

A San Francisco Chronicle Bestseller Vibe Magazine's 2005 Juice List

Forged in the fires of the Bronx and Kingston, Jamaica, hip-hop has been a generation-defining global movement. In a post-civil rights era rapidly transformed by deindustrialization and globalization, hip-hop gave voiceless youths a chance to address these seismic changes, and became a job-making engine and the Esperanto of youth rebellion. Hip-hop crystallized a multiracial generation's worldview, and forever transformed politics and culture. But the epic story of how that happened has never been fully told...until now.

"His scope is operatic, sprawling, and concerns itself with the people, places, and politics that drove hip-hop from its infancy... It is essentially a people's history... perhaps Jeff Chang is hip-hop America's Howard Zinn." —Salon.com

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"Chang tells these stories beautifully... provocative."
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Can't Stop
Won't Stop
Jeff Chang

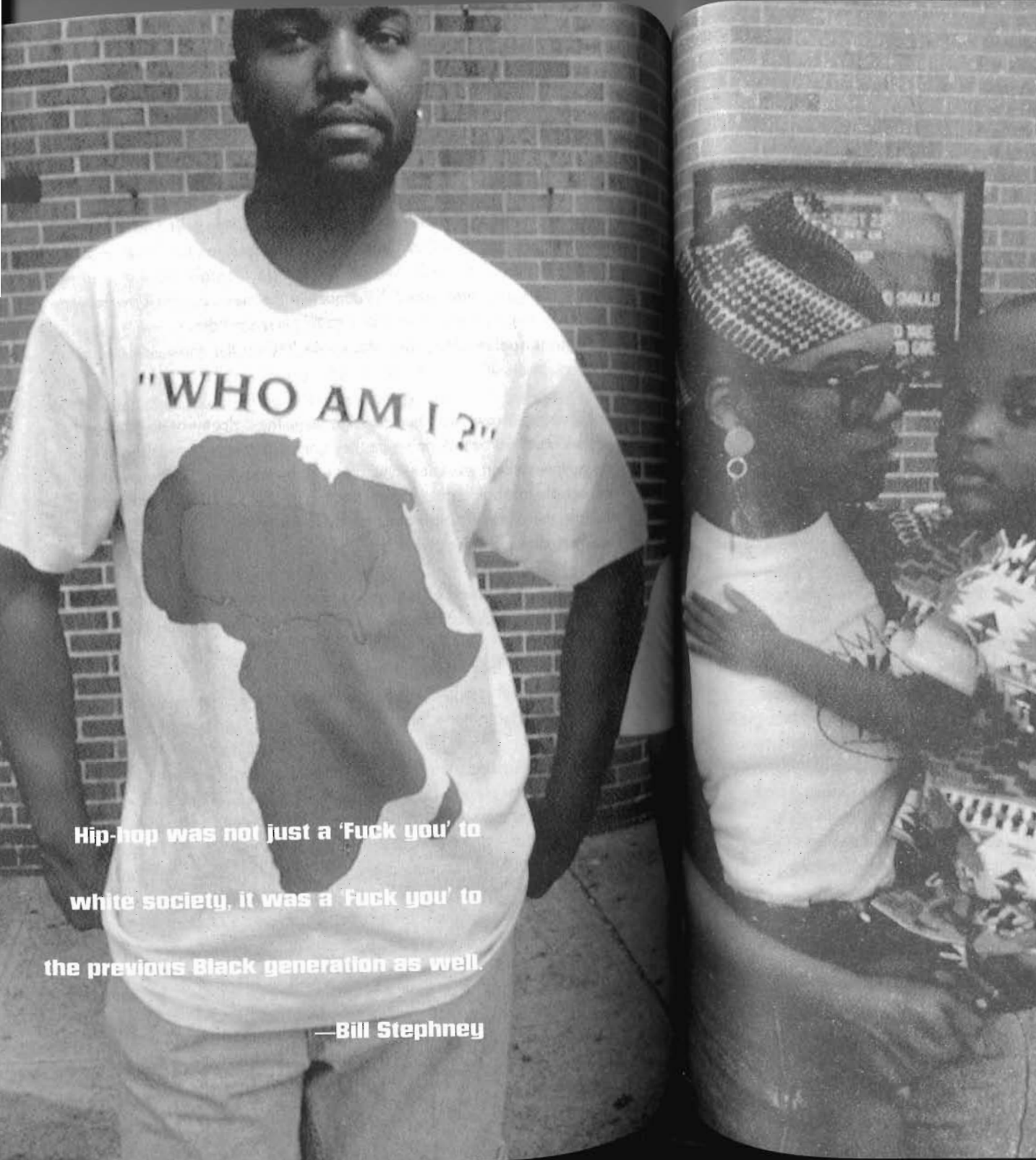
WINNER OF THE
American Book Award
PICADOR

Can't Stop Won't Stop

Jeff Chang
Introduction by
DJ Kool Here

A HISTORY OF THE
HIP-HOP
GENERATION





Hip-hop was not just a 'Fuck you' to white society, it was a 'fuck you' to the previous Black generation as well.

—Bill Stephney

LOOP 3

The Message

1984–1992

The search for identity. Harlem, 1992.
Photo © John Van Hasselt/Corbis Sygma



In response to the killing of Michael Griffith, the "Day of Outrage" demonstration comes to Howard Beach, 1986.

© Eli Reed/Magnum Photos

11.

Things Fall Apart

The Rise of the Post-Civil Rights Era

Not only there but right here's an apartheid.

—Rakim

If there was a single moral struggle that gripped the 1980s in the same way that desegregation had the 1960s, it was the global fight against apartheid, the racist South African apparatus of law and ideology that allowed the white minority, outnumbered five to one, to maintain political and economic power over the native Black majority. The anti-apartheid movement represented the climax of a century of anticolonial and antiracist resistance, the light piercing the last darkness before the dawn of a new global century.

Pedro Noguera, a student leader at U.C. Berkeley during the mid-'80s, says, "Apartheid was such a stark situation. It was so clear. How repressive the regime was, how unjust apartheid was—in some ways it was easier to see the issues there than it was to see the issues here."

The Black struggle in the American south for desegregation had inspired millions around the world to throw off the shackles of white rule, and the children of civil rights, the young Americans who came of age during the late seventies and early eighties, were never allowed to forget it. The elders spend a lot of time talking about the glories of the civil rights movement, while dismissing the hip-hop generation as pathetic and narcissistic.

Angela Brown, the daughter of a family of civil rights activists, was one youth organizer who wearied of her elders' criticism. "Most young people who have grown up in the South have really gone through hell with our elders," she says. "They have constantly challenged us, that we haven't done what they've done as far as moving the movement forward." But in the fight against apartheid, the

post-civil rights children found a desegregation battle to call their own, something in which to find their own voice and stake their own claim to history.

The Divestment Strategy

The roots of the contemporary American anti-apartheid movement date to 1963, the peak of the civil rights movement, a year after the CIA aided South Africa's white-minority regime in their capture of freedom fighter Nelson Mandela.¹ That year, the United Church of Christ called for economic sanctions against the apartheid government, whose rule was being buttressed by highly profitable gold and diamond mining industries. By the end of the decade, the American Committee on Africa, the American Friends Service Committee, radical workers groups and others had launched educational campaigns in African-American communities.

In 1971, the National Council of Churches called upon General Motors to divest of all its direct investments in the South African economy. By pulling money out of South Africa, activists felt they could make a moral statement and weaken the apartheid regime. They then formed the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, which helped organize shareholder resolutions against ITT, AT&T, Union Carbide, Ford, Exxon, Polaroid, Sears, Xerox, IBM and Mobil.² The following year, African-American student Randall Robinson and others turned Harvard Yard into a cemetery of five hundred black coffins, representing the victims of the university's investments, and set off years of student protests against their universities' "complicity in apartheid." The movement would come to call for cultural and consumer boycotts, government sanctions, and divestment of public-sector and corporate funds.

In the beginning, the movement faced long odds. After arresting Mandela and banning his organization, the African National Congress, the South African government brutally quashed Black resistance and rapidly expanded its security, surveillance, and policing complex. The repression had the intended effect; foreign corporate investment skyrocketed. In 1973, U.S. direct investments in South Africa totaled over \$1 billion a year.³ The Nixon administration's so-called "tar baby option" further sealed North American participation in the regime, making it official U.S. policy to accommodate the white minority, and support South Africa as a strategic anticommunist beachhead in the region.

By the mid-1970s, South African youths had reshaped the growing Black Consciousness movement, and their protests took a more militant turn. The apartheid regime stepped up their repression. On June 6, 1976, South African troops fired on demonstrators in the townships of Soweto, leaving hundreds of youths dead. In the crackdown that followed, over a thousand were killed. In 1977, Stephen Biko, the father of Black Consciousness, died of injuries sustained in prison beatings. Dozens more Black and multiracial organizations were banned, newspapers were closed and hundreds more remained in jail. President Jimmy Carter recalled his South African ambassador and urged a tightening of the arms embargo. U.S. campus protests—from Princeton and Brown to Michigan State and Morgan State—took on a new urgency.

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, foreign policy swung back toward Nixon-style normalization, articulated as "constructive engagement." Reagan's United Nations ambassador, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, summed up the position by stating flatly that a racist dictatorship was not nearly as bad as a Marxist one.⁴ In 1985, Reagan called the white-minority regime "a reformist administration," and stirred global uproar by saying, "They have eliminated the segregation that we once had in our own country—the type of thing where hotels and restaurants and places of entertainment and so forth were segregated. That has all been eliminated."⁵

But while Reagan was prematurely hailing the end of South African segregation, the apartheid regime had declared a state of emergency, the equivalent of martial law, in an attempt to crush the rising Black movement. Between 1984 and 1986, the regime detained 30,000 protestors and killed 2,500 more.⁶

The Rise of the Anti-Racism Movement

In 1984, the American anti-apartheid movement began to peak. Jesse Jackson made South African divestment a presidential campaign issue. States like Michigan, Connecticut, Maryland, Nebraska and Massachusetts, cities like New York City; Boston; Philadelphia; San Francisco; Gary, Indiana; Wilmington, Delaware; and Washington, D.C.; and universities like the City University of New York divested.

On November 26, Randall Robinson, now the national coordinator of the Free South Africa Movement, led a small group of protestors to the South

African embassy in Washington, D.C., and launched one of the starkest protests since the height of the civil rights struggle. For months, whether in bitter cold or blazing heat, celebrities, citizens, congresspersons, congregations, youth and elderly sat in at the Embassy doors, and were arrested in a quiet daily ritual. In under a year, over three thousand were arrested there demonstrating against apartheid.

U.S. campus protests swung into high gear. In March 1985, Columbia University students launched a three-week takeover of Hamilton Hall, renaming it Mandela Hall—the biggest campus protest there since 1968. Run DMC came down to perform and show its support. During the divestment springs of 1985 and 1986, hundreds of campuses exploded in demonstrations. On the quads or in front of administration buildings, the shantytown replaced the cemetery as the symbol of disruption.

In one important respect, the student movement of the 1980s was very different from that of the '60s—students of color played a central organizing and demand-making role. During the 1960s, organizations led by young people of color, like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers and the Third World Studies coalitions at San Francisco State and U.C. Berkeley, had lent moral weight to the New Left. But white males had always dominated the student movement's leadership. Even the student anti-apartheid movement, at the beginning, had been led mainly by white students.

By the mid-1980s, students of color were no longer marginal. Students of color led the protests at pivotal campuses like Yale, Rutgers, Stanford and U.C. Berkeley. Columbia University's Coalition for a Free South Africa had emerged in 1981 out of the campus Black student organization. On many other campuses where whites led the anti-apartheid movement, a process of painful self-critique—often initiated by students of color—began to emerge.

"Most white radical or liberal types came [to the anti-apartheid movement] out of empathy abroad and a feeling they'd like to do something to support," says Pedro Noguera. "We had people from the Black fraternities and sororities, a real cross-section of students. We were trying to make links between issues facing people of color in United States and on the campus and the struggle in Africa. The white students didn't see those connections so clearly. With students of color, we made that connection real clear."

Apartheid gave the young students of color a frame to understand the power of whiteness—not only in South Africa, but in the institution and in the movement. They also began to critique the failures of the baby boomer generation. While desegregation had given the new activists a place on the university campus, they still found few professors and administrators of color, under-resourced ethnic studies programs, and inhospitable campus environments. The civil rights and Black power movements had left many promises unfulfilled.

For the student activists of color, the anti-apartheid movement unlocked the connections between their campus struggles and those in their communities, and the South African shantytowns revealed the links between the global and the local. By the late 1980s, the activists had transformed the anti-apartheid movement into a broad antiracist movement, calling for ethnic studies departments and course requirements, culturally sensitive student programming and faculty, staff and graduate student diversity. The cry was for greater, truer representation that would remove the invisibility of nonwhites and counterbalance the Eurocentric bias of the university.

By 1988, Yale student organizer Matthew Countryman could say, "I don't think we will ever be in a situation again where divestment will be the sole focus, rather it will be part of a range of activities dealing with the university's involvement with racism."⁷

Reaction and Victory

The anti-apartheid movement provoked particularly violent reactions from the right. At Dartmouth, conservative students cheered a nighttime sledgehammer attack on the shanties and the shanty-dwellers. Stanford's shantytown was similarly destroyed, and at University of Utah and Johns Hopkins University, they were set ablaze.⁸ In April 1986, shantytown protests at Yale and Berkeley ended with police destroying the camps and beating peaceful demonstrators bloody. In an odd way, American university administrators, police and right-wingers were re-enacting the daily violence of the townships and strengthening public sympathy for the protestors.

But the tide of protests in South Africa, the United States and around the world were having an effect. Months after the "Mandela Hall" takeover, Columbia University trustees divested. On July 18, the University of California divested

its \$3.1-billion South African portfolio, an amount more than portfolios of all the other 130-plus divested universities combined.⁹ In August, the state of California voted to divest \$11 billion of stock, perhaps the single largest one-time global disinvestment ever. Emboldened, Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, which banned any new investment in South Africa, except to Black-owned firms, and ended arms sales and military aid. When an angered Reagan vetoed the bill, Congress successfully voted to override his veto. It was a stunning rebuke to Reagan and the apartheid-tolerant Cold War right.

In 1990, after nearly three decades behind bars, Nelson Mandela, the man that the Reaganites and right-wingers had once called a racial terrorist, was released from jail. Four years later, he stood as the first elected Black president of the country, and he paid tribute to American anti-apartheid activists by consciously evoking the memory of Dr. King: "Free at last! Free at last!"

But in America all the energy—young and old, white, Black, brown, yellow and red—that had been mustered over three decades to fight segregation would slowly disperse. The end of apartheid would be remembered as one of the century's last great victories in the American struggle for desegregation. Nothing would be so stark or clear after this.

Enraged and Disengaged

During the last two decades of the millennium, neoconservatives—with the acquiescence of "moderates" in both parties—turned back a half-century of liberalism. Worker safety and environmental protections were undermined. The size and clout of labor unions atrophied to their weakest since the outbreak of World War II.¹⁰ Hundreds of billions were shifted from battling poverty into building the military. Responsibility was no longer preceded by the word "social," but by the word "individual."

It was not just about survival of the fittest, but *gratification* of the fittest. Republican Kevin Phillips opened his landmark critique of Reagan's '80s, *The Politics of the Rich and Poor*, with these lines: "The 1980s were the triumph of upper America—an ostentatious celebration of wealth, the political ascendancy of the richest third of the population and a glorification of capitalism, free markets and finance."¹¹

Reaganomists latched onto supply-side economics, better known as trickle-down

theory—the dubious idea that tax cuts for the wealthy and for big businesses would stimulate the economy. The corporate share of federal taxes plunged to a mere 15 percent, half of what it had been during the 1950s, a drop of \$250 billion in annual tax revenues.¹² Some American multinational corporations swelled bigger than most nations.

At the same time, Reagan and Bush asked for, and received from Congress, huge increases in the military budget to support Cold War adventurism around the globe. Despite coming into office vowing to rid the government of deficits and deliver "balanced budgets," the deficit ballooned to its highest levels in history, leaving the big payback to the next generation. Most of the tax burden shifted to middle-class and working-class taxpayers, while low-inflation monetary policies kept unemployment rates high.

The gap between rich and poor was higher than at any time since the eve of the Great Depression. Between 1983 and 1989, the top 1 percent of households saw their net worth increase by 66 percent, while four of five households saw their net worth decline. Families of color were hit even harder. In 1983, the median white family owned eleven times the amount of wealth as a median family of color. By 1989, the gap had nearly doubled.¹³

The 1980s began a massive redistribution of wealth back to the wealthy. Everyone else could tune into Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, which from 1983 on, displayed the override fruits of Reagan's tax cuts. On October 19, 1987, the speculative bubble finally burst in a stunning stock market crash.

Small wonder that American faith in democracy soured into cynicism. Election turnout plunged. The center could not hold. Idealism fled from politics. A downward spiral of disillusionment accelerated.

People turned inward, giving up on the possibility of larger unity.

The Splintering of the Civil Rights Coalition

Even that historical wellspring of hope and faith in unity, the civil rights movement, was foundering. Nowhere was this more evident than in the collapse of the Black-Jewish coalition.

The story of the Civil Rights Movement often begins in 1909 when Black and Jewish lawyers come together to found the NAACP in an effort to end racist lynchings. It moves through Black singer and activist Paul Robeson's

denunciations of anti-Semitism, Nazism and racism, which prompts FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover to list him as a subversive. And it climaxes in 1964, as Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" sets the scene for the discovery of three murdered Freedom Summer activists—two Jewish, one Black—at Old Jolly Farm in Mississippi.

To be sure, questions of racial interest had always plagued the NAACP. During the early 1960s, as young Jewish activists went south to become the targets of white racists, Jewish shopkeepers and slumlords in the northern ghettos were becoming targets of Black leaders. Malcolm X famously extended this local dissatisfaction to a critique of Zionism, especially Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

New York, the city where Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey and Louis Farrakhan had found their voices, never experienced the civil rights movement the same way the south did. Just two weeks after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, protests in Harlem and Bed-Stuy, spawned by a police killing of a Black teen, turned to days of rioting, catalyzing similar uprisings from Philadelphia to Rochester. Jewish businesses were often the first to burn. There was an almost physical militancy to the northern front, a kind that seemed to preclude coalition-building.

This kind of militancy crested in 1968 in Brooklyn's Ocean Hill/Brownsville school district, a conflict that Black and Jewish activists, leaders and writers still bitterly bemoan today, and which, in retrospect, looks like one of the inaugurating events of America's post-civil rights era.

At its root, the battle in Ocean Hill/Brownsville pitted a poor, 95 percent African-American and Puerto Rican community against a mostly Jewish-American, liberal teachers union. In 1967, under the cry of "community control," a newly elected, mainly Black activist school board installed a new superintendent and five new principals, all Black. Separately, the United Federation of Teachers, whose citywide contract was up, began the school year by going on strike. The board moved to replace the union teachers with teachers of color from the community, and the conditions were set for a massive confrontation.

Over the next two years, the school district was in constant disruption as Black community activists and Jewish teachers union leaders clashed. In the end, the teachers union won, the board was dismantled, the black superintendent was forced to report to a state trustee and UFT teachers were reinstated. The

"community control" movement disintegrated, and Black-Jewish relations in the city would never be the same again.

A World of Danger

With each going its own way, efforts turned to securing more narrow forms of power. The northern Black civil rights leadership came together to vault a number of Blacks into elected office but steadily lost ground with their urban youth constituencies. They abandoned popular base-building and leaned increasingly on electoral politics and media advocacy. Youths of color, considered marginal to the elections process and invisible in the pop culture mainstream, were abandoned. By the mid-1980s, there was barely any continuity between youth organizers and activists, who were emerging of necessity to address their own issues, and the civil rights establishment, who had long given up on developing young leaders.

And yet Reagan's America had become perilous to youths of color in ways that had never been seen before. The well-organized and well-financed right-wing backlash foreclosed opportunities for urban youths of color. Trickle-down economics and local taxpayer revolts starved local governments and encouraged suburban sprawl, which in turn speeded white flight and racial resegregation. These trends were occurring as demographers projected the most racially diverse generation of youths the United States had ever seen.

In northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, and New York, almost all African Americans lived under conditions of increasing racial and economic isolation.¹⁴ Sociologists, following William Julius Wilson, now spoke of an "underclass", a segment of communities of color permanently locked into poverty and joblessness. Yet even in the suburbs, more than 60 percent of Black and Latino students attended predominantly minority schools.¹⁵ Two decades of progress in integration suddenly and dramatically reversed course. Young whites remained the most segregated group of all. The average white student attended schools that were well over 80 percent white.¹⁶ Nationally, hate incidents spiked.

A New Black Moses

While Black politicians and civil rights organizations seemed to move slowly and ineffectually amidst these new conditions, the Nation of Islam's minister

Louis Farrakhan fired the imaginations of enraged and disengaged Black youths. He stood on the podium and waved his fist, shouting, "I stand boldly in America without an army, with no guns, and I speak against the wickedness of the United States Government."¹⁷

At a time when the right-wing and its coterie of well-funded Black conservatives had absorbed the language of civil rights to claim that Blacks were no longer oppressed, Farrakhan would say, "We don't have to waste time discussing whether racism exists. Racism is so pervasive it has corrupted religion, politics, education, science and economics, and every vital function of life."¹⁸ Yet Farrakhan was not beholden to liberal pieties either. He called for slavery reparations, exhorted Black men to save the race, and constantly reminded his followers what Elijah Muhammad had preached: "Separation is the solution."

Where police corruption or incompetence left the streets to drugs and violence, the Nation of Islam's ministries moved in to forcibly close crack houses and take control of drug-torn blocks. The brio of the Nation's "Islamic patrols" and its Dopebusters programs impressed besieged ghetto residents. At the same time, Farrakhan's message of self-reliance and self-improvement as the foundation for community development struck a chord with the relatively privileged middle-class sons and daughters of civil rights and Black power.

When the hip-hop generation began to come of age, the Black left was a shadow of its former self. Instead, Black leadership was returning to an era of what progressive scholar Manning Marable once termed "the messiah complex." In African-American history, time and again, Marable argued, people turned to male religious figures to deliver them. Social movements were left in the hands of a Moses.¹⁹ Minister Louis Farrakhan was the latest in this mold. The Black left took Farrakhan's emergence as a troubling sign of their own weakness and a serious threat to the advancement of the freedom struggle.

But to younger heads, who had been denied so much, told in so many ways to "just say 'No,'" they heard in Farrakhan a resounding, "Yes." Bill Stephney, who would become a founder of Public Enemy, says, "He was the only Black leader who said, 'You, Black man, can pick yourself up. You can have strong families. You can build your own businesses. You can do. He was the only affirming leader.'"

Farrakhan was despised by liberals and conservatives, whites and mainstream

Blacks. He had been unanimously censured by the U.S. Senate, was hounded by accusations of anti-Semitism and was treated as a pariah by the media. But all of these factors helped legitimize him as the rare man of an older generation whom young people might respond to.

Better than any Black leader, Farrakhan seemed to understand the crisis of the generation left to be abandoned or forcibly contained. As Black-on-Black violence climbed during the summer of 1989, he began to avidly court them. He went first to those furthest from the mainstream, holding an unprecedented peace summit for gang members in Chicago. Then he visited the Cook County Jail, where he was received as a hero.

His major theme for the next several years became "Stop the Killing." In his speeches, Farrakhan said the fact that Black men were killing Black men in unprecedented numbers was not an accident, it was by design. "We believe that the government . . . is frightened by the rise in population of our people," he told *Los Angeles Times* reporter Andrea Ford. "We believe (the government) sees in Black people a useless population that is considered by sociologists a permanent underclass. And when you have something that is useless, you attempt to get rid of it if you cannot make it serviceable."²⁰

On June 25, he took his message to over a thousand gang leaders and members. "The government of the United States of America is planning an assault on the Black community, specifically aimed at our youth," he told them.²¹ "Brothers, you are playing into the hand of your enemy and he is using you to set up your destruction."²² If young Black men did not unite to defend themselves, they would certainly be crushed.

White liberals despaired at the deepening schisms, bemoaning "identity politics" and "Black paranoia." Others felt as if the clock had been turned back two decades. One white political scientist, an expert in urban riots, said, "We have produced in the Black underclass a revolutionary consciousness."²³

Howard Beach

Only eleven weeks after the 1986 Congressional anti-apartheid victory, a twenty-three-year old Trinidadian American named Michael Griffith was run over by a car and killed in Queens after being beaten and chased by a mob of whites shouting, "Nigger, you're in the wrong neighborhood!"

The incident began the Friday afternoon before Christmas. Griffith, his friend, Timothy Grimes, his stepfather, Cedric Sandiford and his cousin, Curtis Sylvester, had gone to Far Rockaway to collect a paycheck for some construction work Griffith had done. When they were returning back across Jamaica Bay on a lonely stretch of the Cross Bay Boulevard, Sylvester's 1976 Buick overheated. Griffith, Sandiford and Grimes left Sylvester with his car and hiked three miles into the nearest town, Howard Beach, in the gathering darkness.

Nestled in the inner Jamaica Bay amidst soft salt marshes, Howard Beach had once been a resort area. By the mid-1980s, it was a whites-only enclave, situated between the Belt Parkway, garbage landfills and John F. Kennedy Airport. New York City's population was almost half people of color, yet there remained pockets in Queens and Brooklyn from which whites had never taken flight. Reaganomics had devastated many of these enclaves, like Bensonhurst—where whites attacked three African-American Veterans Administration workers in 1983—and Gravesend—where in 1982, a group of thugs chased three African-American transit workers and beat one of them to death.²⁴ Not so with Howard Beach, which was solidly middle-class and had registered solid economic gains through the decade.²⁵ Yet the area was now best known as the home of John Gotti and the prevailing view among residents seemed to be that Blacks or Hispanics mainly came into their neighborhood to rob or rape them.²⁶

Griffith, Sandiford and Grimes were walking up the road into Howard Beach when a group of white youths drove by screaming racial epithets at them. The three continued on, then stopped at the New Park Pizzeria and asked for directions to the nearest subway station.²⁷ They sat to rest and eat. By the time they had got up to leave, the white boys in the car had returned. They had a dozen others with them.

It was going to be one of those nights. Two hours before, in another part of town, cops had received a call about a gang of whites who had beaten and chased two young Hispanics. And while Griffith, Sandiford and Grimes were eating, someone had called the police to report "three suspicious Black males." Police had come, seen only the three young men eating quietly, and left.

Now it was after midnight. This crowd was drunk, some had baseball bats, others had tree switches. The whites yelled at them, "Niggers, you don't belong

here." When they stepped forward to leave, the mob surged forward and began beating them. Sandiford covered himself and yelled, "God, don't kill us!" Grimes suffered a blow but ran north into the cold night. Griffith and Sandiford ran west, with the mob in pursuit in car and on foot.

Eight blocks away, the mob caught up with them. In a field of bushes and weeds next to the Belt Parkway, they beat the young Black men mercilessly. Sandiford played dead as Griffith slipped through a hole in the fence onto the six-lane parkway. When Griffith tried to cross the parkway—perhaps confused, certainly in pain and terror—he was struck by a car. His body crushed the hood and he bounced off the windshield out toward the dividing barriers. Police later found Sandiford, badly injured and dazed, stumbling blindly through the streets.

Mayor Ed Koch compared the incident to a lynching in the Old South, called it "the most horrendous incident" of his term and went to Howard Beach to call for the formation of a new Kerner Commission. He told the media that the nation was still divided in two societies—one Black and one white. Howard Beach residents booed him. Some of them told reporters that if they had been walking in Bed-Stuy late at night, surely they would have expected to be visited with the same kind of violence.

Bishop Emerson J. Moore, New York City's only black Roman Catholic bishop, declared, "I have lived in New York all my life, and the racial polarization now is as bad as it's ever been. Things are very bad now, and I fear for a hot summer."²⁸

In New York City's Black community, the message of the Michael Griffith's death, coming on top of the Stewart killing and the Goetz shooting and all the others, was clear. Northern racism was alive and well, and it was time for action. Rage was the dominant chord, an emotion that seemed to catch the Black civil rights leadership by surprise. Following the incident, some had even invited graying southern civil rights icons to come north to give them advice.²⁹ But many favored a more militant, nationalist line, and hoped that new leaders would step forward. They did not want someone who had marched with Martin in the misty past. They wanted a latter-day Malcolm who spoke to their fearful, tense present.

Sandiford's and Grimes's lawyers, Alton Maddox and C. Vernon Mason, took a confrontational approach. Sandiford himself was still angry that, after he

was beaten, he had been harassed by police and treated as a suspect. And thirty-one-year-old Reverend Al Sharpton, whose résumé already included boy preacher, teen community organizer and tour promoter for James Brown and Michael Jackson, led a series of marches into Howard Beach, often ending at the New Park Pizzeria. Separated by thin blue police lines, the marchers faced off with angry white residents.

Young anti-apartheid activists also emerged, such as Rutgers' Lisa Williamson, the leader of the newly formed National African Youth and Student Alliance. Williamson, Sharpton and Ocean-Hill/Brownsville vet Sonny Carson called for a "Day of Mourning and Outrage" and a symbolic boycott of white businesses. On January 21, ten thousand marchers led police all over the city, before they stopped at Mayor Koch's residence. "Mayor Koch, have you heard? Howard Beach is Johannesburg," they chanted below his window. "Black power! African power!"³⁰

Hip-Hop in a New Era

These were the currents that swirled during the mid-1980s. The culture that had poured out from the streets of the Bronx was transitioning into a new era.

Graffiti, pushed off the subways, poured onto the streets and highways and freight trains, initiating a new wave of police crackdowns and internecine fights. Style wars dispersed to thousands of distant cities, where fervent new movements opened new frontlines with local authorities.

B-boying, a dance style that had already died once in New York, disappeared again, to be replaced by a succession of fad dances. Steps like the Whop, the Reebok, the Cabbage Patch and countless others got everyone back on the dancefloor. But each one disappeared faster than b-boying ever had. Third-generation breaking adherents continued the artform as Rock Steady's disciples covered the globe.

Rap proved to be the ideal form to commodify hip-hop culture. It was endlessly novel, reproducible, malleable, perfectible. Records got shorter, raps more concise and tailored to pop-song structures. Rap groups shrank, from the Furious Five and the Funky 4 + 1 More down to the Treacherous Three, and now, to duos like Cash Money and Marvelous or Eric B. and Rakim.

DJs were still often billed first, and after Grandmaster Flash's epochal "Ad-

ventures on the Wheels of Steel," they enjoyed a brief artistic surge with singles like Herbie Hancock's "Rockit," Grandmixer DST's "Crazy Cuts," and the B-Boys' "2,3 Break." But DJs no longer enjoyed the eminence or the central musical role their billing implied. When drum-machine and sampling technology were turned into hip-hop tools, the record producer filled that space. Early rap labels had already marginalized the DJ, and the new technology effectively mimicked and extended the DJ's musical capabilities. The rise of the rap producer, the arrival of some extraordinary rappers, and the increasing flow of capital propelled hip-hop music into a period of remarkable stylistic development.

By 1986, rap eclipsed all the other movements. It had expanded to incorporate many more pop perspectives—satirical rap, teenybopper rap, X-rated rap, Roxanne rap, Reagan rap, John Wayne rap. But in the new crisis time, as it had been for Jamaica's embattled roots generation, rappers were increasingly being recognized as "the voices of their generation." The center of the rap world swung decidedly in a Black nationalist direction. Hip-hop culture realigned itself and reimaged its roots, representing itself now as a rap thing, a serious thing, a Black thing.

The unlikely hotbed of the new energy was in the Black Belt of Long Island.



In the park after the truce. Eazy E video shoot, 1993.

Photo © B+

17.

All in the Same Gang

The War on Youth and the Quest for Unity

And so our brief subject today is taken from the American Constitution and these words, "Toward a more perfect union." Toward a more perfect union.

—Minister Louis Farrakhan

We are facing a potential bloodbath of teenage violence in years ahead that will be so bad, we'll look back at the 1990s and say those were the good old days.

—Criminologist James Alan Fox

First there were the parties. With calm restored to the streets, spontaneous celebrations broke out across from Lynwood to Watts, South Central to Compton, Willowbrook to Inglewood, as rival gang sets tied their colors together, fired up the barbecues and broke bread. Parks that had once been exclusive turf were thrown open. Public spaces were public once again. The rapper Kam summed up the vibe in his epochal single, "Peace Treaty," its hydraulic "Atomic Dog" bassline pumping a giddy joy:

I'ma always remember this
 Because my niggas made the history books
 And now the mystery looks a lot clearer
 The man in the mirror's got power
 It's now or never

More than ever
Black people got to stick together

For Los Angeles's war-weary youths, the gang truce and the Uprising unleashed a burst of creative energy. Rappers like DJ Quik, Compton's Most Wanted and Above The Law were making noise on the national charts. From the fiercely competitive freestyle ciphers at the Good Life Café on the westside to the intergenerational ferment of spoken word, free jazz and hip-hop in Leimert Park to the free floating parties at the Pharcyde Manor in Hancock Park, an underground was taking shape. At the Hip-Hop Shop on Melrose, b-boys and b-girls gathered to advance the elements. Graffiti writers like HEX and SLICK were engaged in a new age of style wars. Some were joining the surge of energy that was transforming street fashion and graphic design. A number of grass-roots magazines, led by *URB* and *Rap Sheet*, captured the local scene and articulated a new West Coast aesthetic.

In the streets, gang members turned their attention to creating a future for themselves and their city.

Give Us the Hammer and Nails

Everyone seemed to agree that economic development was the key to saving Los Angeles. On May 2, Mayor Bradley named Peter Ueberroth, the head of the city's 1984 Olympics, to be the head of a private-sector organization that would be called "Rebuild L.A.," charged with mobilizing business, government, and community investment. It began assembling a board of directors of nearly one hundred city, corporate, Hollywood and community players, including the likes of Jim Brown, Danny Bakewell, Johnnie Cochran, Michael Ovitz and Edward James Olmos.

Ueberroth predicted that Rebuild L.A. would convince five hundred corporations from three continents to invest more than \$1 billion in the city.¹ Economic consultants told them that to begin to turn around the inner-city, they would need to raise \$6 billion and create more than 90,000 jobs.² But by any measure, the organization was a complete failure. Ueberroth stepped down from the leadership after only a year, leaving the organization in disarray. Over the next four years, Rebuild L.A. raised less than \$300 million. Only half of the thirty-two supermarkets that the organization had been promised

were actually built. Vons Corporation had pledged to build two stores but opened only one, in the supermarket-starved city of Compton, and sold it as soon as it could. Rebuild L.A. was, in Mike Davis's words, "the cruelest joke of all."³

At the same time Rebuild L.A. was announced in May of 1992, an alternative proposal to rebuild Los Angeles, purported to come from the Bloods and Crips, circulated through the streets, the media and upper levels of government. Its provenance was in question, particularly because of the document's closing words—"Meet these demands and the targeting of police officers will stop!"—a threat that clearly had not been sanctioned by the peacemakers and that seemed inimical to common sense. But the proposal's details drew interest and support from many gang leaders.

Among other things, the \$3.7 billion plan for inner-city investment called for three new hospitals and forty additional health care centers to be built and the replacement of welfare programs with manufacturing plants. It demanded increased lighting of city streets, \$20 million in business loans and community job creation, new books and accelerated learning programs in inner-city schools, and community policing that incorporated former gang members. "Give us the hammer and the nails," the document read, "and we will rebuild the city."

For a brief period before and after their 1971 truce, the Bronx gangs had turned to the government for relief as they sought to turn themselves around. But two decades later, this generation of gangs would have no Great Society and no Mayor Lindsay. The infrastructure of aid and rehabilitation had been replaced by Bush's "thousand points of light," which usually took the form of do-for-self, faith-based grass-roots nationalism or the trickle-down charities of the anything-goes, everything-is-for-sale marketplace.

To be sure, the new generation was not interested in government promises. Kam put it in the Nation of Islam's terms: "Less government relief checks, more labor." They readily admitted that they would need to do their part to make peace work. "We've got to show people that this eye-for-an-eye stuff is out the door," Charles "Q-Bone" Rachal of the Five-Duce Broadway Crips said. "But we have to do it ourselves. All that hand-out stuff from the '60s was messed up, and those people who did it messed up. We're the generation of the '90s, and we've got to show action."⁴

So gang members met with the Korean American Grocers Organization, who immediately got the point but could only promise a handful of jobs. That was a path Ice T had already known to be useless. "They aimed at Korean people because they felt Koreans were one step above them, so that's the closest step to the system," he wrote of the burners and looters in *The Ice Opinion*. "They didn't know the Koreans are just as broke as them."⁵ In time, many more Black and brown faces appeared behind the counter of these stores, but most of the 2,000 destroyed Korean-American businesses would never be rebuilt, and tiny markets and laundromats could never replace the hundreds of thousands of jobs that corporate flight had spirited away.

Gang peacemakers seized on Minister Farrakhan's up-from-the-bootstraps optimism and leapt into entrepreneurship. Two men from Jordan Downs secured a contract from the Eurostar shoe company to sell a "Truce" brand sneaker. With funds from Congresswoman Maxine Waters, they opened a storefront they called the Playground, where they sponsored basketball games, created a community hangout, and sold the shoes. In a year, the venture was over. The burden of economic and community development, one of the shoe company's representatives later said, was "more of a job for the president of the United States than for a shoe salesman."⁶

The most audacious idea came from Daude Sherrills, who had come to the first peace meeting at the Masjid with a proposal for a nonprofit organization that he called "Hands Across Watts," a government-funded group that would create jobs for former gang-members and sponsor job training, child care and recreational programs. A week after the Uprising, when the Crips and Bloods publicly announced their truce at a press conference at Jordan Downs, Sherrills and Tony Bogard presented the plan, announcing \$100,000 as their fundraising goal. When corporate money did not rush in, they took to the streets to sell car-washing solution, soft drinks, and peace treaty T-shirts. The organization secured federal, city and private grants and job-training contracts, but Sherrills left after disagreements with Bogard over its direction.

Soon after, Bogard was shot dead by another PJ Watts Crip, allegedly as the result of a dispute over cocaine profits. The deal had nothing to do with Hands Across Watts, but grants, contracts, and donations evaporated, and the organization crumbled. "Economics plays a major role in maintaining the

peace," Bogard had once told a reporter. "If we had industry and venture capital, we wouldn't have all the drug selling and robbing that's going on. Economics is the key to everything."⁷ It was a tragic epitaph.

At the corner of Florence and Normandie, three of the four corners remained burned down. Tom's Liquors was the only building that remained. Behind it, one billboard advertised the television talent show, "Star Search." The other read: "Looking for a new career? Join your LAPD. Earn \$34,000 to \$43,000."⁸

"A lot of things was promised," Daude Sherrills says. "They didn't put a billion dollars in the truce movement. So this is where we're at today."

Pressure Drop (Yet Another Version)

But against all odds, the gang truce held in Watts and spread. In the weeks after the uprising, gang homicide tallies plunged, and stayed there.

Police were skeptical. "I'm concerned as to the true motives of the gang members as to why they would make peace," one policeman said. "Is it so they can better fight with us, so they can better deal dope or so they can better be constructive in their neighborhoods? That would be the last item I would choose because gang members have a thug mentality."⁹

Peacemakers came to believe that police were actively trying to undermine the truce. Hours after the National Guard had left town, newspapers reported the appearance of a crude flyer that read: *To all Crips and Bloods: Let's unit [sic] and dont [sic] gangbang and let it be a black thing for the little black girl and the homie Rodney King. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. If LAPD hurt a black we'll kill two. Pow. Pow. Pow.* From there, the anti-gang rhetoric accelerated. The sheriff's office issued a gang intelligence briefing which stated Black Muslims had organized the gangs to loot and burn, and warned that Crips and Bloods were preparing to attack police stations. Mike Davis scoffed, "This is right off that movie *Assault on Precinct 13*."¹⁰

Was there a disinformation campaign afoot? On May 22, the CBS Evening News reported a bizarre story alleging gang members were trading drugs for military weapons from local U.S. Army bases.¹¹ No one was ever arrested in connection with the alleged transaction, and the story sunk like a rock. But the next day, the *Washington Post* reported that four thousand weapons had been

stolen and were probably in the hands of gang members. By May 27, outgoing Chief Daryl Gates was spinning on Larry King's CNN show, "You know, I'd love to see peace in the city, peace among gangs," he said. "But I just don't think it's going to happen. These people simply don't have it in them, I don't believe, to create peace among the gangs or in any other way."¹²

Gates was contradicting at least one of his own officers on the ground. Deputy Chief Matthew Hunt, the police commander of the South Los Angeles area, admitted to the Police Commission, "There's no question the amount of violent crime has decreased. People in the community say they haven't heard a shot fired in weeks. They are elated."¹³

But it had become clear to peacemakers that LAPD was out to disrupt and harass peace meetings and parties. At some events, cops appeared in large numbers without provoking an incident. At others, they forcibly broke up the meetings. In Compton, Congresswoman Waters and City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas came in person to intervene with police who were harassing gang members leaving a peace meeting.

At Imperial Courts, police helicopters and riot squadrons swooped in to break up truce barbecues. When they did the same thing at Jordan Downs, residents and gang members sent thirty police officers to the hospital. With this clash as a pretext, LAPD created a special "crime suppression task force," transferring forty police officers from the San Fernando Valley and the Westside to the South Bureau.¹⁴ Then, in what feds touted as their largest anti-gang effort ever, the FBI beefed up its Los Angeles office with twenty-six additional agents and the ATF added ten. They announced they would use racketeering laws to sweep up the gang leadership.

In August an important peacemaker was taken off the streets. Dwayne Holmes, the cousin of Henry Peco who became one of key architects of the peace, was convicted and sentenced to seven years for a ten-dollar robbery that community organizers and politicians like former Governor Jerry Brown insisted he had not committed. Community leaders wondered if he and others had been targeted for political reasons, not criminal ones.

Author Luis Rodriguez and peacemakers Cle "Bone" Sloan, from the Athens Park Bloods, and Kershaun "Lil Monster" Scott, from the Eight-Tray Gangster Crips, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "The Los Angeles Police Department told the media that the gangs were going to turn on police officers, even ambush

them. Yet no police officer in South-Central has been killed or severely hurt since April 29, the day the King-beating verdict came down."¹⁵

"Now that we're chilling, they want to attack us," Scott said in an interview. "Isn't that ironic?"

Farrakhan put it more bluntly, "Why is there an apparent conspiracy to destroy the youth? In 1992, our fearless Black youth are ready to move for liberation."¹⁶

The Politics of Containment

After the riots, a generation raised on the politics of abandonment saw that it now also faced a sharply evolving politics of containment.

From the beginnings of the juvenile justice system in America, a central doctrine had been that youthful indiscretion could be corrected through proper rehabilitation. The juvenile justice system was there to save as much as it was to punish. This was a benevolent and essentially paternalistic view of how the state should treat youth. With the arrival of the boomers, a more liberalized, permissive view emerged.

But by the late 1980s, a reversal began, and after the riots, the trend accelerated. Forty-eight states made their juvenile crime statutes more punitive. Forty-one states made it easier for prosecutors to try juveniles as young as twelve as adults. A number of states began to consider the death penalty for juveniles as young as thirteen. Teens were too young to hang out, but too old to save.

Social ecologist Mike Males explained the source of the reaction:

The Census Bureau reports that 80 percent of America's adults over age forty are whites of European origin (Euro-white). Thirty-five percent of children and youths under age eighteen are nonwhite or of Hispanic (Latino) origin, a proportion that has doubled since 1970. In most of America's big cities, white elders govern nonwhite kids. In California, two-thirds of the elders are Euro-white; three-fifths of the youths are nonwhite or Latino.¹⁷

The Los Angeles Uprising had clarified these abstractions in a dramatic, unavoidable way, fanning fears of a browning nation, and unleashing a political and cultural backlash of massive proportions. The War on Gangs expanded into what young activists came to call "the War on Youth."

The 1988 killing of Karen Toshima had precipitated the War on Gangs. That

year, California Governor George Deukmejian signed the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP), the broadest legal criminalization of street gangs in history. Gang-related offenses received enhanced punishments, and new categories of gang crimes were created. Under STEP, gang membership itself was punishable by up to three years in state prison. By the end of the century, most major cities and at least nineteen states had laws similar to STEP, and anti-gang units to enforce them.

One of the most profound implications of STEP was its attempt to write into law a process of determining who was a gang member, a move that helped fuel the growth of gang databases. In 1987, the Law Enforcement Communication Network and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department had begun developing a large database—the Gang Reporting, Evaluation, and Tracking System (GREAT)—to collect, store, and analyze personal information about suspected gang members. Its creation, and the spread of STEP-type laws across the country, spurred the Justice Department and the FBI to fund national databases.

But these databases could be indiscriminate, often identifying “suspects” before any crime had been committed. There were no universal standards for entry. Many youths were added by virtue of an arrest, whether or not the arrestee was charged. Others merely fit a “gang profile.” STEP’s attempt to define this profile fostered a multitude of local variations. By 1999, wearing baggy jeans and being related to a gang suspect was enough to meet the definition of being a “gang member” in at least five states. Abuses were rampant.

In 1992, a Denver community organization, Actions for a Better Community (ABC), protested that the city’s gang database had unfairly captured thousands of innocent youths of color. A year later, investigations revealed that eight of every ten young people of color in the entire city were listed in the database. Appearing in the database was no neutral thing. Gloria Yellowhorse, an ABC organizer, says, “Employers could call the gang list to see if a young person was on the list.” Police met with ABC and quietly changed their protocols.

But minutes from downtown Denver in suburban Aurora, any two of the following could still constitute gang membership to the local police: “slang,” “clothing of a particular color,” “pagers,” “hairstyles” or “jewelry.” Nearly 80 percent of Aurora’s list was African-American. One activist said, “They might as well call it a Black list.”

In California’s Orange County, where less than half of young people were of color, 92 percent of those listed in the gang database were of color, primarily Latino and Asian. “The ‘gang label’ has everything to do with race,” says John Crew of the California ACLU. “Frankly, we do not believe that this tactic would have spread so widely, and come to be accepted within law enforcement generally, if it was not being applied almost exclusively to people of color.”

The rapid growth of the databases coincided with the rise of sweep laws—anti-loitering laws, anti-cruising laws, and curfews—that proliferated as local municipalities searched for methods to limit the movement of young people in public spaces.

Cruising bans came after a decade of street scenes—boulevards and neighborhoods where young people’s cruising and partying overtook local traffic on Friday and Saturday nights. In Los Angeles, cruising bans ended the scenes in East Los Angeles, Westwood, downtown and Crenshaw Boulevard. In Atlanta, outcry from white homeowners over the city’s annual Freaknik event in 1996 resulted in a cruising ban that ended one of the nation’s biggest Black collegiate gatherings.

Between 1988 and 1997, curfew arrests doubled nationwide. In California, they quadrupled. Washington, D.C.’s law, which punished parents along with their children, went so far in abridging civil liberties that it was declared unconstitutional. Curfew enforcement was not color blind. In Ventura County, California, Latino and Black youths were arrested at more than seven times the rate of whites. In New Orleans, Blacks were arrested at nineteen times the rate of whites. But these laws, such as the stringent weekday curfews in Detroit, did nothing to stop increases in crime. They did fatten gang databases with false data.

During the mid-1980s there had been scattered anti-breakdancing ordinances and outbreaks of boombox citations. But what united the sweep laws of the ‘90s was a new logic of erasing youths—particularly youths of color—from public space. Not only were there to be no more boomboxes, sagging jeans, street dancing, or public displays of affection, there were to be *no more young people*. Youth itself was being criminalized. The most extreme forms of this logic emerged in Los Angeles and Chicago.

In Los Angeles, City Attorney James K. Hahn pioneered the gang injunction strategy when he won a court order against the Playboy Gangster Crips of

West Los Angeles. The injunction named dozens of alleged members of the set, and, within a twenty-six-block area, prevented them from hanging out together, talking on the street, or being seen in public for more than five minutes. In effect, the gang injunctions removed alleged gang member's freedoms in their own neighborhood without actually sending them to jail. This tactic proved so politically popular that it attracted millions in state and city funds. But in a study of the effects of this strategy, the ACLU concluded that the injunction did not suppress violent crime in the area and may, in fact, have forced gang members simply to shift their activities outside of the area covered by the injunction.¹⁸ Still, the strategy spread to other cities with the blessing of tough-on-crime, tough-on-youth politicians.

In Chicago, anti-youth-of-color hysteria had begun to mount in the late '80s. An anti-cruising ordinance was passed in the southwest portion of the city, and similar measures soon spread across the city's suburbs and exurbs. By 1992, the sweep solution came to the city in the form of the nation's broadest anti-loitering law, which sponsors had drafted with Los Angeles's gang injunctions in mind.

Although it was pitched as an anti-gang initiative, legal experts likened it to Jim Crow laws that were established to restrict Southern Blacks in their leisure time. The law made it illegal just to stand on the street with any person whom a cop "reasonably believed" to be in a gang. Under the ordinance, 45,000 young Chicagoans—mostly Black and Latino—were arrested in just two years. Only a small fraction of them were actually charged with a crime. The Cook County gang database quickly became more than two-thirds black.

"They were arresting lots of innocent people," said Jeremy Lahoud, a youth organizer with Chicago's Southwest Youth Collaborative, who noted that the ordinance distorted police priorities. "It takes police away from the real work, and pushes them to simply sweeping youth off the street." The law was so broadly dismissive of basic liberties that it was declared unconstitutional by a conservative U.S. Supreme Court in 1999.

The racial effects of all of these sweep laws were lopsided. While white youths made up 79 percent of national juvenile arrests, 62 percent of youths in juvenile detention facilities were of color. Even when charged with the same offense, Latinos and Native Americans were 2.5 times more likely to

end up in custody than whites. Black youths were five times more likely to be detained.¹⁹

Fear and the Ballot Box

The politics of containment moved next to the ballot box.

In 1993, the state of Washington passed the first "three strikes" initiative in the country, establishing life without parole for convicts with three violent felony offenses. The following year, although crime rates were lower than in 1980, California voters passed Proposition 184, a much harsher three-strikes law.²⁰ The effect was to imprison thousands in life sentences for nonviolent crimes.²¹

Right-wing anti-immigration ideologues also pressed Proposition 187, an initiative to ban all government services to undocumented immigrants, like health care, social services and education. Playing up the image of young Latino looters, they claimed the "Save Our State" initiative would end incentives for "illegal aliens" to immigrate. Instead, the initiative would have denied basic human services to thousands and bounced many children from the public schools. Although the measure passed, it was never implemented, and was finally ruled unconstitutional.

In 1994, University of California regent and Black Republican Ward Connerly began pushing to overturn affirmative action in the nine-campus system. The University, a recurring right-wing target, was one of the most diverse elite public systems in the country. On July 20, 1995, Connerly and Governor Pete Wilson combined to force a proposal through the Board of Regents to end affirmative action in hiring and admissions. The following year, Connerly's Proposition 209, ending affirmative action throughout California state government, was passed by the electorate. Nineteen ninety-six also marked the first year in the state's history that spending on prisons and corrections exceeded spending on higher education.

When the ban took effect in 1998, the number of Black and Latino freshmen admitted to the system dropped by 10 percent. At U.C. Berkeley alone, the numbers plunged by over 50 percent. By the end of the decade, the Justice Policy Institute estimated that nearly 50,000 black males were in a California prison, while 60,000 were in a California university. Across the country, 800,000 black males were in prison, while 600,000 were in college.²²

Sentencing Project assistant director Marc Mauer tells this story: shortly after President Clinton took office, he proposed a \$30 billion aid package for job creation and economic development for urban America. Congress reduced the proposal into a \$5 billion allocation, primarily for unemployment insurance. The following year, Congress pushed through its own \$30 billion proposal—for crime prevention. The bill included sixty new death penalty offenses, \$8 billion in prison construction and federal "three strikes" sentencing.²³ Clinton, of course, signed it.

Harvard criminologist James Q. Wilson, the father of the "Broken Windows" theory, had begun telling another story:

Meanwhile, just beyond the horizon, there lurks a cloud that the winds will soon bring over us. The population will start getting younger again. By the end of this decade there will be a million more people between the ages of fourteen and seventeen than there are now. . . . This extra million will be half male. Six percent of them will become high rate, repeat offenders—30,000 more young muggers, killers and thieves than we have now. Get ready.²⁴

Here were the naked post-riot fears of imminent racial and generational change codified into more crackpot conservative pseudo-theory, into an ideology that could preserve the War on Youth.

The truth was that juvenile violence had already peaked. National homicide arrest rates dropped by forty percent between 1993 and 1997. In 1998, California reported its lowest juvenile felony arrest rate since 1966. National crime rates were at their lowest since the mid-'70s. But fears outweighed facts. It was as if the generation that had coined the aphorism, "Never trust anyone over thirty," was now unable to trust anyone *under* thirty.

Sister Souljah's declaration no longer seemed hyperbole: "We are at war!"

Rap and the Culture War

During the 1980s, cultural conservatives had launched attacks on everything from government funding of transgressive art to campus initiatives toward multiculturalism and inclusion. But in rap music, race, generation and pop culture all came together. By attacking hip-hop, conservatives could move their culture-war

agenda out of obscure Congressional debates and campus Academic Senates into the twenty-four-hour media spin cycle.

In 1985, Tipper Gore, the wife of Tennessee Democratic senator and future presidential candidate Al Gore, and three other Washington wives launched the Parents Music Resource Center to combat sexually explicit lyrics. Gore's eureka moment had come when she heard her daughter, Kareenna, enjoying Prince's "Darling Nikki" in her bedroom. Citing songs by Twisted Sister, Cyndi Lauper, David Lee Roth and Madonna, the PMRC successfully pressured the record industry began placing "Parental Advisory" stickers on potentially explicit records.

At first, "satanic" heavy metal artists drew most of the cultural conservatives' ire. But after NWA's brush with the FBI, Gore and the cultural conservatives turned their attention to rap music. In 1990, she wrote an editorial in the *Washington Post* ripping Ice T for a rap from an album ironically subtitled *Freedom of Speech*. . . . *Just Watch What You Say*: 'Do we want [our kids] describing themselves or each other as 'niggers'? Do we want our daughters to think of themselves as 'bitches' to be abused? Do we want our sons to measure success in gold guns hanging from thick neck chains?'²⁵

A network of Christian fundamentalist groups sprung up to fight rap, pressing the Bush Administration and state and local politicians to ban rap groups like the 2 Live Crew. The campaign was led by Florida lawyer and failed political candidate Jack Thompson, who sent letters to hundreds of sheriff's departments and politicians urging them join the fight to ban rap records. "I think there is a cultural civil war going on," Thompson said. "I'm kind of the foot-soldier type."²⁶

In 1990, Thompson's campaign against the 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* got the album banned from Broward County, Florida, to Ontario, Canada. Dozens more record-store employees were fined or arrested for selling the album to minors. Conservative Florida governor Bob Martinez, in a difficult reelection race, denounced the album. Apparently, rappers in gold chains presented a better target than rockers with headless pigeons. Frank Zappa, an early opponent of the PMRC, told *The Source*, "The whole racist aroma swinging from the metal aspect to the rap aspect is a bit suspicious. The devil stuff didn't work. The devil business only played in certain parts of the country."²⁷

A Florida judge later ruled 2 Live Crew's album obscene, effectively banning

the record. But on May 7, 1992, a Federal Court of Appeals in Atlanta overturned the decision, a decision the Supreme Court let stand. "It's gonna go over to the majors next," Campbell had predicted at the height of the controversy. "The censors will come after them when they finish with us."

Clinton Vs. Souljah

When the 1992 presidential election season rolled around, Campbell's comments proved prophetic. While Democrat Bill Clinton and President George Bush moved toward their formal nominations, Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot threatened to upset the usual political calculus with a third-party run. Perot was particularly attractive to middle-aged, upper-middle class, suburban and exurban "swing" voters, the so-called center that both parties so desperately coveted. Skillful exploitation of racial and generational fears might prove the key to the election. A month after 2 Live Crew's victory, rappers Sister Souljah and Ice T were both in the gunsights.

Young Black activist Lisa Williamson had become Sister Souljah when she joined Public Enemy in 1990. During the late '80s, she had worked with the crew when she served as organizer for the National African Youth/Student Alliance. After Professor Griff left the group, she became "Sister of Instruction/Director of Attitude." "Rap is a vehicle for mass marketing Black consciousness," she now said. "You cannot fight fire with a flyer."²⁸

After appearing on the Terminator X and Public Enemy albums, she worked with Eric "Vietnam" Sadler on her own album, called *360 Degrees of Power*. Released in March, it had not been a big seller. Souljah was a better polemicist than a rapper, and she settled into a heavy schedule of interviews and lectures. Days after the uprising, she sat down for an interview with David Mills, who had now moved downtown to the *Washington Post*.

Mills baited Souljah on the riots, asking her if she thought the violence against Reginald Denny was "wise, reasoned action." Here, he writes, "Souljah's empathy for the rioters reached a chilling extreme." He quoted her answering:

"I mean, if Black people kill Black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people? You understand what I'm saying? In other words, white people, this government, and that mayor were well aware of

the fact that Black people were dying every day in Los Angeles under gang violence. So if you're a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person? Do you think that somebody thinks that white people are better, or above dying, when they would kill their own kind?"

As she said on "Sunday Today": "Unfortunately for white people, they think it's all right for our children to die, for our men to be in prison, and not theirs."²⁹

On June 13, as a guest of Jesse Jackson at the Rainbow Coalition's political convention, Bill Clinton read an edited version of Souljah's words in disgust. The night before, Souljah had participated in the convention's youth panel, and Clinton's advisors believed he had been handed the perfect opportunity to distance himself from Jackson's constituencies and ingratiate himself with Perot voters. Clinton said to the stunned crowd:

Just listen to this, what she said: She told the *Washington Post* about a month ago, and I quote, "If Black people kill Black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people? So if you're a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person?"

I know she is a young person, but she has a big influence on a lot of people, and when people say that—if you took the words white and Black and you reversed them, you might think David Duke was giving that speech.³⁰

Souljah blasted Clinton for taking her statements out of context. She had never personally advocated violence against whites, she said. She was trying to describe the mindset of those who had committed such actions. Clinton, she said, was trying to make her "a Willie Horton, a campaign issue, a Black monster that would scare the white population."³¹ Jackson and other Black leaders seethed at Clinton's well-placed, high-profile 10 percent dis. "She represents the feelings and hopes of a whole generation of people," Jackson said after Clinton's speech. "She should receive an apology."³²

None was forthcoming. Instead, political pundits heaped praise on Clinton.

New York Times writer Gwen Ifill wrote, "There is no question that the Clinton campaign is quite satisfied with the outcome of the Sister Souljah episode, and that it may become a blueprint for future risky missions to rescue the campaign's flagging fortunes."³³

Ice T Vs. the Police

The same week, the National Rifle Association and police organizations presented Republicans with an opportunity to resuscitate their own plunging poll numbers. On June 10 and 11, in press conferences from Maryland to Texas, they called for a boycott of Time Warner businesses because of a song called "Cop Killer," released on their Sire Records label by Ice T's Black heavy metal band Body Count.

In Austin, the law enforcement group pushed to close the Time Warner-owned Six Flags Over Texas theme park. In Houston, the Police Officers Association pressed the City Council to block renewal of its Time Warner Cable contract. Within a week, the national Fraternal Order of Police, the National Association of Chiefs of Police and the governor of Alabama had joined the call for a boycott and a ban.

"People who ride around all night and use crack cocaine and listen to rap music that talks about killing cops—it's bound to pump them up," Paul Taylor, the Fraternal Order's president, said. "No matter what anybody tells you, this kind of music is dangerous."³⁴

Vice President Dan Quayle attacked Time Warner's execs as a "cultural elite" that cared less about family values than about making a buck. At a National Association of Radio Talk Show Hosts convention, he asked to thunderous applause, "So where is the corporate responsibility here?"³⁵ The line worked so well it became a permanent part of Quayle's limited repertoire. In one stump speech, Quayle even stated he felt his Democratic opponent Clinton had been correct to criticize Sister Souljah.³⁶ Not to be left out, Oliver North hired Jack Thompson to take on Time Warner on behalf of his Freedom Alliance organization and President Bush let reporters know he felt "Cop Killer" was "sick." No one could muster the same passion to protest Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger's cop-killing movie, *The Terminator*.

Lost in the noise was a statement from the National Black Police Association,

which represented 35,000 Black cops, condemning the ban and the Time Warner boycott. "This song is not a call for murder. It's a rap of protest. Ice T isn't just making this stuff up," said Ronald Hampton, the Association's director. "There are no statistics to support the argument that a song can incite someone to violence."³⁷

The cultural conservatives' position on "Cop Killer" was not even consistent with their stance on campus hate speech codes, which they huffed would restrict the free flow of ideas and bend discourse to the forces of "political correctness." But the battle over "Cop Killer" indicated that conservatives were willing to be intellectually dishonest if it helped advance their agenda. In late June, at the request of a Florida sheriff, John McDougall, the state's attorney general began investigating whether Ice T could be charged under the Florida hate crime laws for speech that "dehumanized" police officers.

Why were law enforcement organizations and right-wingers so passionately committed to banning one song from a rapper's heavy metal side-project? A clue came in a report by Amnesty International on police brutality in Los Angeles released in the middle of the "Cop Killer" controversy. Investigators from the human rights organization had come to the city after the beating of Rodney King to look at police practices. In a year-long inquiry, they found that police and sheriffs' treatment of harmless suspects sometimes "amounted to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment." Police brutality, Amnesty International Secretary General Ian Martin said, was "one of a number of current human rights scandals in the U.S. that undermine its credibility in promoting rights internationally."³⁸

Calls for police reform across the country had reached deafening pitch since the March 1991 beating of Rodney King. The Amnesty report reflected the fact that Los Angeles had become a global symbol of American law enforcement's systemic breakdown over issues of race and youth. Embattled police associations, it seemed, saw "Cop Killer" as an opportunity to reverse unwanted scrutiny. Here was the culture war as a strategic diversion.

Charlton Heston stepped into the Time Warner shareholders meeting on July 16 and gave a masterful performance. With the voice of Moses, he condemned Time Warner executives for choosing greed over responsibility, and proceeded to dramatically read the lyrics to Body Count's "KKK Bitch"—a song in which Ice T's character imagines rough sex with the daughter of a Grand Wizard and Tip-

per Gore's two twelve-year-old nieces. Then he turned to "Cop Killer." Heston asked a rhetorical question, "If that song were titled 'Fag Killer' or the lyrics went, 'Die, die, die, Kike, die,' would you still sell it?"³⁹ Outside, police carried picket signs that read, TIME WARNER PUTS PROFITS OVER POLICE LIVES and MEDIA MOGULS OF MURDER. They chanted, "Ban rap! It's all crap!"

Thousands of record stores pulled Body Count's album, many at the request of California state attorney general Dan Lungren. The city of Philadelphia's pension fund voted to divest millions of dollars in Time Warner stock. Republican party officials made an issue of Clinton receiving political contributions from Time Warner. When Body Count played a show in Hollywood, one fan mused, "There are more cops out here than at Florence and Normandie."⁴⁰

Ice T called a press conference for July 28. Before he spoke, he showed a half-hour clip about the Black Panther Party. "One of the main problems with the press is that they don't have the slightest idea of what I'm talking about," he said. Then he announced he was pulling the song off the album so that he could offer it free at his concerts. It was never about money, he said, "This song is about anger and the community and how people get that way. It is not a call to murder police."⁴¹

"The police are sending out a message to all the other record companies," he added, admitting that he and Time Warner execs had received death threats. "I predict they will try to shut down rap music in the next three years."⁴²

Working for the Clampdown

Major labels immediately began to re-evaluate their investments in hip-hop, scrutinizing their rosters for artists whose works might prove politically provocative. By the end of 1992, the witch-hunt had affected dozens of major-label rappers. Kool G Rap and DJ Polo's *Live and Let Die* album was withheld. Tragedy was forced to drop a song called "Bullet," about a revenge hit on a killer cop. Almighty RSO saw their single "One in the Chamber" lose its promotion budget after protests from the Boston Police Patrolman's Association. The centerpiece of a Boo-Yaa Tribe EP, a song called "Shoot 'Em Down" that condemned the acquittal of a Compton policeman who had killed two Samoan brothers with nineteen shots, was shelved.

Bay Area rapper Paris was signed to Tom Silverman's Tommy Boy Records,

who had a distribution deal with Time Warner. The political rapper had not only recorded two songs for his new album *Sleeping with the Enemy*—"Coffee Donuts and Death" and "Bush Killa"—which assassinated corrupt cops and President Bush, but he had turned in cover artwork which depicted him laying in wait with a gun near the White House. Paris admitted it was all agit-prop. "In the real world, particularly Black and Latino communities, the problem isn't cop killers, much less records about cop killers," he said. "The problem is killer cops."

After President Bush joined the debate around "Cop Killer," the album's cover art was leaked to the New York Sheriffs Association, and hit the tabloids. In September, Time Warner execs forced Silverman to drop him from Tommy Boy. His next deal with 4th and Broadway, an imprint of the multinational Polygram, was thwarted by high-level execs who, he says, were concerned that his record might visit the same kind of political attacks on the parent company that Time Warner had suffered.

By October, Paris had signed with Rick Rubin, who was also distributed by Time Warner. To avoid being hamstrung by Time Warner, Rubin formed an indie label, Sex Records, and hurriedly geared up to release the record before the election. But before the elections, Time Warner stopped Rubin from releasing the record and gave Paris \$100,000 as a settlement. With the money Paris finally released the album on his own Scarface label three weeks after Clinton and Gore had defeated Bush and Quayle.

Ice T spent the last months of 1992 in bitter negotiations with Time Warner over the release of his next album, *Home Invasion*. He came to the realization, he later wrote, "that Warner Brothers cannot afford to be in the business of Black rage. They can be in the business of white rage, but Black rage is much more sensitive. The angry Black person is liable to say anything. The angry Black person might just want to kill everybody. You just don't know. So, they can't be in the business of Black anger while being in the business of Black control, which is another part of the system."⁴³ He left Time Warner and signed a deal with Bryan Turner's indie, Priority Records.

In just a decade, major labels had gone from playing catch-up in a musical genre they had once pegged as a passing novelty to signing every rap act they could to shaking out large numbers of rappers because of their political beliefs. It was that old familiar cycle: neglect, seduction, fear.

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Raising Hell—that wasn't gangs in Long Beach. It was a race riot. Let me tell you what happened. The Long Beach Insanes had stole a Mexican girl's purse and some Mexican dudes went upstairs, broke in the broom closet and hit up the Long Beach Insanes. They broke some brooms and mops and sticks with sharp edges on 'em. Then all the black gangs got together that was out there and they just start whooping every Mexican or white boy, throwing 'em off the second level, whooping they ass and everything. But no one's ever brought that to light. I was right there on the stage trying to calm the crowd down like I always did. They had 100 T-shirt security guards. End of the night you supposed to turn your T-shirt in. End of the night there was only about 30 of them left. They had took off and left and ran. That shit was never brought to light on TV, media or nothing. That was a fucking race riot. It wasn't about gangs. All the black gangs had combined and started whooping ass.

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