

Bakar: Kitwana

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THE NEW BLACK YOUTH CULTURE

The Emergence of the Hip-Hop Generation

I'VE HEARD ENOUGH OF [OUR YOUTH] TO KNOW THAT WE OUGHT TO BE HOLDING THEM UP AND SHARING WITH THEM WHAT WE KNOW INSTEAD OF STANDING ON TOP OF THEM TELLING THEM WHAT THEY'RE NOT DOING RIGHT. THEY'RE DOING A LOT RIGHT AND SOME THINGS WRONG. WE CONTINUE TO FAIL THESE BRILLIANT, VERY TALENTED, VERY CREATIVE AND COURAGEOUS YOUNG PEOPLE BECAUSE THEY'RE NOT SAYING WHAT OUR MESSAGE WAS. BUT FOR CHRIST'S SAKE . . . WE'RE ABOUT TO ENTER THE 21ST CENTURY. SOMETHING SHOULD BE DIFFERENT. AND THEY MAY BE RIGHT ABOUT SOME THINGS.

—AFENI SHAKUR, FORMER BLACK PANTHER,
MOTHER OF RAPPER TUPAC SHAKUR

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ASK ANY YOUNG BLACK AMERICAN BORN BETWEEN 1965 AND 1984 where they were on September 13, 1996, and most can

tell you. Ask them where they were six months later on March 9, 1997, and you'll get recollections as crystal clear as a baby boomer reminiscing on his or her whereabouts upon hearing of the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., or Malcolm X. The September 1996 death of twenty-five-year-old Tupac Shakur was followed by memorials in New York City, Los Angeles, and several cities in between. Likewise the March 1997 death of Christopher Wallace, aka Notorious B.I.G., did not pass without the recognition of his peers. The twenty-four-year-old was commemorated with a statesman-like funeral procession through his old stomping grounds. The deaths of both rap artists fueled record sales of their CDs. Their music and their lives became the subjects of books, college courses, television documentaries, and conference discussions. Killed in a hail of bullets fired by unknown gunmen, both rappers were deemed by countless critics as irresponsible, self-centered thugs who sowed the seeds of their own destruction. Those fans who celebrated their lives were seen as equally irresponsible. But the outpouring of affection was more than simply a fascination with the underworld of rap music and its entertainers. This commemoration of B.I.G. and Pac marked a turning point. Not only had we, the hip-hop generation, come of age, but more importantly, we were conscious of our arrival.

Both rappers, like their peers who saw hope and promise in their short lives, were hip-hop generationers—those young African Americans born between 1965 and 1984 who came of age in the eighties and nineties and who share a specific set of values and attitudes. At the core are our thoughts about family, relationships, child rearing, career, racial identity, race relations, and politics. Collectively, these views make up a complex worldview that has not been concretely defined.

This worldview first began to be expressed in the insightful mid- to late 1980s sociopolitical critiques of rap

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 artists like NWA, KRS-One, Poor Righteous Teachers, Queen Latifah, and others. In the mid-1990s, a handful of young writers such as Carlito Rodriguez, Bonz Malone, Selwyn Hinds, Mimi Valdez, and Scoop Jackson, to name a few, captured this sensibility in their work—although their essays were marginalized in magazines like *The Source*, *Vibe*, and *Rap Pages*. Filmmakers like John Singleton, Albert and Allen Hughes, and Hype Williams (particularly in their 1990s films *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, and *Belly*, respectively), also deftly presented these nuances—as do the youth-specific political concerns articulated almost daily by young activists like Conrad Muhammad, Lisa Sullivan, DeLacy Davis, and Donna Frisby-Greenwood.¹ A delayed response has more recently come out of the academy, most notably in the work of young scholars like historian Robin Kelley and sociologist Mary Pattillo-McCoy.

Collectively, hip-hop-generation writers, artists, filmmakers, activists, and scholars like these laid the foundation for understanding our generation's worldview. Mary Pattillo-McCoy's *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (University of Chicago, 1999), in comparing middle-class Black Americans to their white counterparts, put it this way:

We know that middle-class African Americans do not perform as well as whites on standardized tests (in school or in employment); are more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses; are less likely to marry and

¹Conrad Muhammad, executive director of A Movement for CHANGE; Lisa Sullivan, executive director of Local Initiative, Support, Training, and Education Network, Incorporated (LISTEN, Inc.); DeLacy Davis, president of Black Cops Against Police Brutality; Donna Frisby-Greenwood, executive director of Inner City Games.

more likely to have a child without being married; and are less likely to be working.

Pattillo-McCoy makes clear that even though this Black middle class is about half of the Black population, almost half of it is concentrated in the lower-middle-class region. Pattillo-McCoy also states that this Black middle class is distinguished by its close proximity to the Black working poor. I would add that what Pattillo-McCoy describes above extends to poor and working-class Blacks and not just in comparison to their white counterparts but, more importantly, relative to our parents' generation as well. In reaching these conclusions, Pattillo-McCoy relies on the objective evidence, but this worldview also extends to what we believe.

Of course, this definition is still fluid as this generation continues to come into its own. But I would further generalize that we, like our white peers, are more likely than our parents' generation to be obsessed with our careers and getting rich quick. For us, achieving wealth, by any means necessary, is more important than most anything else, hence our obsession with the materialistic and consumer trappings of financial success. Central to our identity is a severe sense of alienation between the sexes. Likewise, our perspective on personal relationships and marriage is more likely to take into consideration concerns as diverse as our parents' generation's divorce rates and child support enforcement laws, and we are more likely to be open to family arrangements other than the traditional American family. At the same time, our views of politics, race relations, and racial identity are more likely to have been shaped by Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and/or the Million Man March. Our views about safe sex are more likely to have been influenced by Easy E or Magic Johnson's public announcements regarding themselves and HIV/AIDS.

That Black youth share a national culture is nothing new in itself. Black youth culture during the 1920s, the 1930s, and even the 1960s was national in scope. Yet, during each of these periods, Black youth were more likely to derive values and identity from such traditional community institutions as family, church, and school. Despite slight local variations, the passing on of Black culture to the succeeding generation remained orderly and consistent from one Black community to the next. Today the influence of these traditional purveyors of Black culture have largely diminished in the face of powerful and pervasive technological advances and corporate growth. Now media and entertainment such as pop music, film, and fashion are among the major forces transmitting culture to this generation of Black Americans. At the same time, the new Black youth culture cuts across class lines, so that whether one is middle class, coming of age in a suburban or rural setting, college-bound, or a street-wise urban dweller, what it means to be young and Black has been similarly redefined. As such, the defining values of this generation's worldview have taken a dramatic turn away from our parents' generation.

For our parent's generation, the political ideals of civil rights and Black power are central to their worldview. Our parent's generation placed family, spirituality, social responsibility, and Black pride at the center of their identity as Black Americans. They, like their parents before them, looked to their elders for values and identity. The core set of values shared by a large segment of the hip-hop generation—Black America's generation X—stands in contrast to our parents' worldview. For the most part, we have turned to ourselves, our peers, global images and products, and the new realities we face for guidance. In the process, the values and attitudes described above anchor our worldview.

Our parents' values maintain a strong presence within our worldview. But in cases where the old and the new

collide, the old—more often than not—is superseded by the new. For example, Black pride is still an important part of this generation's identity. In fact, the hip-hop generation has embraced the idea of Blackness in ways that parallel the Black consciousness raising of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The popularization of the Afrocentric movement from the late 1980s through the 1990s, pro-Black lyrics on the contemporary rap scene, as well as traditional hairstyles (dreadlocks and braids, for example) adopted by many hip-hop generationers all speak to this. Regardless of whether this is a brand of hard-core nationalism or a lukewarm, flash-in-the-pan bou-gie nationalism, the fact remains that when many hip-hop generation youth have to choose between personal financial success at the expense of what the older generation considers communal cultural integrity, individual gain generally comes first.

It is important to distinguish this worldview from hip-hop culture, the youth-oriented lifestyle that birthed rap music. Certainly, the commercialization of rap music expanded the definition of hip-hop culture beyond the four elements (graffiti, break dancing, dj-ing, rap music) to include verbal language, body language, attitude, style, and fashion. By contrast, the new Black youth culture is expressed both publicly and privately in myriad ways. You see the street culture manifestation of this in "hood" films and hip-hop magazines like *The Source* as much as in rap music and hip-hop culture. You see it in the defiant attitude and disposition of our generation's professional athletes and entertainers like Allen Iverson, Ray Lewis, Mike Tyson, Randy Moss, and Albert Bell. You see it in the activism of the younger generation, which not only fights the power coming from the mainstream politics but is routinely at odds with older-generation activists like Jesse Jackson, Kweisi Mfume, and Al Sharpton. You see it coming from happy-to-be-middle-class-themed magazines

like *Honey* and *Savoy* as well as like-minded, youth-oriented television programming such as MTV and on-line publications like BET.com.

What were the catalysts for this new worldview? Like any generation, much of the hip-hop generation's group identity has been shaped by the major sociopolitical forces of our formative years. At least six major phenomena that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s have had a major impact on this generation's way of viewing the world.

Let us begin with popular culture and the visibility of Black youth within it. Today, more and more Black youth are turning to rap music, music videos, designer clothing, popular Black films, and television programs for values and identity. One can find the faces, bodies, attitudes, and language of Black youth attached to slick advertisements that sell what have become global products, whether it's Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Reebok and Nike sneakers, films such as *Love Jones* and *Set It Off*, or popular rap artists like Missy Elliott and Busta Rhymes. Working diligently behind the scene and toward the bottom line are the multinational corporations that produce, distribute, and shape these images. That Black youth in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Champaign, Illinois, for example, share similar dress styles, colloquialisms, and body language with urban kids from Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City is not coincidental.

We live in an age where corporate mergers, particularly in media and entertainment, have redefined public space. Within this largely expanded public space, the viewing public is constantly bombarded by visual images that have become central to the identity of an entire generation. Within the arena of popular culture, rap music more than anything else has helped shape the new Black youth culture. From 1997 to 1998, rap music sales showed a 31 percent increase, making rap the

have been effective in bringing the generation's issues to the fore. From NWA to Master P, rappers—through their lyrics, style, and attitude—helped to carve a new Black youth identity into the national landscape. Rappers' access to global media and their use of popular culture to articulate many aspects of this national identity renders rap music central to any discussion of the new Black youth culture. The irony in all this is that the global corporate structure that gave young Blacks a platform was the driving force behind our plight.

In fact, the face of globalization that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s is itself a critical factor that has significantly influenced the worldview of hip-hop generations. In short, the transnational corporations of the 1970s evolved into the mega-corporations of the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond. Several hundred of these giants, some with economies larger than most countries, collectively make up what is commonly referred to as the global economy—although there are now literally tens of thousands of smaller corporations operating at a global level, based primarily in the United States, Japan, and Europe. These mega-corporations are fueled by cutting-edge biological and digital technology and are impacting the lives of most of the world's population through their integration of commerce. As everyday people worldwide struggle to survive, these corporations work diligently to sell them a slice of modern life—from automobiles and electronics to food and entertainment. Global corporations—with the help of global institutions like the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund—have created immense wealth, further concentrated it in the hands of a few, and escalated the widening division between the haves and the have-nots. These mega-corporations are enabled by international trade agreements like NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) and GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). This reorganization of the world

fastest growing music genre, ahead of country, rock, classical, and all other musical forms. By 1998 rap was the top-selling musical format, outdistancing rock music and country music, the previous leading sellers. Rap music's prominence on the American music scene was evident by the late 1990s—from its increasing presence at the Grammy's (which in 1998, for example, awarded rapper Lauryn Hill five awards) to its pervasiveness in advertisements for mainstream corporations like AT&T, The Gap, Levi's, and so on.

Cultural critic Cornel West, in his prophetic *Race Matters* (Beacon Press, 1993), refers to this high level of visibility of young Blacks, primarily professional athletes and entertainers, in American popular culture as the Afro-Americanization of white youth.

The Afro-Americanization of white youth has been more a male than female affair given the prominence of male athletes and the cultural weight of male pop artists. This process results in white youth—male and female—imitating and emulating black male styles of walking, talking, dressing and gesticulating in relations to others. The irony in our present moment is that just as young black men are murdered, maimed and imprisoned in record numbers, their styles have become disproportionately influential in shaping popular culture.

Whereas previously the voices of young Blacks had been locked out of the global age's public square, the mainstreaming of rap music now gave Black youth more visibility and a broader platform than we had ever enjoyed before. At the same time, it gave young Blacks across the country who identified with it and were informed by it a medium through which to share a national culture. In the process, rap artists became the dominant public voice of this generation. Many

economy has filtered down to the lives of everyday people, including African Americans, in ways that are highly contradictory.

Young Black Americans born between 1965 and 1984 are the first generation of Black Americans to come of age in the era of globalization. Globalization certainly accounts for some "positive" outcomes, such as the success of rap music described above. In terms of wealth, those hip-hop generationers who are at the upper end of the middle class and beyond have enjoyed increased income and wealth during the 1980s and 1990s. Increases in income among college-educated professionals account for some of this; professional athletes and entertainers as well as a small number of young Blacks who cashed in on the high-tech boom of the 1990s account for much more. It must be emphasized that these individuals constitute a very small elite.

The real story of globalization's impact on the hip-hop generation is revealed in the widening division between the haves and have-nots that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Richard Freeman and Lawrence Katz, editors of *Differences and Changes in Wage Structures* (University of Chicago, 1995) investigated this trend and concluded:

Earnings inequality increased substantially in the United States in the 1980s, and the real earnings of many groups of workers, primarily men, fell from the early 1970s through the early 1990s. . . . In short, in the 1980s, if not earlier, the U.S. labor market experienced a massive twist against the less skilled and lower paid that reduced their living standards.

Experts like these point to movement of manufacturing jobs away from urban centers to the suburbs and overseas as a major factor in wage stagnation from the early to mid-1970s

through the 1980s and into the 1990s. Before this period, the Black middle class had been steadily growing since World War II. Despite the celebration of "the new Black middle class" in sensational media reports and self-congratulatory books like Lawrence Otis Graham's *Our Kind of People* and Ellis Cose's *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, no subsequent real growth of the Black middle class occurred until the very end of the 1990s, when Black poverty rates began to decline for the first time in more than twenty years. During the intervening period of the 1980s and 1990s, young Blacks faced the realities of rising rates of unemployment, Black youth reliance on the underground economy, particularly the crack-cocaine explosion of the 1980s, and the simultaneous boom in incarceration rates. The great contrast between the positive and negative outgrowths of this new global economy has heavily influenced the values, lifestyles, and worldview of young Blacks.

Third, the worldview of hip-hop generationers has been influenced by persisting segregation in an America that preaches democracy and inclusion. This contradiction has been particularly hard for us to swallow. Our generation is the first generation of African Americans to come of age outside the confines of legal segregation. We certainly live in a more inclusive society than existed in pre-civil rights America. However, continuing segregation and inequality have made it especially illusory for many young Blacks. The illusion of integration allows for some access, while countless roadblocks persist in critical areas where Blacks continue to be discriminated against in often subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. Young Blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts. Young Blacks with similar skills, experience, and educational backgrounds continue to be paid less than whites for the same jobs. More so than any other racial or ethnic group, African Americans remain segregated from whites in housing. In

terms of electoral politics, although there are more Black elected officials than ever before (nearly 9,000 in 1999, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies). Black politicians find it nearly impossible to get elected to statewide office in majority white states. In nearly forty years, only two Blacks have been elected to the U.S. Senate, and only one Black has been elected governor of any state. These obstacles in the face of lip service to human rights and democracy foster resentment among young Blacks. Inevitably, the contradictions of these racial double standards are embedded in our worldview.

A fourth impact on our worldview has been public policy regarding criminal justice, particularly policy that has clear racial implications. Beginning as early as 1982, such national policy was highlighted by initiatives such as the Reagan administration's "War on Drugs," which relaunched earlier anti-drug efforts by heavily shifting the focus of fighting illegal drug use from rehabilitation to punishment. The Omnibus Crime Bill of 1984, the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, and the 1988 Omnibus Anti-Drug Abuse Act were all part of the 1980s wave of legislation aimed at getting tough on crime. The most controversial aspects of these laws were elements like the disparity in sentencing for crack cocaine and powder cocaine. Offenders convicted of crimes involving as little as five grams of crack cocaine receive a minimum of five years in prison. For a powder cocaine offender to receive a similar sentence, the crime would have to involve nearly one hundred times that amount. Critics charge that the disparity is unjustified as there is no chemical difference between the two. The only difference is that the low cost of crack makes it affordable to almost anyone. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, by 1990 most crack cocaine users were white. Yet, in the early 1990s, 90 percent of those convicted in federal court of crack cocaine crimes were Black.

In a similar vein, in 1992 the Bush administration created the Violence Initiative, a series of federally funded studies that sought behavioral and biological markers for predicting a propensity for violence in young males. Under the auspices of helping "at least 100,000 inner-city kids," the studies also developed intervention models. Although the name Violence Initiative was dropped following protests from civil rights groups who claimed the studies attempted to determine that young Blacks were biologically prone to violence, the government continues to spend at least \$50 million annually on such studies.

These efforts dovetailed into the Clinton administration's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, a \$30 billion appropriation that earmarked nearly \$10 billion for prison construction alone and sanctioned the death penalty for federal crimes commonly associated with inner-city young Blacks and Latinos, such as carjacking and drive-by shootings. The law also targeted gang members with new and harsher penalties for drug crimes, and made life imprisonment mandatory for federal offenders after more than two state or federal convictions for violent felonies or drug crimes (three strikes). Finally, the 1994 law called for adult prosecution of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds charged with certain violent crimes. Some lawmakers went even further in turning up the heat on young violent offenders. This was especially true of the Juvenile Crime Control Act, a bill that received tons of media coverage but never made it into federal law. However, between 1992 and 1997, all but six states adopted its main tenants, which allowed youths to be tried as adults, allocated funds for more prison construction, and relaxed laws that restricted the housing of youths in adult facilities.

In addition to federal legislation, local laws that criminalized Black youth behavior were a mainstay of the 1990s as well. In 1992, for example, Chicago lawmakers enacted an

anti-gang loitering ordinance. Following in the footsteps of other cities whose anti-drug/anti-gang efforts quickly collapsed into anti-youth laws, Chicago's ordinance prohibited two or more youth from loitering in public places like the sidewalk in front of their homes, the neighborhood park, and so forth. Convictions carried a maximum six-month prison sentence and \$500 fine. The idea was to keep gang members off the streets and thereby stop crimes before they occurred. However, Chicago's anti-gang loitering ordinance went one step further. Police were given the authority to order loiterers to move on if they suspected that one was a gang member. Nearly 40,000 youth were arrested under the law within a two-year period. In 1999, the Supreme Court ruled that the law was unconstitutional, but such legislation persists.

Furthermore, various styles of dress, hairstyles, and fashion popular among Black youth have been banned from many of the nation's schools and in some communities make one subject to arrest. In the mid- to late 1990s, law enforcement agencies in Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles, as well as countless smaller cities, began to develop "gang profiling" databases. These databases consist of suspected gang members and their family, friends, and associates. Some include photographs and other categorized data that can be used against individuals in court. Most of those found in these databases are young Blacks and Latinos, as some of the characteristics used in profiling include being a member of a racial minority, graffiti writing, and dressing in a particular manner. In Los Angeles, the sheriff's department stores information on at least 140,000 individuals, many of whom have not committed any crime. Across the country, policies like these have become common in the 1990s.

This legislative association of Black youth with criminality inevitably spills over into law enforcement. Throughout

the decade between the Rodney King beating in 1991 and the police shooting death of Timothy Thomas, nineteen, in Cincinnati in 2001, incidents of brutality and murder—often deemed justifiable homicide—have continued unabated. Christian Parenti in his illuminating *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (Verso, 1999) asserts that this is part of a 1980s and 1990s nationwide trend in policing designed to put the force back in the police industry.

In the last decade the pressure to police effectively and secure urban space has become all the more important. For centuries, "the urban" has been synonymous with filth, lawlessness, and danger, but in recent years cities have also taken on a renewed economic and cultural importance as sites of accumulation, speculation, and innovative profit making. For cities to work as such, they must be, or at least appear and feel, safe. If the economic restructuring of the eighties and nineties intensified urban poverty, it also created new, gilded spaces that are increasingly *threatened by poverty*. This polarization of urban space and social relations has in turn required a new layer of regulation and exclusion, so as to protect the new hyper-aestheticized, playground quarters of the postmodern metropolis from their flipside of misery. This contradiction, between the danger of cities and their value, has spawned yet another revolution in American law enforcement: the rise of zero-tolerance/quality of life policing.

Parenti says this style of policing has naturally led to rising rates of police brutality, especially against people of color. In New York City, complaints of police brutality rose nearly 50 percent in 1994 alone, according to Parenti.

This seemingly open season on young Blacks by police officers is a pattern that too often has repeated itself throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The mass demonstrations, including those that followed the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles, Malice Green's murder in Detroit, Johnny Gammage's murder by police in Pittsburgh, Abner Louima's beating in New York City, and Amadou Diallo's murder by officers in New York City, reflect overwhelming frustration and a growing cynicism about policing that has reached an all time high. This collapse of trust in law enforcement and the vilification of Black youth through crime legislation certainly play a role in the view Black youth share about legislation, law enforcement, and criminal justice.

Fifth in our discussion of influences on the new Black youth culture is the media representation of young Blacks. Prior to the 1990s mainstreaming of rap music, the nightly news was where young Blacks were most widely represented in terms of televised images. This media representation, as Mike Gray reveals in his *Drug Crazy: How We Got into This Mess and How We Can Get Out*, was critical to selling America on the war on drugs.

The media in the 1980s got hooked on the drug war itself. . . . A surveillance van with a hidden camera can park on a street in Harlem, but it has no access to the Chicago Yacht Club or the ladies' room at Dan Tana's in West Hollywood. As a result, the drug-war footage showing up as the nightly news focused almost exclusively on the urban street scene, and though the vast majority of drug users have always been white, the people doing drugs on TV were now black and Hispanic. When a couple of researchers from the University of Michigan spotted this phenomenon . . . [they] discovered that from 1985 onward, the number of

whites shown using cocaine dropped by 60 percent, and the number of Blacks rose by the same amount.

This image of young Blacks persisted into the 1990s, although it was more and more counterbalanced by the visibility of young black professional athletes and entertainers.

Degrees of monstrosity of their crimes aside, the Lake Worth, Florida, Black thirteen-year-old Nathaniel Brazill, who shot and killed his English teacher, thirty-five-year-old Barry Grunow, became the poster boy for the turn-of-the-century spate of high school shootings rather than Dylan Klebold, seventeen, and Eric Harris, eighteen, who planned and carried out mass killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. Klebold and Harris killed twelve students and one teacher and injured nearly two dozen others before killing themselves. Likewise, Charles Andrew Williams, fifteen, opened fire on classmates at Santana High School in Santee, California, in March 2001, leaving two students dead and thirteen wounded.

Despite the cold-hearted, calculated nature of these white executioners, media coverage mainly humanized them. Commentary like this one from Nancy Gibbs writing in *Time* magazine (March 19, 2001) was the rule rather than the exception. "Given the agony that Williams inflicted on his victims," Gibbs wrote, "it is awkward even to discuss the agony that Williams was in." Yet Gibbs proceeded to do so, pointing the finger at the community and suburban culture as the cause of the crime rather than Williams himself.

Some friends came to his defense, talked about how badly he had been treated, how the bullies stole his skateboard, stole even the shoes off his feet. Was there, this time, a measure of pity for a lost boy, who seemed to have had nowhere to go, who wore a silver necklace

with the word MOUSE on it, who called at least three of his friends' mothers Mom, who in the end seemed to want nothing more than to be taken seriously and to be taken, at least, into somebody's custody?

Young Blacks who commit crimes, such as Brazill, rarely receive this kind of humanizing treatment in the mainstream press. This contributes to the alienation of young Blacks from the mainstream culture.

Finally, this generation's worldview has been affected by the overall shift in the quality of life for young Blacks during the 1980s and 1990s. Although by 1999, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Blacks living below the poverty line had dropped to its lowest level in nearly three decades, many young Blacks remain poor and working poor. The Urban Institute estimates that 60 percent of America's poor youth are Black. In addition, although unemployment rates for young Blacks had dropped by the late 1990s, Black youth unemployment rates remain twice as high as white youth unemployment rates (just as they have been for the past two decades).

The rate of unemployment directly corresponds with the number of youth involved in the underground economy. The growth of youth street gangs, which experts say form primarily to sell drugs, was a product of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1995, the National Youth Gang Center of the Office of Juvenile Justice reported that gang activity existed in all fifty states, including rural, urban, and suburban communities, some but not all of which were Black. This underground economy has contributed to the exorbitant number of Blacks within the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems, which by 1995 involved one-third of Black men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, while juvenile arrests for females increased by 55 percent.

Statistics regarding gun homicide, suicide, and AIDS among young Blacks in the 1980s and 1990s provide a clear picture of the state of the hip-hop generation. Gun homicide has been the leading cause of death of Black men between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four since 1969. Today, like thirty years ago, young Black men are most likely to die at the hands of another young Black male. For Black males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, gun homicide increased 79 percent between 1980 and 1990.

Once nearly nonexistent among young Blacks, suicide, according to the Centers for Disease Control, is now the third leading cause of death for Blacks fifteen to twenty-four years old, the same as for the general population. The suicide rate for Black youth fifteen to nineteen years old more than doubled between 1980 and 1995, increasing most dramatically (146 percent) for young Black males ages 15-19. Nearly three-fourths of Black male teens who committed suicide in this period used guns to kill themselves.

And finally, AIDS, once a disease that struck primarily gay white men, fast became a disease of young Black heterosexuals during the 1990s. Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Blacks have the highest rate of HIV infection in terms of new AIDS cases. But the situation is even more dire for young Blacks. According to the Centers for Disease Control, African American teens represent 60 percent of new AIDS cases among those aged 13-19. By 1999, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, AIDS was the leading cause of death among Black men ages 25-44 and the second leading cause of death for Black women in the same age group.

Why has the response to these monumental problems been so limited? When it comes to public policy and issues specific to Black youth, little happens beyond identifying the problems and discussing them. A large part of what stands in

the way of implementing workable solutions is the steadily intensifying war going on inside Black America itself. The divide between the hip-hop generation and that of our parents (the civil rights/Black power generation) has not yet registered on the radar screen of cultural critics, activists, or policy makers. It is a divide that is as vast as the one that separated white America in the 1960s, as radical white youth culture broke from the mainstream and swept across the country.

When many of our parents, grandparents, and civil rights leaders disapprovingly comment on events like Freaknik (the annual gathering of Black college students in Atlanta), which over the years has devolved into a blend of general mayhem, partying, and in some cases incidents of violence, they are quick to recall earlier times in Black America when such behavior was not simply embarrassing to one's self and family but detrimental to the race overall. They point to this as evidence of how the hip-hop generation has veered off course.

A further indication of what they deem a withering sense of values and social responsibility among the younger generation, they say, is the steady drop in youth membership and attendance in the Black church—long a community haven of spiritual centeredness and respectable values. According to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, attendance for eighteen to thirty-five-year-olds has dropped 5.6 percent from 1995 to 2000. (Black America's young energetic Christians like platinum-selling gospel singer Kirk Franklin are the exception rather than the rule.)

Likewise, it is not uncommon to hear some of these community leaders dismiss rap music—the most significant cultural achievement of our generation—as ghetto culture. Most of our parents, and especially civil rights leaders and

community activists, would rather ignore rap's impact—especially those lyrics that delve into the gritty, street culture of the Black underworld—than explore its role in the lives of hip-hop generations. At the core of each of these complaints is the voice of Black middle-class elitism. Another component of this criticism is fear—fear of what the older generation did to make the hip-hop generation so vastly different from their own. Another part of this criticism is rooted in the unwillingness among the older generation to adjust to the social transformations that have shaped the hip-hop generation.

"Each generation," writes Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*—the bible for activists in our parents' generation and a source often cited in the nostalgic search for deeper values within our own—"out of relative obscurity, must discover their mission, fulfill it or betray it." Now more than ever these divided generations must begin to understand the ways that the new Black youth culture both empowers and undermines Black America. As brilliant a moment in history as the civil rights and Black power eras were, the older generation must realize they cannot claim any real victory if the hip-hop generation cannot build significantly on those gains. The younger generation must understand that no matter how grand our individual achievements (achievements built on the gains from past struggles), they mean very little if we cannot overcome at least some of the major social obstacles of our time, leaving a formidable foundation on which the next generation can stand strong. As long as the older generation fails to understand the new Black youth culture in all of its complexities, and as long as the younger generation fails to see its inherent contradictions, we cannot as a community address the urgent crises now upon us, particularly those facing Black American youth. New ways of relieving current forms of oppression can be implemented only when the

younger and older generations do so together. Our collective destiny demands it.

The rags-to-riches rap careers, the lyrics, and very lifestyles of Tupac and B.I.G. epitomize the new Black youth culture. Like their lives and deaths, each of these elements informs the worldview of our generation and speaks to our attitudes about all aspects of life from sex, love, and family to community, education, and future possibilities. This new Black youth culture raises some critical questions: how has Black America changed, what new circumstances and conditions have affected its evolution, and finally, what is the legacy of that culture at the dawn of the millennium? If Pac and B.I.G. are to be martyrs for the hip-hop generation, let them be martyrs in beginning an intergenerational movement to answer these questions and resolve those problems that threaten to undermine the very fabric and future of Black America.

2

AMERICA'S OUTCASTS

The Employment Crisis

IF I WASN'T IN THE RAP GAME,
I'D PROBABLY HAVE A KI KNEE-DEEP IN THE
CRACK GAME.
CAUSE THE STREETS IS A SHORT STOP
EITHER YOU SLINGIN' CRACK ROCK OR YOU GOT A
WICKED JUMP SHOT.
—NOTORIOUS B.I.G., "THINGS DONE CHANGED"

ALTHOUGH OUR PARENTS' GENERATION FIRST SERIOUSLY raised the issue of reparations in the 1970s (through activist-nationalist organizations like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee [SNCC], the Republic of New Afrika, the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America [N'COBRA], and religious-nationalist groups like the Nation of Islam), only in the past few years has the debate gained currency in the American mainstream.¹ Reparations, the idea

¹Every year for the past twelve legislative sessions, Congressman John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), a baby boomer, has introduced a bill to establish a commission to explore the impact of slavery on African Americans and