

Black Culture Beyond Hip-Hop

By Thomas Chatterton Williams
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Over the past three decades black culture has grown so conflated with hip-hop culture that for most Americans under the age of 45, hip-hop culture is black culture. Except that it's not.

During the controversy over Don Imus's comments this spring, the radio host was pilloried for using the same sexist language that is condoned, if not celebrated, in hip-hop music and culture. As the scandal evolved, some critics, including the Rev. Al Sharpton and the NAACP, shifted their attention to the rap industry. Indeed, every couple of years, it seems, we ask ourselves: Is hip-hop poisonous? Is it misogynistic, violent and nihilistic? What kind of message is it sending?

But what critics consistently fail to emphasize in these sporadic storms of opprobrium, as most did during the Imus affair, is that the stakes transcend hip-hop: Black culture itself is in trouble.

Born in the projects of the South Bronx, tweaked to its gangsta form in the 'hoods of South Central Los Angeles and dumbed down unconscionably in the ghettos of the "Dirty South" (the original Confederate states, minus Missouri and Kentucky), there are no two ways about it -- hip-hop culture is not black culture, it's black street culture. Despite 40 years of progress since the civil rights movement, in the hip-hop era -- from the late 1970s onward -- black America, uniquely, began receiving its values, aesthetic sensibility and self-image almost entirely from the street up.

This is a major departure for blacks, who traditionally saw cultivation as a key to equality. Think of the days when W.E.B. Du Bois "[sat] with Shakespeare" and moved "arm in arm with Balzac"; or when Ralph Ellison waxed universal and spoke of the need "to extend one's humanity and one's knowledge of human life."

The historian Paul Fussell notes that for most Americans, it is difficult to "class sink." Try to imagine the Chinese American son of oncologists -- living in, say, a New York suburb such as Westchester, attending private school -- who feels subconsciously compelled to model his life, even if only superficially, on that of a Chinese mafioso dealing heroin on the Lower East Side. The cultural pressure for a middle-class Chinese American to walk, talk and act like a lower-class thug from Chinatown is nil. The same can be said of Jews, or of any other ethnic group.

But in black America the folly is so commonplace it fails to attract serious attention. Like neurotics obsessed with amputating their own healthy limbs, middle-class blacks

concerned with "keeping it real" are engaging in gratuitously self-destructive and violently masochistic behavior.

Sociologists have a term for this pathological facet of black life. It's called "cool-pose culture." Whatever the nomenclature, "cool pose" or keeping it real or something else entirely, this peculiar aspect of the contemporary black experience -- the inverted-pyramid hierarchy of values stemming from the glorification of lower-class reality in the hip-hop era -- has quietly taken the place of white racism as the most formidable obstacle to success and equality in the black middle classes.

As John H. McWhorter emphasizes in his book "Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America," "forty years after the Civil Rights Act, African-American students on the average are the weakest in the United States, at all ages, in all subjects, and regardless of class level." Reading and math proficiency test results consistently show this. Clearly, this *nostalgie de la boue*, this longing for the mud, exacts a hefty price.

A 2005 [study](#) by Roland G. Fryer of Harvard University crystallizes the point: While there is scarce dissimilarity in popularity levels among low-achieving students, black or white, Fryer finds that "when a student achieves a 2.5 GPA, clear differences start to emerge." At 3.5 and above, black students "tend to have fewer and fewer friends," even as their high-achieving white peers "are at the top of the popularity pyramid." With such pressure to be real, to not "act white," is it any wonder that the African American high school graduation rate has stagnated at 70 percent for the past three decades?

Until black culture as a whole is effectively disentangled from the python-grip of hip-hop, and by extension the street, we are not going to see any real progress.

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