Despite perennial quibbling over the exact birth date of rap music, hip hop pundits generally agree that it was born sometime in 1974, and that its birthplace was a playground in the South Bronx, New York. A stylistic off-shoot of “house” music, the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” emerged as rap’s first major commercial hit. The song’s rhythmic background, Chic’s “Good Times,” was almost appropriately the last dying breath of the disco craze.

Since its humble beginnings in the South Bronx, rap music has grown exponentially, creating a hip hop culture and lifestyle whose influence spans the globe. No longer just a highly lucrative music genre that recently outsold every other music category, including country, rap music and hip hop culture have spawned a multibillion dollar enterprise. While the hip hop industry produces music and apparel, hip hop itself serves as the thematic back-drop for the marketing of hundreds of consumer goods—from food, soft drinks, sneakers and cosmetics, to banking services, entertainment, furniture, alcohol and cars.

A measure of hip hop’s influence and stature was the decision by prominent Harvard Professor Cornel West to cut a rap CD, the willingness of his colleague Henry Louis Gates to testify as an expert witness for a gangsta rap group whose lyrics were the focus of an obscenity trial, and their colleague Charles Ogletree’s role as moderator of a Harvard summit to draft a code of conduct for rap music’s hardcore element. Not surprisingly, the number of books on the topic has grown, lining bookstore shelves alongside titles on music, culture, biography, sociology, history, politics, and even current events. The most recent addition to this growing body of literature is The Hip Hop Generation – Young Blacks and the Crisis in the African American Culture, by Bakari Kitwana, a former editor at The Source magazine.

Part I of the book’s two sections, entitled “The New Crises in African Culture,” consists of five chapters in which Kitwana defines the members of the hip hop generation, explains their collective outlook and attitude, and recognizes hip hop as the single most significant achievement of their generation. He argues, however, that political and socioeconomic forces have made their struggle for equality uniquely more difficult than that of their parents during the Black power/civil rights era. Unlike the earlier generation, whose struggles focused on the fight against racial segregation, the hip hop generation is beset by problems of racial profiling, rising rates of incarceration, poor education, heightened gender wars, environmental racism, AIDS, and unemployment that only worsened with increased globalization. These issues, Kitwana argues, are often lost in the public debate because the hip hop generation, for most of the last two decades, has been seen as the “problem.”

“The near obsessive national attention given to praising the long gone civil rights movement, [ignoring] the reality that concrete progress within the civil rights arena has been almost nil for nearly four decades,” further obscures these issues.

As the first generation of African Americans come of age outside the confines of de jure segregation, according to Kitwana, these worsening conditions have created a contradictory worldview—one that embraces elements of the past, such as Afro-centric dress and hairstyles like...
dreadlocks and braids, but that also rejects others, like strict allegiance to the Democratic party and the traditional roles of the family, schools, and the Black church. Their defiant attitudes and disposition are seen in professional athletes like Allen Iverson and Mike Tyson, as well as in their activism—directed against both the white status quo and the older generation of middle class Black activists like Jesse Jackson, Kweisi Mfume, and Al Sharpton. As beneficiaries of the 1960s civil rights era, today’s young Blacks are more likely to resemble their white counterparts who seek to get rich quick, achieve wealth by any means necessary, and acquire the materialistic and consumer trappings of financial success.

In the three chapters of Part II, “Confronting the Crises in African American Culture,” Kitwana regards, even more than fashion, language and style, hip hop as the “vehicle for transmitting culture and values to this generation, relegating Black families, community centers, churches and schools to the back burner.” He decries the negative images projected by “hood” movies and gangsta rap music that have fused in the public mind as a string of destructive “isms”—sexism, gangsterism, materialism, anti-intellectualism, and nihilism. He also laments the irony of the rappers’ access to global media through a multinational corporate structure that simultaneously supports their plight. Still, he lauds the hip hop generation’s nascent political activism, and provides small but hopeful examples of grassroots involvement by dedicated young Blacks nationwide who struggle anonymously to make a positive difference. Finally, he challenges the rap industry and the hip hop generation to translate their significant cultural influence into a unified political force. He envisions a “unified front” behind which hip hop’s commercial and grassroots sector may finally unite, along with young whites, to pool their professional and financial resources to effectuate broad socioeconomic change.

Part polemic, part jeremiad, The Hip Hop Generation is a deeply troublesome book. Some problems inhere in the subject matter itself, reflecting the complex of contradictions and paradoxes that form a major component of the hip hop phenomenon. But the major problems here are authorial. Authorial problems arise as early as the preface where Kitwana describes the book as “not about rap music or the hip hop industry’s insiders.” Whatever benefits accrue from this choice seem insufficient to justify the absence of references to those who created, nurtured, and who now sustain the hip hop industry. By the early 1990s, as an example, Marion “Suge” Knight’s Death Row Records label (once home to Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dog and Dr. Dre), had earned $325 million in only four years, becoming the most profitable Black music label in history. Knight, a former Oakland Raider who stood 6’3” and weighed 300 pounds, had adopted the unusual CEO style of intimidation, gang violence, pistol-whipping, and threats of anal rape or death. How Knight and his Death Row label shaped the evolution of gangsta rap and the future business of hip hop are subjects ripe for robust discussion and analysis. Yet Kitwana makes no reference to Knight or his influence. This is especially unfortunate in an industry so driven by individual personalities—whether they work exclusively on the business side (Russell Simmons, Suge Knight), the talent side (Tupac, Biggie Smalls, Snoop Dog), or straddle both (Dr. Dre, P. Diddy, Ja rule, Jay Z).

Also problematic is Kitwana’s definition of the hip hop generation as those Blacks born between 1965 and 1984, or now roughly between the ages of 18 and 38. This demographic seems both overbroad and oversimplified as it permits him to assume the hip hop generation a huge monolith whose political views and attitudes are the same. He accordingly gushes with praise for Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr., the 35 year-old son of Jesse, but ignores Harold Ford, Jr. (D-Tenn.), the youngest Democrat in Congress and its most conservative Black, and F.C.C. Chairman Michael Powell, the conservative 38-year old son of Colin. He wisely concedes the existence of a “bridge” generation of Blacks born on the cusp of the hip hop movement—those too young to relate wholly to the Black power/civil rights era of the 1960s, but too old to be rooted in the hip hop era. He also concedes that even those born between 1965 and 1984 must be split into three sub-groups. These early concessions are justified as it soon becomes evident the demographic loses significant value as descriptive tool.

The problem arises most clearly in Kitwana’s discussion of the recent Newark Mayoral elections in which incumbent Sharpe James, 66, was challenged by two young newcomers, first Ras Baraka, age 32, and then Cory Booker, 34. Kitwana is quick to embrace the younger Baraka and Booker as part of the new hip hop generation of political leadership. Yet a closer look at the candidates’ campaigns all but negates the definition. Baraka, son of poet/playwright Amiri Baraka, was a public school teacher and a grassroots community activist who lost to James in 1994. Booker, who lost to James in 2002, was educated at Stanford, Yale Law School and at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar; plays tennis in the Hamptons, praises school vouchers and found support among free-marketers at the Conservative Manhattan Institute. He also received praise from conservative Republicans like Arianna Huffington, Jack Kemp and George F. Will.

Incumbent James’ less-then-stellar background includes a federal corruption probe that resulted in the convictions of his chief of staff for embezzlement and his police director for taking bribes. Though his annual salary was $80,000 when first elected mayor in 1986, it now approaches $250,000. He drives a Rolls-Royce, and owns vacation property at the Jersey shore. During the 2002 race, he reportedly warned Booker; “I’m going to out-nigger
you in the community,” and called him the “faggot white boy” who was not “authentically black.”

Whisper campaigns slimed Booker for being gay, Jewish and white, and for accepting money from the KKK. Newark police officers and other city employees harassed Booker supporters during the campaign and later at the polls. James won a fifth term by a 53 to 46 percent margin.

Against this background, Kitwana’s definition of the hip hop generation’s political vanguard serves no descriptive purpose. Although similar in age, Baraka and Booker were as different as night and day, and even if they were the hip hop generation’s candidates—demographically, in both political modus operandi and “keepin’-it-real” style—the true hip hop candidate was arguably James.

Other problems abound. Though blissfully lacking in dogma and Ph.D.-speak, The Hip Hop Generation has the dated, heavily-clichéd tone of a 1960s political tract in which the author’s rants barely conceal an easy racial chauvinism. In a recent interview, Kitwana stated: “The conversation [about race] in the ‘80s and ‘90s got to be redundant. There was Studs Terkel’s Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession, and Cornel West’s Race Matters, [but] I don’t think . . . the conversation has shifted much since then.”

The above statement, of course, begs the question: Redundant, to whom? In fact, the 1980s and 1990s was the period in which the debate on race, both academic and popular, was irreversibly widened and made especially pertinent. Major universities and law schools across the nation granted tenure to many Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other “non-white” professors during that period and the debate predictably took on new voices. Seminal works in the last decade alone have thus broadened the racial debate in ways that intersect with concepts of property law, feminist theory, violence against women of color, current immigration policy, law school pedagogy, free speech, and even hair. The traditional binary racial paradigm of simple Black and white was variously deconstructed and criticized. Several titles heralding the arrival of an entirely new body of scholarship—White Studies—also appeared. Traditional historiography reevaluated its take on racial matters—especially in “new labor history”—and spurred a number of revisionist historical works. Our last residual notions of the “tragic” mulatto-as-outcast were forever nullified by a bracing biographical debut. A noted law professor shifted the context of the debate and ventured into the tricky depths of fiction, as did a popular essayist/critic, while a Nobel-winning novelist ventured (more effectively) into non-fiction. More recent works note the growing Hispanic population as central to the debate as Hispanic Americans have already begun to blur the edges of white America’s concept of race in ways inconceivable only a decade ago. In Short, the current debate on race remains not only pertinent, but has never been more lively or polyvocal.

Kitwana’s biggest problems, however, arise in his discussion of rap music and hip hop as potential agents for political change. Given hip hop’s unprecedented influence as popular culture (and as a $4 billion a year force in the music industry), he argues that rap’s expansion into the political arena is “inevitable.” “Hip hop as an economic force and as a cultural movement has given us foot soldiers. They exist already,” Kitwana has stated. “This infrastructure gives us unprecedented power. All it needs is a national organization to connect the dots.” The question, according to Kitwana, is not will rap become a major political force, but rather how soon? Yet he never fully discusses how hip hop will expand into the political arena, or how effectively it will advance the hip hop agenda. Answers, however, may be gleaned from hip hop’s position with respect to current problems in the rap community, the music industry as a whole, and the larger body politic.

In the 1992 movie comedy “Mo’ Money,” Damon Wayans plays a streetwise hustler who woos a female coworker (with the aid of his brother Marlon) through a series of fraudulent schemes. After the opening scam, involving the sale of a TV in a rundown tenement apartment, the two flee the scene by sliding down a rear fire escape, happily counting their cash as they chant, “Mo’ money, mo’ money.” Despite Kitwana’s optimism of the imminent politicization of the rap community, and that it will be for the “good,” concerted political activity in the foreseeable future seems unlikely if only because the politics of “mo’ money, mo’ money” still rule the day.

Criticism of rap music’s excesses—sexism, misogyny, gangsterism, materialism, nihilism, etc.—has been blunted by claims that the music merely mirrors the harsh realities of the streets. The rapper-as-artist (the argument goes) must follow the postmodern imperative of “keepin’ it real” to reflect the realities of communities where murder, drugs, and official violence and corruption are quotidian facts of life. For many in the rap community, however, the quest for a politically pure urban aesthetic may not be the principal creative force.
The Politics of “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Money,” and the Strange Dialectic of Hip Hop

N.W.A.’s 1988 Straight Outta Compton ushered in the era of the highly lucrative gangsta rap genre, with N.W.A. promptly hailed as the first “crossover” gangsta rap superstars.

In the wake of N.W.A.’s success, hip hop magazines like Vibe and The Source promptly ignored the more positive acts like Public Enemy or X-Clan, focusing instead on other violent groups like Above the Law, The Geto Boys, and Compton’s Most Wanted.

Dr. Dre started out critical of marijuana use, until Cypress Hill released their eponymously titled debut album in 1991 celebrating habitual marijuana use, which sold a million copies.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Dre filled his next album, The Chronic, with songs built around marijuana use. The Chronic’s success, having become the highest-selling hard-core rap album in history after selling more than three million copies, altered the direction of rap music as many new artists and writers quickly followed suit.

Dr. Dre’s popularity even soared after his assault of a woman, banging her head against a wall and trying to kick her down a flight of stairs. These actions greatly impressed segments of his increasingly “multicultural” audience, for whom the violence in his private life established him as the gangster he professed to be on his albums and CDs.

The tenderness and compassion so evident in Tupac Shakur’s first hit, “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” were conspicuously absent from his nihilistic, death-addicted last album, “Makaveli the Don Killuminati.” Once the “voice of hunger and purity,” according to one writer, Tupac “regressed both mentally and spiritually as his financial status progressed.”

Indeed, Suge Knight was not interested in signing Tupac until his reputation for violence and rape was well-established and until he became “more appealing to Death Row Record’s core audience, the suburban white kids who [bought] millions of . . . gangsta rap albums.” Snoop Doggy Dogg’s murder charges hardly damaged the sales of his debut CD/album, Doggystyle.

Indeed, “the hype [was] clearly responsible for pushing Doggystyle to the top of the charts [even] before it was released.”

Nor is the mo’ money mindset a purely West coast (or intraracial) phenomenon. In the late-1980s, a then relatively unknown promoter named Russell Simmons came up with the idea of a white, punk-oriented rap group, which later became the Beastie Boys. Under Simmons’ tutelage the Beastie Boys “mutated into hip hop’s official gross-out act, spewing beer on audiences and taking promotional cues from Duran Duran, whose X-rated nightclub videos included topless models clambering on a giant inflated phal- lus.”

Their debut, Licensed to Ill, sold four million albums.

In 1990, 2 Live Crew’s LP Nasty as They Wanna Be was ruled obscene despite the testimony of Henry Louis Gates, but still benefited from the publicity, selling 1.7 million copies of an otherwise mediocre album.

Robin G. Kelley observes that “the massive popularity of gangsta rap coincided with a fairly substantial increase in white suburban consumers of rap.” According to Martha Bayles, what these young whites “crave are aggressive, noise-dominated sound; obscene, violent lyrics; and emotions ranging from sadistic lust to nihilistic rage.”

Over the years, hip hop has learned how to satisfy this craving, building a “core audience for ‘gangsta’ rap [that] is increasingly white.” [As a result,] hip hop was becoming a “grim art form.”

What seems clear is that major rap stars (and the industry) reap millions of dollars by pandering to white audiences’ glorification of a lifestyle that annually claims the lives of hundreds of Black and Hispanic men.

The hip hop response to problems in the broader music industry has also been less than courageous. Though many rap groups have immortalized lyrics that criticize racial and economic injustice in the society at large, they rarely look over their own corporate shoulders. None of the five major recording companies—Bertelsmann, Sony, EMI, Universal, and Warner—has a Black president or distributor, none has ever contracted with a Black-owned advertising firm, despite the millions in promotional dollars spent every year, and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) has refused to release the names of Black vendors with which the five major companies do business.

Other unfair practices in the industry are legitimized and perpetuated by laws that are facially neutral but especially harmful to Blacks in practical application and effect. Copyright law, as an example, considers the lyrics and recordings of countless musical artists as “work for hire,” making them property of the record company and not of the individual performer.

The copyright regime commonly denied black musical artists legal protection for their creative works; the treatment of Black artists by the music industry and the laws reveals a pervasive history of infringement. “For blues artists particularly, it was almost as if their work—some of the most innovative, original and imaginative artistic work ever produced in America—was in the public domain, i.e., freely usable by anyone.”
The legions of Black artists who had their work appropriated, or were otherwise cheated out of substantial royalties and income, included Frankie Lymon, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and scores of blues, jazz and R&B artists. White performers appropriated many of Bo Diddley’s tunes by “covering” his work, thus denying him the opportunity to become a hit-maker himself. The Lanham Act, enacted to protect the names of musicians and musical groups, also works against many Black musical artists of the past. Many of these artists had several million-selling hit records but died penniless, without union benefits or even basic health care, because they were prohibited from using the name of their former group to advance subsequent solo careers. The decisional authority is clear that former members of a group do not necessarily enjoy a right to the use of a service mark or trademark in the group’s name simply because they once performed as members of that group. The law therefore endorses the unconscionable conduct of record companies (often decades earlier) which denies these artists any share in the ownership of the group name trademark—even the right to use the “formerly of” designation. If, as Kitwana believes, a “politicized” hip hop community exists, where is the groundswell of support for these former artists—many of whom wrote and performed hugely successful songs that we still enjoy, and whose works are subtly “sampled” by rappers even today? This is especially fertile ground for hip hop politicization since many current Black artists, whether in rap or R&B, remain as unsophisticated and vulnerable to exploitation as the blues artists of the 1920s. Since the real “talent” in the recording studio is often the producer or the engineers and recording technicians sitting outside the booth, many rappers are more or less fungible, with a short shelf life, or vulnerable to the vagaries of public tastes. For each LL Cool J, Nelly, or Ja Rule, a hundred Sisqos work their way back to oblivion. Toni Braxton sold more than $188 million in CDs but eventually filed for bankruptcy because her contract provided payment of less than 35 cents per album. TLC also filed for bankruptcy after receiving less than 2 percent of the $17 million their CDs had earned. The bankruptcy laws have allowed many artists to extricate themselves from unconscionable contracts, yet the major music labels, acting through the RIAA, have lobbied congress to amend the bankruptcy laws to deny even this relief. Recording artists like Courtney Love have been joined by others to protest practices that prevent the negotiation of less restrictive contract terms. Nashville’s Dixie Chicks, members of the Recording Artists’ Coalition (RAC) (which also includes Madonna and Seal), negotiated a new contract with Sony only after ten months of feuding with the company and publicizing its “systematic thievery” while Love recently settled her lawsuit against Universal for an undisclosed amount. White groups like the RAC and the Future of Music Coalition (FMC) have been fighting the major battles thus far, “while most major black recording artists have been MIA.”

Kitwana’s “politicized” hip hop community is similarly silent on the issue of “payola,” the widespread practice of paying radio stations to play certain records, which many call institutionalized “bribery.” Under this practice, the record company pays an “independent promoter” to pay a local radio station to add the company’s records to its list of most-played artists. This “pay-to-play” practice has generally become more corporatized and subdued over the years—everywhere, that is, except the inner-city or “urban” markets, often called the Wild West of the industry because the practice is more deeply entrenched and flagrant in these venues. Of the nearly 300 urban radio stations, few have made any efforts to change the practice, and there has been no discernible remedial response by the hip hop community.

Nor has the hip hop community enjoyed any measurable success within the larger body politic. Rappers themselves are coming under increasing attack for their political apathy and conspicuous absence from mass protests like the fifteen-day protest over the police killing of Amadou Diallo. In the mid-1980s, many hip hop albums showed a political awareness and consciousness. A review of current play lists and sales charts, however, shows that consumer interest has shifted dramatically in the last decade. The typical hip hop fan of today is more interested in “rocking platinum and ice,” raking in the Benjamins, passing the Courvoisier, swilling Cristal, and spinning 22-inch chrome rims behind Cadillac grills.
James, proclaiming that Baraka, the hip hop candidate, has “staked out” New Jersey’s largest city. In fact, however, Baraka is a virtual political nonentity who has never held elective office, garnered only a negligible percentage of the 1994 vote, never articulated a coherent political vision, and remains largely ignored by the news media. Moreover, during the 2002 mayoral election in which Cory Booker lost by a relatively small margin, Baraka even lost his bid for a city council seat. Of all the socially conscious celebrities of the hip hop generation, none supported Baraka—not even Queen Latifah, Redman, Shaq O’Neill, or Naughty by Nature’s Vinnie and Treach, all of whom are natives of the Newark area. Indeed, Queen Latifah’s eleven-hour support went to the conservative school voucher candidate, Cory Booker.

Kitwana also refers to Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D-Ga) as one of several participants in an “impressive” hip hop summit called by rap mogul Russell Simmons. In her last campaign, McKinney, known for her firebrand style and for making controversial statements, dismissed her Black female challenger as a “tool of whitey.” McKinney, however, lost to the more moderate Denise Majette, a former state judge who, interestingly, was also more “conscious” of the “emerging African American middle class in the suburbs [who were] long ignored by McKinney.”

Much like McKinney, the hip hop generation’s political prospects seem bleak without the support of the Black middle class. Throughout much of the book, however, Kitwana seems mildly disdainful of the Black middle class. He never fully discusses the cultural divide between the hip hop generation and the Black middle-class, or suggests ways in which the divide may be bridged. Despite this wide rift, the hip hop generation desperately needs the support and leadership of figures like Jesse Jackson, Kweisi Mfume, and the Rev. Al Sharpton, among others. This political continuity has always served the Black community well. Despite their legendary ideological differences, Booker T. Washington, we now know, secretly financed some of the political activities of W.E.B. DuBois. Martin Luther King, Jr., stood center stage at the historic March on Washington, D.C., but A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin literally stood watching in the wings.

And though Malcolm X often criticized Dr. King, there was a substantial philosophical reconciliation by Malcolm X, near the end. (Indeed, if this political continuity has its artistic counterpart in the timeless appeal of much Black music, one should note that the genre of rap music is formally much more democratic than the blues, R&B, or even jazz.)

Kitwana acknowledges the “bitter generational divide between hip hop generationers and [their] civil rights/Black power parents” as one of the Black community’s “best kept secrets.” Still, he fails to convey Black middle class resentment for gangsta rap, which is much broader and deeper than the public antics of Rev. Calvin Butts and Delores Tucker. It is noteworthy that the rising popularity of gangsta rap among teenagers coincided with the renaissance of social groups like Jack & Jill—originally established for elite Black kids in a hostile white society, but now a means of separating them from kids of the Black underclass. Cotillions and debutante balls are back in vogue; locales like Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts and Sag Harbor on Long Island, New York, have become the vacation spots (summer enclaves, actually) for educated middle class and wealthy Blacks. These events were followed by the rise of a new genre of books that shared much with Lawrence Otis Graham’s unabashed celebration of the Black upper class; books whose authors were unapologetic, proud members of the Black elite.

The success of these titles is even more revealing when one considers that for decades it was deemed declasse for Blacks to boast of middle class roots or to otherwise regard white ancestry with anything resembling familial pride. E. Franklin Frazier’s Black Bourgeoisie was, after all, a scathing attack on the historical black middle class whose values, he argued, were but clownish repetitions of those held by whites. That single paperback defined the values of tens of thousands of Black collegians of the 1960s and 1970s. But time passed. Many of those collegians became exactly what Frazier railed against. Now they cringe at the vulgarity of gangsta rap videos on BET and MTV. And even those Blacks who criticized Graham’s Our Kind of People for its snobbism also stuck their collective chest out a little further—accepting the book as a psychic antidote to the racist, degrading images of rap videos that supposedly depicted “our” culture—privately proud that we too could boast an aristocracy, of sorts.

Kitwana also assumes that whites who wear FUBU and listen to Ice-T will also vote for the hip-hop political agenda. This presents the most troublesome argument in the book. Like Russell Simmons, Kitwana is convinced that since nearly 80 percent of rap music is purchased by young, non-Black, consumers, a commonality exists in the hip hop culture that joins the projects and the trailer park—a fusion of consumer interests that augurs well for the formation of a broad-based, multi-racial, pro-
gressive political movement. But Kitwana mistakes commercial values for social values, and commercial values do not always translate into political values in the voting booth. Recent polls of white teenagers show that some 65 percent felt that interracial dating, as an example, made no differ-

dence at all in the quality of American life. A 1997 poll found a surprising 68 percent of Americans between 15 and 24 felt that racial separation was acceptable in America as long as opportunities were somehow the same for all, a result that was up from 41 percent in 1991.150 Teenagers of this generation are often no more socially or politically liberal than their parents, according to generational historians Howe and Strauss who argue that today’s teenagers reject the “group-rights” model for resolving problems of racial inequality. They are leery of orthodox multiculturalism,152 take few cues from activists or ideologues of any stripe,153 and often oppose affirmative action in practice if not in theory.154 Leon E. Wynter notes that many observers of hip hop culture fail to appreciate the “easy cleavage” between hip hop and a liberal social consciousness. This explains the incongruous segment of white youth known as “wiggers”—generally working class white youths who are racially isolated and hold bigoted views yet “make the same fashion statements as the rappers on MTV, whom they idolize.”155 These findings suggest, in short, that young whites today—however partial to FUBU or gangsta rap CDs—are still likely to vote tomorrow just as their parents voted yesterday.156

In all academic discourse, authors occasionally miss the mark, unforeseen trends surface, and old scholarship is eclipsed by new. For these reasons, libraries are filled with books that promised revolutions or upheavals that never occurred. Kitwana could be forgiven had he advanced a unique view, or tried unsuccessfully to challenge the academy. But he does neither. This is a mean-spirited, opportunistic, shallow book; a lengthy pamphlet heavily padded with facts and data that are hardly new, using old arguments stated more persuasively elsewhere. More informative (and heartfelt) titles in the area include Hip Hop Nation by Nelson George, The New Beats by S.H. Fernando, Black Noise, by Patricia Rose, and even the 1999 Horizon article, “20First Century Hip-Hop: Puff or Politics,” by the late Lisa Sullivan (from which Kitwana lifted not only his epigram, but apparently his topical scaffolding as well).

BUT Kitwana mistakes commercial values for social values, and commercial values do not always translate into political values in the voting booth.

In his criticism of the Black middle class, Kitwana complains that the older civil rights activists “haven’t nurtured [sic] a younger generation of activists, neither [sic] have they made room for us at the table.”159 Here, however, Kitwana misconceives the dynamics of grass roots leadership and the historical accretion of political power. The student sit-ins and other civil rights protests of the mid-1950’s were typically small, modest acts of courage by nameless college students, community activists, and members of the Black church. In countless dusty towns across the South they faced police dogs, billy clubs, fire hoses, and angry white mobs. Nor should it be forgotten that most were still in their twenties and early-thirties, and today would be part of the hip hop generation. They did not wait in whiny expectation for an “invitation” to sit at the table. They virtually stole the show from the Old Guard, captured the imagination of the American public, and in a way that not only moved the conscience of the world’s most powerful nation but also influenced its national foreign policy (and Third World diplomacy) for decades to come.161

Turning his back on this civil rights tradition, Kitwana writes that the “defining values of this generation’s worldview have taken a dramatic turn away from our parents’ generation.”162 He adds: “For the most part, we have turned to ourselves, our peers, global images and products, and the new realities that we face for guidance.”163 Awash in consumer goods, and armed with consumer-foot soldiers and a marketing network, the hip hop generation’s mantra of “‘mo’ money, mo’ money” has made a postmodern fetish of cash. But the vast entrepreneurial wealth belies a deeper spiritual poverty. Why else is there no leadership, no collective passion, not a single unifying cause? Will the hip hop generation ever produce courageous leaders and activists like King, Evers, Shuttlesworth, Malcolm X, Meredith, Lewis, Ture, or even Jackson? Perhaps. Probably.

And therein lies the existential rub, the dialectic dilemma the hip hop generation must ultimately face: how to build a political movement akin to that of the 1960s, when that movement grew out of the traditions of family, college, community and the Black church—the very institutions the hip hop generation rejects.164

ENDNOTES

Ronald D. Brown, B.A., Rutgers College; J.D., Rutgers University School of Law (Camden); former law clerk to Associate Justice Mark A. Sullivan of the New Jersey Supreme Court and Assistant U.S. Attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice (District of New York); LL.M., Columbia University Law School (candidate).
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2 Id. at 10.

3 BAKARI KITWANA, THE HIP HOP GENERATION - YOUNG BLACKS AND THE CRISIS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE 9-11, 195-98 (1996). The influence of African American culture through music is now global in scope. James Bernard notes that “from small clubs in Moscow to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro to MTV Tokyo, rap has begun to elbow its way onto the world stage . . . increasingly, rappers in other countries are using [American rap music] to reflect on and grapple with their own local realities, adding their own flavor to an American art form.” A Newcomer Abroad, Rap Speaks Up, N.Y.TIMES, Aug. 23, 1992, sec. 2.

4 KITWANA, supra note 3, at 9-10. According to Soundscan, more than 80 million rap albums were sold in 1998, 9 million more units than country, making rap music the largest and fastest growing genre in the industry. Jeff Stark, BRILLIANT CAREERS, RUSSELL SIMMONS, Salon.com, 2, available at http://www.salon.com/people/bc/1990/07/06/simons/index.html (July 6, 1999).

5 S. H. Fernando, Jr., observes that the “pervasive influence of hip-hop extends to television, film, advertising, fashion, the print media and language itself . . . [H]ip hop . . . exploded onto the mainstream and expressed itself via rap music . . . While addressing the hopes, dreams, and frustrations of America’s minorities, rap is the music of a whole generation, breaching barriers of race and class.” THE NEW BEATS: EXPLORING THE MUSIC, CULTURE AND ATTITUDES OF HIP HOP (Anchor 1994).

6 Professor West’s rap CD, entitled Sketches of my Culture, is a ten-song tribute to the African American experience in the words, songs and music that sustained Blacks throughout their historical journey, available at http://www.cornelwest.com.

7 In June of 1990, the members of the rap group 2 Live Crew were arrested for their stage performance in an adults-only club in Hollywood, Florida. The arrests were made two days after a federal judge ruled that the lyrics in 2 Live Crew’s album, As Nasty as They Wanna Be, violated Florida’s obscenity law. In his testimony at the criminal trial, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Harvard professor and scholar of African American literature, testified that 2 Live Crew’s performance fell within the standard forms of cultural expression with a long history in the aesthetic evolution of African American culture and politics. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 2 LIVE CREW, DECODED, N.Y.TIMES, June 19, 1990, at A2.


9 KITWANA, supra note 3, at 4.

10 Id. at 4-24.

11 Id. at xii, 22, 195.

12 Id. at 6-8.

13 Id. at 7-8.

14 KITWANA, supra note 3, at 10-22.

15 Id. at xx.

16 Id. at xxi.

17 Id. at 13.

18 Id. at 8.

19 Id. at 7, 150.

20 Id. at 8.

21 Id. at 8-9.

22 Id. at 6.

23 Id. at 202.

24 Id. at 127-141.

25 Id. at 11.

26 Id. at 147-56.

27 Id. at 156-74. One such individual is DLacy Davis, founder and president of Black Cops Against Police Brutality (B-CAP). East Orange, New Jersey. Davis, a local police officer, founded this community-based group in 1991 to improve community-police relations. He conducts workshops across the country for activist groups, individuals and churches to educate youth on how to deal with law enforcement. Topics include what to do if stopped or searched by police and what to do if you witness an incident of police brutality. The group’s commitment also includes the management of surrendering lawbreakers who want to turn themselves in, but often fear that they will be beaten or killed by the police once they are in custody. In such cases, the group makes all the arrangements to turn
lawbreakers in, and also insures that police officers do not beat confessions out of them or otherwise coerce incriminating statements from lawbreakers while in custody. Id. at 159-60.

28 Id. at 206.

29 Id. at 211-14.

30 Id. at xxi.

31 Id. at xxii.


33 Id. at 156.

34 KITWANA, supra note 3, at 4.

35 Id. at 146, 161-63.


37 KITWANA, supra note 3, at xiv.

38 Id. Kitwana views hip hop as the defining element for an entire age group (those born between 1965 and 1984), but argues that three age groups probably exist within this generation. Older hip hop generationers, as an example, would find rappers like KRS-One or LL Cool J to represent their notion of hip hop, whereas the younger end of the generation might see their hip hop truths in Hot Boys or Lil’ Bow Wow, and a hip hopper in the middle of the age group might be more comfortable with Wu-Tang Clan.

39 Id. at 145-46, 156-57.


41 Id.

42 Id.

43 Id.

44 Id. at 1.

45 Id. at 4.

46 Id.

47 Id.

48 Id.

49 A similar electoral dynamic unfolded quite differently in the recent congressional primary between incumbent Alabama Rep. Earl Hillard (D-Ala.) and Arthur Davis, who had never held elective office. Hillard, 60, was the first Black elected to Congress from Alabama since Reconstruction; Davis, 34, is a Black Harvard Law School graduate and former federal prosecutor who practiced law in his native Montgomery. Like Sharpe James in Newark, incumbent Hillard used a racialist approach, pointing out that the much younger Davis had received much of his financial support and backing from outside Alabama. He also appealed to Black voters' fears after his congressional district lines were redrawn in a way that included largely white sections of the Greater Birmingham and Tuscaloosa Counties -- areas in which Davis had run strongly in a previous challenge. Unlike the Newark mayoral race, however, here the young, highly educated Davis beat the older, streetwise incumbent to become Alabama’s next Black congressman. Though the two elections differed in results, the striking feature is not how similar Artur Davis and Cory Booker are to each other, but how different they are from losing candidates like Ras Baraka and Cynthia McKinney who fit Kitwana’s notion of a hip hop political vanguard. See Tapper, supra note 40, notes 115-122 infra


51 Juan F. Perea criticizes Cornel West’s Race Matters as yet another example of the traditional Black/White paradigm that “focus[es] exclusive attention on the relationship between Blacks and Whites,” and “seem[s] indifferent towards the history and conditions experienced by other non-Whites, non-Black groups.” The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The “Normal Science” of American Racial Thought, 8 Calif. L. Rev. 1213, 1231 (1997).

52 It is generally agreed that Derrick Bell’s seminal textbook, Race, Racism and American Law (1976), spawned this kind of
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scholarship, known as “critical race theory”.


68 KITWANA, supra note 3, at 193.

69 Id.

70 Id.

71 Hansen, supra note 50, at 2.

72 Id.

73 KITWANA, supra note 3, at 193.

74 Mo’ MONEY (Sony Pictures 1992).

75 Id.


77 The Letters N.W.A. stand for “Niggaz With Attitude.”

78 See RO, supra note 32, at 29.

79 Id.

80 Id. at 97.

81 Id. In fact, the term “chronic” is L.A. street slang for marijuana.

82 Id. at 101.

83 Id. at 100. See also TRICIA ROSE, BLACK NOISE -- RAP MUSIC AND BLACK CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA 178-79 (Wesleyan University Press 1994).

84 Id.


86 See RO, supra note 32, at 136.


88 Id.


90 Id.

Bayles, supra note 89, at 349.


Bayles, supra note 89, at 342.

Id.

Id., at 355.

Ro, supra note 32, at 99-100.

Id. at 112.


See, e.g., Estate of Tupac Shakur v. Death Row Records, Inc. (D.D. Cal. 1997) (involving a lawsuit brought by the estate of Tupac Shakur against Tupac’s record company, Suge Knight’s Death Row Records, alleging gross fraud and theft of assets by the company). Tupac, a platinum-selling rap artist, sold millions of albums that earned in excess of $60 million. Tupac’s mother, Afeni Shakur, filed the suit, arguing that while Tupac was one of the most successful artists in the business, he owned almost no assets on the night of his murder. Indeed, Death Row Records claimed the recently deceased Tupac still owed them $4.9 million. See also Ro, supra note 32, at 340-341.


Id. at 372.

Id. at 372-73.

Id. at 373.

15 U.S.C.A. 1051, et seq’s cases under the Lanham Act involving the names of musical groups ordinarily arise in four contexts: 1) artists who once performed together but later disbanded; 2) the repackaging of early recordings by performers who later became famous; 3) situations where the performer’s name or image appears on posters or other goods; and 4) where a musician adopts a trade name that closely resembles a name already being used by another musician. See generally, Kenneth Nahigian, The Great Pretenders: An Analysis of the False Perpetuation of the Legacy of Musical Groups, 2 J. Legal Advoc. & Prac. 143 (2000).

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Florence Ballard, one of the original Supremes (the most successful female group in music history), died penniless in part because she could not advance a solo career after losing a lawsuit against Motown Records, which owned the exclusive rights to the use of the name “The Supremes.” Nanjian, supra note 106, at 159-60. Similar tragedies include Wanda Rogers, one of the lead singers of the Marvelettes, who was destitute and homeless for years. She had been the lead singer on “Please Mr. Postman,” which became Motown’s first number one hit, and also sung lead on such classics as “Don’t Mess With Bill;” and “The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game.” Id. at 160. Mary Wells, who had three Top Ten hits in the 1960s, could not even afford to pay her medical bills in the early 1990s after she was diagnosed with cancer. Id.


This was perhaps illustrated by the recent uproar over the nomination of Ashanti for The Lady of Soul Award of 2002. The Award was named after R&B legend Aretha Franklin, and former recipients include Mariah Carey, Toni Braxton, TLC, and Jill Scott. A 21-year-old newcomer, Ashanti sold more than 2.3 million copies of her eponymously titled album in 2002 and became a sensation with TV appearances, magazine pictorials, and videos. Still, after Soul Train officials announced her nomination for the Award - along with Indie.Arie, Alicia Keys, Mary T. Blige, and Destiny’s Child - more than 20,000 signatures were quickly gathered on an Internet petition denouncing the show’s decision; the reason: she lacked talent. Salon.com, at http://www.salon.com/ent/wire/2002/08/2002/ashanti-petition/print.html (Aug. 20, 2002).


Id.

Supra note 110.


After Universal sued Love in 2000 for allegedly not delivering five albums, she countersued, claiming that she was coerced into signing away her rights, including ownership of the music. She also claimed the company made about $40 million from album sales of her rock band, Hole, while she and the band received only about $2 million in royalties. See Anthony Breznican, Courtney Love, Universal Settle Lawsuit, Salon.com, available at http://www.salon.com/ent/wire/2002/09/30/love/print.html (Sept. 30, 2002).

See Kelley, supra note 114, at 2.

The independent promotion of records is the record industry’s alternative to outright “payola,” which had reigned in the industry for decades. In the 1980s, as an example, CBS records spent about $9 million annually on indies, and the industry as a whole spent about $40 million. In the 1970s, a record company might hire a freelance promoter to work a single record for $100.00 a week, but by the 1980s it cost the company as much as $100,000 to hire a top promoter for a single popular song. The function of independent promotion had grown from a small line item in the company’s budget to the company’s biggest expense after salaries. FREDRIC DANNEN, – POWER BROKERS AND FAST MONEY INSIDE THE MUSIC BUSINESS 5-13 (Time Books 1990).


Though some of top rap artists appeared at a summit meeting called last year by Russell Simmons to assist the United Federation of Teachers’ protest of Mayor Mike Bloomberg’s cut in education funds, none of the stars like Sean “Puffy” Combs, Jay Z, LL Cool J, DMX, Queen Latifah, KRS One, Snoop Dog, or Lauryn Hill, among others, was among the 1,166 celebrities, politicians and others arrested in the protest over Amadou Diallo’s death. However critical Kitwana is of the older generation of civil rights activists, to their credit, leaders like Al Sharpton and NAACP president Kweisi Mfume were joined by others like former mayor David Dinkins, and actors like Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and Susan Sarandon and led off to jail during the demonstrations outside police headquarters. Peter Noel, Targeting Silent Rappers: A Street Fight for Justice or Hip Hop McCarthyism, VILLAGE VOICE, 1, at http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0027/noel.php (last viewed April 11, 2003).


124 Kitwana, supra note 3, at 145.

125 Id. at 146.

126 Tapper, supra note 40, at 5.

127 Id.

128 Id. at 204-05.

129 See Tapper, supra note 40, at 5-6.

130 Id. at 6.

131 Id.

132 Kitwana, supra note 3, at 5-6, 13, 45.

133 Tapper, supra note 40, at 5.

134 A number of rap stars who had run-ins with the law quickly ran for cover and sought the guidance and counsel of middle class Black leaders like Al Sharpton. Hip hop icon Sean Puffy Combs and Jama “Shyne” Barrow recently sought political cover soon after both were charged with various weapons possession offenses at a Manhattan dance club. In response, Sharpton called a summit, lining up civil rights leaders such as NAACP’s Kweisi Mfume, Hugh Price of the National Urban League, and Martin Luther King, III, of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Sharpton then came under attack for using the moral shield of the civil rights movement to deflect criticism of rap’s gangster element. See Peter Noel, Taking the Rap - Are Civil Rights Leaders Frontin’ for Hip Hop Gangstas?, VILLAGE VOICE, available at http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0102/noel.php (Jan. 10, 2001). More recently, pop icon Michael Jackson sought the public relations counsel of Al Sharpton and noted attorney Johnny Cochran after a messy business dispute with Sony’s Tommy Matola exploded in the press. See Kelly, supra note 114. In seeking to align themselves with, and gain the support of, Black middle class leaders, it seems that gangsta rappers and other artists in the industry know intuitively what Kitwana does not realize or refuses to admit.


138 Kitwana, supra note 3, at 203.

139 In the late 1970s, the Rev. Calvin Butts campaigned to ban early hip hop music, and in the early 1990s renewed his efforts to ban the music, especially gangsta rap, by organizing a rally in front of Sony’s corporate headquarters in midtown Manhattan. In front of TV cameras, he had boxes of CDs and albums by various gangsta artists dumped in a pile on the street, drove over the pile with a bulldozer, then gave a speech criticizing Sony for profiteering off black-on-black crime. The Reverend eventually relented, however, explaining that he finally realized that rap music was an honest expression of life in the streets. See Ro, supra note 32, at 212.

140 Dr. Delores C. Tucker was more relentless than Rev. Butts. A native Philadelphian who was raised by a minister, she called herself “Dr.” even though she had never graduated college. Fired from a high-level state job in Pennsylvania, she ran unsuccessfully for U.S. Senate in 1980, shortly after which she was approached by Dionne Warwick and Melba Moore, who resented the disrespectful sexist lyrics of rap music. After listening to a few rap albums, Tucker founded the National Political Congress of Black Women, with Warwick and Moore as co-chairs of the organization’s entertainment commission. She quickly gained the support of more than sixty organizations, including the NAACP, the U.S. Congress, and former Bush-administration drug czar William Bennett and his Empower America movement. She soon convinced Senator Carol Mosley-Braun to hold congressional hearings on the matter of the indecency of gangsta rap lyrics, blaming rappers and the music industry for the cultural deterioration and damage to young Black audiences. After much publicity, she finally claimed a partial victory when Time Warner agreed to withdraw its financial investment in a venture designed to produce a series of gangsta rap albums. Id.

141 Karen Grigsby Bates, Young, Black, and Too White, Salon.com (May 15, 1998), at http://archive.salon.com/nwt/feature/1998/05/15feature.html. This article is perhaps as interesting for what it does not say. The author writes ostensibly on the rising number of Black parents who enroll their privileged children into groups like Jack & Jill so that they do not forget their ethnic roots. However, the oppo-
site premise, stated only inferentially, is that these children are also being protected from the pathological culture of the ghetto and the ravages of the streets.

142 See Kitwana, supra note 3, at 151-81.


144 See, e.g., ELLIS COSE, THE RAGE OF A PRIVILEGED CLASS (Harper Collins 1994); SHIRLEE TAYLOR HAIZLIP, — A FAMILY MEMOIR IN BLACK AND WHITE (Simon & Schuster 1994); JILL NELSON, — MY AUTHENTIC NEGRO EXPERIENCE (Noble Press 1993); NEIL HENRY, PEAR’S SECRET: A BLACK MAN’S SEARCH FOR HIS WHITE FAMILY (Univ. of California Press 2001); and STEPHEN L. CARTER, REFLECTIONS OF AN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BABY (Basic Books 1991). This trend finds expression in fiction as well. See, e.g., BENILDE LITTLE, GOOD HAIR (1996); PERCIVAL EVERETT, ERASURE (2001); STEPHEN L. CARTER, ACTING OUT (2003).

145 E. FRAZIER FRANKLIN, BLACK BOURGEOISIE (COLLIER BOOKS 1962).


147 For several years Simmons, the hip hop magnate and fashion mogul, has been cultivating a hip hop political movement that he hopes will eventually effect fundamental socio-economic change. A supporter and fundraiser for a number of candidates and political causes, he also markets his long list of products, from clothes to sneakers. Dasun Allah, among others, has asked the inevitable question: Can political consciousness be packaged and marketed like designer footwear, hats and coats? Simmons is optimistic. As an example, his attempt to break into the mainstream sneaker industry was bolstered by tying the sales campaign to the broader issue of reparations, thus becoming the first Black-owned sneaker company to move major numbers while simultaneously raising awareness among young Blacks of the campaign for reparations. Somewhat defensively, he said, “I sold a shitload of sneakers.” Dasun Allah, The Swami of Hip Hop, VILLAGE VOICE, 3, available at http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0236/allah.php (Sept. 4, 2002).

148 Id.

149 WYNTER, supra note 68, at 183.

150 Id.

151 Id. (citing Neil Howe and William Strauss, MILLENNIALS RISING: THE NEXT GREAT GENERATION (2000)).

152 Id. at 184.

153 Id. at 189.

154 Id. at 184.

155 WYNTER, supra note 68, at 194.

156 Id. at 191-92.


159 Urban Think Tank Inc. Staff, Interview with Bakari Kitwana, available at http://urbanthinktank.org/bakari%20interview.cfm. Kitwana also levels this criticism against incumbent Newark Mayor James, arguing that “James cannot point to young people in his administration that he’s nurtured for leadership.” See Hansen, supra note 50.

160 Lest the Boomer generation forget how young most of the prominent civil rights activists were at the height of the movement, in early 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr., was 35, Jesse Jackson was 28, John Lewis was 24, Julian Bond 27, Nikki Giovanni was 24, Malcolm X was 37, Angela Davis 25, Huey Newton 28, Bobby Seale 35, Medgar Evers 35, Stokely Carmichael 27, Muhammad Ali was 25, Viola Liuzzo 35, and Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner were still in their early 20s.

161 See generally Mary L. Dudziak, Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative, 41 STAN. L. REV. 61 (1988).

162 Kitwana, supra note 3, at 7.

163 Id.
Directed by Peter MacDonald. With Damon Wayans, Stacey Dash, Marlon Wayans, Joe Santos. A petty crook stalks a cute girl into an office building and is taken for a job applicant. Conning gets him the job. It's in the mail room of new credit cards. 2 superiors are worse crooks. Needing money to impress her, Johnny steals a credit card, goes on a shopping spree and wins the girl. The story isn't over though, because a security guard who caught his theft on videotape is blackmailing Stewart to join his own credit-card ring. – John Bush, Rovi. Silly and predictable, Mo Money still manages to direct some well-aimed barbs at the idiosyncrasies and hypocrisies of mainstream America. Oct 11, 2019 | Full Review… Brian D. Johnson. The Notorious B.I.G. - Mo Money Mo Problems (Naxsy Remix). Mo money the best looking dog in the world.