many intra-office debates about hip-hop in general, especially the place of various cultures, ethnic groups, and races in it, as well as the fierce arguments over which social and political issues were relevant to the “average kid on the street,” helped focus this book.

Sarah McNally, my editor. Her contemplative questions, gentle but firm prodding, and brilliant sense of structure made this book infinitely more compelling than the original manuscript.

INTRODUCTION

Confronting the Crises in African American Culture

BACK ‘N THE DAY OUR PARENTS USED TO TAKE CARE OF US
LOOK AT ‘EM NOW, THEY EVEN FUCKIN’ SCARED OF US CALLIN’ THE CITY FOR HELP BECAUSE THEY CAN’T MAINTAIN DAMN SHIT DONE CHANGED.
—Notorious B.I.G., “Things Done Changed”

The morning following the 2000 presidential election, I received a call from a fifty-year-old Italian American friend, a former ’60s Berkeley radical, lamenting how devastating an almost certain George W. Bush win would be for young African Americans. His sentiments echoed those of a handful of young Black students at a small, Midwest liberal arts college whom I had met with the night before to discuss the election, hip-hop generation voter participation, and ways of moving the hip-hop generation into the mainstream
political process. "It must be a really sad day to be young and Black in America," he told me somewhat apologetically.

As I contemplate the unique challenges facing our generation of African American youth, those words reverberate in my thoughts. Although he was referring to disenfranchisement and a growing American conservatism, for the students, like most hip-hop generationers, a George W. win, in the final analysis, pales in comparison to the field of crises already afoot in African American culture, crises that threaten the very future of African American life.

These crises are interconnected, bound by the cross-section of racial politics, shifts in the American economy over the past two decades, and significant changes in Black youth culture. Leading the list is America’s unfulfilled promise of equality and inclusion. Great disparities in education, housing, health care, employment opportunities, wages, mortgage loan approval, and the like persist. Collectively, these disparities have profoundly impacted our generation, though we have lived our entire lives in post-segregation America. Part of the promise, most certainly, following the civil rights movement was that these problems would be eradicated. The many side effects of the ever-lingering war on drugs, the escalating tensions between young Black men and women, and the great inter-generational abyss, dubbed the generation gap, pose an array of previously unseen challenges in African American life.

Despite their magnitude, these issues, particularly as they affect hip-hop generationers, get lost in contemporary popular discussion, media reports, and public policy. One reason for this is that African American youth, for much of the past two decades, have been deemed the problem—whether criminalized in sensational news crime reports or demonized as the architects of America’s declining moral values. Another reason is the near obsessive national attention given to praising the long gone civil rights movement. Ignored is the grim reality that concrete progress within the civil rights arena has been almost nil for nearly four decades. Neither acknowledged are the ways persisting institutionalized racism has intensified for hip-hop generationers despite 1950s and 1960s civil rights legislation.

A final obstacle is the unprecedented influence Black youth have achieved through popular culture, especially via the hip-hop phenomenon. Young Blacks have used this access, both in pop film and music, far too much to strengthen associations between Blackness and poverty, while celebrating anti-intellectualism, ignorance, irresponsible parenthood, and criminal lifestyles. This is the paradox: given hip-hop’s growing influence, these Birth of a Nation–styled representations receive a free pass from Black leaders and organizations seeking influence with the younger generation. These depictions also escape any real criticism from non-Black critics who, having grown tired of the race card, fear being attacked as racist. Void of open and consistent criticism, such widely distributed incendiary ideas (what cultural critic Stanley Crouch calls “the new minstrelsy”) reinforce myths of Black inferiority and insulate the new problems in African American culture from redemptive criticism.

What is to be done? The necessary first step toward illuminating and addressing the new crises in African American life is to understand the generation most heavily besieged by them. Those genuinely concerned about these crises must begin to carefully examine the major social and political forces shaping young Black Americans at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Rather than be shortchanged by worn ways of thinking about Black life, this criticism must be bold, unapologetic, painstaking, and unbound by traditional political orientations.

This criticism must use a clear lens to examine, at the very minimum, the following questions. How is the worldview of