

Thug Life

A journalist argues that the "ghetto mindset" isn't doing anybody any good.

Reviewed by William Jelani Cobb
Sunday, April 1, 2007; BW04

GHETTONATION

A Journey Into the Land of the Bling

And the Home of the Shameless

By Cora Daniels

Doubleday. 205 pp. \$23.95

It has been almost three years since Bill Cosby's infamous "Pound Cake Speech" -- his unfiltered chastisement of poor people who, in his estimation, "are not holding their end in this deal" -- and the howls have yet to fade. Academics (myself included), pundits and barbershop prognosticators are still arguing about the validity of Cosby's tirade, over whether racism or bad habits are responsible for the conditions of poor blacks in this country. Into this century's old tangle of intraracial anxiety falls *Ghettonation*, Cora Daniels's exploration of all that is gauche, urban and embarrassingly public.

For Daniels, "ghetto" is a condition -- an addiction, even -- that has metastasized throughout American popular culture. It is an impoverished mindset defined by conspicuous consumption and irresponsibility. Given the popularity of neo-minstrel fare such as VH1's "Flavor of Love" or the cringe-worthy spectacle of the rap group Three 6 Mafia singing "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" at last year's Oscars, it's easy to see why this phenomenon troubles her. In an era when we scarcely talk sympathetically about the conditions of poor black people, the entertainment value of their impoverished "lifestyle" has increased exponentially.

Much of what we learn about "ghetto" in this book comes from man-on-the-street interviews that Daniels conducts in her Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in New York. We learn of neighborhood men who see the author's wedding band as an invitation to flirt (they prefer married women because adulterous relationships require less responsibility on their part). We meet Aisha, an 18-year-old working hard toward a nebulously defined goal of "success," Chris, a 16-year-old who frequently cuts class to play video games and has had 16 girlfriends in his young life, and Daniel Howard, a teenager who examined the violence in his Brooklyn community in an award-winning documentary. Daniels's profiles of the people she encounters and their thorny attempts to figure out the world they live in are the strongest portions of the book. When Aisha points out the pejorative sting of the G-word Daniels so liberally applies, you can almost feel the uncomfortable silence in the room.

Yet even as Daniels makes worthwhile observations and displays a wry wit about a troubling subject, *GhettoNation* falls into one of the most common and troubling pitfalls of these discussions: lumping damaging behaviors (criminality, drug abuse) together with simply distasteful ones. That is to say, bad etiquette is not shorthand for bad character, but the singular term "ghetto" irrevocably conflates the two. (Bill Cosby, for instance, linked people who steal with those who give their children colorful names such as "Shaniqua.")

Daniels wisely recognizes the responsibility we all share when two 9-year-old boys perform a mock stick-up on a crowded subway train (one that culminates in an all-too-real arrest when they exit the train). And you cannot help but lament the story of two 13-year-olds who set a fire in their housing project that takes the life of a security guard. But does this really belong to the same class of phenomena as the person who tastelessly broadcasts the intimate details of his personal life by talking too loudly on his cellphone or drives around blaring music from the studio-worthy sound system in his car?

Despite Daniels's protests to the contrary, a strong thread of class condescension runs through the book. This is partly a result of her loose definition of the term "ghetto." Early on, in an attempt to steer clear of accusations of simple class bias, she reports that since "ghetto is a mind-set," it can be found anywhere and everywhere. As proof of this, she points to an ostensibly affluent white suburb where the palatial homes remain empty because the over-extended owners cannot afford to furnish them. This, we learn, is the quintessence of ghetto. But herein lies the contradiction. Why stigmatize the behavior of middle-class people by hurling a term generally associated with the bad choices made by poor black people? We would never look at a poor single parent who purchased a high-end car she could not hope to pay for, shake our heads and say, "That is so *suburban*." Thus Daniels's catholic use of the term serves to heighten its power as a racial slur, not diminish it.

Still, it is difficult to disagree with Daniels's core thesis: that a blinkered mindset lies at the heart of many of the problems we see and associate with "ghetto." And in raising this point, she offers one insight that transcends the morass of racism-versus-personal-responsibility arguments that we are currently mired in. Whether the ghetto mentality is a product of limited opportunities or personal failings, changing one's mind is clearly the prerequisite to changing one's circumstances. ·

William Jelani Cobb is an assistant professor of history at Spelman College. His books include "To The Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic."

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Your washingtonpost.com User ID will be displayed with your comment.

Comments: (Limit 5,000 characters)

Post

