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## **Race, Violence, and the City: Chicago's Black Urbanity in Contemporary American Film and Literature**

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**Abstract:** In this article we look at three recent films—*Native Son* (2019, dir. Rashid Johnson, based on Richard Wright's 1940 novel), *Widows* (2018, dir. Steve McQueen, based on a 1983 TV series), and *The Hate U Give* (2018, dir. George Tillman Jr., based on a book by Angie Thomas)—by Black directors that showcase the interactions between Blacks and whites in an American urban milieu. We argue that the setting of two of these films—*Native Son* and *Widows*—in Chicago, with *The Hate U Give* being set in a fictional urban setting bearing a strong resemblance to the Windy City, serves to articulate the continuing racial divisions of American cities in the twenty-first century. The three films show that the fossilization of the divide between Black and white districts inevitably leads to outbreaks of racial violence.

**Keywords:** Black urbanity, Chicago, *Native Son*, *The Hate U Give*, *Widows*, racial violence

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### **Introduction**

The present paper discusses the articulation of the relationships between race, violence, and urbanity in new American films. The movies in question include *Native Son* (2019, dir. Rashid Johnson, based on Richard Wright's 1940 novel), *The Hate U Give* (2018, dir. George Tillman Jr., based on a book by Angie Thomas), and *Widows* (2018, dir. Steve McQueen, based on a 1983 TV series). The portrayals of Black<sup>1</sup> characters against the background of Chicago in two of these movies (*The Hate U Give* is set in a fictional urban milieu) speak to the whole tradition of Black urbanity, started by the Great Migration of Blacks from the plantations of the South to the metropolitan areas of the North in the first decades of the twentieth century. We argue that Chicago functions as a useful model for visual representations of American racial relations due to its history of racial segregation and the continuing validity of the metaphor of the racial line, whose cartographic predecessor dates back to the establishment of Chicago's Black Belt, a Black ghetto on the South Side, neatly separated from white parts of the city by Chicago's horizontal and vertical streets. The fact that all the three movies (and the literary predecessors of the two of them) have been authored by Black artists suggests that there is an ongoing struggle for representation of what it means to be Black in an urban milieu, a struggle in which African-American authors clearly wish their voices to be heard.

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1 In this paper we follow the style adopted by several media organizations and capitalize Black when we refer to American people and communities of African origin. On the other hand, white is used in lowercase, because, unlike Black, it does not stand for a common culture and history. See Coleman, "Why We're Capitalizing Black".

What links all the three movies is the motif of violence as an apparently inevitable part of African-American urban experience and the fact that, as adaptations of two well-known literary texts and of a British TV show, they all attempt to re-construct earlier interpretations of Black urbanity and offer their new visualizations through film. *Native Son* and *The Hate U Give* present their twenty-first-century cities as still divided into clearly demarcated Black and white zones, with racial tensions and prejudice resulting in outbursts of violence. In *Widows*, Steve McQueen uses the popular format of the heist movie and the plot of a TV series to offer an intelligent and moving portrayal of the space of the twenty-first-century Chicago and the current transformations of the city's race relations.

### *Native Son*

The first case study that we focus on to discuss the construction of Black urbanity is the seminal novel by Richard Wright, *Native Son*, published in 1940, and its recent cinematographic revisioning in Rashid Johnson's 2019 film. To begin with the novel, Isabel Soto maintains that "space functions as a major structural and organizing principle, driving the novel at the levels of plot..., theme and rhetoric" (23). Our claim is that despite the passing of several decades between the publication of the novel and the release of the movie, during which significant events occurred that had a bearing on the political status and artistic productions of Blacks, the major one being the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s, Johnson's film offers hardly any reconceptualization of Black urbanity as construed by Wright. As controversial as this view on the fossilization of Chicago's Black urbanity may seem, it appears valid and convincing when interpreted with the use of Henry Lefebvre's theory of social production of space.

With the use of Henry Lefebvre's triad of spatial concepts, Chicago's Black space in Richard Wright's novel can be interpreted in terms of its representation of the social production of space. Lefebvre's triad consists of three elements: perceived space (spatial practice), conceived space (representation of space) and lived space (representational space). These are connections and relationships among the elements of the triad which show how people produce space and how socially produced space influences their lives (Lefebvre, esp. 1-61). The protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas, inhabits the territory which is in many ways the product of the abstract representation of space, based on the visions, principles, and beliefs of the people in power: city planners, policy makers, housing contractors, and estate owners. In part, these ideas produce the South Side as a racially segregated place, imposing the values of late capitalism and racial politics on urban space. The social space of the Black Belt is also constructed by spatial practice: actions, interactions, and daily routines, collective and individual, the visible and observable behavior of the people living in the district. Black inhabitants of the novel's Chicago co-create its space in the ways which reflect their needs, labor routines, and leisure practices. In addition, there is representational space, the unconscious space directly linked to the experience of such users of the space of Chicago as Bigger Thomas. Representational space is "directly lived through its associated images and symbols," "space which the imagination seeks to change

and appropriate” (Lefebvre 39). It is Bigger’s subjective “lived space” that stands in stark contrast to the conceived and perceived space of the Black Belt in particular and Chicago in general, resulting in the protagonist’s marginalization, exclusion, sense of social injustice, and the belief in the inevitability of personal failure.

The familiar story of Bigger Thomas’s inadvertent killing of a white affluent young woman in her family mansion and his subsequent attempts to escape the law evolve against the backdrop of the 1940s Chicago, a city neatly divided into two zones with clearly demarcated boundaries. The Black Belt, a Black neighborhood on the city’s South Side, the only area where white real estate owners would rent apartments to Blacks, is presented in the novel as a space fraught with extreme poverty, dire living conditions, and a prevalent sense of gloom. The novel famously opens with an image of Bigger’s family of four, living in one small rat-infested room in a dilapidating tenement house, owned—as it later transpires—by the father of the white girl who will be later killed by Bigger, Mr. Henry Dalton. “This prescribed corner of the city” (Wright 114), “this corner of the city tumbling down from rot” (174), “the marked-off ghettos” (405) where Blacks are forced to live is a space that has a bearing on Black subjectivity and a sense of social determinism that Wright’s naturalistic novel subscribes to, and is reflective as well of the dynamics of Black-white relations in the US of that period.

Just like the rat that he kills in the opening image of the novel, Bigger Thomas is himself driven by forces outside his control. His sense of being lost in the world is poignantly rendered in the following passage of the novel: “Sometimes, in his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square: a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understand it, divide it, focus it” (Wright 240). Pointing to the spatial imagery of the cityscape—the square walls of the buildings and the straight city streets—the excerpt presents the cityscape the protagonist inhabits as a strange labyrinth that is virtually impossible to navigate and maneuver. What propels Bigger onwards throughout the labyrinth of both the city and his life is the fact of his Blackness vis-à-vis the whites he comes into contact with. Significantly, he does not seek contact with whites out of his own volition; he is first pressured to work for Mr. Dalton by his mother so that their food stamps are not revoked and then he is forced to associate with his employer’s daughter and her boyfriend due to the naïve belief of the two in the equality of the races, a belief clearly spawned by their communist worldview.

The opening image of the novel—that of the rat being frantically chased throughout the room and then killed by Bigger with a skillet—bears a striking similarity to Bigger himself being chased by the Chicago police throughout the Black Belt in a later part of the narrative. Hiding in unoccupied apartments, Bigger keeps tabs on the policemen’s whereabouts thanks to the maps of the search published in daily papers, their “[s]haded portion show[ing] area already covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer [and w]hite portion show[ing] area yet to be searched” (Wright 245). The map obviously changes as the search progresses; shortly before Bigger is finally caught, he examines the most recent map in the paper:

This time the shaded area had deepened from both the north and the south, leaving a small square of white in the middle of the oblong Black Belt. He stood looking at that tiny square of white as though gazing down into the barrel

of a gun. He was there on that map, in that white spot, standing in a room waiting for them to come. (256)

The maps published in the papers deploy the spatial metaphor of the color line: it is now not only the Black ghetto that is separated from the white part of the city with streets marking the boundaries of the Black Belt. Bigger visualizes himself on the map as occupying the ever shrinking white square, with the lines signaling the presence of white law enforcement closing in on him. The way in which Bigger is forced to proceed ever closer towards an imaginary center of the Black Belt appears to particularly bespeak his lack of agency in the context of the seminal theorization of city walkers offered by Michel de Certeau. As de Certeau argues, walking city streets is akin to the act of speaking, a process through which walkers create the city as a text (93, 97). The fact that Bigger has no control over the direction of his urban mobility suggests that his map of the city is not really created by him but by forces beyond his control (in this case, law enforcement). At the same time, however, as de Certeau further argues, walking is ultimately synonymous to placelessness:

To walk is to lack a place. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City. (103)

This lack of place, experienced according to de Certeau by any city-dweller and city-walker, is exacerbated in the case of Black denizens, like Bigger Thomas, by the fact of their powerlessness to even decide upon the directions and trajectories of their city perambulations.

Before 2019, Wright's *Naked Son* was adapted to the screen twice, in 1951 and in 1986. The 1951 black and white film, entitled *Sangre Negra*, with the controversial casting of Richard Wright himself as Bigger Thomas, was made in Argentina by French director Pierre Chenal. Its heavily censored version had only a limited distribution in the US. In the very prologue of this movie a sharp contrast is drawn between the modern, affluent white downtown of Chicago and the extremely poor Black South Side. The spatial division of the city is introduced by the off-screen narrator and the stock shots of Chicago are contrasted with the following images of primitive houses of a Black neighborhood, which were actually constructed on the film set in Buenos Aires. Although the issue of spatial segregation and its immediate relationship to racial politics is thus placed at the very center of the film's narrative, the 1951 adaptation does not further explore this question visually, as its diegetic space is mainly limited to interior locations. Apart from a few panoramic shots of downtown Chicago, the making of the film in the Windy City was impossible, both because of the anti-racist message of the script and the association of Wright with the American Communist Party. The racial mapping of the city could not be realistically shown on the screen. Instead, the camera focuses on the vivid pictures of crowded South Side slums, constructed on the

set in Buenos Aires, where people are oppressed by their drab environment, living in poverty and squalor (Phu 54-55).

In 1986, Wright's novel was again adapted to the screen by Jerrold Freedman. The film was made as a historical drama, set in the 1940s, with the story largely following the plot of the book, though its original extreme naturalism was blunted by omission of several more controversial scenes and topics, such as the rape and murder of Bessie. In terms of its use of spatial categories to convey the sense of racial relations, rather than to refer to the geographical space of Chicago as a point of reference, the director and cinematographer Thomas Burstyn relied on lighting, framing, and juxtapositions of color and shapes (Laws). Bigger, just as in the novel, is often framed with "whites to either side," or against a white background. The black-and-white newspaper maps from the novel are replaced in the movie by a medley of voices, accusing and denigrating Bigger as the police follow him on a snow-covered roof. The scene of Bigger's capture follows the passage from the book (and, incidentally, the 1951 film), showing how white water from fire hoses knocks him down from a black tower (Laws).

Neither the 1951 film nor the 1986 adaptation was a financial or artistic success. One critic called them "fascinating failures" (Laws 33), while several reviewers argued that the novel was "unadaptable." Despite that, the third adaptation was produced by HBO in 2019, with Rashid Johnson, so far known for his conceptual post-black art, debuting as director. While preserving the central message of the novel about Black identity and fate being inescapably structured and determined by forces beyond individual control, the film transfers the story of the novel to Chicago in the 2010s. Thus, the adaptation of the original text is of twofold nature: the literary text is made into a cinematic one, and the story is retold from the point of view of a contemporary Black youth. The plot has been subject to considerable transformation: for example, the whole Part 3 of the novel is omitted and Bigger meets his fate when he is killed by white police officers attempting to arrest him.

This way of paying homage to Wright's novel was only partially successful. Most reviews stress that the film's Bigger (more often called just Big, played by Ashton Sanders) is a character whose motivations are much more difficult to accept than was the case with the protagonist of the novel. An outsider in the visual terms, with his hair dyed green, sporting a leather jacket and steel jewelry, he stands out as much from white people as from his Black environment. In a sequence reminiscent of Rashid Johnson's artistic projects, Big is standing motionless in front of Chicago's famous landmark, Cloud Gate, among frantically moving people. The sculpture's rounded surface reflects and distorts both the city's skyline and the human figures. Big says in the voiceover: "Hurrying around like a bunch of rats. And they are blind... taking everything in a groove, but living in a rut." The scene suggests the city has a powerful effect on its inhabitants, determining their behavior, and possibly perverting their morality.

Bigger's appearance may actually suggest that he is strong enough to withstand the pressure of all forces around him and retain his individuality anywhere he finds himself: in the bleak environment of the South Side, the majestic Chicago's downtown, and in the rich white suburbia. Big's erroneous belief in his power to have control over his life is signaled in the very first scene of the film, when the camera

shows a panoramic picture of downtown Chicago and Big appears in a window of a brick apartment block, smoking pot and saying in a voiceover: “Early morning. I’ve got the whole world to myself. I don’t need anyone to wake me up.” At the beginning of the film, Big works as a bicycle courier; he easily moves around different districts of the city and shows no sense of being restricted by the urban space around him. To the contrary, he appears to be completely at ease navigating the city. If the city is a labyrinth, Big believes he is able to easily find his way out and claim the city as his own place. To relate again to de Certeau and Lefebvre, Big is wrong in assuming he can control the territory of the city at his will: it has already been produced as “conceived space” and his movements, limited by the physical mapping of the city, will not create an original sense of space.

Chicago is shown here as a city still demarcated by invisible boundaries, separating the all-Black South Side from the affluent white districts of the city. Within the film’s visual and narrative representation of Chicago, Bigger seems one of the few Blacks able to cross such boundaries, even if only to serve whites in very low social roles. There are no liminal areas, no places where the two races can interact and share social space. The visit of the white protagonists, Mary and Jan, to a soul food restaurant in the South Side leads to an awkward and disconcerting situation, provoking stares and angry comments from the Black patrons and making Big uncomfortable. It is only outside the city that the racial divisions can be crossed. The scene set on a beach of what seems to be Lake Michigan is when Big and Bessie most freely interact with Mary and Jan, playing together and talking honestly about their lives. The space of the city, with its clearly demarcated boundary lines, and their social designations, puts both whites and Blacks within the exacting template of race relations.

The white suburban district where the Daltons live is still, as it was in the book and in the earlier films, a long train ride away from the South Side. The huge mansions of the white upper class, comfortably situated outside the city, have enormous spaces under their roofs and ample land outside. In contrast, the shabby and dirty South Side tenement houses speak of years of neglect and lack of investment. However, the interior of the Thomases’ apartment is no longer a shockingly squalid, filthy location. It is a simple, but well-furnished family space with a large and nicely decorated living room, where the appearance of the rat seems to be a fairly surprising event. The apartment of Big’s family cannot measure up to the Daltons’ residence, but does not seem to be much limiting the social aspirations or life chances of its inhabitants. Bigger has such high aspirations, even if he is unable to express what exactly they are. With his punk appearance, dislike of rap and black sports, his literary interests and passion for Beethoven, he, improbably, shares the intellectual and aesthetic space with upper class whites, such as Mr. Dalton. In many ways, Big’s sense of alienation—both from whites and from Blacks—is thus presented not so much in terms of physical but abstract, cultural space (Lefebvre 49-53).

Contrary to the original novel, the use of spatial categories in Johnson’s *Native Son* does not help the viewer to understand the motivations of Big’s actions, which is an obvious weakness of the movie. The question of the adequacy of film’s representation of Black space of Chicago seems to be more complicated. It is true that *Native Son* 2019 fails to give account of the effects of such demographic and social

processes which have affected American cities, including Chicago, since the 1940s, as, for example, increased social mobility, gentrification of city centers, the flight of Black middle class away from the ghettos, and urban migrations of new ethnic groups. The film's narrative and visual representation of Chicago insists on the fossilization of racial mapping of Black urbanity in twenty-first-century America. According to the logic of Big's story, it is as much today as it was in the 1940s that social forces predetermine the fate of urban Blacks. Going back to Lefebvre's concept of social production of space, Johnson's adaptation of the novel shows the space of twenty-first-century Chicago to be a result of the confluence of a new "conceived space" (the effect of new city planning and housing development), the new forms of "spatial practice" of the novel's protagonists transferred now into the contemporary urban environment, and the "lived space" of Big, reproduced from the narrative of the novel in a largely faithful fashion. Strikingly, but not surprisingly, the film's social space of Black Chicago, resulting of the connections and relationships within the new spatial triad, remains very similar to the one which Richard Wright outlined in his original narrative. When the movie premiered in 2019, its somewhat incredible narrative and the bleak, selective representation of Black urbanity might have been one of the reasons for the film's lack of box office and critical success. However, it seems that today, after the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement, Rashid Johnson's re-invention of Wright's critical vision of Black urbanity has been significantly validated.

### *Widows*

*Widows* is the first venture of artiste British director Steve McQueen, famous for *Hunger*, *Shame*, and *12 Years a Slave*, into the mainstream cinema. The film, an adaptation of Lynda La Plante's 1983 ITV miniseries of the same name, combines action and melodrama. The movie is set in Chicago in the middle of the 2008 recession and offers the picture of a city demarcated by racial divides and plagued by corruption and class disparities. McQueen and his script writer, Gillian Flynn, reveal that they transferred the original plot from London to Chicago, the setting which worked better for a heist movie, and which made it possible to address a plethora of interconnected issues, such as patriarchy and sexism, class conflict, and racial inequality (Kilkenny, Di Rosso).

The eponymous widows are three Chicago women who plan a robbery when a crime boss Jamal Manning (Brian Tyree Henry) demands that they pay back the money stolen by their dead husbands. Veronica (Viola Davis), grief-stricken after the death of her expert thief husband Harry Rawlings (Liam Neeson), joins forces with Linda (Michelle Rodriguez) and Alice (Elizabeth Debicki), whose husbands were also killed during the last heist of Harry's gang. In the parallel plot, Jamal competes in a local alderman election against Jack Mulligan (Colin Farrell), a candidate running for the office vacated by his father in Southwest Side's Ward 18th.

Within its entertaining, sensational plot, *Widows* offers a grim picture of Chicago's racial divide and wealth inequality. With a rapid change of locations, the camera explores the city, from the South Side to the Gold Coast. Extremes of poverty and wealth exist in near proximity, as shown in a spectacular single take in which we

see Jack go from a campaign event organized for Black constituents to his opulent—and fortified—mansion, still within the district’s boundaries. The camera is fixed to the car’s bonnet and captures the changing landscape, from desolate slums and empty storefronts to magnificent mansions, just a few blocks away from each other.<sup>2</sup>

The movie makes references to demographic and economic processes which are transforming Chicago’s physical and social space, but is dramatically pessimistic about their outcome. The ward’s demographics has changed, but Jack Mulligan still believes this is his territory, even though, as Manning tells him, he owns a house in the district, but does not really live there. Mulligan considers himself a politician of a new generation, open to ethnic and racial diversity, adapting his public image to receive endorsements from the Black community. But he is not much different from his racist father Tom (Robert Duvall). Cynical and corrupt, he uses the district’s development projects for his own benefit. Jack initiates an employment program for Black women only to take a cut from each business they open. It is suggested he has taken bribes to advance an expansion of the Chicago Green Line, the project which he presents as a way of opening up his district to more business and employment opportunities. In a symbolic scene, Veronica discovers that the door to the safe room where the Mulligans keep their illegal money is hidden behind a huge 1927 ward map of Chicago, the city which Tom believes they “have made.”

And if one remembers that Jack’s opponent in the alderman race is unscrupulous boss of a black criminal gang, Manning, the movie tells the story of Chicago’s ongoing disintegration, both in spatial and racial terms. The motifs of racial separation and incompatibility of the white and Black worlds appear on several levels of the narrative. The marriage of Harry and Veronica breaks down after their son Marcus is murdered by the police during a traffic stop, when he is shot reaching for something in his car. Harry reinvents his life with a white partner and a baby son. The widows, strikingly different in their ethnicity and class (Veronica, a middle-class African American; Alice, with a working class Polish background; and Linda, self-employed and of Latinx origin), are brought together by the imaginary narrative of the heist, but after the robbery their common story ends, as there are no other forces binding them together in the “real world,” as shown in the film’s final scene (Simmons).

Steve McQueen frequently uses the visual language to emphasize the sense of racial and class disparities and the distance among characters. One of the techniques is to show reflections of faces in mirrors and images filmed through glass. Veronica lives in an apartment in the Gold Coast, with splendid views of Lake Michigan. The camera emphasizes the absence of her husband by framing her with negative space, using black/white contrast and putting her in a sterile, cold environment (Kermode). Through rapid cuts, Veronica’s apartment is contrasted with the places where the other widows live: Alice’s impersonal, empty apartment and the cluttered house where, although surrounded by her children and relatives, Linda remains lonely and desperate.

*Widows*, despite its seemingly sensational and formulaic plot, explores Chicago race relations and class inequalities at great length. The movie’s discourse on

2 The scene actually shows an eight-block drive from 47th Street to a Hyde Park mansion (Kilkenny).

race bears distinct similarities to that of Rashid Johnson's contemporaneous adaptation of *Native Son* (and Wright's novel itself). However, in contrast to Johnson, McQueen gives account of new processes such as Black social mobility and gentrification of Black districts, and offers a more complex picture of Chicago's ethnic diversity. In *Widows*, the space of the Windy City is subject to slow, gradual change, but this physical transformation does not affect the social space—and fate—of the majority of urban Blacks, which seems to be still shaped by larger social and political forces.

### *The Hate U Give*

*The Hate U Give*, a 2018 film directed by George Tillman Jr., based on the young adult novel of the same title written in 2017 by Angie Thomas, similarly to *Native Son*—novel and film—manifests the existence of clearly demarcated and hardly crossable lines separating Black and white populations of American cities. Even though Thomas's novel is set in a fictional urban milieu, its depiction of Garden Heights—a black ghetto where the teenage protagonist lives with her family—and of Williamson—an upper-middle-class area where she goes to an almost exclusively white school—corresponds to the divisions of Chicago into Black and white zones that we have already pointed out in *Native Son*.

Written with young adult readers in mind, the novel employs relatively simple and informal diction to present the story of its first-person narrator/protagonist Starr, who in the wake of a white police officer shooting of her unarmed Black friend begins to ponder her identity as a Black American and starts to develop a certain political consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Both in the novel and in the film, Starr is portrayed as having a sort of compartmentalized identity, corresponding to the two worlds—or spatial zones—that she simultaneously inhabits: that of the Black ghetto, presented as a dangerous space, fraught with gang violence and drug abuse, and that of a white school, where she and her brother are practically the only Black students. As Starr puts it in Thomas's narrative, "Williamson is one world and Garden Heights is another, and I have to keep them separate" (Thomas 35). Lee M. Pierce reads Starr's code-switching as "an instantiation of the double consciousness concept-metaphor" developed by W. E. B. Du Bois (416). She goes on to argue that "[t]o come of age, Starr must shift from a DuBoisian double consciousness to a Fanonian one; instead of two identities in perpetual tension, Starr must shed the White false consciousness layered over the real of Black identity" (416). What Pierce finds problematic about the narrative—both in its literary and cinematic versions—is the fact that ultimately "Starr is made White—not in the demographic sense, but in the sense of having the illusion of Whiteness afforded by her capacity for political speech" (417). In other words, she becomes "white" by virtue of being able to perform the political ritual of speaking out, a capacity that very few Blacks enjoy.

It is interesting that Blackness is articulated in both the novel and its film adaptation in terms of certain easily recognizable tokens such as hip-hop music,

3 Bernard Beck cites the film adaptation of Thomas's book as an example of "a recent outpouring of movies of protest by African American moviemakers" (202) addressing police brutality against Black youth.

basketball playing, wearing Air Jordan sneakers, and the like. These tokens of Blackness are perfectly acceptable to whites, especially when they are “performed” within a white space and preferably by whites themselves. This way Blackness is disciplined/domesticated and deprived of its unruly, uncontrollable potential. White students at Starr’s school listen and dance to hip-hop, and play basketball, thus performing this aestheticized version of Blackness. However, when they are exposed to the genuine conditions of life in a Black ghetto, for example when Starr’s schoolfriends visit her at home and hear gun shots—a scene narrated in the book, though not in the movie—or when Starr’s childhood friend Khalil is murdered and the whole district explodes into a wave of violent protests and demonstrations, white “fans” of Blackness by and large exhibit their displeasure and try to distance themselves from matters Black by withdrawing into their safe white suburban worlds.

The white consumption of Blackness is presented in Thomas’s novel and Tillman Jr.’s film in contrast to a more authentic Blackness of Starr’s father, Big Mav, who is deeply concerned about the fate of both his family and his community and manifests a decidedly political stance, shown for example in his unwavering support for the ideology of the Black Panthers or his prayers to Black Jesus. The father tries to protect his family by inculcating in his children the proper ways of behaving when stopped by a cop. He, however, refuses to leave the area despite the pleadings of his wife—who demanded that the children be placed in a school far away from their district—and her brother, who is a police officer himself. In this respect, the film adaptation fails to give justice to the complexity of characterization that Thomas attains in her narrative. Unlike in the film, the book’s Big Mav and his brother-in-law manage to forge a connection based on their Black masculinity, whereas the film portrays Uncle Carlos almost as an Oreo, with white values and viewpoint internalized to a large degree. Further, in the novel the family ultimately decide to relocate to a safer neighborhood, without, however, severing their ties with Garden Heights. One can venture a statement that the cinematic narrative offers a somewhat watered-down version of the story, perhaps more amenable to the viewing public. Still, in both the novel and the movie, the white and Black worlds are presented as essentially irreconcilable.

### Conclusion

Although *Native Son*, *Widows*, and *The Hate U Give* belong to very different cinematic genres, the three films offer complex articulations of the relationships between race, violence, and urbanity in twenty-first-century America. The three movies present the American city, Chicago being a representative example, as still divided into racial zones, with clear demarcation lines. Despite the transformations of physical urban space, the on-going processes of social production of space result in systemic marginalization and exclusion of African-Americans. The motif which links the three movies discussed here is that of violence: the institutional violence against Blacks and the retributive violence committed by African-Americans. This cycle of violence may again be interpreted as a series of attempts to control or defend one’s territory, a peculiar form of social practice related to space. Thus, it is interesting to respond to these movies in the context of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests that were rampant

in American cities in the wake of George Floyd's death. The media coverage showed the participants protesting against the systemic racism inherent in the US public life, against police brutality, and against unequal access to medical care, felt deeply acutely during the Covid-19 pandemic. American cities got ravaged during the protests, as if their Black participants refused to be contained within their prescribed ghettos. A reflection that comes to mind as regards the outcome of the protests, however, can be articulated in terms of Starr's statement in Thomas's novel: "People like us in situations like this become hashtags, but they rarely get justice" (59).

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