

# **Say It Loud!**

**American Audiences, Media, and Identity**

Edited by Robin R. Means Coleman

Routledge  
*New York and London*

## The Menace II Society Copycat Murder Case and Thug Life

A Reception Study with a Convicted Criminal

Robin R. Means Coleman

*In 1994, Appellant, Caryon Johnson, then fourteen years old, pled guilty to facilitation to murder, facilitation to robbery in the first degree, facilitation to kidnapping, and complicity to attempted theft over \$300.00. . . . This case involves what eventually came to be known as the "Menace II Society" shootings, the name of a violent movie which Appellant and his friends viewed immediately before embarking on a crime spree.*

—Johnson v. Commonwealth of Kentucky

*I don't want to talk about it [the possibility that their film might provoke violence]. What about the White kids coming out with baseball bats after "Lethal Weapon"? . . . You don't hear about that. But anytime that violence happens, everybody goes and pushes it off on some rap song or some movie.*

—Allen Hughes, director, *Menace II Society*

On May 18, 1993, twenty-one-year-old twin siblings and film director/producer duo Allen and Albert Hughes (the Hughes brothers) made their cinematic debut when their hyperviolent, urban drama *Menace II Society* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, and a few days later opened in movie theaters across the United States. The film, a coming-of-age tale, chronicles

a summer in the life of Caine, an African-American teen male and recent high school graduate. The film's focus is on Caine's attempt to move into manhood by making some tough choices about how he plans to map his (potentially bleak) future. His growth is hampered at nearly every turn as Caine is forced, often violently, to negotiate the mean streets of South Central Los Angeles: Caine has little going for him. He is an orphan left behind by a heroin addicted mother who dies of an overdose, and a trigger-happy father who is gunned down during the course of the film. Caine's surrogate father figure, Pernell, is in prison for life. Caine himself is facing fatherhood as a result of a sexual relationship with a young woman he cares little about. Most notable, however, is Caine's penchant for violence: Caine is a cold and violent criminal who pistol-whips an acquaintance, beats and stomps a relative of the young woman he impregnated, commits an armed carjacking, is an accessory to a convenience store robbery that ends in a double homicide, and commits double murder as he seeks revenge for the carjacking/murder of his cousin Harold.

*Menace II Society* garnered accolades from numerous film critics who found the film's depiction of Black ghetto tribulations, including the frequent and gruesome violence, as particularly realistic. The Hughes brothers, reared in an upper-middle-class home far from the ghetto, were hailed for possessing great acumen. Noted film critic Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the movie review television program *Siskel and Ebert at the Movies* awarded the film a perfect four stars in his column and a "thumbs up" on the show. Ebert (1993) wrote: "*Menace II Society* is as well-directed a film as you'll see from America this year, an unsentimental and yet completely involving story of a young man who cannot see a way around his fate. . . . If *Menace II Society* shows things the way they often are—and I believe it does—then the film is not negative for depicting them truthfully." Other arbiters agreed on the film's quality as, in 1994, *Menace II Society* was nominated for the Independent Spirit Award's Best First Feature and Best Male Lead awards. It won the Independent Spirit Award for Best Cinematographer and MTV Movie Award for Best Movie.

*Menace II Society* moved from the lauded into the infamous, however, when it took center stage in an eerily similar, real-life urban drama of murder, robbery, and carjacking involving five, also coming-of-age, African-American male teens:

This chapter presents a reception study with Caryon Johnson, one of the five youths who was ultimately convicted of copycat crimes in the case

that came to be known in the media as the "*Menace II Society* Murder Case." The purpose of this case study of Caryon's reception practices is to lay bare the relationship Caryon had with the film specifically, and with mass media in general. Here, I detail Caryon's emergent constructions, or interpretations, in response to media's presentation of the urban, ghetto-centric narratives, as well as media's representation of young, often criminal, African-American men. This study seeks to understand his identification with the characters, behaviors, lifestyles, and messages in such presentations. More, it seeks to account for how Caryon views the symbolic world as it informs and merges with his own African-American, urban, male teen identity. I introduce three themes—masculinity, viewing style, and desired representations—that emanated from Caryon's constructions and typify the manner in which he engages with media and identifies (or not) with its representation of a distinct social world. I conclude by discussing the implications of Caryon's socialization as a media consumer and how his familiarity with very specific media symbolic systems plays a significant role in his life. Echoing JoEllen Fisherkeller (chapter 7 in this book), I maintain that it is important to extend our insights in meaning making and media consumption by examining the role media play in youths' everyday life, and how media have the potential to converge with their identities.

Interviewing an incarcerated individual who was part of a high-profile case proved to be quite challenging.<sup>1</sup> A major hurdle was access. Not only is Caryon confined in the maximum-security Kentucky State Penitentiary, but it is an institution that is very restrictive regarding access to inmates (only immediate family or legal counsel), inmate privileges (only select materials that arrive by mail are given to inmates), and other freedoms (no incoming calls, limited outgoing calls, and restrictions on postage stamps and envelopes). A second difficulty was securing the trust of a young man who took part in a crime that attracted national media attention. Caryon believed that reporters were seeking to exploit him and sensationalize the crime for ratings. Trust was established and reestablished through a number of methods, which included securing the endorsement of a defense attorney involved in the case, sending educational materials that evidenced the kind of work scholars engage in, explaining that the purpose of this research is educative, not profit-motivated, and member checks—providing the participant with a chance to elaborate on the researcher's interpretations of the participant's constructions. Given Caryon's confinement (in-



*Menace II Society*. Courtesy of *Photofest*.

cluding over two hundred days that he spent in solitary confinement during this study), the individual, in-depth interviews that I desired to engage in had to be conducted via letters. I sent Caryon interview questions, he wrote back, and I responded with questions that prompted him to expound upon his answers, and new questions. While the interview process was not ideally hermeneutical and dialogic, I worked diligently to maintain the spirit of such an engagement.

This chapter is based largely on letters Caryon wrote to me from December 1999 to January 2001 that contain data specifically regarding his meaning making of *Menace II Society* and his relationship with media that inform his identity. Though Caryon is the focus, this study is supplemented by interview data collected from one other young man involved in the murder case, Sylvester Berry. Kunta Sims is also a research participant; however, for this chapter I have relied on his constructions for background information, and therefore do not present his constructions. I have also utilized media reports, attorney interviews, family interviews, and court documents collected since 1994. Because the five did not go to trial, but entered plea agreements to avoid the death penalty, official testimony on the night's events from the teens, their families and friends, or their victims was never entered into record. This study focuses on Caryon, as his constructions are some of the most compelling in their ability to contribute to a knowledge base about youths' relationship with media. My research with Caryon,

The *Menace II Society* Copycat Murder Case and 'Thing Life' ■ 253

Sylvester, and Kunta continues today. The other two young men involved in the murder case declined to participate.

#### **The *Menace II Society* Murder Case**

On the evening of January 23, 1994, in Paducah, Kentucky, four youths—Caryon Johnson, thirteen; Steven Johnson, sixteen (Caryon's cousin); Calvin "Kevin" Smith, sixteen (Kunta's close friend); and Kunta Sims, seventeen—viewed the film *Menace II Society* on videotape. Later that evening, they would find themselves the perpetrators of a crime spree and murder they would link to the film. The teens had all viewed the R-rated film on video and in the theater many, many times before. Each viewing exposed them to particularly violent and bloody scenes. In one scene that would later prove key in the boys' lives, the film's main character, Caine, and his cousin Harold are carjacked at gunpoint by a group of African-American men. Harold resists, and is shown getting blown away, at close range, by a shotgun. Caine is seriously wounded by the carjackers. As Caine lies bleeding profusely on the street near his cousin's body, the carjackers drive off in Harold's car, now awash in blood. After viewing the movie on that January evening, the four Kentucky adolescents devised a plan: steal cars and shoot people "until their bullets were gone" (Groves Hayes 1994, 8A).

Late in the evening of January 23, the four came upon James "Shane" Pearson, a high school sophomore and star athlete, as he was driving home from his part-time restaurant job at a steakhouse. They carjacked Pearson at gunpoint, kidnapped him, and took his vehicle. After riding Pearson around for some time, Kunta, described by prosecutors as the ringleader and by defense attorneys and family as having a low IQ and being easily influenced by others, repeatedly shot Pearson. His body was later discovered dumped on the lawn of a home not far from the shooting.

Soon after the murder of Pearson, the four picked up their friend Sylvester Berry (sixteen), filled him in on their plan, and offered to take him joyriding in Pearson's car. Berry, too, had repeatedly viewed *Menace II Society*. While driving around, the five came upon nineteen-year-old Matthew Fiorentini and his passenger Melissa Hall. The pair's car was stuck in a snowbank on the side of a road and they were working to free it. Fiorentini and Hall were confronted by Steven, Sylvester, who was sitting in Pearson's car, exited the car with a concealed gun that he surreptitiously passed to Steven. Steven shot Fiorentini twice and believed he had killed him. Fiorentini was seriously wounded, but survived. There was some dis-

cussion among the five about abducting or shooting Melissa Hall. Eventually the five fled the scene without Hall. A day later, most of the five were taken into custody or arranging for their surrenders. During police questioning, the five youths offered that they were motivated by the film *Menace II Society*. Indeed, their crimes, especially the carjacking and shooting of Pearson, closely paralleled the fate that Caine's cousin Harold faced in the film. The survival of Fiorentini, though eerily similar to Caine's survival of the carjacking in the film, was certainly serendipitous.

### Masculinity and the Thug Life

I see myself in some of the characters. I identify with whoever is playing a *thug life part* [emphasis mine], like Ice Cube in *Boyz in the Hood*, or Chris Tucker in the movie *Friday*. Because I always had to struggle to reach the top, and I still haven't made it yet.

The character that identify with me was Caine because he was layed back selling drugs, getting his money. That's my style right there—even though I wouldn't do it now. He done a little shooting and fighting too, but very, very little. So he's similar to me.

And so it began. These were Caryon's responses to what was supposed to be a generally benign warm-up question asking him to discuss any of his favorite media presentations. From the very first letter, Caryon revealed a pattern of admiration for and identification with a single character type—the African-American male criminal and a specific type of media text—the ghetto-centric, violent drama. Admittedly, Caryon was keenly aware that he was contacted to be a study participant because of this potential affinity for such imagery. However, it would become clear that he was not simply conforming to the interests of the researcher. At every turn, he would work to *disassociate* himself from the film that made him infamous, and at every turn, his interpretations of his world, life, and relationship with media led him right back to it.

### Living the Thug Life

It is not surprising that Caryon states he identifies with portrayals that present a “thug life part.” Indeed, Caryon has led, and according to prison officials in the state of Kentucky, continues to lead the thug life. In April of 2000, while housed in the medium-security facility Greentree Correctional Center, Caryon wrote to a family member asking that the individual “bring

him some stuff” because he needed some money. It was risky to make such a solicitation, as Greentree officials randomly monitor outgoing prisoner mail. For Caryon, it turned out to be a bad move. Though written in code, Caryon had requested that a relative smuggle drugs into the prison during a visit so he could sell them.

Inmates learn a great deal about the legal system while incarcerated, and come to rely on two important tenets: (1) admit nothing; and (2) to be charged with a crime, there must be proof of wrongdoing. Regarding this drug solicitation infraction, Caryon did not deny his actions, as he wrote, “I needed some money Mrs. Coleman.” He also lamented “they had no proof” that he was asking for drugs. Though not charged with a crime, much to the chagrin of Caryon he received a category 4-5 write-up for attempting to smuggle drugs into the prison, and was sentenced to one month in solitary confinement, or “the hole.” He also “lost visits for six months and sixty days of my good time.” While in the hole, it was believed by prison officials that Caryon, a Gangster Disciples gang member since the age of twelve, committed a category 5-10 for gang activity by instigating a gang fight. Upon this second charge, Caryon was transferred to the maximum-security facility Kentucky State Penitentiary and immediately placed in their hole. Later Caryon was cleared of this infraction, but the transfer stayed. While in the hole in his new prison home, Caryon tried to make contact with fellow inmates who were friends from his hometown. This communication attempt earned Caryon another 5-10 charge of being a gang leader and attempting to organize a gang. This Caryon vehemently denied, writing, “I used to be a gang member. But that was on the streets in my past. Not now.” Sylvester Berry expressed a similar concern when he wrote to me for help: “Was you able to find out anything about helping me with the ‘gang’ stereotype in here?” In the end, between April 2000 and January 2001, Caryon spent over two hundred days in the hole.

Caryon is no stranger to trouble. Sadly, much of his very short life before going to prison was defined by violence and dysfunction. At the age of four, while enrolled in a Head Start program, he was expelled for disciplinary problems. Every year thereafter, until his imprisonment during his eight-grade school year, Caryon was expelled from school. Though from kindergarten to eighth grade he never completed a full school year, he was never once denied promotion to the next grade. Nor was he or his family counseled about his problems. In fact, his mother claims that school officials often failed to contact her when Caryon was absent from school or ex-

pelled. Once a teacher questioned whether Caryon might have been suffering from a mental illness, given that one of his siblings had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. However, this inquiry did not go well as the teacher asked Caryon's mother (with Caryon present) if he was ill. Caryon reacted angrily to the accusation, proclaiming he was not sick. Because the two adults left it up to the then nine year old to indicate that he needed help from mental health professionals, there was never any further discussion about his psychological well-being.

Today, most who know him best—family and friends—believe that what Caryon really needed was a stable home life. Caryon's father was not part of the household. Though Caryon lived with his mother in her housing project apartment, she was often physically, emotionally, and morally absent. She engaged in criminal activities (including selling drugs to supplement her public assistance, theft, and illegally possessing a firearm). His mother served three years in prison prior to Caryon's own incarceration.

Young, emotionally underdeveloped, minimally educated, and impoverished, Caryon was largely left to his own devices and reared himself (though for brief periods of time he stayed with various relatives and friends, including his father and stepmother, older sister, cousin, and two different girlfriends). Beginning in the second grade, Caryon began running the streets and committing small crimes with other young boys. He wrote of these escapades:

On the south side of town in Elmwood Court Projects my friends were King, Preston, Charles, and Tucker.<sup>2</sup> We all came up fighting the whole neighborhood. Breaking out people's windows, playing knock knock run, where you would knock on a person's door at nighttime and run while they're coming to answer the door. We had to sneak out of the house at night every night to do the things we were doing. We would bust out streetlights, car windows that drove by. We flattened people's cars tires. Cut out their screen doors. Anything you could name we done it.

With each year, Caryon and his friends became more rebellious and their crimes began to escalate in seriousness. Caryon talked about his criminal activities around the ages of six and seven: "In Dudley Court [Projects] we clowned out there too. [My friends and I] started breakin' into houses out around there." And around ages eight and nine: "In the Forest Hills Projects my friends were C-Note, Tall Jack, Luke, Chaney, Shaggy, Nevin, and two of my cousins. We didn't do nothing [because] those dudes was scared except for my friend C-Note. We done alot of bad stuff including

smoking marijuana. We call that stuff 'trees'."

By ten, wholly unsupervised, Caryon turned to those young people who were similarly socioeconomically situated for friendship and support. However, the composition of his group of friends changed often. Some moved away, others became part of the penal system. Without a family unit, around age twelve Caryon sought out, and was accepted by, a notorious street gang, the Gangster Disciples. He wrote:

I was about 12 years old now. They used to have shoot-outs in T.J. [Thomas Jefferson Projects]. Yeah, T.J. was the hot spot with gangs and stuff. . . . My cousin Jessie, Jr. was in a gang called G.D. which is the Gangster Disciples.<sup>3</sup> He put me [and a friend] in the gang by Jessie and some gang members beating us up. We wanted to be in though. We wasn't forced at all.

As street gang culture goes, Caryon had hit the big time:

This is where I got my first gun, and drugs to sell. I loved T.J. It's on North 13th and North 14th, then the sides is Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, and the other side is Madison Street. It's two liquor stores right across the street from that project. I had to quit going home. I had this girlfriend named Toya that I lived with. I was going to school, but I was skipping school also. They would call my mom's and she would come to my girl's house to see what was up. I was going to 21 and up clubs every night. Smoking big trees—I'm talking about ounces with my partners. We were driving dope fends' cars. We would give them cocaine to drive their cars for a certain amount of hours. We would wreck [sic] the cars. The dope fend would report it stolen, so we would leave the cars in ditches, alleys, people's back yards, just anywhere. . . . We mainly used those cars to go out of town in. I've been to places like Carbondale, Ill., Houston, Texas, Union City, TN, Mayfield, KY, Clarksville, TN, Memphis, TN, Chicago, Ill., Gary, IN, and many more other places. My family didn't even know I was out of town.

Caryon, the gang's youngest member, took on a nickname, "Bambino," and worked hard to prove his worth to the older (teen and adult male) gang members. He, indeed, earned bragging rights:

We kept hotel rooms payed for mostly on the weekends, so that we could take girls up there and have sex with them any time we wanted to. That was all fun stuff. I was known all over the whole Paducah, Kentucky and I'm still known to this day. I was the youngest dude down there selling

drugs, stealing, staying with grown women, robbin', and all of that. I even kept different kinds of guns. I had already turned 13 by then. I never needed money because I kept my own at all times. I would never be broke.

And then that fateful January night was upon him.

All of my friends were always older than me, and they would look out for me if I ever needed it. . . . I started hanging with these guys. I liked two of them which was Sylvester Berry, and my first cousin Steven Johnson. The other two I didn't like very well [Kunta Sims and Calvin Smith]. Plus Kunta wasn't in my gang. He was in another gang that was against mines. . . . My real true partnaz from T.J. Projects told me not to leave with them guys that night our case happened, but I didn't listen. We were chillin', smoking some trees and my case partners [Sims, Smith, and Johnson] came to pick me up to go out of town with them to mess with some girls and to go to the clubs. My real partnaz said "man forget them, they on some stupid stuff" but I was hard-headed and didn't listen. So here I am today, locked up in prison with a 20 year sentence. There you go.

#### *The Process of Thug Life Identification*

Caryon's self-worth continues to be situated within the so-called thug life. In his world, he is richly rewarded for it through respect and admiration from his cohort: "I'm known world wide." An extremely powerful symbol of bravado and the macho male myth, the thug life identity position is male gender masculinity marked by an overt desire for dominance and power. In this, the thug life, men (even twelve-year-old boys) must be powerful. Here power is displayed through dominance and control. In Caryon's world this means controlling the streets (other youths, criminals, and the drug trade), frightening neighbors (and thereby keeping them from contacting police),<sup>4</sup> abusing drug addicts who are at his mercy (e.g., taking their cars), possessing women (heterosexuality is key in this world), and keeping enemies at bay by any means necessary. It means being a member of a notorious gang, and, if prison officials are correct, being a leader of a notorious gang in prison.

The thug life is a practice of identity that also includes displaying strength, often through (physical) aggression. For Caryon, this was defined by his participation in community sports (football and basketball) and robbing and warring with rival gang members. More, the mere practice is not enough. In the thug life, great competence in the areas of dominance,

power, and strength is requisite to the persona, and, frankly, to survival. One cannot simply control the street, but he must have a *thriving* drug trade. He must be in *irrefutable* control over neighbors and drug users, and maintains this through random acts of terror (violence and harassment). This role of the thug is hailed through an antihero worship where the more notorious are prized. Likewise, those who perish (be it by death or imprisonment), if courageously (e.g., by defending the gang, continuing gang activity and adopting the thug persona capably inside prison), are exalted. It is a "live by the sword, die by the sword" masculine heroism.

However, Caryon's fate may not have been sealed by his identification and participation in this hyperbravado. Caryon believes, and I concur, that it would have been very likely that he would have ended up in prison, but not for an unusual murder that may be connected to a film. He wrote: "If I did get locked up, it would of been a drug or robbery case, not no murder case."

Through his emergent constructions it became clear that media was really the only other socializing institution in his life, outside of his gang, and one he spent a significant amount of time with. For this study, I probed Caryon on a variety of issues to gain some sense of his social world. Though media questions did not take center stage for weeks at a time, Caryon kept media at the center of his discourse. I learned that, be it in lived experience or in media, Caryon encountered no messages against the conditions of his thug masculinity and his violent world. What he did encounter was a Black manhood framed by and (re)produced through media spectacle (e.g., celebrities and Hollywood films) that reaffirmed an identity position marked by power—sexual conquests, aggression/violence, and wealth.

Caryon saw real-life celebrities blurring the lines between thug life fact and media-created fiction. He saw rapper Tupac Shakur, with "thug life" tattooed prominently across his midsection, whisked off to jail for his involvement in a shooting and in a sexual assault against a young woman, and finally shot to death. Caryon noted the street credit Tupac earned, the records he sold, and the media attention he garnered as the rapper moved closer and closer to thug life authenticity. He saw rapper Notorious B.I.G. lead the same lifestyle and garner the same kind of media spotlight. And Caryon purchased their records, for they were heralded for living the kind of life Caryon was leading in Kentucky. Caryon wrote: "[One of my] favorite music artists is 2 Pac [Tupac] because he's a real thug that had knowledge." Caryon listened to the music and watched the music videos of these

rappers, and others, such as DMX, Ruff Ryders, Master P, and the Hot Boys, who rhymed of women, violence, and material wealth. He noticed when gangsta rapper MC Eith moved from narrating his thug life on CDs to portraying that life in *Menace II Society*. MC Eith played A-Wax, a thug described in the film as “always doing dirt.”

It was also obvious to Caryon that the athletes who wrapped themselves in displays of excess such as wealth (gold, diamonds, fancy cars, drugs), who were boldly sexual (frequented prostitutes, in the company of a lot of beautiful women), who were defiant in their narcissism (from fights with opponents to victory dances to bragging) were the ones who received the hero worship that was so valuable to ghetto/street life. Toward this end, prior to his incarceration, Caryon took up playing football and basketball.

Caryon also noted that media cannot help but focus on the thug, even as it castigates him. As often as the thug lifestyle is halted in the spectacle of celebrity, it is also featured in news magazine programs, documentaries, and print exposes (e.g., all those “crisis of the urban Black family, of the Black male, or of Black youth” front page features and television specials). “The thug life is profitable for more people than just the thug. Such positive reinforcement proves to be confounding for Caryon who, ironically, wants to secure a film deal that will chronicle the violence in his life, to include the crimes he committed that in some ways were informed by other violent films. Caryon does not see the irony in this proposition. Nor, at times, does Caryon see it necessary to end the thug life cycle. On this point, Caryon opined: “Yes, the thug life should be looked up to, because it’s just a lower part of living which is surrounded by hard times, sometimes violence, and just struggling in general. There are no reasons it shouldn’t be looked up to.” Sylvester, too, seemed to adopt a strange logic about his participation in the thug life. He wrote: “I get to take part in this study and help people because of what I did.”

And then there is the genre of film that is so attractive to Caryon. Some call it ghetto-centric (as Celeste Fisher does in chapter 10 in this book), others, “neo-blaxploitation” (Guerrero 1995). Both terms define a popular culture form rooted in rap and hip-hop iconography that features a Black, urban-based “street style cool” persona (George 1992). The film genre frequently taken on by young, African-American filmmakers such as the Hughes brothers, John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*), and Ernest Dickerson (*Juice*) relies upon a narrative that often focuses on Black-on-Black violence, street/thug life, and the hurdles encountered as young, African-

American men attempt to improve their lot and/or escape the ghetto. Nelson George, in his book *Blackface: Reflections on African Americans and the Movies* (1994), describes these films as marked by an urban imagery and fast pace that can be thought of as hip-hop moviemaking. For example, one of the early offerings from this new genre was the 1991 *New Jack City*, directed by Mario Van Peebles. Focusing on the rise of a drug dealer, it was ghetto-centric, full of Black-on-Black violence, and moved at a fast and rhythmic pace, keeping up with the tempo of its rap soundtrack. It came along to “reclaim and deconstruct” the Willie Horton, threatening Black male, recasting him as young, tough, glamorous, wealthy, attractive to women, and savvy (Means Coleman 2000). Popular culture critics such as Guerrero (1995), however, do not sing the praises of these films’ Black hypermasculinity and their counterhegemonic potential, finding them troubling thanks to the “wave of neo-blaxploitative, violently toxic, ghetto-action flicks, which too often package and sell the extermination of black men as entertainment while profiting filmmakers offer up shallow alibis about only depicting ‘what is real’” (396).

Indeed, in recent years these ghetto-centric, new-jack stylized, hood based, thug life films have become inescapable. *Juice* starred Tupac Shakur as a ruthless, teenaged villain of the ghetto streets. *New Jersey Drive* featured Black, male, teenaged carjackers. *Clackers* turned the Black male drug-dealing youth into a sympathetic hero. *Above the Rim* cast Tupac Shakur in yet another thug role as it focused on ghetto hoodlums who shot guns as often as they shot basketball hoops. *Original Gangstas* pitted Black, aging, former rulers of the hood against a new, younger wave of thugs. Every one of these films featured a hip-hop or gangsta rap soundtrack that, in many cases, equaled or exceeded the popularity of these films thereby extending the popularity and profitability of the thug icon.

Thus far, I have been detailing and working to make sense of Caryon’s process of “identification” with the symbolic. A central concept from psychoanalysis and Freud’s theorization that a child’s understanding of itself is as a (sexed) subject during the Oedipal stage; identification is defined by the psychological process whereby an individual, such as Caryon (the subject), takes on or assimilates (not to be confused with copying or imitation) “an aspect, property or attribute of the other” and is transformed, wholly or partly, after the model the other provides” (Mladen 1996, 30). Hence, it is through identification(s)—gang street culture, symbols of power and wealth, media spectacles and fantasies of celebrity, and so on—that identity



(here, the thug life) is realized. My starting point is *not* the primordial, but a more developed self who negotiates the self and the other—in this case, people or the symbolic—by identifying similarities and/or differences. Caryon was able to identify similarities between the self and stars' depiction of the thug lifestyle, or the thug lifestyle that some stars came to live. His close reading of stars/thug life helped Caryon to recognize differences, such as evolving masculine identities and desires (power and dominance) yet to be fulfilled. The relationship between media consumer/spectator (Caryon) and the mode of address (symbols of thug life), according to Stacey (1994, 126–75), permits identity to be transformed and affirmed by attending to symbolic representations such as media images/music, through a variety of ways and a range of connections. These include: (1) enjoyment in viewing and recognizing the familiar and everyday life; (2) looking to media fantasies for cues for something better and qualities already possessed; and (3) imagining oneself in the position/situation depicted and deciding on a course of action based on the pretense that one is actually in that position. These three moments of identification emerge in the constructions offered by Caryon.

#### *Recognizing the Familiar*

The films that make up the ghetto-centric genre, like *Menace II Society*, are attractive to Caryon because they acknowledge his social/subject position. Again and again, he talks about how his favorite media are those that closely depict his life experiences. He likes these films, which he calls action movies, because he can identify with the situations based on his own practice. He wrote: "I can relate to action movies because I've always been a hyper person. Some of the things I can relate to is fighting, robbing, and driving vehicles very wild and unsafe." Of the ghetto-centric film *Boyz N the Hood* he makes clear that he prefers the film because of its perceived realism, which is defined by how closely a media presentation parallels his own life. Caryon explained: "*Boyz N the Hood* is one of my favorite movies because it's real. What makes it real is when they show the runned down parts of California neighborhoods. And the shoot-outs, liquor drinking, attempted robberies, the fights, the custody disputes of [the character] They being with his mother or father. These things were all similar to my life."

In one letter, I prompted Caryon to clarify statements he made that seemed to indicate that he only liked thug life media representations and rejected characters that did not take up that lifestyle. He indicated that he

could not identify with what he called "good guy" representations because they did not measure up to his definition of verisimilitude. Although media consumers engaged in the process of identification often turn to media representation for cues on how to behave in situations, good characters (non-thugs) do not provide Caryon with an alternate identity, as they are too dissimilar from his lived experiences. Caryon explained:

Yes, I identify with the thug life. And no I don't identify with Black characters who are good because they made it to a up-to-date type living. [This is] unlike myself. Even though they may have struggled, they climbed up the mountain dodging big rocks that came tumbling down toward them. That's how they made it to the top. But as I climbed a little bit up that mountain, the big rocks that came tumbling down always hit me, and would knock me back to the bottom every time. They [the good characters] also seen opportunities. But I was blind to opportunities and couldn't see far enough.

I encouraged Caryon to talk freely about what he identified as his two favorite movies, *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society*. Most often, he turned his attention to *Menace II Society*. In this final example, Caryon's talk about the film is one of the best indicators of his connection to its symbolism specifically. He wrote:

The Black people in *Menace II Society* are most definitely like real people because most Black people that live in project housing, and neighborhoods that are ruff like that movie. Poverty is poverty, and it was there. . . . The Black people in the movie found themselves in poverty situations. That's why they robbed, sold drugs, and shot stuff up alot through that movie. It was called survival to me. . . . What makes this movie one of my favorites is that it's a action movie, and that I could relate to it. I feel their pain when they do illegal stuff to survive. I've been there, done that. I can comprehend to it.

Sylvester shared the same insights about his identification with the film and its depiction of ghetto street life:

You asked me what made this [*Menace II Society*] my favorite movie. The fact that I could relate to this movie completely is one reason. Another reason is because I felt Caine's pain wholeheartedly. I felt that I was going through all the things that he was going through. I wanted to pack up and get away from the streets, but ended up in the pen. He [Caine] wanted to do the same, but he ended up dead.

*Cues for Fantasies and Identifying Qualities Already Possessed*

Much of this study has been about how Caryon relied upon *Menace II Society* and other phetocentric media representations to reinforce his fantasies about the thug life and hail those practices he already participated in. I have presented examples of how the self (Caryon) and media representations can be united around preexisting identities, identities that Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us are always formed within the symbolic and discursive. Hence, Caryon's desires for power, dominance, and wealth, as well as his thug life participation, do not presuppose media consumption, but are formed within a media culture. It is within this culture that media representation, consumption, and production work through identity. In both setting a standard for Caryon's identity fantasies and confirming his participation in the lifestyle that is part of that identity, media help create a social world that Caryon reaps rewards for and is fulfilled by keeping in line with the lifestyle. Pierre Bourdieu (1994) with his notion of "realized myth" is useful here. Bourdieu, talking of members of an Algerian community, observes that groups within a community may act in accordance with mythical structures (in this study it is spectacles of the thug life) and that collective practice emerges as realized myth. He writes: "Moreover, when the conditions of existence of which the members of a group are the product are very little differentiated, the dispositions which each of them exercised in his practice are confirmed and hence reinforced both by the practice of the other members of the group . . . and also by institutions which constitute collective thought as much as they express it, such as language, myth, and art" (162).

Caryon, as an individual, and as a member of variously constituted groups such as the Gangster Disciples, or as one of five who had a role in the murder case, saw his myths realized when his thug life beliefs and fantasies found reinforcement through practice (he earned respect from his fellow gang members) and symbolic discourses (those who led a similar life were prominently featured in media). It may be this realization that permitted the self (Caryon) to not only engage in identification (assimilation of parts of the other), but to work to resemble, in the physical, the fantasies of the other. It was not that Caryon was imitating thug life crimes, but that, constrained by frequent ghetto/thug presentations, he saw that certain mythic behaviors were reinforced by various institutions (gangs, the media). Therefore, Caryon saw no reason *not* to work to see the myth fully realized in the physical by participating in crimes.

*Course of Action Based on Images*

The realized myth with its reinforcement of the thug life practice and of fantasies of penultimate thug life desires such as gross accumulation of material wealth, beautiful women, and dominance (as often seen in rap music videos), confirms and opens the door for a range of possible thug life behaviors. Caryon maintains that he was not engaged in some sort of playing or mimicry (though with real guns). That is, immediately after viewing the film, he did not seek the promise of attaining pleasure from the performance of thug life crimes he'd just seen. Rather, Caryon saw ghetto-centric media (in mythic proportions) and real life conflate to create a series of acceptable courses of action for him to choose from in a given situation.

Time and again, Caryon has weighed the feasibility of possible behaviors and courses of action seen in media as exemplars of how to handle real life situations. In one letter, Caryon wrote of how the film *A Time to Kill* showed how African Americans are forced, unfortunately, into "do or die situations" when they lose their power and control. The film depicts a Black father exacting deadly revenge on two White men who raped his young daughter. For Caryon, this is one possible reaction to a situation of injustice. Caryon proposed a second course of action, based on the images, but more suitable to his current view (in part, based on personal experience) of punishment. He wrote:

I like the movie *A Time to Kill* because justice was served in the end. Justice was served because Samuel L. Jackson killed those two White guys that raped his little Black daughter. And he walked free at the end he walked free because he killed with a good cause even though killing is wrong. If I wrote the end of the movie about me, I would of had myself torturing those two White guys, just like they tortured my little baby girl. I probably would've let them live also. Only if they were sent to jail for life, after I tortured them.

With seven years between him and the realized myths he encountered as a twelve year old, Caryon saw *Menace II Society* as being more useful (clearly, with hindsight, more useful to him) if it presented a different course of action for at least one thug character. He created a revised *Menace II Society* narrative that included a second chance at life for a young man who led a thug life:

I would have the characters to do just what they did, but I would have

one of them go to prison for a short period of time. Then I would let him back out. And have him leaving the criminal game and doing positive things like going to college, or having a very top-notch job. I would make it like that so people watching it would have a choice between good and bad.

This revision of the outcome of the movie reveals how Caryon once turned to media as a barometer of an ideal outcome for living a thug life. It also reveals (certainly toward a self-serving end) how today he wishes that message of the ideal end game to a thug's life had been different. In one letter, Caryon said he recently talked with another inmate about the limited number of options African Americans are depicted as having. He explained: "I talk about the Blacks in film that's going through coming up from childhood to now. I always seem to come to the conclusion that [there are] 2 choices, either penitentiary or death."

Finally, Sylvester was more pointed in his discussion of media's potential to inform his life choices. Sylvester "dialogued" with me about media he turns to to help him make sense of his experiences. During this exchange he provided two examples of how media presentations help him determine the path he will take. First, he recounted how the film *Freedom Song* (a civil rights film about African Americans securing their right to vote) with its lessons of goodwill helped him to conclude that he should manage his temper and to not commit any other crimes. In a unique dialogic moment, Sylvester decided to pen the outline for a new film in an attempt to explain how he regrets the decisions he has made in his life, and how film can help youth make wiser choices. Sylvester contributed this version of *Scrooge*:

I'd like to see a situation in a Black film, where a young Black male, maybe played by Jaleel White, anyway, the guy makes a mistake that has him on his way to prison. While he is on the bus, his life flashes before him, and all of the wrong he has done is now going through his mind. I think the movie about Scrooge comes to mind. Anyway, a guardian angel played by a very serious Eddie Murphy takes this person through every mistake he ever made, and tells him what choice he should have made during those situations.

This is the majority of the movie, but in the end, he wakes up in his own bed, not on the bus going to prison. He vows to make a change in his decision making.

As soon as he goes outside his house to go to the bus stop for school, some of his friends pull up in a stolen car, and tell him to get in,

because they are going to skip school today. The young man says, "nah, I think that I will go to school today." Faced with his first test, he passes with honors in decisions. As his bus pulls up, he looks behind him, and he thinks that he sees his guardian angel smiling at him.

I know this is unrealistic, but I believe it is a type of movie that would open alot of youngsters' eyes.

### Viewing Styles and Media Consumption

Caryon's media diet has not been a steady stream of thug life representations, though that is his favorite body of media fare. Caryon does not have a television in his cell (Sylvester does), therefore, Caryon watches television in a semi-private viewing area, "so that I won't be disturbed and that way I can get the full understanding of what I'm watching," he wrote. The television is on at all hours, giving Caryon unfettered access to the medium: "[I watch] late at night, all through the week, mainly alot on weekends and holidays. I listen to my own music. But we can't watch video tapes. I watch TV, and listen to music 7 days a week. If I don't watch or listen, I'm probably busy at those times."

His passion for the kind of media fare that is said to have landed him in prison continues to be met. He detailed: "I watch drama TV shows, mainly things with a lot of action in it like fighting, killing, etc. Like *Scream*. I watch action movies the most, because I've related to it in the past, at least some of it. Like *Boyz N the Hood* 'cause it was real." Of the media he has attended to most recently (1999–2000), Caryon offered that *Scream*, *Boyz N the Hood*, and *A Time to Kill* were his most favorite because of his penchant for the scary and horror (*Scream*), for "what was real" (*Boyz N the Hood*), and for a film where "justice was served at the end" (*A Time to Kill*).

Interestingly, Caryon revealed to me that he had seen *Menace II Society* numerous times since his incarceration, but also offered that inmates are not afforded access to videotapes. Sylvester, though confined in the same prison as Caryon, had seen the film only a few times since 1994, but reported viewing other movies on video, such as *A Time to Kill* and *Freedom Song*. The truth came in a review of prison practices. Caryon continues to have an opportunity to view the film *Menace II Society* often, though he has no access to videotapes, because twice a week the prison guards show a film over prison monitors. Caryon views *Menace II Society* (as with most movies shown) via this opportunity. More, the prison is equipped with cable television, and the prisoners have access to some cable networks. Sylvester, who

works the night shift in the prison, often works during movie time and sleeps during the day. He has fewer opportunities to view films, and maintains that he would choose to not watch *Menace II Society* if it were shown.

When he moves out of the action genre, Caryon turns to comedies like *The Jamie Foxx Show*, "because his shows are so comical," and to the syndicated comedy *Thea*, "because she does a good job on discipline when it comes to her three children." Here again, with *Thea*, Caryon shows that he is seeking out media that most closely resembles his life experiences. *Thea* is a single mother with three children. She is stern and feisty (much like the character Roseanne) in her approach, but, unlike Caryon's mother, she was physically, morally, and emotionally present for her children. He wrote: "She did good as a single mother, and the show is similar to my life experience because my mother had three of us, and none of our fathers lived in our household." It is this quest to "see himself and his life" that also draws him to the weekly talk show for African-American youth, *Teen Summit* on BET. An issues-oriented program, *Teen Summit* addresses topics that directly affect the lives of Black youth. Caryon likes it as he is able to attend to discussions about the dilemmas that are faced in his world: teen pregnancy, employment, and education. He shared: "I like *Teen Summit*. It's Black history. Black history is more than just in the month of February. Because it is very important that young people grow up with integrity and dignity about themselves. It shows teen pregnancy—hard times on teen mothers due to the fact that they have to get their schooling, jobs, baby sitters. Jobs would be another issue tied in with education, because a large percentage of Black teens have low education rates, which could determine what kind of job they're qualified to get."

#### *Narrative-Based Viewing and Image-Based Viewing*

Thus far, this discussion has focused on the role media play in everyday life and on identity-centered meaning making of specific texts. What has not been accounted for here, and what needs to be attended to as we explore the relationship between media and an audience member, is the overlapping considerations of viewing culture and viewing practices. That is, simply, the manner in which media consumers may engage media's discourses. Lembo (1997) in his audience analysis takes us "beyond the text" to offer a typology of media audience viewing practices as he attends to the varied complexities of audience involvement and identification. Focusing on television viewing activities, Lembo argues that people can enter into two viewing

moments—narrative-based viewing and image-based viewing. The first moment, narrative-based viewing, describes the manner in which people, when watching television, work to gauge the plausibility of the discourse. In an effort to make this judgment, viewers look for what seems believable, probable, or "the real," based on their individual lived experiences. Even as plausibility is uncovered—and narrative-based viewing (involvement with the story and characters) entered into—critical viewing stances may still emerge. When critical viewing occurs, which is often, the viewer distances him- or herself from the narrative and may question the plausibility of depictions of specific social actions, identify broader implausibilities/critique more general depictions, or recognize the commercial basis of programming. In sum, people will question what they see, consider television's ability to represent social realities, and work to create meanings around those depicted realities. As viewers assess the quality of the narratives and reconstruct the discourses based on their social worldview, Lembo argues, viewers engage in two more specific viewing practices within narrative-based viewing: viewing at the *representational* level of social action and viewing at the *real* level of social action.

Viewing at the representational level is defined by an audience member's attention to media's form and text construction, including production techniques and aesthetic qualities such as writing, plot development, directing, dialogue, and camera work. At this level, viewers are clear in their understanding that media texts are constructed, and look at how those constructions work to create the plausible. Lembo (1997, 240–41) describes this viewing practice as one where *how* things are represented are noted as the viewer becomes emotionally involved in the narratives; yet, it is a more distant viewing position. Viewing at the real level of social action moves the audience away from form ("ignor[ing] or fail[ing] to notice the 'constructedness'") and to a direct involvement with the stories, the character's lives and motives, and to anticipating and speculating about coming actions and potential consequences. Lembo reminds us that requisite to the depth of this engagement is plausibility—similarities to real life—so that the viewers can act out the story, recreate it in their minds, and place themselves in the narrative.

Caryon's experiences with (thug life) narratives tend to recombine and blur media technologies. For example, his listening to rap music is accompanied by viewing music videos on cable television. His preferred cinematic presentations are viewed outside of a darkened theater and on network or

cable television, complete with commercial breaks. Given this state of symbiotic and technological merger, I believe Lembo's television audience study can be extended to a more general framework of media discourses consumption to identify viewing practices.

Caryon has provided compelling insight into his, by definition, narrative-based viewing practices. His responses have revealed what I believe to be a unique engagement style with media. This knowledge is based on more implicit constructions Caryon provided over the course of this study to date. I work hard to present moments to illustrate his viewing style. Narrative-based viewing is about the viewer looking for the "real." As already detailed throughout much of this study, Caryon's principle criterion for even attending to a media text is its plausibility. If a text passes critical viewing muster, such as the presence of plausible actions, then the viewer becomes emotionally involved. Caryon has already established here that ghettocentric narratives are the real. Science fiction, however, fails his plausibility test in the arenas of specific depicted actions and broader patterns of representation. On science fiction, Caryon wrote: "I never watch TV shows like Star Trek, Sci Fi Channel, or any space type stuff. I hate that with a passion. What I don't like about it is that they're hardly ever on earth. That's fake to me. I never watch movies with aliens in it like *Independence Day* with Will Smith. That stuff is wack. It's also fake. That's why I hate it."

Over time I came to understand that Caryon adopted very literal readings of plausibility. Humans, with the exception of astronauts, spend their time on earth, not in space. Space aliens do not exist, and if they do, the creatures do not pay earth a visit toting destructive laser zap guns. Hence, for Caryon it is fake or implausible, and he will not attend to such texts.

As I sought further exposition on this rejection based on this cynical reading of implausibility, Caryon explained that he once saw a documentary that claimed that a UFO had been found in New Mexico. The documentary format gave credibility to the UFO tale, thereby the narrative approached plausibility. His religion, the Egyptian Order (which is detailed later in this chapter), is based on the arrival of extraterrestrial superhumans. Given these two experiences, Caryon offered: "I find myself curious to find out about these different galaxies that surround us in the *real world* today [emphasis mine]." He noted reading about the discovery of water on Mars: "To me, if there's water, then there some life also." Yet, space aliens have not really bombed earth or needed to "phone home." Nor have we been "trekking," "voyaging," or moving through "deep space" with Klingons

or Borgs. Caryon possesses what Potter (1999, 114) describes as a "low tolerance for ambiguity": "During exposure to media violence, people with a low tolerance for ambiguity are likely to encounter the messages on the surface and latch onto easily accessible schemas. . . . If the message does not meet the easily accessible schema, it is ignored." Thus Caryon ignores or rejects the fantasy text: "I still wouldn't watch sci-fi." However, should aliens make themselves known, then, he explained, "[I'd watch] the news." Also quite interesting is that this low tolerance for ambiguity and rejection based on implausibility seems to be present among Caryon's peers. Sylvester offered a purely emergent, similar critique of science fiction. He wrote, "I never watch any science fiction, unless *The Matrix* is considered science-fiction. Other than that, sci-fi movies are very boring movies that I really find it hard to relate to."

In the coming Emerging Tastes and Desired Representations section, I talk about Caryon's increased critical viewing savvy that I believe has improved dramatically, in part as a result of participating in this study. This savvy is evidenced through a third critical viewing practice—recognizing the commercial basis of media. In the last letter he wrote to me that informs this chapter, he displayed a level of insight into the profit-driven nature of media industry not previously seen. He observed: "I don't knock that [stereotyping of African Americans] because that type of stuff will always sell and make plenty of money, just like sex sell, violence sell, as well as criminal activities, so get your money!"

Lembo also describes how viewers focus on production qualities in narrative-based viewing, as well as place themselves in the text as they get directly involved with a media narrative. Caryon has shown little engagement with the text at the level of the "how" or the production level. He has intimated repeatedly that he understands that though the discourses presented seem quite real, he knows that it is offered by actors: "The Blacks are like real people, but they're acting. . . . real life situations. They had to learn a role that they have to play." I believe that what makes Caryon's engagement with media unique is that he believes media narratives are closer to the real than most would assume. He seems to indicate that the actors are simply learning how to act out real life incidents, as they would if, as he so desperately desires, his life story were to become a Hollywood movie. When I worked to explore this separation between the real and the text, he wrote: "This stuff really happens to people . . . but they're acting, and off the show, they got a lot of legal money to survive with." What is clearer is how Caryon

places himself inside the narratives, becoming directly involved in the social action and even, as we have already learned, makes choices for his life based on that involvement. In one letter, Caryon revealed his envy for the characters in *Menace II Society* as they never spent lengthy periods of time in prison for crimes that were similar to those he committed: "They got small prison time. Probably even probation, but me, I got slammed and had to cop out and I'm doing flat time. No probation or nothing."

According to Lembo, in addition to the complex narrative-based viewing practice, there is a second possible viewing encounter—image-based viewing. In image-based viewing the media audience member is wholly familiar with the conventions of programs. He or she comes to see images as "movable" or interchangeable across programs and channels because the stories offered in media are similar because so few stories are told. For example, in viewing daytime television, there may be only two narratives being presented—the tabloid talk show narrative (*Jerry Springer* or *Maury Povich*), and the personal courtroom drama (*Judge Judy* or *Divorce Court*). Because of the great familiarity with these shows and their formulas, image-based viewers do not attend to these texts deeply or emotionally, as in narrative-based viewing. Rather, they pick up bits and pieces of the story, but rarely focus on the unfolding narratives. Lembo argues that these viewers' engagement is decentered on the narratives, as they instead take part in activities such as channel switching. Channel switching/simultaneous viewing can sometimes result in an ironically funny game where, given programs' segmented nature, they can be pieced together across stations, ultimately resulting in a new, grand narrative that is little different than if a single narrative had been followed through to its completion. In image-based viewing, the self is not as well established as in narrative-based viewing. At times, viewers may engage in a mythic moment where they see themselves as the star of a program, but not with any great emotional depth, as when young boys see themselves as Rocky Balboa and momentarily shadowbox with the screen. Image-based viewing is also characterized by a state of "vegging out." Here a program is used for more than background noise, but its narrative is minimally attended to. Instead, a viewer may play with the colors, form, or contours of the production, for example, when older teens marveled at the stark, surreal richness of the coloring of the *Yeltribes* world.

In my interviews with Caryon, he did not indicate that he disengaged with media by "vegging out." Nor did he indicate that he physically engaged

in channel switching. I believe that, in fact, he cannot channel switch given that he views television on prison monitors; hence, he is not allowed to control the programming. This does not mean he is not engaging in a form of channel switching and simultaneous viewing in his mind. Caryon's responses indicate that he is aware that the narratives of ghetto-centric films are quite similar in content, style, and formula (e.g., *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society*), thus, he creates a bricolage of thug life narratives. Most obvious is Caryon's engagement with media at the mythic level. He has indicated that he sees himself, his life and experiences, in the narratives. More, he has talked about viewing the celebrity and heroic status of thug life as worthy of emulation. It is this viewing practice of seeing himself like the stars, at the mythic level, that is important here as it augments his more emotional, narrative-based engagement. These two moments, channel switching/simultaneous viewing and the mythic viewing level are evidenced by him placing himself in the role of the main character in both *Menace II Society* and *A Time to Kill*, and in each case doling out punishment in what he sees as heroic proportions. Lembo argues that such image-based viewing is cultivated in those who regularly attend to media, and Caryon certainly does. However, Caryon's critique of science fiction may give us a clue that rich visual imagery is not enough to even minimally pull him in; rather, narratives that address the real are far more important. What is important to take away from this insight into Caryon's viewing practice is how viewing is an extension of the self—how the meanings around social action, offered through storytelling, are "elaborated" as Lembo calls it, in viewers' minds. Lembo believes that because this meaning making takes place in a televisual world, the self during media viewing becomes different than the self outside of viewing and when interacting with other people. However, in Caryon's case, his is a world fully intermingled with media narratives, hence his becoming an active participant with a narrative is not so different from his real-world self.

### Emerging Tastes and Desired Representations

Thus far, I have introduced Caryon's preference for thug life depictions, his identification with these representations, the notion that the mythic was "realized" in this life, his continued consumption of thug life depictions, and his continued quest for media messages that speak directly to his lived experiences and his unique media engagement style. All of these give us some insight into Caryon's relationship with media, and how he came to be

involved in the *Menace II Society* murder case. Still, the leap from attending to, and prizing, a certain type of media presentation, to participating in a carjacking, kidnapping, murder, robbery, attempted murder, and attempted kidnapping that is similar to those crimes depicted is confounding.

#### Violence

Mortley's (1980) reminder that social class is an important mediating factor is well taken. Caryon comes from an environment of poverty and where school, religion/the spiritual, and family were unavailable as role models. The media, however, were present. Also present was his gang cohort, who consumed media, with their thug presentations, as much as, and in the same ways as, Caryon. In this media culture, life and the mediated are hardly separable. Potter (1999) in *On Media Violence* places media in the same position of culpability for dysfunction as the breakdown of the family or poverty. He writes: "They [media] manufacture a steady stream of fictional messages that convey to all of us in this culture what life is about. Media stories tell us how we should deal with conflict, how we should treat other people, what is risky, and what it means to be powerful. The media need to share the blame for this serious public health problem" (2). As presented here, Caryon chose to attend to media stories rooted in what he called "action"—violence, killing, and robbery. It was these media stories that, beginning when he was in elementary school, schooled him on how he should deal with conflict, how to treat other people, what actions and behaviors were risky, and what it means to be in power. Indeed, the constructions presented thus far have indicated that the more he identified with portrayals of a thug character/lifestyle, the more he used those texts as a basis to construct meanings and make sense of his world, and the more reinforcement he received to behave aggressively.

Copious attention has been paid to the consumption of violent media. Media watchdog groups, government, scholars from virtually every field, the press, educators, politicians, and parents have all weighed in on the media violence debate. Generally, all have come to the conclusion that media violence alone does not move an individual to engage in violence, but that there are a variety of other factors (psychological, social, behavioral) at play that move a person to engage in such actions. Turning our attention to Caryon's preference for media violence and how he encountered violent texts, we get an even clearer picture of his relationship with media. First, Caryon had no parental monitoring of his media consumption.

There was no supervision over his media choices. It seems no one in his world attended to the ratings of movies or the parental warning labels on his music. Hence, he was able to seek out media that should have been off limits to an under-seventeen audience member. When I inquired if his access to media was ever restricted (e.g., denied access to an R-rated movie, not able to purchase music marked "explicit"), he indicated that such restrictions were "discipline" or punishment, and that his mother did not mete out punishments in this way. He wrote: "I wasn't disciplined as a child around my mother too much. Restricting TV show or music is most definitely discipline. . . . I like to have freedom of choice where I wouldn't have to sneak over a friend's house to listen to explicit lyrics or hard core movies."

Second, as we have already learned about Caryon, portrayals offered in a realistic manner are most attractive to him (recall his shunning of science fiction such as *Star Trek*). Gerbner et al. (1980) in their "cultivation" research found that the consumption of large quantities of violent media create a worldview in an audience member that sees the world as "mean" and hostile. In the video documentary *The Killing Screens* (Hally 1994), Gerbner provides examples from films such as *Robocop* and *The Terminator* (films attractive to and/or marketed to youth), with their depictions of "body counts" that number into two or three dozen, to illustrate the quantity of violence. However, it is the genre, setting, and quality of the (violent) presentation that are prized by Caryon. He repeatedly talks about preferring media that are close to real life. He chooses most often those presentations that possess production techniques that closely resemble possible lived experiences. If *Menace II Society* were an apocalyptic tale set in the future (think *Road Warrior*), he may not have attended to it. This film's strengths, for Caryon, were that it was housed in the action/ghetto-centric genre, a genre whose pace and activity presented a life's tempo that Caryon worked to emulate. It was set in a housing project community and featured a thug lifestyle that was similar to his own. And then there was the quantity and quality of violence. *Menace II Society* had a body count of seven, a plausible amount of killing that a gang member could encounter in a summer. However, the killings were graphic and brutal—they represented the hyperviolence that complemented the hypermasculinity and bravado also depicted. More, unlike films like *The Terminator* or *Robocop*, death did not come at the hands of a robot, nor was it presented conched with humor ("I'll be back") and futuristic fantasy. *Menace II Society* showed the

weaponry that Caryon was accustomed to seeing in his life. It was also a no-holds-barred depiction of the impact of violence on a community. It is this characteristic of realism that brought *Menace II Society* so much praise from film critics (recall one film critic proclaiming he believed it "told the truth" about what happens in the ghetto). It became "good" action/drama, not only for Caryon, but, given its MTV Best Film Award, for many American viewers. Further, extending the work of Nelson George (1994), an additional, important production technique in the media Caryon prizes is the music, the "new jack swing" pace and the symbiotic rap lyrics and their message. The music, coupled with the realism, works to prompt visceral feelings of identification (Potter 1999).

There is little normally left in Caryon's life. Access to his family, educational opportunities, role models, the potential to see alternate lifestyles are now all gone. He is fully immersed in a sort of ultra-thug life in prison, and if the state of Kentucky has its way, he will remain in this state for at least the next thirteen years. What is changing is that Caryon is growing older. This brings us to the third and final observation about his tastes. Caryon is seeking out more mature social discourses. His attention to BET's *Ten Summit* may be seen as one example. His joining a religious movement called the Egyptian Order is another. The Egyptian Order is a religious sect that teaches that the center of the universe was, thousands of years ago, a planet inhabited by an advanced civilization of people of color. According to the religion's literature, the planet faced an environmental crisis, so its inhabitants came to earth, landed in Egypt, and built the pyramids. The leader of these people, who for (earth) members of the religion is thought of as God, is several millennia old and resides on a compound in Atlanta, Georgia. The Egyptian Order is largely comprised of Afrocentric, Black nationalists who have taken up Marcus Garvey's mantra to return to Africa—the land of diasporic Black peoples. The return to Africa has not yet taken place. In the meantime, followers of the Egyptian Order (many of whom are African-American men who are, or who have been, incarcerated) take a pilgrimage to Atlanta where their God has built an enormous pyramid that is said to be in-line with specific star systems. The religion has, of late, received considerable media attention because of the pyramid, and also because its membership is said to be surpassing that of the Nation of Islam, rising into the tens of thousands.

Caryon's attraction to this religion is expected given his lifestyle thus far. He has sought out a religious icon as role model that is masculine—

powerful, dominant, displaying power prominently, and, importantly, Black. His God, then, fits in neatly with those already in his life that embody hypermasculinity or display it through spectacle, including the rap artists, sports stars, and gang leaders Caryon admires. For Caryon, all of their bravado is praiseworthy.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Identifying Another Lack*

Through the process of identification, Caryon filled a lack in the self by turning to the other—the symbolism of the thug life. His consumption practices indicate that representations of the thug life are preferred and he fully surrounds himself with it. Indeed, he seeks this content out, especially since it speaks to his life experiences. However, in the world of African-American media representations, and given his preference for the genres of drama and action, he may have had few options outside of the ghetto-centric. In fifty-three years of television there has been only one Black family drama, *Under One Roof*. Instead, on network television, African Americans remain largely relegated to the comedic, specifically Black situation comedies—from *Amos 'n' Andy* in the 1950s to *Good Times* in the 1970s to *Martin* in the 1980s and *The Parkers* today—Black life and culture have been offered up as sources of entertainment. Taken at its worst, these images have been rich fodder for the ridicule and demeaning of Blackness. *Under One Roof*, the critically acclaimed drama series, did not last half a season. The Black condition in media has been so dismal that even the civil rights organization the NAACP has recently (1999–2000) placed media industry diversity at the top of its agenda, alongside gun and election reforms. Hollywood has continued to disappoint with their filmic offerings as the "brutal buck" (the African-American male who menaces and is to be feared) often takes center stage. African-American film producer Warrington Hudlin (*Houseparty, Boomerang*) intimates that "the Black experience in America has had two incarnations on TV and film . . . one is the comic performer, who usually has a buffoonish, demeaning persona. The other is the pathological victim in so-called 'hood movies. Both images do very little to promote the notion of black equality in American life" (Fife 1995, 3D). This "modern racism," as Entman (1990) labels it, on the part of media exhibits a hostility and ignorance toward Black culture.

It is within this media culture that Caryon was reared. It is one that lacks representations of African-American men that could speak to the needs, concerns, and desires of youths such as Caryon (and the other four



involved in the case, and who were similarly situated). The real and fictional representations provided by Bernard Shaw, Colin Powell, Eric LaSalle, Bill Cosby, Denzel Washington, Danny Glover, and Will Smith act as a sort of "anti interpellation," failing to hail Caryon. They tend to not embody the kind of masculine, economic, educational, and street respect dilemmas that are part of Caryon's world. Over the course of our correspondence, Caryon indicated that he wished he could communicate with members of the media industry about representations he would like to see. I strongly encouraged him to draft a letter. He chose the Hughes brothers, makers of *Menace II Society*, to write to. The letter was poignant, and demonstrated a newly displayed savvy about how media industries work, and a critical eye. It also made clear the kind of representations and situations (overcoming thug life) that were absent from media that he desperately wants to see. He wrote, in part:

Dear Hughes Brothers,

... I don't know if you remember back in 1994 around January some kids in Paducah, Kentucky went out and car-jacked one car killing the driver, and then tried to car-jack another one that same night. But the second shooting was not a killing. But it was said that those kids attempt to kill that driver also. It was 5 kids under 18 years of age on that case. And one kid claimed that all of those kids watched your movie and decided to go out and car-jack some cars. Do you remember this case? It was all over the world in January 1994... I'm one of the guys that was on that case. Me myself. I didn't do what I did over no movie. I do not act off of what I have seen or heard, some people, but not me... In movies as your own, Black people are always represented kind of bad. And put down. Which I don't knock that because that type of stuff will always sell, so get your money. I got a question, when will Black drama films start out with violence and criminal activities and end with the Black people on top. From violence to running they're own positive business. Where they won't have to resort in violence, drug sells, and robberies. Basically when will Blacks go from rags to riches in movies without getting locked in jail or killed?

Guerrero (1995) describes this lack that Caryon has identified as "empty space in representation." This notion recognizes the polar opposite African-American male portrayals that are represented by a Healthcliff Huxtable (in *The Cosby Show*) and a Caine. It cites Hollywood for its "flat, binary construction of black manhood" and recommends the inclusion of

"intellectual, cultural, and political depth and humanity of black men." Guerrero (1995, 396) takes on the representational lack that media consumers like Caryon may face, writing: "To say this is not to argue simplistically for a wave of insipid, compensatory positive images of successful doctors and attorneys or happy, 'buppie' fathers. Hollywood has given us enough 'noble Negroes,' de-sexed comedian buppies, and upwardly mobile, black 'exceptions' to fuel several film waves to come." Then the author proposes a solution, much like the one Caryon offered to the Hughes brothers: "We must now proceed to fill the empty space in representation with movies about the deeply complicated and brilliant black men that populate the African American narrative tradition." Today, Caryon understands the profit-driven nature of media, and he understands that images of gross consumption, sex, and violence are popular, money-making fare. He, and Guerrero, are simply asking that within those images of hypermasculinity the African-American male become more complex by moving out of the mire of the brutal buck, savage stereotypes. Contrary to media myth, hypermasculinity is not an essentialist trait for the urban African-American male. Without this change, society is provided with few narratives that work to counter the traditional Black-male stereotypes.

#### *Ontological Authenticity*

According to Lincoln and Guba (1989), a criterion for "good" qualitative, constructivist research (such as that presented here) is that of "ontological authenticity." Ontological authenticity describes an elevating of consciousness—the moment when a participant has, according to the authors, "improved, matured, expanded... it is literally improvement in the individual's (or group's) conscious experiencing of the world" (248). Such growth is beginning to manifest itself in Caryon. For example, in recent letters Caryon has started to critique and criticize the ghetto-centric presentations he values so much. He does not like that African Americans' lives are not valued in media, "they're presented and portrayed very poorly because they always end up getting killed in the movies I watch." He is realizing that there is a class bias in the films that he attends to, "plus they're barely ever high class, and they're always the foolish ones... I see high class White people like doctors, lawyers, senators, presidents, FBI agents, etc. You never see Black characters like doctors, lawyers, or someone that holds a high position; on the top basically... I would like to see more characters with higher qualifications instead of being pawns." And he understands how images may inform how African Americans are viewed by those outside the racial group:

"I would like to see situations where Blacks get to shine for a change and be looked up on instead of down. I would like to see that so that Blacks . . . wouldn't feel like we're outcasted from the world or from other races." Finally, he offers an adept critique of how racial depictions are tied to race relations in the real: "When I see this, I'll know that things are becoming equal between Blacks and Whites." As a researcher, I am most pleased with this level of engagement on the part of Caryon. I agree with Lincoln and Gibbs's charge that researchers are not simply working with subjects who are data sources, but that through interactions, people grow and change. Teaching Caryon, raising his awareness, and thereby achieving ontological authenticity has been one of the greatest rewards.

### Conclusion

To be clear, the argument here has not been that *Menace II Society* had a direct effect on Caryon's behavior that January 1994 night. I make no claim that after Caryon viewed the film there was an immediate attitude change that prompted him to engage in mimicry of the violence seen in the film. Caryon vehemently denies that the film, or media like it, made him commit a crime. And I agree with him. Predictably, Caryon feels the need to deny such a relationship because to admit such a correlation would mean, in his mind, that he is a dupe and "follower" of media, a condition that *other people* (especially children) may have, but certainly not him. This reaction is expected. Like limited-effects theorists would argue, I believe that *Menace II Society* did not serve as the single catalyst for the night's violence; rather, it was part of a number of socializing institutions, people in his life, and lived experiences in his neighborhood that made Caryon perceive violence (thug life) as a reasonable social response, and that some media images contribute to that repertoire of potential actions. This study does not work to make excuses for his behavior, making the claim that something or someone forced him into these social actions. Caryon himself admits that he would have probably ended up on the wrong side of the law eventually, just not for murder, or murder under these unique circumstances. What this study has revealed is that, in cases like Caryon's, media have the potential to be a principal socializing institution, particularly when family, religion/church, school, positive role models, and normalized values around law and order are all absent. It reveals the symbolic language that is prized by youths socially situated like Caryon. It details how the symbolic and the real come together and lend credence to certain values, behaviors, and choices.

What are we to take away from this learning experience that Caryon has provided? We know that as agents of change we must work together. Social workers could have assisted Caryon when he was repeatedly kicked out of school, government agencies could have been alerted when it was realized that mental illness, poverty, and dysfunction were crippling this family, and media educators could have helped this youth to learn how to consume media, particularly to engage in media with greater critical savvy, balancing narrative- and image-based viewing, and with a higher tolerance for ambiguity. For media researchers and educators in particular, Caryon has helped us to see that change must come from within the contexts that, in this case, youth operate. It would serve us well to understand Caryon's and other (Black) youths' identification process with a system of symbols that frequently present African Americans and Black culture as ghettoized and violence prizing. We too should come to understand how behavior, gender identity (masculinity), and social world are all in articulation. Caryon makes clear, given his social situation, that he is going to continue to attend to these kinds of media presentations; hence it would serve us well to take up his wise recommendation to start from within the genre he prizes—"When will Black drama movies start out with violence and criminal activities and end up with Black people on top?"

### Epilogue

Neither Caryon nor Sylvester communicate with Calvin "Kevin" Smith. Among the five, Calvin was the only one who was reared in a traditional, nuclear family. He is especially close to his father, who prayed with him and counseled him during the trial. Calvin's father also advised him not to talk to the press or any others soliciting information (which would include me as a researcher). He also warned Calvin to stay away from those that landed him in trouble—particularly, Caryon, Sylvester, and Steven. Calvin and Kunta had been friends before the shootings. Calvin is currently incarcerated in the Northpoint Treatment Center serving a twenty-year sentence.

Steven Johnson declined my invitation to participate in this study, despite a letter from his attorney supporting this research effort. He does, however, closely monitor my research inquiries, thanks to Sylvester who maintains a close relationship with Steven. On occasion, Sylvester will share insights offered by Steven. Steven is confined in the Eastern Kentucky Correctional Center. It is unclear how Sylvester and Steven communicate to each other beyond sending messages through prisoners who are transfer-

ring between the prison where Sylvester is held, Kentucky State Penitentiary, and Steven's Eastern Kentucky Correctional. Steven escaped the death penalty when his plea agreement of two life terms plus 110 years was accepted.

Kunta Simms took a hiatus from this study for a period of several months while he pursued an appeal in the hopes of getting a sentence reduction. He worried that writing to me about the shootings may jeopardize his appeal. On November 27, 2000, Kunta wrote to me announcing that he successfully had parts of his case overturned. He is facing retrial, and a court date has not yet been set. He remains in Kentucky State Penitentiary.

Sylvester Berry continues to write me often about his relationship with media and about prison life. As a result of our correspondence, and my desire to send him textbooks and literary works, Sylvester successfully appealed to his warden at Kentucky State Penitentiary to provide inmates with access to reading materials beyond popular magazines such as *Jer*, *Source*, and *Playboy*. Sylvester completed two college-level courses (English and sociology), however, his education halted prematurely when the state of Kentucky ended a program that offered inmates college courses. Sylvester hopes to resume his studies in sociology so that he may become a youthful offender counselor and social worker. Sylvester is currently serving a twenty-year sentence.

Caryon Johnson continues to be the most eager participant, writing lengthy letters during his spare time. He hopes that his life story will ultimately become a feature film and/or the subject of a best-selling novel (much like *The Hurricane*). He maintains a journal, which I sent him, that he uses to write his life story and to pen raps about his life. While spending over two hundred days in solitary confinement in 2000 for drug and gang activity, Caryon found religion in the Egyptian Order. Upon release from prison, he hopes to move to the religion's headquarters in Atlanta. He is pondering moving his two sisters, two nieces, and his mother to Georgia as well. Because inmates cannot receive visits from convicted felons, Caryon's mother had been unable to visit her son. In late 2000 an exception was made on her behalf. She has not yet gone (as of early 2001) to pay him a visit. Caryon is serving a twenty-year sentence, but is up for parole in April 2001.

#### One Final Note

In December 1997 Paducah, Kentucky, was sent reeling yet again when a fourteen-year-old boy shot and killed three classmates as they conducted a

prayer meeting. The young teen told police investigators that he had always wanted to break down a classroom door and shoot people, just as he had seen in the film *The Basketball Diaries*.

#### Notes

1. See Means Coleman (2001) for a detailed methodological account of interviewing the incarcerated.
2. I have replaced his friends' real names with pseudonyms to protect their identities.
3. On October 2, 2000, Jessie Jr. was murdered, execution-style, in his home while his family was held at gunpoint and forced to watch. His murder, at the time of this writing, is unsolved.
4. For example, on eleven occasions before the *Menace II Society* murder Steven Johnson was arrested. Three of those were felony allegations, including shooting at a neighborhood youth. However, nine of those charges were dismissed when witnesses failed to appear.
5. I credit Herman Gray and his essay "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture," with helping me to make sense of Caryon's trinnivariate interest in rap, ghetto-centric films, and thug life.

#### References

- Bourdieu, P. (1994). Structures, habitus, power: Basis for a theory of symbolic power. In N. Dirks, G. Eley, and S. Ortner, eds., *Culture, power, history* (pp. 155–99). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Ebert, R. (1993). *Menace II Society*. *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 26 [online]: [http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert\\_reviews/1993/05/859437.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1993/05/859437.html).
- Entman, R. (1990). Modern racism and the images of blacks in local television news. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7: 332–45.
- Fine, M. (1995). Drama's color block. "Under One Roof" bucks the odds against blacks. *USA Today*, March 14, p. 3D.
- George, N. (1992). *Buppies, b-boys, baps, and bohos: Notes on post-soul black culture*. New York: HarperCollins.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1994). *Blackface: Reflections on African Americans and the movies*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Getbner, G., L. Gross, M. Morgan, and N. Signorielli. (1980). The "mainstreaming" of America: Violence profile no. 11. *Journal of Communication* 30: 10–29.
- Groves Hayes, D. (1994). 2 carjackers face 20 years. *The Paducah Sun*, August 16, pp. 1A, 8A.

- Guerrero, E. (1995). The Black man on our screens and the empty space in representation. *Callaloo* 18: 395–400.
- Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs identity? In S. Hall and P. DuGay, eds., *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). London: Sage.
- Jhally, S. (Producer) (1994). *Killing Screens* [film]. Northampton, Mass.: Media Education Foundation.
- Johnson v. Commonwealth of Kentucky, 97-SC-354-MR (S. C. Kentucky 1998).
- Lenbo, R. (1997). Beyond the text: The sociality of image-based viewing practices. *Cultural Studies: A Research Volume* 2: 237–64.
- Lincoln, Y., and E. Guba. (1989). Ethics: The failure of positivist science. *Review of Higher Education* 12: 221–41.
- Madan, S. (1996). *Identity, culture and the postmodern world*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Means Coleman, R. (2000). *African American viewers and the Black situation comedy: Situating racial humor*. New York: Garland.
- . (2001). Maintaining perspective during troubling research interviews: A reception study with three convicted murderers. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Morley, D. (1980). *The "Nationwide" audience: Structure and decoding*. London: British Film Institute.
- Potter, W. (1999). *On media violence: Thousand Oaks, Calif.*: Sage.
- Stacey, J. (1994). *Star gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship*. New York: Routledge.
- Waxman, S. (1993). *Ménage II Society*. Washington Post, May 19 [online]: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpst/v/style/longterm/movies/video/s/menaceisociety/waxman\\_a09e60.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpst/v/style/longterm/movies/video/s/menaceisociety/waxman_a09e60.htm).

## Contributors

**Jacqueline Bobo** (Ph.D., University of Oregon) is chair of the women's studies program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests include film/television, cultural studies, race, and cultural production. She has published in *Jump Cut*, *Callaloo*, *Camera Obscura*, *Wide Angle*, and *Screen*, and with Routledge, Bay Press, and Ballantine Books.

**Leda Cooks** (Ph.D., Ohio University) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her research interests include the communication of identity, power, and culture. She has published in the *Howard Journal of Communication*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, *Discourse and Society*, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, *Mediation Quarterly*, *World Communication Journal*, *Negotiation Journal*, *Western Journal of Communication*, and *Communication Theory*.

**Nancy C. Cornwell** (Ph.D., University of Colorado, Boulder) is an assistant professor of communication and women's studies at Western Michigan University. Her current research, which includes developing a feminist philosophical approach to hate speech and critical analyses of media products, has been published in the *Journal of Intergroup Relations*, *International*