chapter 1

THE POST-HIP-HOP GENERATION

Now, as then, we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorizations.
— JAMES BALDWIN

All the fresh styles always start off as a good lil’ hood thang;
look at blues, rock, jazz, rap . . .
By the time it reach Hollywood it’s over,
but it’s cool, we just keep it goin’ make new shit.
— ANDRÉ 3000

“The hip-hop generation,” a tag typically rocked by Blacks and browns born after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, certainly captured the essence of the rebellious, courageous, creative, politically discontent ‘teens and twenty-somethings of the 80s and 90s. But “nah, not today,” says Alton Smith, a nineteen-year-old poet from North Philly who counts himself among a new generation of world-changers that believe—he tells me as our Black bodies climb into the night—“It’s bigger than hip hop.”

With its sands scattered to the winds of the world, hip hop joins
scores of other vibrations that are born in the Black community, but that live, thrive, and reproduce all over the world. More than just an integral part of pop culture, hip hop has shaped the perceptions of people, especially young ones, wherever they are. Take, for instance, Planète Rap, a hip-hop clothing store whose front window is tatted with images of a heat-throwin’ 50 Cent, located on the posh Grande Boulevard in Paris. Or the Ghanaian teenager who, as I hopped through his neighborhood in Accra, greeted me with “What’s good, my nigga?” Although these examples straddle some stereotypes, there are many others—like the marriages between hip-hop groups and grassroots organizations in São Paulo, Brazil, the emergence of revolutionary Palestinian female emcee Sabreena Da Witch, or the East African hip-hop groups Kalamashaka and Kwanza Unit whose raw rhymes routinely expose government corruption in the region—that demonstrate how the adoption of hip hop outside of the U.S. has been collectively constructed.

In its homeland, “hip hop,” says Alton, “empowered my dad’s generation to be better, to stand up, to stop the violence.” He flashes a yellowed Polaroid of his father who, in 1980, eight years before Alton was born, founded a rap group. “But it just don’t do that now.” Alton’s disappointment is amplified by an urban crisis that has recently stolen the life of his seventeen-year-old cousin.

“I stay at a funeral,” he sighs, then roll-calls a few names of the young Black men, boys even, who are among the over four hundred murder victims in Philadelphia in 2007. “But turn on the radio and what do you hear? You hear, I’ll kill you nigga, I’ll kill you nigga,” he says, trying to shrug off the senselessness. When the murder rate is higher for Blacks in Philadelphia—the city of brotherly love—than it is for U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, young men like Alton search for ways to interrupt this wretched cycle of death and despair.

Although Alton sees the hip hop of his father’s generation as empowering, he acknowledges that the economic dominance of all things hip hop during his own time has brought many voices into the mainstream that, prior, were barely heard and never listened to in that space.

“Yeah, but at what price?” quizzes Tiffany Coles, a twenty-one-year-old “Seventh Wardian” from New Orleans who, as we motor through the ruins of her desolate city, says that hip hop’s mainstream success reminds her of Rosie Perez’s monologue in White Men Can’t Jump. “Sometimes when you win, you really lose, and sometimes when you lose, you really win, and sometimes when you win or lose, you actually tie, and sometimes when you tie, you actually win or lose.” For Tiffany, hip hop’s dive into the mainstream was a win for the handful of corporations and artists who grew rich, but a significant loss for those who it is supposed to represent.
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no music to make its point. We sing the freedom songs for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that “We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday.” These songs bound us together, gave us courage together, helped us march together.

Going beyond the naïve idea that Black music is simply entertainment helps us to better understand the current crisis. “It seems to me that if the Negro represents, or is symbolic of, something in and about the nature of American culture, this certainly should be revealed by his characteristic music,” is how poet Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) puts it in Blues People. So, in that way, to observe contemporary hip hop is to observe ourselves; an observation that, for Alton, Tiffany, and others, not only blares problems loud enough to drown out seductive samples or head nod—inspiring bass lines, but turns them toward redefinition.

The current crisis isn’t just that rap music, hip hop’s voice box of values and ideas, has drifted into the shallowest pool of poetic possibilities, or even that most of today’s hip hop betrays the attitudes and ideals that framed it in the same way that, say, the U.S. Patriot Act neglects the principles—at least in theory—espoused by the framers of the constitution. Many young people—myself, age twenty-five, included—who were born into the hip-hop generation feel misrepresented by it and have begun to see the dangers and limitations of being collectively identified by a genre of music that we don’t even own. And it is our lack of ownership that has allowed corporate forces to overrun hip hop with a level of misogyny and Black-on-Black violence that spurs some young folks to disown the label “hip-hop generation.”

The balance, here, as Tiffany measures, is remembering “that the stuff on BET and on the radio, which is mainly negative, is not all of hip hop.” So while Tiffany is skeptical of the label “hip-hop

They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of songs the slaves sang—the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns, and the anthems of our movement. I have heard people talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the movement are as inspired by their words. “Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom” is a sentence that needs
generation,” she embraces the contributions of emcees who, in the triumphant tradition of Black arts, have employed the medium as a means to elevate, uplift, and inspire collective change. At the same time, she realizes that “most people ‘round here won’t listen to it if it’s not on the radio.”

Part of the crisis is centered around the distribution mechanisms for hip hop. Although hip hop is the cultural expression of young Black America, we do not control how the cultural expression is disseminated. Instead, multinational corporations like Viacom, Clear Channel, and Vivendi, through their radio and television outlets, control how most people hear and see hip hop. When I ask my students at Morgan State—an urban, predominantly Black university—about emcees like Immortal Technique, Talib Kweli, and Dead Prez, an overwhelming majority of them reveal that they’ve never even heard of them. This is tragic because the aforesaid emcees are among a select few that address the social and political issues that affect them most. This is partly due to the unfortunate reality that rappers whose lyrics fall into the abyss of negativity are not usually demarcated as “negative” or “ignorant”; however, emcees who rhyme against self-destruction are always marginalized as “conscious,” “alternative,” or “political” rappers, tags that sling them into categorical ghettos and thus help to place them outside the earshot of the masses.

While it is important to acknowledge that mainstream rap is not all of rap, it’s also important to acknowledge the effect that the mainstream has on aspiring emcees. When Alton, for instance, says that the rappers from his neighborhood are rapping about killin’ niggas, they are imitating the models of success that they see on TV and hear on the radio. In that way, the mainstream has a dominating effect and is able to dictate the direction of the culture and art.

All of this is against the ambivalent backdrop of globalization, the fog of an unjust war, the impending consequences of the corporate desecration of mother nature, and the apex of an unprecedented urban crisis. These are problems that hip hop, as art, culture, and community, has failed to respond to, and we are now at a generational tipping point, the moment when a dramatic shift is more than a possibility; it’s a certainty. And while a dramatic shift is certain (and can be felt already), the outcome is not. History teaches us that both action and inaction lead us to dramatic shifts. If the post-hip-hop generation chooses to act, what values, whose ideas, will inform that action? If they choose not to act, not to “wake up,” as it were, whose values and ideas will be imposed upon them?

The term “post-hip-hop” describes a period of time—right now—of great transition for a new generation in search of a deeper, more encompassing understanding of themselves in a context outside of the corporate hip-hop monopoly. While hip hop may be a part of this new understanding, it will neither dominate nor dictate it, just as one can observe the civil rights generation’s ethos within the hip-hop generation, yet the two remain autonomously connected.

Post-hip-hop is an assertion of agency that encapsulates this generation’s broad range of abilities, ideals, and ideas, as well as incorporates recent social advances and movements (i.e., the women’s movement, the antiwar movement, gay rights, antiglobalization) that hip hop has either failed or refused to prioritize. How can one, for instance, dialogue progressively about gender issues within a space dominated by sexism and phallocentrism? Or take seriously notions of cooperative or participatory economics within a space that espouses guerilla capitalism? Or talk seriously about the end of war—over there and right here—within a space that promotes violence? Of course these elements are not exclusive to the hip-hop generation and are mere reflections of American culture on the whole. Saul Williams, in an open
letter to Oprah Winfrey, points out that the ideologies that govern hip hop also govern America:

“50 Cent and George Bush have the same birthday (July 6th). For a Hip Hop artist to say “I do what I wanna do/Don’t care if I get caught/The DA could play this mothafukin tape in court/I’ll kill you/I ain’t playin’” epitomizes the confidence and braggadocio we expect and admire from a rapper who claims to represent the lowest denominator. When a world leader [George Bush] with the spirit of a cowboy (the true original gangster of the West: raping, stealing land, and pillaging, as we clapped and cheered) takes the position of doing what he wants to do, regardless of whether the UN or American public would take him to court, then we have witnessed true gangsterism and violent negligence.

When we consider hip hop’s origins and purpose, we understand it is a revolutionary cultural force that was intended to challenge the status quo and the greater American culture. So, its relegation to reflecting American culture becomes extremely problematic if one considers the radical tradition of African-American social movements—which have never been about mirroring dominant American culture.

Post-hip-hop is not about the death of rap, but rather the birth of a new movement propelled by a paradigm shift that can be felt in the crowded spoken-word joints in North Philadelphia where poet Gregory “Just Greg” Corbin tells a crowded audience, “So these cats will rhyme about Rick Ross before they talk about African holocaust rhyme about Pablo Escobar before they talk about how many bodies was lost.” A shift that can be felt at the kump-dance dance-offs in Los Angeles where young pioneer Tight Eyez proclaims, “We’re not gonna be clones of the commercial hip-hop world because that’s been seen for so many years. Somebody’s waitin’ on something different,

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another generation of kids with morals and values that they won’t need what’s being commercialized or tailor-made for them; custom-made, because I feel that we’re custom-made. And we’re of more value than any piece of jewelry... or any car or any big house that anybody could buy.” And a shift that can be seen on a tattered stoop on the corner of Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn where Rashard Lloyd, a high school senior and budding community activist, grumbles when I ask him, “What does hip hop mean to you?” After a moment of contemplation, he makes clear, “Hip hop don’t speak to or for me.”

While Rashard’s attitude may surprise those who mistake the ring tones, reality shows, and glossy advertising campaigns as indicators of hip hop’s dominance; it shouldn’t. Trailblazers of every generation have always sought radical alternatives to what corporate America deems cool. According to “The U.S. Urban Youth Market: Targeting the Hip Hop Consumer,” a study conducted by research and analysis firm PackagedFacts, Black youths like Rashard “possess an overriding desire to remain outside of the mainstream.” Claire Madden, vice president of marketing for Market Research, the parent company of PackagedFacts, says that once “there is a perception from urban youth that these manufacturers [companies and artists] are ignoring their origins, they are named sell-outs and it is only a matter of time before they fall.”

In order to understand the rise of the post-hip-hop generation, it’s imperative to understand the foundations of hip hop. Although West African in its derivation, hip hop emerged in the Bronx in the mid-seventies as a form of aesthetic and sociopolitical rebellion against the flames of systemic oppression. This rebelliion, on one hand, was musical because rap music was a radically alternative to disco, which excluded many Blacks and Latinos in the inner cities. As Kurtis Blow, one of hip hop’s first commercially successful rappers, told me as we drove through the South Bronx on a hip-hop tour bus packed with European tourists,
"At that point, everybody everywhere was completely disco crazy. Hip hop was a rebellious mutation of disco that stemmed from the cats in the South Bronx and Harlem who couldn’t afford the bourgeois Midtown discos. Instead, hip hop took to the streets, the parks, the community centers, block parties. Hip hop represented the same freshness of view that drew me to Malcolm X. It’s critical that Blow links hip hop to Malcolm because it is this connection that represents hip hop’s most potent and dominant sense of rebellion. Put another way, the force that created Malcolm was the same force that created hip hop—a visceral energy aimed at transforming (or at least voicing) the conditions of oppressed people. This was not simply hip hop’s promise, but its reality.

Its quintessence was epitomized in the late 1980s during hip hop’s Stop the Violence Movement with the anthem “Self Destruction,” a collaborative effort by the era’s most well-known rappers, including KRS-One, who proclaimed: “To crush the stereotype here’s what we did / We got ourselves together / So that you could unite and fight for what’s right.”

Although hip hop was founded on the principles of rebellion, over the past decade it has been lulled into being a conservative instrument, promoting nothing new or remotely challenging to mainstream cultural ideology. Even in the midst of an illegitimate war in Iraq, rap music remains a stationary vehicle blaring redundant, glossy messages of violence without consequence, misogyny, and conspicuous consumption. As a result, it has betrayed the very people it is supposed to represent; it has betrayed itself.

Saul Williams, a poet whose musical combination of hip hop, rock, techno, and a cappella Black oration might be called post-hip-hop, asks us, “So what is hip hop? Well, with Public Enemy and KRS-One, hip hop became the language of youth rebellion. But now, commercial hip hop is not youth rebellion, not when the heroes of hip hop like Puffy are taking pictures with Donald Trump and the heroes of capitalism—you know that’s not rebellion. That’s not ‘the street’—that’s Wall Street.” And it is this reality that prompts Chuck D—an emcee that represented the Black youth rebellion in the eighties and nineties—to ask the question today: How You Sell Soul to a Soulless People Who Sold Their Soul?

The popular commercialism of hip hop, which has resulted in a split from those it’s supposed to represent, is not new. In fact, it goes in part by the same name: hip. Just as the hip-hop generation was charged by rap, the hip era of the fifties and sixties was fueled by jazz. In The Conquest of Cool, an exploration of the bond between advertising and counterculture, Thomas Frank describes the co-opting of hip through “hip consumerism” as “a cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption.”
In hip’s case, and the same is true for hip hop, Scott Saul, professor of English at Berkeley, points out that “it [hip] moved from a form of African-American and bohemian dissent to become the very language of the advertising world, which took hip’s promise of authenticity, liberation, and rebellion and attached it to the act of enjoying whatever was on sale at the moment.” Today, young people have been tricked into seeing their acts of consumerism as acts of rebellion.

No one knows what will be next, or if their generation will sell it. However, the post-hip-hop ethos allows the necessary space for new ideas and expressions to be born free from the minstrel toxins that have polluted modern hip hop.

Although post-hip-hop is not about music, per se, the music that is and will be created is critical as it is the soul of a new movement, functioning as a soundtrack to a fresh set of attitudes, ideas, and perspectives. All forms of art are fundamental to the post-hip-hop generation, as art possesses the remarkable ability to change not only what we see, but how we see.

The late Martinican writer Frantz Fanon once said, “Each generation, out of relative obscurity, must discover their destiny and either fulfill or betray it.” The post-hip-hop generation must be brave enough to fully engage in exploration, challenge, and discovery, acts that will ultimately result in a revelation of contemporary truths that will help define us, and, in turn, the world.