

"Fearless, bracing, and expansive...*Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop* confirms [Kitwana's] place as one of the most important thinkers of our generation."

—Jeff Chang, author of *Can't Stop Won't Stop*



WHY

wankstas,

WHITE

wiggers,

KIDS

wannabes,

and the

LOVE

new reality

HIP

of race

by the author of

in america

Bakari

THE HIP-HOP

Kitwana

HOP

GENERATION

**why
white kids
love
HIP-HOP**

Also by Bakari Kitwana

**The Hip Hop Generation
The Rap on Gangsta Rap**

**why
white kids
love
HIP-HOP**

**wankstas, wiggers, wannabes,
and the new reality of race in America**

bakari kitwana

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To my mother, Dorothy Dance, for teaching me everything I need to know about America's old racial politics. Her motto, "Don't let other people's ignorance make you ignorant," daily keeps me from falling into the abyss of easy answers about racial matters.

To hip-hop generationers fighting this wrongheaded war in Iraq. In the words of Bob Marley, "Every day the bucket goes to the well. One day the bottom's gonna drop out." Hold your heads.

And to hip-hop activists on the battlefield to building a new world and a new politics. Your example is necessary, noted and the best gift we can give the next generation, other than change itself.

And

To the memory of Dr. Jacob Carruthers, whose example of "intellectual warfare" brought much beauty into the world; Lu Palmer, journalist, organizer and instigator extraordinaire, who knew the right combination of truth, insight and agitation "enough to make a Negro turn Black"; and "bridge generationer" Lisa Sullivan for teaching the hip-hop generation where to find our natural leaders.

No generation can choose the age or circumstance in which it is born, but through leadership it can choose to make the age in which it is born, an age of enlightenment, an age of jobs, and peace, and justice. Only leadership—that intangible combination of gifts, discipline, information, circumstance, courage, timing, will and divine inspiration—can lead us out of the crisis in which we find ourselves.

—Reverend Jesse Jackson, Democratic National
Convention Address (San Francisco, July 18, 1984)

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Preface

**What goes around comes around I figure
Now we got white kids callin themselves “nigger.”
—KRS-One “MC’s Act Like They Don’t Know”**

The premise of this book is simple yet long overdue: the national conversation about race in this country has yet to catch up with the national reality. Given the technological gains of the past three decades, which ultimately defined the concept of the “information age,” it’s not far-fetched to assume that cutting-edge ideas in most areas of thought are quick to penetrate the mainstream. However, when it comes to racial matters, long an American obsession, the new reality of race is rarely part of the national conversation. Particularly ignored are the ideas and voices of the post–baby boom generation. Members of both generation X (those born between 1965 and 1984) and the millennium generation (those born between 1985 and

2004) have inherited and created a new world when it comes to living race in America. They are the first Americans to live their entire lives free of de facto segregation. This alone warrants our attention as we consider racial matters. What is more, today's acceptance of hip-hop as mainstream popular culture has radically altered the racial landscape. And in that nebulous space where hip-hop and popular culture meet, we see specific shifts in the ways young Americans are processing race. These shifts help explain the dawning of a new reality of race in America.

Hip-hop culture has its roots among young Blacks in urban communities throughout the northeastern United States. The Black subculture that emerged in the South Bronx in the early to mid-1970s began as what hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa called the five elements—graffiti art, break dancing, rapping, deejaying and “doing the knowledge.” What is popularly known as hip-hop expanded beyond that definition by the early 1990s, mostly due to the commercialization of rap music. So today, when we speak of hip-hop culture, we are also referencing a hip-hop-specific language, body language, fashion, style, sensibility and worldview.

Part of the reason the culture is so influential among today's youth is that most young people who identify with hip-hop, unlike rock and roll and other musical genres, identify with more than music. Although bebop, the jazz subculture, was also associated with a cultural lifestyle, that lifestyle never ventured far beyond jazz aficionados. Hip-hop's emergence in a global information age is a major variable that sets it apart, vastly increasing its capacity to reach beyond anything the world has ever seen.

Throughout this book when the term “hip-hop” appears, depending on the context, I'm referring to either rap music or

some other aspect of hip-hop culture. When I use it to describe individuals (e.g., hip-hop activists, hip-hop designers, hip-hop educators), I'm implying that they have a connection to the culture that goes beyond simply being pop culture consumers. When I use the term "mainstream hip-hop," I'm talking about aspects of the culture that have been packaged, often distorted and then sold by corporate America.

It is helpful to think of hip-hop's cultural movement as having both a local and a national manifestation. Even though hip-hop has reached a national consumer culture level, the local is still crucial to its survival. The local too, at times, has a life of its own. So it shouldn't be assumed that the local, off-the-radar manifestation of hip-hop is exclusively defined by what hip-hop does in the mainstream.

That American youth across race have embraced hip-hop culture, in both its local and national manifestations, is as much about hip-hop culture's sense of inclusiveness as it is a testament to American youth incorporating the founding fathers' "all men are created equal" rhetoric into their worldview. Another reason for its wide acceptance is that consumerism has become an American value. And hip-hop, as part of the American entertainment industry, is now for sale to all buyers.

But hip-hop music, no matter how widely accepted in the mainstream, isn't entertainment alone; it's also a voice of the voiceless. More than just a new genre of music, hip-hop since its inception has provided young Blacks a public platform in a society that previously rendered them mute. It has done the same for youth of other cultures as well. This in large measure explains hip-hop's mass appeal.

In the past decade American youth across the board have increasingly had to confront some of the economic and social

frustrations (declining job options, deteriorating quality of education, rising incarceration for nonviolent crimes and the evaporation of living-wage employment) that began to handicap Black American youth in the early 1980s. A recent study (*Left Behind in the Labor Force*) by a team of scholars at Northeastern University found that by 2002, 5.5 million American young people between 16 and 24 were out of work, out of school and virtually dropping off the mainstream radar. At the same time white American youth, like their Latino American, Asian American and Native American counterparts, have embraced hip-hop culture. The music and culture of hip-hop, once deemed a Black thing, has been a ready refuge.

It is not only hip-hop's message of resistance to the status quo that young Americans find welcoming. The hip-hop cultural movement has provided a new arena of public space (although still largely off the radar of the mainstream) for young people to come together at local and national levels. In these spaces, which include local hip-hop collectives, spoken word venues, rap concerts and more, America's multicultural youth enjoy, observe and participate in this cultural arts movement.

A clear understanding of hip-hop's cross-cultural engagement, which may seem superficial to those outside the culture, affords us a unique lens for analyzing the evolution of ideas about race in America—changes that are manifesting themselves in a new generation. We are moving away from what I call the “old racial politics,” characterized by adherence to stark differences—cultural, personal and political—between Black and white, away from cultural territorialism on both sides and away from an uncritical acceptance of stereotypes, also on both sides. The “new racial politics,” on the other hand, is marked by

nuance, complexity, the effects of commerce and commercialism and a sort of fluidity between cultures. The new views about race also allow us a radical standpoint from which to see the ways that America's outdated racial politics—a force more deeply embedded in our national psyche than we generally acknowledge—works against new definitions.

Although hip-hop is a refuge (albeit temporary) for many young people, old ideas about race continue to undermine attempts by pockets of youth to redefine the terms through hip-hop. Every day the nation clings to the old agenda and, even more troubling, rallies the younger generation to take up its dying causes. Examples are everywhere in pop culture, national debates and public policy at federal and state levels:

- In Al Sharpton's recent run for president a tired old racial history charade was played out. The campaign itself, and the way it was perceived in the media and political circles, took us back to the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson, which were steeped in similar oppositional race politics. Was Sharpton's candidacy to be taken seriously or was he *just* a Black candidate?
- Affirmative action, seen in years past as a valuable tool for balancing racial inequalities, has itself recently been called racist. As it comes under attack at colleges and universities, the younger generation is strongly encouraged (if not coerced) to take up an older generation's dispute.
- Reparations is an issue with roots in the World War II generation. The manner in which the national discussion has been framed forces Americans to choose sides along outdated racial lines. One study at Harvard University, for

example, found that 90 percent of white Americans oppose reparations, while 90 percent of African Americans support it.

Old ways of thinking about race certainly persist in the younger generation. However, the mainstreaming of hip-hop culture has in part provided a space where American youth, Black and white included, can explore these new ideas together, even if the old racial politics are always lurking in the shadows.

This book attempts to unmask not only “the why” but “the who, what and when” of today’s pop culture fascination: Why does hip-hop appeal to white youth? How is this generation’s fascination with Black youth culture different from previous generations of American youth, given that R&B, jazz, blues and even rock and roll have all enjoyed similar cross-cultural mass appeal? What role do telecommunications, mass media and consumer culture play in these differences? What does generation X think about race? How do gen Xers differ on the issues from their parents and grandparents? How have ideas of race evolved? Are white kids stealing Black culture? Can culture exclusively belong to one race in the first place? Why is the race/color of hip-hop’s audience so significant, and to whom? Where does America’s racial politics fit into this phenomenon? Are young Americans achieving Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream via hip-hop?

A large part of this book’s concern is hip-hop itself, especially the terrain of popular culture, youth culture, economics and politics, where Black and white kids interact. But at its core, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop* reveals the ways the younger generation is challenging the comfort zone that has made it

fashionable for Americans to accept only baby steps in social change and race relations since the 1960s. This post–baby boom generation is forcing the country closer to Jefferson’s assertion of equality: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” For the first time in forty years, a giant step in social change is before us.

Introduction

Toward a New Racial Politics

People are not born racist. Racism is learned behavior that is part of American culture. If hip-hop can change that, then there is reason for hope.

—Haki Madhubuti, author of *Run Toward Fear*

When most Americans, reared on a steady diet of American racial politics, think of white kids and hip-hop, two questions come to mind: (1) Will this generation's music, hip-hop, be appropriated by white America just as rock and roll was, leaving its Black originators all but forgotten? (2) If white youth are emulating the same young Black men our society has vilified for two centuries, are the pathologies and immoral behaviors deemed to be "Black problems" now going to infect the young whites who fall under the spell of hip-hop music and culture?