paved path, asserting his normative masculinity of power and strength. Breaking it down step by step for the listener, Biggie retains a halo of arrogance by insinuating others need the rules to be broken down on a smaller level, so they can be digested slowly given they are not as knowing as Biggie. After all, Biggie just wants to train or educate his fellow members of the Thug Nation, so they do not get their “wig pushed back,” meaning getting shot in the head. Violence is an integral part of hip-hop rhetoric and Biggie confirms him and his crew, Bad Boy, do partake in violent acts. Violence is used as a way to display masculinity and assert power and authority over others. The justification for a majority of the violence expressed in hip-hop is that some ‘thugs’ are not acting properly, according to the rules, and need to be “schooled” or taught right from wrong. This notion ties back to discourse concerning the family and their role in suitably socializing members of the

family to performance in accordance with national interest. To “take it from your highness,” suggests a double meaning in the construction of Biggie’s authenticity. Highness is both referring to royalty, with Biggie as King, providing knowledge and commandment to his people, in addition to being high off of marijuana<sup>14</sup>. Saturated in claims to authenticity, being a real thug entails experience on the streets, dealing drugs and hustlin’<sup>15</sup>. Although Biggie became successful in the rap game and no longer had to resort to selling drugs, he still used these experiences to root himself to the game and reinforce his authenticity as a thug.

By claiming, “Money and blood don’t mix like two dicks and no bitch,” Biggie is further asserting his authenticity by adhering to the ‘rules’ of performing thug-ness, affirming a normative, homophobic masculinity. Ideologically speaking, Biggie, in the familial role of thug, must be earning money to provide for his family. Since he is a thug, an authentic thug, it is inferred he will be successful in earning money hustlin’ or slingin’.<sup>16</sup> This money, in thug standards, is generated on the street, obtained in illegal ways. So by suggesting keeping money and blood separate, is deepening the public/private divide. Money is obtained on the streets from his ‘job’ hustling, representing the public, and blood, signifying the family, the home and the private, which needs to be looked after and protected by him. In a 1996 interview with XXL magazine, Biggie was quoted as saying, “Only thing I gotta do is feed [my daughter] Tianna and take care of Ms. Wallace. That’s my only job.” Undermining the mainstream notion of

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<sup>14</sup> Marijuana and other recreational drugs are a common and integral necessity in the hip-hop world. As a part of establishing authority and authenticity, a thug must smoke a lot of marijuana since it is a part of the thug “culture.” It is also a status symbol and a means of making it, when rappers are able to brag about how much they smoke and the quality of the marijuana they smoke.

<sup>15</sup> <sup>15</sup> Hustlin’ refers to the various ways to earn money in an illegal manner, often times in the context of the “street.”

<sup>16</sup> Slingin’ refers to selling street drugs.

black men as ‘deadbeat dads<sup>17</sup>,’ Biggie challenges this stereotype by rapping about taking care of his daughter. This masculinization and militarization<sup>18</sup> of protecting the family and the nation can be seen throughout the Thug Nation. This particular strain of masculinity is constantly reinforcing heteronormativity within the Thug Nation. Biggie is blatantly expressing his disapproval of homosexuality by saying two dicks to not mix, that they do not work together properly, thus are wrong. He then expresses his heteronormative masculinity and reinforces the notion that women should be bodies able to sexually satisfy men, thugs, and also be able to provide for men in a domestic manner, such as hooking<sup>19</sup> up a good steak.

In order for Biggie, Tupac, or any other self proclaimed thug to be seen as such, they must enact their masculinity for others to see and easily identify and internalize what it means. Visibility is key in determining who correctly performs gender. This performance, however, must be displayed as seamless, to not be identified as a performance at all. Rather, for any gender performance to be authenticated, it must seem natural-effortless and instinctive.

Tupac’s song *Niggaz Nature Remix* is a blatant example of how thug-ness is produced and naturalized.

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<sup>17</sup> A deadbeat dad refers to dad who is not around or involved in their children’s lives.

<sup>18</sup> Militarization of the male body will be further explored in the following chapter in regards the construction of thug masculinity.

<sup>19</sup> To “hook” something up means to prepare in a special way.

Understand my ways, livin major

Blessed with a thug's heart...and a real live nigga nature...

Don't blame me blame my momma, a nigga nature

Tupac *Niggaz Nature Remix*, 1996, Amaru, Death Row, Interscope

Throughout the song, Tupac describes the different parts of his “thug nature,” which include heterosexual sex, use of drugs, and capital, including pagers and cell phones.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the song, Tupac justifies his actions and claims to capital by saying: “That's a nigga nature,” “Cause that's a nigga nature,” and “Hey, just be a nigga nature.” Providing such logic to justify why he behaves this way does not leave any room for questioning this “nigga nature.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, in the chorus of the song, sung by female rapper Lil’ Mo, the actions of the nigga, or thug, are excused and attributed to the perception that this is the natural way for a thug to behave. Thus, not seeking to challenge or change these behaviors since they are seemingly innate, further authenticating him as a thug.

Kissed the girls, made them cry

Thuggin life, and gettin high

Why you gangsta, all the time?

That's a thug's nature

Though sometimes, I can deal with it

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<sup>20</sup> Please note this was in the early to mid 1990’s when technologies such as pagers and cell phones in cars were luxuries and not many people, especially in the hood, had these luxuries.

<sup>21</sup> Nigga nature can also be understood as thug-ness since it is a certain gender performance which seeks to naturalize itself.

I realize, that I'm feelin it

It's a love and hate relationship

but that's a thug's nature

Lil' Mo, *Niggaz Nature Remix*, 1996, Amaru, Death Row, Interscope

The female 'voice<sup>22</sup>' or representation in this song openly admits to sometimes not being able to deal with the thug nature. I will argue, as a heterosexual woman belonging to the thug family, the female voice of this song has a love/ hate relationship with the thug nature because while she is attracted to the constructed and attractive<sup>23</sup> thug masculinity being performed, she is also aware of the issues associated with this thug nature, including substance abuse and infidelity. So then, the female voice is forced to a standstill- she does not agree with all the actions of the thug, but cannot question them since she internalizes them as being fixed in nature. This perception that women may be bothered by men's erratic behavior but not say anything about it since they feel they can not control it, is also reinforcing this performative gender divide.

The ones performing the thug-ness, however, also attribute certain characteristic traits as being natural and thus, pre-political. According to Butler (1988), "the authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness" <sup>24</sup>(522). Biggie and Tupac were so entrenched in

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<sup>22</sup> I am not referring to the actual voice on the track, rapper Lil' Mo, but the overarching 'voice' of the women of the Thug Nation.

<sup>23</sup> Attractive in the sense that in the Thug Nation, the thug is a manifestation of what it means to be a "real man."

displaying their authenticity, that they even spoke of themselves, their positing in the hip-hop game as naturally occurring, something innate within them. This naturalization of gender and thug, these identity politics, are seeped in falsely constructed notions of authenticity. But for them to be able to represent their communities, to become king of the rap game, they had to make sure their authenticity was not doubted or questioned.

## **2.2. Women**

In the hip-hop world, men talk about women in 3 major ways: mothers, partners, and hoes. While there are women rappers and they do construct an identity for themselves outside of these three categories, for the purpose of this analysis, I will focus on how the roles of ‘women’ are being constructed and enacted within the specific context of the thug family by the rappers. Although the women do share similar backgrounds, ethnicity, and socioeconomic statuses, there are still intersections of their lived experiences that place them in varied positioning within the Thug Nation. If we visualize their positioning(s) as a pyramid, mothers would remain on the top, as the most respected, then partners, who include wives and girlfriends, and on the bottom, hoes or tricks<sup>25</sup>. One thing all these roles have in common is each provides some sort of capital for men within the thug family.

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<sup>25</sup> Tricks refer to women who are viewed as deceitful in that they only want some sort of financial gain, from a man.

### 2.2.1. Women as mothers

As with the traditional notion of family, age carries significant weight in receiving respect within the family. Besides rapper Eminem, I do not know of any other male hip-hop artists who speak badly about their mothers. Mothers are the ones who supported the rappers and loved them, even if they were running the streets. In his platinum hit, *Dear Mama*, Tupac shows his esteem for his mother, Afeni Shakur, and all she has done for him throughout his life. He talks about the sacrifices she made to raise him, the difficulties she went through, and apologizes for the stress and pain he has caused her.

Ain't a woman alive that could take my mama's place...

You always was a black queen, mama

I finally understand

for a woman it ain't easy tryin to raise a man

You always was committed

A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it

There's no way I can pay you back

But the plan is to show you that I understand

You are appreciated...

And I could see you comin home after work late

You're in the kitchen tryin to fix us a hot plate

Ya just workin with the scraps you was given  
And mama made miracles every Thanksgivin...  
Through the drama  
I can always depend on my mama  
And when it seems that I'm hopeless  
You say the words that can get me back in focus...  
You never kept a secret, always stayed real

Tupac, *Dear Mama*, 1995, Interscope

In this sense, Tupac is recognizing the vital role of the mother in the thug family. For as rough and tough as life could get on the streets, Tupac knew his mother would remain by his side and guide him in life when he needs it. She is there for him, to take care of him, and make sure he feels comfort when needed. Although the mother is well respected in the thug family, she is still required to be at the service of men, to put focus into bettering their positioning while often times neglecting her own.



### 2.2.3. Women as partners

The majority of lyrics and discourse surrounding women, who are not mothers, is often times misogynistic and degrading to women. But sometimes, women are constructed not as being equals to thugs, because the hierarchy remains, but described as being “down.” To be down can be understood as willing and ready to be there for the thug and support him in whatever he chooses to do, even if this includes illegal and violent work. It goes without saying that to be down also includes participation in sexual activities. In Biggie’s song *Me & My Bitch*, the rapper shows a not so common, softer side of himself. In the song, he describes the relationship between him and his bitch<sup>26</sup>, or partner.

Moonlight strolls with the hoes, oh no, that's not my steelo

I wanna bitch that like to play celo, and craps

Packin gats, in a Coach bag steamin dime bags

A real bitch is all I want, all I ever had (yeah, c'mon)

With a glock just as strong as me

Totin guns just as long as me, the bitch belongs with me...

She helped me plan out my robberies on my enemies

Didn't hesitate to squeeze, to get my life out of danger

The Notorious B.I.G, *Me & My Bitch*, 1994 Bad Boy Records

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<sup>26</sup> In this context, bitch is not meant to be a derogatory term, rather it is renegotiated and used in a positive context, which happens often in hip-hop.

Still maintaining his thug-ness and making sure not to come off as “weak” in this song, Biggie clarifies that typical romantic activities, like taking a moonlight stroll, are not his style. Rather, the ideal girl for Biggie mirrors activities associated with being thug, while still maintaining her femininity. This double burden imposed upon women as partners is a common theme throughout hip-hop. To not be labeled as a trick, they have to be “down to ride,” or ready to be involved with the criminal workings and even violence, her man is involved with. Relating back to authenticity and being ‘real,’ Biggie asserts his authenticity by claiming he is only ever with ‘real’ bitches, for Biggie would not be seen as authentic if the woman he is with is seen as ‘frontin’ or being fake. In this context, for Biggie, his partner is ‘real’ because she has a glock, or gun, as powerful as Biggie and also had guns the same size as Biggie. He explains how she has helped him plan robberies on his enemies and how she is willing to squeeze, or pull the trigger, on someone if they are putting Biggie’s life in danger. Women as partners then, are understood as those who support and take part in the activities asked of them by their thug partners.

#### **2.2.4. Women as tricks and hoes**

Black women as overly sexualized objects that are angry and promiscuous and are only out to use thugs for their fame and fortune. This is the notion of what it means in the Thug Nation to be considered a hoe or a trick. I know not all hip-hop music has a sterling reputation for how they depict women and I am not here to argue any different. In fact,

both Biggie and Tupac have various songs directing disrespect and hatred towards women they deem to be a hoe.

I will provide two samples of this discourse of women in hip-hop, one from Biggie and one from Tupac to support this claim, although it may already be evident hip-hop does not always show the most respect for women. I will not go into further analysis of the lyrics because they are self-evident

No...fuck the bitches, fuck all the stank-ass hoes, all my niggas know...Junior Mafia click, Gucci Don, you know how we play. Fuckin' skanless-ass bitches. You know how it go Boots...I meet a bitch, fuck a bitch, next thing you know you fuckin' the bitch. You just pass it around and shit, pass the shit like a cold and shit. Fuck'em.

The Notorious B.I.G, *Friend of Mine*, 1994, Bad Boy Records

You probably crooked as the last trick; wanna laugh  
At how I got my ass caught up with this bad bitch  
Thinkin I had her but she had me in the long run  
It's just my luck I'm stuck with fuckin with the wrong one, uh!...  
Everywhere I go, it's all about the groupie hoes  
waitin for niggaz at the end, of every show

I just seen you in my friend's, video

Could never put a bitch before my friends, so here we go

Tupac, *All About You*, 1995, Death Row, Interscope

Because nations are conceptualized as sovereign and limited, there are borders in place granting only certain people access to the nation. This holds true for the Thug Nation since it is not an open nation for simply anyone to join. Rather to become a citizen, is dependent on ties with and relation to a specific inner city locale. Internal rules and regulations are carried out within the Thug Nation and there are forms of internal policing. One of the ways to police and socialize citizens is through the trope of family. The use of the family in forming the nation is also a beneficial framework in addressing the larger social structures furthering institutionalized racial inequality within the United States, although certain hierarchies are still maintained and enacted with the concept of the family. The use of family provided Biggie, Tupac, allowed the opportunity to create a political space for awareness of life in the inner city and to make the concept of the Thug Nation intelligible. The next chapter will explore the Thug Nation further, displaying the ways in which Biggie and Tupac make claims to space to root themselves in the Thug Nation. Also, their political campaigns and formation of crews will be explored to highlight the processes of thug-ness and authentication within the rap game.

### **Chapter 3. Coast to Coast, Hood to Hood, Block to Block: Spatial Saturation in Hip-Hop**

The first prerequisite needed in order to become a member of the Thug Nation is plain and simple: space. One can only be a member of the Thug Nation via a specific relation to specific space, that being America's poverty stricken, post-industrial inner cities. As I have explained in the previous chapter, the paradigm of 'hood' is conceptualized in relation to 'home.' In order for Biggie or Tupac to be able to campaign themselves for leader of the Thug Nation, they first needed to connect with their local hoods and communities. Gaining that support is the first step towards authenticating themselves as rulers. To represent the people, to have the privilege to be the 'voice' of a people, both Biggie and Tupac had to share similar lived experiences with these people. Their narratives and the narratives of many other rappers are saturated in ties to space- from the streets they grew up on, to the neighborhoods they lived, and the cities they called home. It was the recognition of these spaces, their geographical stages, which kept them connected to the people of their communities. Although both men are a part of the Thug Nation and do share very similar life experiences, they were still battling for ruler of the nation. Because of this, the emphasis on space and local ties was used as a tactic to gain support on the 'home front' first. Forman (2000) elaborates,

“Since its inception in the mid-to-late 1970's, hip hop culture has always maintained fiercely defended local ties and an in-built element of competition waged through hip hop's cultural forms of rap...This competition has traditionally been staged

with geographical boundaries that demarcate turf and territory among various crews, cliques, and posses, extending and altering the spatial alliances that had previously cohered under other organizational structures, including but not exclusive to gangs. Today, a more pronounced level of spatial awareness in one of the key factors distinguishing rap and hip hop culture from the many other cultural and subcultural youth formation currently vying for attention” (68).

This focus on space in hip-hop, I would argue, comes down to the fact that the hoods the rappers come from, are theirs. They are their surroundings- the experts of this space; they know the structures within the hood, the rules, roles, regulations, and codes of conduct. It is the only part of America that is truly theirs- both in terms of space and power. As Biggie and Tupac make so clear, American social structures are not in place to better them or their lives. In fact, it is these racialized social structures keeping the people of their communities in the hood. For rappers to pay so much homage to space is to assert their authority and expertise of that space. The Thug Nation, which is located in hoods, is self-governing. It is the place where inner city black (men) have the opportunity to have a say in their nation, not within the greater American governmental system. Yes, there are federal and state laws and police<sup>27</sup> intervention in these spaces, but there are different laws in the hood that can only be policed within the hood- remaining autonomous from the American nation they are situated in. Therefore, in order to assert their authenticity and power to other rappers and the American nation, special attention is paid to addressing specific, local spaces and places.

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<sup>27</sup> The police are a reoccurring theme in hip-hop music.

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of space saturating hip-hop is seen in Tupac's 1995 song California Love. The song pays tribute to California, the west coast, and its various cities and hoods.

Let me welcome Ya'll to the Wild, Wild West

...

The life of a west side playa where cowards die and it's all ball

Only in Cali where we riot not rally to live and die

...

Famous cause we program worldwide

Let'em recognize from Long Beach to Rosecrans

...

Let me serenade the streets of L.A.

From Oakland to Sacktown

The Bay Area and back down

Cali is where they put they mack down

...

Hey, you know LA is up in this

Pasadena, where you at

Yeah, Inglewood, Inglewood always up to no good

Even Hollywood tryin to get a piece baby

Sacramento, Sacramento where ya at? yeah

...

Let's show these fools how we do this on that west side

Cause you and I know it's tha best side

...

Yeah, That's right

West coast, west coast

Uh, California Love

Tupac, *California Love*, 1995, Death Row, Interscope

Welcoming somebody to someplace infers a belonging to that location. Tupac is welcoming the listener to the West because it is his to offer welcoming to. He explains that for playas, which can be understood as thugs, strength and bravery, traits associated with masculinity, will keep you alive, stating “cowards die.” Tupac says “its all a ball<sup>28</sup>,” meaning making money and a successful name for oneself. Therefore, thugs in the west, true thugs, are not ‘weak’ and are successful in making money, further asserting their thug-ness. This is also ‘othering’ those not representing the west coast, as being less of a thug. This dominating masculinity is also inferred when Tupac said they riot to live in the west, rebelling against social structures and demonstrating their power and force. Giving shout outs<sup>29</sup> to specific areas and hoods in California, Tupac is showing support for and unity with these places. He explains that California puts the mack down, meaning they bring the best of their game and are successful in both obtaining power and sexual

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<sup>28</sup> Ball stems from baller, originally referring to men who made it out of the hood and became successful playing professional basketball.

<sup>29</sup> Verbally paying recognition to someone or something.



relations with women. Showing “fools” what thugs do on the west side, suggests that the west side knows the proper way to conduct themselves, according to the rules of the game, further naturalizing their authority and expertise of the Thug Nation.

### **3.1. Hood Roots**

Making specific claims to places or territories, seeks to naturalize ones belonging in those spaces. This holds true with the naturalization of the thug within the hood. A way to create a positive social identity is to assert authenticity via space, as being naturally belonging. By constantly calling attention to specific spaces, Biggie and Tupac naturalized their belonging in those spaces. When someone or something is thought of as belonging inherently to a space or place, there is a sense of authority and expertise authenticated by that believed natural belonging. As Malkki (1992) explains, “people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from rootedness.” (56) This notion of natural, national belonging, or rootedness, is often times expressed in an essentializing manner, thinking about national identities and nations in arborescent terms, including roots, trees and origins (57). The roots, the belonging, is directly related to the soil, or the space, they stem from. This notion of rootedness is crucial in authenticating ‘natural’ belonging because it is, in itself, essentializing. Biggie and Tupac went to great lengths to display their rootedness and natural belonging in the hood. Here are two examples from Tupac, where the notion of rootedness and relation to soil is seen:

Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice  
I say the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots

Tupac, *Keep Ya Head Up*, 1993, Interscope

Out in Cali niggaz rally others all for the soil

Tupac, *Loyal to the Game*, 2004, Amaru, Interscope

Roots are authenticating, they assert a ‘natural’ belonging to specific spaces and places. Tupac claiming darker flesh equating deeper roots seeks to authenticate the belonging of black people in the United States, while insinuating light skinned people<sup>30</sup> are not as rooted. This undesirable uprootedness, as shown by Tupac, and the negative associations with it can be understood in relation to political refugees. As Malkki (1992) illuminates, in reference to refugees, being unrooted and ultimately detached from the soil or homeland, results in a ‘loss of bodily connection’ to national homelands. When this happens, people are often thought of to have a ‘loss of moral bearings’ and “no longer trustworthy as “honest citizens” (63). Not being rooted to a specific place entails a sort of freedom- a freedom to roam and a freedom from cultural and national ties. However, “violated, broken roots signal an ailing cultural identity and a damaged nationality” since there is no assumed connection to place (65). In short, not seeming to be ‘naturally’ belonging to a place tends to create an uncertainty and wariness amongst others who claim rootedness to various places. Already belonging to a marginalized group, Tupac did not want people from the hood to be seen as unrooted or with no ‘moral

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<sup>30</sup> White people

bearings.’ Instead, he sought to reclaim the hood in a sense by rooting people to it and positively affirming that rootedness.

The reference to soil in the lyrics of Tupac shown above reinforces the importance of belonging and being rooted to a place. Specifically mentioning California, Tupac lets it be known that him and his niggaz<sup>31</sup>, or crew, are ready and willing to defend their soil and maintain claims to their rootedness within that soil. People like predictability; they like to feel they can assess others based on things like nationality and rootedness to places in order to better predict interpersonal interactions. Not being rooted to a certain soil, or place, then, seems to create an unnerving effect on people since they cannot predict<sup>32</sup> what the ‘other’ is representing. Ideals of national belonging help place people in categorical boxes, promoting the feeling of being able to fully predict people’s identities based on national belonging. Biggie and Tupac could recognize this; they already knew the boxes placed around them as inner city, low-income, young black men, by the majority of American society. They knew they were unnerving to people from outside of the hood, and they even knew they were unnerving to people within the hood. In his 1994 song *Things Done Changed*, Biggie illuminates the nervousness associated with the thug within the hood.

Back in the days, our parents used to take care of us  
Look at em now, they even fuckin scared of us

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<sup>31</sup> Niggaz can be understood in regards to crew, cliques, or posse in this context. In other contexts, niggaz can be understood as the social ‘other.’

<sup>32</sup> Even knowing someone’s nationality or ‘origin of roots’ does not mean their actions and behaviors are predictable.

Callin the city for help because they can't maintain  
Damn, shit done changed

The Notorious B.I.G., *Things Done Changed*, 1994, Bad Boy  
Records

Biggie acknowledges the fear expressed between members of the same hood. This being the case, Biggie knew the importance of a strong sense of community that needed to be instilled within the hood. If negative perceptions of the hood and the people living there were ever going to change within the greater American discourse, these negative perceptions first had to be eradicated within the hood. Both Biggie and Tupac were able to create a sense of solidarity and belonging with their listeners who identified as being a part of their crew, either reppin<sup>33</sup>, the east coast or the west coast. This created an imagined solidarity between members of the crew, thus developing a trust in both the crew and its leader. Reclaiming the hood in a positive light *within* the hood was necessary to be able to alter the typical, negative American notion of the hood. Both rappers knew they had to change that negative image in order for the structural situations concerning the hood to change. Yes, the reputation of the hood in terms of people and space in the greater American discourse is overtly racist and negative. But, by demonstrating their rootedness to the hood via ties to space, they sought to reclaim the hood in a more positive light. The two of them, by pure example, were proof that although life in the hood is hard, there are *some*<sup>34</sup> options for getting out. They are reclaiming the hood in

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<sup>33</sup> Reppin' is slang for representing.

<sup>34</sup> I italicize some because they realize these options are still limited compared to those not born in the hood. The three main options both rappers discuss are: selling drugs, becoming a rapper, or, ta a professional basketball player (the rarest of all three).

order to demonstrate that it is not the people of the hood who are bad, rather the social structures that make the hood what it is. They are working with what they were given and trying to make the best of the situation. Referring back to botanical analogies, Tupac compares himself and his location in the hood to a rose and concrete.

All I'm trying to do is survive and make good out of the dirty, nasty, unbelievable lifestyle that they gave me. I'm just trying to make something good out of that. It's like if you try and plant something in the concrete...if it grows and the rose pedals got all kind of scratches and marks, you're not gonna say 'Damn look at all the scratches on the rose that grew from the concrete'. Your gonna say...Damn! A rose grew from the concrete? Well that's the same thing with me.. .Folks should be sayin' 'Damn! He grew out of all that? (<http://www.daveyd.com/pacwestin.html>)

Tupac recognizes the limited options for (men)<sup>35</sup> in the hood and reinforces they are structural by saying 'they,' meaning American racialized social structures, "gave" him this lifestyle. But regardless of what he was 'given,' Tupac uses the notion of a rose, a beautiful, treasured flower, to represent what he *is*. The rose, which typically has its roots in soil, was not given soil as an option to grow. Instead, concrete was provided and although, as thought by most people, the rose would never grow, it did. Even though soil would have made it easier for the rose to blossom, it persevered and blossomed in non-traditional circumstances. Tupac is reinforcing the notion of rootedness, but

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<sup>35</sup> I say men because the 'given options' in the hood are gendered. Women have other sets of options within the hood structure.

reconceptualizing it in terms of being rooted to the hood; and just because one has roots there, as he shows, does not mean they too cant blossom into something beautiful.

While attention is being drawn upon the rootedness of the men to their hoods and the Thug Nation, they also both seek to expose potential unrootedness in regards to the other. This excerpt from an interview with Tupac shows how he played upon this notion of up rootedness.

“New York is where everybody comes to. There is no New York, niggas from New York is from the West side and from down south. They all migrated to New York, had kids and that’s what happens. That’s why New York has the most style, cause it’s a gumbo pot of all these different niggas...but that’s it. . its a little thing and Biggie was the don<sup>36</sup> of that. Now, I took over his kingdom.”

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC4S6FLW1Us>)

Furthering affirming his authenticity and rootedness to the west coast, Tupac seeks to uproot New York, and ultimately the entire east coast, negating their legitimacy in the game. As Malkki has noted, when connection to roots seem to have been lost, people are not viewed as trustworthy, ‘honest citizens’ anymore. Therefore, Tupac was seeking to de-authenticate the east coast while playing up the authenticity of the west. But, Tupac was tactful in doing so as to not overtly offend belonging to the east coast

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<sup>36</sup> Don can refer to the leader or boss. The context is taken from Italian mobster culture, which was popular among rappers.

because he knew their (eventual) support was necessary in representing the entire Thug Nation. He did pay recognition to Biggie's representation of the east, but confirms he now has taken over Biggie's territory and thus, his ability to be king of the game.

So then, by closely incorporating specific ties to spaces and places, both rappers were rooting themselves in these spaces, ultimately asserting their authenticity in these locales. This worked on two levels for the rappers. First, by both claiming ties to their inner city spaces, they were, together, promoting a community, a belonging for all the people of the hood. But on a more personal level, they were rooting themselves to *their* specific hoods, displaying their rootedness and thus, their authenticity as leader for their coasts and the entire Thug Nation.

That is why it was so important for the rappers to be able to root themselves in their distinctive hoods; rapping about the specific spaces and places they came from, demonstrating their 'inherit' connections to these places, their natural belonging to the hood and thus, the Thug Nation.

### **3.2. Turning Hoods into the Thug Nation**

The relations to space do not only authenticate Biggie and Tupac's rootedness to the hood, but also serve as the material and inspiration for their lyrical narratives. It is

their talent; their ability to rap that provides them the medium for asserting these ties to space.

In rap, there is a widespread sense that an act cannot succeed without first gaining approval and support from the crew and the 'hood. Successful acts are expected to maintain connections to the 'hood and to 'keep it real' thematically, rapping about situations, scenes and sites that comprise the lived experience of the 'hood (Forman, 2000, pg. 72).

The hood is the raw inspiration for an authentic thug, because according to the rules, a thug must be real, true, and not frontin'. You cannot rap about being a thug if you are not a thug, which is considered frontin'. And frontin' means being fake, thus not real, true, or authentic. See the cycle? In order to be a thug, you need to have your schooling on the streets and actually rap about the difficulties, and success', of being a thug. This is one of the authentication processes of thug-ness. In an MTV interview, Biggie talks about his positioning in the hood and how that inspired him to write his raps.

I make music about what I know. If I'd worked at McDonald's, I would've made rhymes about Big Macs and fries and stuff like that. In Brooklyn, I see hustling, I see killing, I see girls, I see cars — that's what I rap about, what's in my environment. Everything I did on the album was all about me. Me and Brooklyn. My Brooklyn representees know that. All that everyday struggle, waking up, check-cashing place, it's 9 o'clock in the morning,



that's all Brooklyn, baby. That's all real. As far as somebody else not liking it, it's on them, man. I got love from the peeps, it's all good. I look at myself as the eyes of the world.  
([http://www.mtv.com/bands/n/notorious\\_big/news\\_feature\\_070305/index2.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/bands/n/notorious_big/news_feature_070305/index2.jhtml))

In these few sentences, Biggie mentions Brooklyn four times, authenticating his positioning in Brooklyn and the aspects of the hardness in the hood there. While placing emphasis on the killings, hustling,<sup>37</sup> and struggles in Brooklyn, he is simultaneously downplaying those same occurrences in other hoods as being less “real” or intense. Also, Biggie is creating a sense of community within Brooklyn, further developing his crew by declaring his love for them. Because of this, Biggie then appears to be the best representative for the Thug Nation because he *knows* what it's like to be in the struggle and he had what it took to get out of the struggle, showing it is possible. He is able to say he looks at himself as the ‘eyes of the world’ because he is attempting to show he has been through the hardest, toughest situations that gives him the authenticity to be able to have the eyes of the world, since he has seen and been through it all.

Linking the struggles of their individual cities or spaces with the various struggles they each faced within those spaces, both rappers were attempting to turn their turfs, their hoods, into their kingdoms. They were authenticating themselves as rulers and their hoods as kingdoms to be governed by them, since they each felt themselves to be the ‘realest’ leader for the Thug Nation. What both rappers did, via interviews, performances,

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<sup>37</sup> Hustling means selling drugs illegally on the streets.

and their raps, can be understood as political campaigning to build their respective parties and recruit supporters and members of their parties in order to help them be elected leader of the Thug Nation. After all, Biggie and Tupac knew a dictatorship would not be possible with the people of the Thug Nation since it can be articulated that people living in the hood are already under a sort of dictatorship- barely having any control over the social institutions affecting them. Instead, the rappers knew community support and loyalty of others was their only way to the throne. Forman (2000) elaborates,

With the discursive shift from the spatial abstractions framed by the notion of ‘the ghetto’ to more localized and specific discursive construct of ‘the ‘hood’ occurring in 1987-88 (roughly corresponding with the rise and impact of rappers on the US West Coast), there has been an enhanced emphasis on the powerful tie to place that both anchor rap acts to their immediate environments and set them apart from other environments and other ‘hoods as well as from other rap acts and their crews which inhabit similarly demarcated spaces(68).

It was this separation or differentiation of rappers and their crews that allowed for the coastal rap battle to begin. Both Biggie and Tupac needed their crews there to support them, fight with them in the name of their local hoods and coasts, and for the greater Thug Nation. Each rapper constructed their identities to be in accord with the coasts, the

hoods, they represented, thus ‘keeping it real’<sup>38</sup>. To become a member of a crew, one must first identify with that crew- share similar beliefs, experiences, and histories. This strong identification with crews is tied to space. Rose (1994) explains,

Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one’s attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family. These crews are new kinds of families forged with intercultural bonds that, like the social formation of gangs, provide insulation and support in a complex and unyielding environment and may serve as the basis for new social movements (Rose 34).

While the previous chapter has already explored the notion of the thug family as a building block for the Thug Nation, we can take this quote from Rose to better understand the notion of family in regards to crew formation and loyalty. While there is the overarching notion of the thug family, there are also other familial structures within the crews. There are hierarchies in familial crews, with some men as the patriarch and others as the soldiers. There is an expectation of loyalty between members of the crew- they are there to support and back each other up. There is an all-or-nothing attitude to the crew; you mess with someone from the crew, you mess with the entire crew.

Both Biggie and Tupac recognized not only the loyalty within their own crews, but also the loyalty between the *other’s* crew.

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<sup>38</sup> Keeping it real entails being authentic to yourself and where you came from.

In a bonus track interview from his 1997 album *Life After Death*, Biggie said:

It's a funny thing, I kind of realized how powerful Tupac and I was, you know what I'm saying? Because we two individual people, we waged a coastal beef<sup>39</sup>, you know what I'm saying? One man against one man made a whole west coast hate a whole east coast and vice versa, you know what I'm saying? And that really bugged me out, like yo, dude don't like me so this whole coast don't like me, you know what I'm saying? I don't like him so my whole coast don't like him. They just kinda let me know how much strength I have.

The Notorious B.I.G, *B.I.G Interview (Bonus Track)*, 1997, Bad Boy Records

Biggie acknowledges the power both him and Tupac had over the entire rap game. He knew his coast, his crew was behind him and he knew the same held true for Tupac. This made the stakes even higher during their battle for king because each side was truly invested to each leader. These coasts, these spaces being rapped about are peoples everyday lived experiences, their identities. For the true supporters of either Biggie or Tupac, this was the future of their lives, of their communities that could potentially be changed by either of these men. Their loyalty was strong and they were committed. Even today, more than fifteen years after their deaths, people are still siding up and either supporting the works and the politics of Biggie or Tupac. Although both rappers have

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<sup>39</sup> Beef is slang for conflict, most often used when talking about rappers who are battling one another, most often in lyrical form.

met their death, in honor of the Thug Nation, which will be explored further, people continue to support them and what they sought to do for the hood.

While both men did recognize the loyalty of people to either the east or west coast, they still sought to obtain loyalty and support beyond their coastal crews, throughout the entire Thug Nation. After all, they both already won representative titles of their coasts, with the next step stretching across the coasts and in between to gain supporters. Since Tupac was born in New York and spent time in Baltimore<sup>40</sup> before moving to California, he made connections to these places from time to time, I would argue in a strategic way. He realized the importance of needing support from more than just the coast he was representing, even rapping, “I got thug love for my nation wide possey<sup>41</sup>, feel me?” (Tupac, *Thug Love*, 1996, Relativity, Ruthless) Tupac knew in order to authenticate himself to become leader of the Thug Nation, he needed to reach out and develop a nation-wide crew.

In this 1995 interview with Tupac, he reinforces his connections with other spaces besides his usual ties to the west coast.

I love the Bay. Everywhere I go...and every episode I've been through, I always felt like I was sharing it...both the good times and the bad times with the Bay Area. I felt like whatever I am the Bay Area had something to do with making me. So if I'm bad            they had something to do with making me and

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<sup>40</sup> Baltimore is a city in Maryland, on the east coast of the United States.

<sup>41</sup> Possey can be understood in terms of crew.

if I'm good they had something to do with making me. Between the east coast, the Bay Area and LA and Baltimore, those places made me...I owe them everything. It's not like I just got love for one block. I got love for those communities... I got love for those areas because everything about those areas made me who I am...From the crack heads to biggest ballers to the teachers to the principals in schools to the police that pulled me by the arm to the mammas on the block. To everybody who help raise me and I appreciate it...With all my fans I got a family again... That's love and I'll never trade that...so for the Bay and Philly and all those areas and all those ghettos and towns...I love y'all...don't let this east coast west coast thing get to you... I love you with all my heart with everything. I do this for y'all.

(<http://www.daveyd.com/pacwestin.html>)

This interview serves as a helpful example in seeing the many ways authenticity is asserted and its relation to space in a hip-hop context. First, Tupac, realizing the importance of rooting oneself to specific places, calls special attention to give thanks to all of the places he has lived, which can be understood as “paying dues.” As Forman (2000) explains, “paying dues is also part of the process of embarking on a rap music career, and the local networks of support and encouragement, from in- group affiliations to local club and music scenes, are exceedingly important factors in an act’s professional development” (73). Tupac is therefore connecting himself with these communities, even if he is not currently living in these places or ‘officially’ representing them. Although he is already clearly rooted to the west coast, he makes sure to ‘water his roots,’ if you will,

in other locations in order to appear more rooted to the Thug Nation as a whole. As we have read from Rose, in hip-hop, identity is often rooted in local experiences, in local places. Tupac is giving a shout out, or paying respect to these places and recognizing their role in shaping his identity. He acknowledges these communities as a family, saying they helped raise him and with his fans, his ‘crew,’ he has a family. Asserting his desired position for leader of the Thug Nation, Tupac says he does ‘all this’ for ‘ya’ll,’ meaning the members of the Thug Nation, aiming to display his selfless devotion for the nation.

### **3.3.Thug Campaigns**

While Biggie and Tupac both aim to construct different identities from one another, they still perform according the same rules of thug-ness. Thug-ness can only be performed when the actor (authentically) identifies with a specific place, the hood. But this necessary affinity with the hood, as seen with Biggie and Tupac, does not ensure a solitary identity of ‘thug.’ That is because “places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal conflicts...conflict over what should be its present development, conflict over what could be its future” (Massey, 1991, pg.155). Indeed, Biggie and Tupac both had their ideas on how the Thug Nation should be run and the ways to do it.

Though Biggie and Tupac both sought to be crowned king of the rap game, they had different styles, different ways of authenticating themselves and asserting their leadership abilities. Biggie was more of a storyteller, vividly painting a picture of what the day-to-day struggles are for a black man growing up in an American inner city. Tupac

on the other hand, was the more ‘political’ one of the two, rallying for changes of the racialized social systems aimed towards people in the hood. Their tactics for campaigning varied and each rapper made different political promises to the members of the Thug Nation.

### 3.4. Biggie’s Campaign

This goes out for those that choose to use  
Disrespectful views on the King of NY...

Ain't no other king in this rap thing  
They siblings, nothing but my chil'ren

The Notorious B.I.G, *Kick in the Door*, 1997, Bad Boy Records

One of Biggie’s tactics was pure and simple- blatantly stating his (desired) positioning in the rap game as ruler and King. Since he sought to tell the truth about the hood, he also claimed he was the truth, the realest representative of the Thug Nation. When Biggie raps, “they siblings, nothing but my chil’re,” he is using the structure of the thug family to assert his role in the family as father and patriarch. Saying to the listener, ‘they siblings,’ is putting the listener in a subordinate positioning, along with other rappers, and placing Biggie at the head of the family when he says they are all nothing but his children. Referring back to the previous chapter with the notion of naturalizing of familial roles, we can understand how Biggie asserting himself as ‘father’ represents him as the leader of the Thug Nation.



In this interview, Biggie attempts to establish himself as a transparent medium used to expose ‘true’ struggles of life in the hood. Biggie then is a middleman, understanding and experiencing what happens in the hood and putting it out there for the public to hear. Biggie says,

Its reality. You can’t hide the truth man, it’s going to be seen. There’s killings. I’m just, I’m just a narrator, you know? I’m just telling a story, that’s all. I ain’t telling nobody you need to do this and you need to do this, I’m just letting you know this is what happens. Can’t be mad at me. Get to know me man. To know me is to love me.

The Notorious B.I.G, *B.I.G Interview (Bonus Track)*, 1997, Bad Boy Records

Biggie is taking a stab at the political tactics used by Tupac to call people to action for the injustices imposed upon them by the American nation. He explains that he is not telling people what to do; rather, he is shedding light on the situation of the hood. Not everyone is action oriented or inspired by calls to action, even if they are not satisfied with their situations in life. For Biggie, he felt it more effective to let the people know he is on their level, he understands where they are coming from because he has been there; he knows the struggle. Biggie was more interested in ‘giving back’ to the people in the community by sharing his success with them and helping them in achieving their success. Ultimately lifting the people up with himself, out of the hood.

When I started my album or whatever, I was rolling with a bunch of little dudes, you know, from around the way on the corners or whatever, and I was like, “Yo, once I get on and get my foot right where I need it, I’m a leave the door open and put ya’ll on and its on you to bum rush it. You know what I’m saying? You handle it how you wanna handle it.

The Notorious B.I.G, *B.I.G Interview (Bonus Track)*, 1997, Bad Boy Records

Without a doubt, Biggie wanted to be a ‘voice’ for the people in the hood, showing solidarity with them by rapping about specific situations in the hood. While he did not use call to actions for political change, he sought to inspire and pave the way for other rappers to also get the story of the hood circulating outside of the Thug Nation and in the American public conversation.

### **3.5. Tupac’s Campaign**

Tupac on the other hand, was more of hood activist, seeking not only to raise awareness as Biggie did, but call his people to action for structural changes. Both Tupac’s mother and father were apart of the Black Panthers, and interviews with Tupac show this was the inspiration for some of his political motives. Tupac talks about the battle between him in Biggie in terms of a political race with varying political parties.

To me its like a politician's race- if I lose, if I lost New York, I won the 49 other states. And that makes me in control and now I'm the new president for the next four years...Just like republicans hate Carter or whatever, and now Republicans is like we cant wait for Bush to come back, you know? Just like now I'm in power, they, everybody that love Biggie, they all like 'I cant wait for Biggie to come back... That's why they root for them, they root for they people and when I was gone (in jail) that's why all my niggas were like we can't wait for him to come. That's why they rushed the polls, they wanted a new regime and my regime includes the East coast, it includes the West coast, it brings money, economics, I mean I studied this shit.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC4S6FLW1Us>)

Studied he did. Tupac, in many interviews, discussed his self-taught schooling on various forms of power and politics. Tupac recognized in order to be able to change the situation of the hood, he needed to gather various tactics that have worked in other contexts. This following passage is a bit lengthy, but I feel it highlights so nicely this notion of Tupac accumulating various political tactics to forge a political identity of his own.

I hate America as for what we did, but I love us for being strong- you gotta do that. So what we don't got a good image, we the strongest motherfucking nation. That's me, right fucking there, you know what I mean? I don't give a fuck if ya'll don't like, I got the balls cant nobody touch me or nobody rush

me. Something we doing right. That's that capitalism shit cause you can feed your kids with that thought. All that other shit, you cant feed your kids with that. You can't feed your kids, you cant have a nation. So that's what more important then, to me. Is to take the disciple, the seriousness, and the bond that the mob has. To take, the um, the enthusiasm, the mold, the principles that the Black Panthers had, and the strength that the Black Panthers had, and the go all out, I'll die for you, all of us as a team that the police have. To take the nation is first attitude that we got to do whatever we got to do to be number one that the United States take, and that's what makes me unstoppable. And take that nigga attitude that makes me look at all of that shit, studying and learning. Take the young African American to have the talent to exhibit it, you know what I mean? And take the business man, the president, the philosopher to be able to break it down to an actual philosophy...Its up to me to bring it to the people or else we gonna have an East Coast West Coast war cause I'm not about to bow down. You know? Cause everything I did was righteous by rules of war, you know what I mean? And they got to recognize that.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC4S6FLW1Us>)

This passage is a fitting example of how Tupac sought to accumulate knowledge and follow the frameworks of various political groups and thoughts in order to develop his own philosophy and political framework for the Thug Nation. He highlights the importance of power and strength needed to run a nation, asserting he does indeed

embody this strength and power. He also emphasizes loyalty to the nation when talking about willingness to die for the nation, in honor of the nation. He really takes many different ideologies and combines them to construct his politics of the Thug Nation.

While Biggie's philanthropy was more focused on bringing people out of the hood via the rap game, Tupac was more focused on bringing his successes back to the hood. Tupac spoke a lot about community involvement and the various ways he wanted to give back to the hood, the Thug Nation.

Yeah, I'm bringing money to New York. I'm signing groups like Death Row East. Its bringing money, economics, that's sales. I'm bringing the bridge through this motherfucker. I want to start an athletic team where all the rappers sponsor a team. I mean I'm bringing the community involvement, giving money back to the community. We got Mother's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas so far, Death Row, we been doing that every year. And we gonna do it every year. Clothing, feeding, that's, come on, that's the welfare right there. We are the best choice for this fucking millennium. And I'm the only one in it like that. This nigga Biggie still try to be the motherfucking Godfather.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC4S6FLW1Us>)

First, Tupac sought to create an internal welfare system within the hood, critiquing the lack of help from the current government run welfare system in place. This self-governance or autonomy from the American nation helps establish the Thug Nation as its own entity. Also, Tupac emphasizes the good he wants to do for the *entire* Thug Nation, not only the west coast. He seeks to build the community and thus, the strength of the Thug Nation. As I have explained earlier in the chapter, in order for the greater American discourse to change and see members of the hood in a more positive light, people within the hood have to see themselves as positive as well. Tupac recognized this and paid special attention to the positive formation of community within the Thug Nation. Forman (2000) explores further this notion community building and its benefit to the hood,

This continual reference to the important value of social relations based in the ‘hood refutes the damning images of an oppressed and joyless underclass that are so prevalent in the media and contemporary social analysis. Rap may frequently portray the nation’s gritty urban underside, but its creators also communicate the importance of places and the people that build community within them. In this interpretation, there is an insistent emphasis on support, nurture and community that coexists with the grim representations that generally cohere in the images and discourses of ghetto life (73).

Both Biggie and Tupac could distinguish the importance of establishing and solidifying community within their hoods and ultimately the Thug Nation. As the two contenders in the battle for ruler of the throne, Biggie and Tupac both established their thug policies and political promises to the Thug Nation, allowing for the people to pick a leader to support.

### **3.6. Only the hood die young**

These ties to space within hip-hop enable the rappers to form their crews, and ultimately battle it out for ruler of the nation. I do not know of any songs by Biggie or Tupac that do not include specific shout outs to or mentioning of, turf or territory. This also includes shout outs to their cliques and crews since they too, by pure formation, represent territory. It is these territories, these spaces, which comprise the lived experiences of Biggie and Tupac. Their identities are constructed through their seeming naturalized belonging to their 'hoods. Because of that, in regards to national thug duties, the members of these specifically local groups become soldiers for the nation, ready and willing to battle in the name of national interest. By turning their territories into their kingdoms, Biggie and Tupac authenticated themselves as leaders in relation to the spaces they lived. But this authentication process also included support from their kingdoms, and peoples willingness to defend the kingdom.

Defending one's own community and country has been seen as an ultimate citizen's duty- to die (as well as to kill for) the sake of the homeland or the nation (Yuval- Davis, 1985; 1991b). This duty has given rise to Kathleen Jones' (1990) claim that the body is a significant dimension in the definition of citizenship. Traditionally, she claims, citizenship has been linked with the ability to take part in armed struggle for national defense; this ability has been equated with maleness, while femaleness has been equated with weakness and the need for male protection"(Yuval-Davis 89).

As I have explored in the previous, thug-ness is a process of becoming; it is a specific performance of masculinity within the Thug Nation. A big part of this performance is the willingness to not only kill, but die for the nation in honor of being thug. For they must battle it out, a civil war within the Thug Nation, to vouch the 'realist' leader is elected.

According to Vibe Magazine, one of the most popular American hip-hop magazines,

The history of hip hop is built on battles. But it used to be that when heads had a problem, they could pull a mike and settle it, using hollow-point rhymes to run their competitors off the map. Well, things done changed. The era of the gun clapper is upon us, with rappers and record execs alike taking their cue from Scarface. Meanwhile, those on the sidelines seem less concerned with the truth than with fanning the flames—



gossiping about death threats and retribution, lying in wait for the first sign of bloodshed (<http://www.vibe.com/page/biggie-puffy-break-their-silence-95-vibe-cover-story-pg5>).

So then, we can understand that battling is nothing new in hip-hop. In fact, freestyle competitions, where rappers spit rhymes<sup>42</sup> from the top of their heads in a lyrical battlefield, surround the origins of hip-hop. But in the early to mid 1990's, during the height of Biggie and Tupac's careers, a new military discourse equating thugs to soldiers emerged. The rise of this discourse coincided to the rise of casualties of thug soliders within the Thug Nation. Anderson (1991) writes,

The great wars of this century are extraordinary not so much in the unprecedented scale on which they permitted people to kill, as in the colossal numbers persuaded to lay down their lives...the idea of the ultimate sacrifice comes only with an idea of purity, through fatality (144).

The Thug Nation then, became a battleground for the ultimate authentication of a thug leader. In order for Biggie or Tupac to be authenticated as a leader, they had to have an army of thug soliders, ready and willing to put their lives on the line in the name of the nation. Biggie even raps, "Bad Boy, Who we die for, All day, everyday nigga"

In a Vibe magazine article, Tupac talks about the construct of thug soldiers,

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<sup>42</sup> To spit rhymes entails rapping from the top of one's head, not having previously written down or memorized material.

*Vibe Magazine*: Why do you think so many young black men around the country identify with you?

*Tupac*: Cause we all soldiers, unfortunately. Everybody's at war. Some of us are at war with different things. With ourselves. Some of them are at war with the establishment. Some of us are at war with our own communities.

(<http://www.vibe.com/article/tupac-his-dualing-sides-getting-politics-pg-4>)

This war Tupac talks about is both within the American nation and internal to the Thug Nation. With people so strongly supporting either Biggie or Tupac, viewing them as their saviors for the Thug Nation, they were willing to defend their leader, taking the battle to the streets. After all, "it is this magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny" (Anderson, 1992, pg. 11)

Death is always lurking in the hood and the future can often times seem grim.

This lingering of death created a sort of Thug nervousness- knowing that death is just around the corner and calling their names. In both of their lyrical narratives and many interviews with both rappers, death takes center stage- both the killings of others and their own deaths. Biggie's first album was even titled *Ready to Die*. It has been argued that both rappers predicted their untimely deaths, realizing the dangers in their battle for king. When asked where he will be in ten years, Biggie replied,

Where I think I'll be? Ten years? I don't think I will see it for real dogg, for real man. That shit ain't, promised man. I don't think my luck is that good, I hope it is but if it ain't so be it, I'm ready.”

The Notorious B.I.G, *B.I.G Interview (Bonus Track)*, 1997, Bad Boy Records

In his song *Tattoo Tears*, Tupac talks about the constant stress of death within the hood.

I been, handlin stress in this shit for years  
Blazed out sheddin tattooed tears.....

I got a dream to see my whole team in Lexus Coupes  
My enemies dead n buried, now the stress is through  
But that's a dream, though it seems like reality; there'll  
never be peace long as there's fiends on these Cali streets  
Even on the other side brothers die, but ride  
niggaz get high off a slow form of suicide

Tupac, *Tattoo Tears*, 1995, Amaru, Death Row, Interscope

This ‘slow form of suicide’ Tupac refers to is the daily deaths of people (men) within the hood as a result of civil battles against one another. Although this war is directly affecting the Thug Nation, riding itself of citizens, it is at the same time a tool used by thugs to assert their positioning within the Thug Nation, displaying their loyalty

to their crews and coasts. In a sense, dying for the nation makes the soliders martyrs for the hood. “Dying for the revolution also draws grandeur from the degree to which it is felt to be something fundamentally pure” (Anderson, 1991, pg.144). This notion of pure duty in death is, I would argue, the ultimate rooting of ones self to the nation- willing to end their lives where they began, in regards to the Thug Nation.

Maybe the ultimate tactic to assert authenticity in the rap game is to die in the rap game, for the rap game. Anderson (1991) explains, “If the manner of a man’s dying usually seems arbitrary, his mortality is inescapable. Human lives are full of such combinations of necessity and life” (10) Therefore, simply dying in the hood does not make one a solider; does not mean they died in an honorable way for the Thug Nation. In his song, *You’re Nobody til Somebody Kills You*, Biggie emphasizes the importance of death in solidifying ones positioning in the rap game. At the same time, he emphasizes Anderson’s point that death must not be a result of an arbitrary situation- it has to be commendable in regards to the Thug Nation.

You can be the shit, flash the fattest five  
 Have the biggest dick, but when your shell get hit  
 You ain't worth spit, just a memory  
 Remember he, used to push the champagne Range (I remember that)  
 Silly cat, wore suede in the rain  
 Swear he put the G in game, had the Gucci frame...  
 I can't recall his name, wasn't he that kid

that nearly lost half his brain over two grams of cocaine?

Getting his dick sucked by crackhead Lorraine

A fucking shame, dude's the lame, what's his name?

Darkskin Jermaine, see what I mean?

The Notorious B.I.G, *You're Nobody til Somebody Kills You*, 1997, Bad Boy Records

As Biggie explains, the memory of ones life is not truly depended on what they did in life, but rather *how* they died. The character he is referring to in the song may have seemed like a true thug in life- displaying his masculinity based on penis size, and his use of guns, but it is his death that now leaves his legacy. Since the character lost his life over two grams of cocaine, he is not remembered. Biggie cannot even recall his name since his death was not honorable, not in the name of the Thug Nation.

For both Biggie and Tupac, it was their deaths- the way they died, which ultimately solidified their positioning in the rap game and in hip-hop history. Both men were shot and killed by unidentified suspects, as a result of their battle for leader of the Thug Nation, forever rooting them to the Thug Nation. As Anderson (1991) said, “Nothing connects us affectively to the dead more than language” (145). Today, with the lyrical narratives of both rappers still being circulated and explored, comes their eternal life.

Tupac sang in his song, *No more pain*,

When I die, I wanna be a livin legend, say my name

Affiliated with this motherfuckin game, with no more pain.

Tupac, *No More Pain*, 1996, Death Row Records

Although it has been over fifteen years since Biggie and Tupac have left this earth, their legacies, their influence, and their politics still live on. They are still touching the lives of people and the stories they told of life in the hood remain true today. People still want to believe in them, to follow them and support them, while still promoting their words. In fact, people still flock to the spots where each rapper suffered gunshots wounds, resulting in their lives. According to Anderson (1991) these “pilgrimages are probably the most touching and grandiose journeys of the imagination” (54-55) People want to know that Biggie and Tupac are not so far away, that they are still somehow connected with these two influential artists. I would argue this is because since their deaths, there has not been any other hip-hop artists who even begin to talk about the things Biggie and Tupac did- Raising issues, pushing buttons, making people feel uncomfortable listening to the things that are going on in the hood. Both Biggie and Tupac used hip-hop as a platform and means to develop their politics and raise awareness of the social structural issues that contribute to a specific lived experience in the hood.

## Conclusion

This analysis sought to explore the ways in which rap music and hip-hop provided Biggie and Tupac the means for offering an alternative political space where they could construct ‘authentic’ narratives on what life is like the hood. Seeking to challenge racialized social structures, both rappers constructed narratives illuminating the ways in which these structures tend to keep certain people located in certain spaces- for them those spaces being the hood. They used the trope of family as a way to authenticate themselves and challenge hierarchical structures. Although they sought to challenge these institutional hierarchies, I demonstrated the ways in which they still maintained hierarchies within their reclaimed notion of the family. The family then, was used as the building block for the conceptualization of the Thug Nation. Having its own rules, regulations, and codes of conduct, the Thug Nation sought to be autonomous from the greater American nation, thus demonstrating Biggie and Tupac’s expertise and authority over that space. Rooting themselves to specific locations was a tactic used by both men in order to better authenticate their positioning in the rap game and in the running for ruler of the nation. This notion of authenticity is saturated throughout the entire analysis because, as I have shown, claims to being the ‘ realest’ or ‘ truest’ are necessary in hip-hop music in order to anchor the rapper to their hood. So then, by using themes of family, space, and rootedness, Biggie and Tupac were able to create a political platform; campaigning for ruler of the nation while performing a specific masculinity I called thugness.

### **Where does Hip-Hop go from here?**

Today, as Rose (2008) has made clear, hip-hop is in a crisis. Rose writes,

The excessive blame leveled at hip-hop is astonishing in its refusal to consider the culpability of the larger social and political context. To many hot-headed critics of hip-hop, structural forms of deep racism, corporate influences, and the long-term effects of economic, social, and political disempowerment are not meaningfully related to rappers' alienated, angry stories about life in the ghetto; rather, they are seen as "proof" that black behavior creates ghetto conditions (5).

Indeed it is this common American notion of the hood that is seeped into the negative discourse surrounding the hood and the people within it. The majority of people do not question the space and location of hood or the social structures that gives certain people certain advantages, opportunities, and privileges over others. Biggie and Tupac sought to do this and it resulted in their deaths. Both men were so apt to become leader of the Thug Nation, that they risked their lives for it. But, is that still being done in hip-hop today? The answer is no.

Along with the monopoly of most all business within the United States, the music industry has been no different. Previously, the way for crews or small groups of rappers



to promote their individual styles in regards to their individual hoods was through small locally owned record labels. But, with the mainstream appeal of rap to the masses in the late 1990's came the sanitation of rap. Inherently, rap was used as a means to create a new political space for marginalized members of America's inner cities to have a voice and create awareness on the issues plaguing their communities. But as rap music became more popular, more mainstream, it also became depoliticized. Rose (2008) even went as far to argue,

If Tupac Shakur were a newly signed artist today, I believe he'd likely be considered a socially conscious rapper and thus regulated to the margins of the commercial hip-hop field. Tupac (who despite his death in 1996 remains one of hip-hop's most visible and highly regarded gangsta rappers) might even be thought of as too political and too "soft" (3).

Indeed this is what has come of politically conscious rap music today and I would like to argue it is a strategic move on part of the music industry and also the government. Biggie and Tupac did not always rest well with people because they made people nervous. They sought to be raw and real, telling the gritty details to the life in the hood. When Hip-hop became more commercial, I argue people did not want to be engaged in these political rhymes. Instead, the mainstream appeal of rap music to the masses was its exoticization of black culture. Many people simply wanted the novelty of hip-hop, but not wanting to feel politically responsible for anything.

The problem is today these lyrical narratives are not political in any sense. It's not that they do not exist, but they are circulating in an underground community where the people actively seeking them out already know or at the very least have an idea about the struggles of life in America's inner city. For the word to really get out, the story has to go out to the masses. The way hip-hop is being performed today is more regulated than during the time of Biggie and Tupac. There is a mold one must fit into today in order to become a successful rapper. Like the humans zoos that were so popular in colonial France and England, putting peoples "exotic" cultures on display, rap in the United States seeks to package the concept of the hood up in a pretty little package, making sure not to bring attention to any negativity surrounding it. By keeping rap into these categories, where any change of political messages or struggles with hierarchies as muted, there is no longer a platform for rap in the United States to be used as an alternative political space for marginalized people.

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[http://www.mtv.com/bands/n/notorious\\_big/news\\_feature\\_070305/index2.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/bands/n/notorious_big/news_feature_070305/index2.jhtml)

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