

CHAPTER 7

CULTURE

CULTURAL RACIST: One who is creating a cultural standard and imposing a cultural hierarchy among racial groups.

CULTURAL ANTIRACIST: One who is rejecting cultural standards and equalizing cultural differences among racial groups.

MY DAD DRAGGED me to see the 1994 documentary *Hoop Dreams*, a film about the perils of two young boys pursuing the exceedingly unlikely possibility of a lucrative NBA career. His intervention failed, like the dreams of the kids in the film. For me, basketball was life.

It was a cool early-winter day in 1996 and I sat warm in the locker room after practice, getting dressed and exchanging jokes with my new teammates on John Bowne's junior-varsity basketball team. Suddenly, our White coach burst into the locker room like something was wrong. We muted the jokes as he looked hopelessly at our dark faces. He leaned against a locker as if a lecture was building up inside him.

"You all need to post two Cs and three Ds to remain on the team. Okay? Okay?" Everyone nodded or stared back, perhaps expecting more. But that was all he had to say. Our jokes resumed again.

I had neither loved nor hated middle school. But a few months in high school had changed me. I cannot pinpoint what triggered my hatred of school. My difficulty separating the harassing cop

from the harassing teacher? A heightened sensitivity to the glares from teachers who saw my Black body not as a plant to be cultivated but as a weed to be plucked out of their school and thrown into their prison? Freshman year I posted what grades I needed to stay on the basketball team: two Cs and three Ds. Only basketball and parental shame stopped me from dropping out and staying home all day like some other teens.

When I climbed onto the crowded public buses after school, I felt like a runaway. Most days, Smurf was nowhere to be found. Stopping and going, the bus headed south, until the last stop—my cultural home away from home.

We called the central artery of Southside Queens the Ave, the place where Jamaica Avenue crosses 164th Street. On weekends, I'd walk out of my house, strut a block up 209th Street to Jamaica Avenue, and hail a dollar cab down those three dozen blocks to the Ave. One dollar, one ride, one random driver. Little did I know, similar privately run cheap cars or vans, stuffed with sweating and content and tired and recharged and traumatized Black bodies, were hurrying through neighborhoods all over the Black world. I have since traveled on these fast-moving cultural products in other parts of the world, from Ghana to Jamaica (the island nation, not the Ave). The ride always takes me back to Queens.

Nothing compared to arriving at the Ave. A couple dozen city blocks lined with stores, this enormous shopping district was crowded with wide-eyed teens. We never knew what we were going to see—what kicks (sneakers) were going to be on sale; what beef (conflict) was going to be cooking; what guads (boys) and shorties (girls) were going to be rocking (wearing). Excuse my Ebonics—a term coined by psychologist Robert Williams in 1973 to replace racist terms like “Nonstandard Negro English.” I must use the language of the culture to express the culture.

Some Americans despised my Ebonics in 1996. In that year the Oakland school board recognized Black people like me as bilingual, and in an act of cultural antiracism recognized “the legitimacy and richness” of Ebonics as a language. They resolved to use Ebonics with students “to facilitate their acquisition and mas-

tery of English language skills." The reaction was fierce. Jesse Jackson at first called it "an unacceptable surrender, bordering on disgrace. It's teaching down to our children."

Was it? It helps to dig back into the origins of Ebonics. Enslaved Africans formulated new languages in nearly every European colony in the Americas, including African American Ebonics, Jamaican Patois, Haitian Creole, Brazilian Calunga, and Cubano. In every one of these countries, racist power—those in control of government, academia, education, and media—has demeaned these African languages as dialects, as "broken" or "improper" or "nonstandard" French, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, or English. Assimilationists have always urged Africans in the Americas to forget the "broken" languages of our ancestors and master the apparently "fixed" languages of Europeans—to speak "properly." But what was the difference between Ebonics and so-called "standard" English? Ebonics had grown from the roots of African languages and modern English just as modern English had grown from Latin, Greek, and Germanic roots. Why is Ebonics broken English but English is not broken German? Why is Ebonics a dialect of English if English is not a dialect of Latin? The idea that Black languages outside Africa are broken is as culturally racist as the idea that languages inside Europe are fixed.

WHEN THE REACTION to the Nazi Holocaust marginalized biological racism, cultural racism stepped into its place. "In practically all its divergences," African American culture "is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture," Gunnar Myrdal wrote in *An American Dilemma*, his 1944 landmark treatise on race relations, which has been called the "bible" of the civil-rights movement. Myrdal's scripture standardized the general (White) American culture, then judged African American culture as distorted or pathological from that standard. Whoever makes the cultural standard makes the cultural hierarchy. The act of making a cultural standard and hierarchy is what creates cultural racism.

To be antiracist is to reject cultural standards and level cultural difference. Segregationists say racial groups cannot reach their superior cultural standard. Assimilationists say racial groups can, with effort and intention, reach their superior cultural standards. "It is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture" and "to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans," Myrdal suggested. Or, as President Theodore Roosevelt said in 1905, the goal should be to assimilate "the backward race . . . so it may enter into the possession of true freedom, while the forward race is enabled to preserve unharmed the high civilization wrought out by its forefathers."

Even Alexander Crummell, the stately Episcopalian priest who founded the first formal Black intellectual society in 1897, urged his fellow Black Americans to assimilate. He agreed with those racist Americans who classed Africans as fundamentally imitative. "This quality of imitation has been the grand preservative of the Negro in all the lands of his thralldom," Crummell preached in 1877.

WE CERTAINLY WEREN'T imitating anything on the Ave—to the contrary. The wider culture was avidly imitating and appropriating from us; our music and fashion and language were transforming the so-called mainstream. We did not care if older or richer or Whiter Americans despised our nonstandard dress like our nonstandard Ebonics. We were fresh like they just took the plastic off us, as Jadakiss rapped. Fresh baggy jeans sagging down. Fresh button-down shirts or designer sweatshirts in the winter under our bubble coats. Fresh T's or sports jerseys in the summer above our baggy jean shorts. Dangling chains shining like our smiles. Piercings and tattoos and bold colors told the mainstream world just how little we wanted to imitate them.

Freshness was about not just getting the hottest gear but devising fresh ways to wear it, in the best tradition of fashion: experimentation, elaboration, and impeccable precision. Timberland

boots and Nike Air Force 1s were our cars of choice in New York City. It seems as if everyone—girl or boy—had wheat-colored Tims in their closets if they could afford or snatch them. Our black Air Force 1s had to be blacker than the prison populations. Our white Air Force 1s had to be whiter than the NYPD. Had to be as smooth as baby skin. No blemishes. No creases. We kept them black or white through regular touch-ups from paint sticks. We stuffed our shoes at night with paper or socks to ward off creasing in the front. Time to put on the shoes in the morning. Many of us knew the trick to keep the creases away all day. Put on a second sock halfway and fold the other half twice on top of my toes to fill the front of the sneaker. It hurt like those tight Guess jeans around the waists of shorties. But who cared about pain when fresh brought so much joy.

Jason Riley, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist, did not see us or our disciples in the twenty-first century as fresh cultural innovators. “Black culture today not only condones delinquency and thuggery but celebrates it to the point where black youths have adopted jail fashion in the form of baggy, low-slung pants and oversize T-shirts.” But there was a solution. “If blacks can close the civilization gap, the race problem in this country is likely to become insignificant,” Dinesh D’Souza once reasoned. “Civilization” is often a polite euphemism for cultural racism.

I HATED WHAT they called civilization, represented most immediately by school. I loved what they considered dysfunctional—African American culture, which defined my life outside school. My first taste of culture was the Black church. Hearing strangers identify as sister and brother. Listening to sermon conversations, all those calls from preachers, responses from congregants. Bodies swaying in choirs like branches on a tree, following the winds and twists of a soloist. The Holy Ghost mounting women for wild shouts and basketball sprints up and down aisles. Flying hats covering the new wigs of old ladies who were keeping it fresh for Jee-susss-sa. Funerals livelier than weddings. Watching Ma dust

off her African garb and Dad his dashikis for Kwanzaa celebrations livelier than funerals.

I loved being in the midst of a culture created by my ancestors, who found ways to re-create the ideas and practices of their ancestors with what was available to them in the Americas, through what psychologist Linda James Myers calls the “outward physical manifestations of culture.” These outward physical manifestations our ancestors encountered included Christianity, the English language, and popular European food, instruments, fashion, and customs. Culturally racist scholars have assumed that since African Americans exhibit outward physical manifestations of European culture, “North American negroes . . . in culture and language” are “essentially European,” to quote anthropologist Franz Boas in 1911. “It is very difficult to find in the South today anything that can be traced directly back to Africa,” attested sociologist Robert Park in 1919. “Stripped of his cultural heritage,” the Negro’s reemergence “as a human being was facilitated by his assimilation” of “white civilization,” wrote sociologist E. Franklin Frazier in 1939. As such, “the Negro is only an American, and nothing else,” argued sociologist Nathan Glazer in 1963. “He has no values and culture to guard and protect.” In the final analysis, “we are not Africans,” Bill Cosby told the NAACP in 2004.

It is difficult to find the survival and revival of African cultural forms using our surface-sighted cultural eyes. Those surface-sighted eyes assess a cultural body by its skin. They do not look behind, inside, below. Those surface-sighted eyes have historically looked for traditional African religions, languages, foods, fashion, and customs to appear in the Americas just as they appear in Africa. When they did not find them, they assumed African cultures had been overwhelmed by the “stronger” European cultures. Surface-sighted people have no sense of what psychologist Wade Nobles calls “the deep structure of culture,” the philosophies and values that change outward physical forms. It is this “deep structure” that transforms European Christianity into a new African Christianity, with mounting spirits, calls and re-

sponses, and Holy Ghost worship; it changes English into Ebonics, European ingredients into soul food. The cultural African survived in the Americans, created a strong and complex culture with Western “outward” forms “while retaining inner [African] values,” anthropologist Melville Herskovits avowed in 1941. The same cultural African breathed life into the African American culture that raised me.

THE AVE. I just loved being surrounded by all those Black people—or was it all that culture?—moving fast and slow, or just standing still. The Ave had an organic choir, that interplay of blasting tunes from the store to the car trunk, to the teen walking by, practicing her rhymes, to the cipher of rappers on the corners. Gil would freestyle; I would listen and bob my head. The sound of hip-hop was all around us.

“Son, they shook / Cause ain’t no such things as halfway crooks / Scared to death, scared to look, they shook.” “Shook Ones” was the Queens anthem in the mid-nineties from the self-proclaimed “official Queensbridge murderers”—Mobb Deep. They promised to get their listeners “stuck off the realness,” and indeed I was. I despised the teen actors hiding their fear under a tough veneer. They seemed so real to racist cops and outsiders, who could not make distinctions among Black bodies, anyway. But we could tell. “He ain’t a crook son / he’s just a shook one.”

I heard the booming rhymes of Queens’s finest: Nas, Salt-N-Pepa, Lost Boyz, A Tribe Called Quest, Onyx, and LL Cool J’s “Hey lover, hey lover / This is more than a crush”; and a couple of Brooklyn cats like Biggie Smalls and the whole Junior M.A.F.I.A. and the newbie Jay-Z; and that ill Staten Island crew, the Wu-Tang Clan, learning “life is hell / living in the world no different from a cell”; and that Harlem genius, Big L; and those guads from outside the city, from Queen Latifah setting it off, to Bone Thugs-N-Harmony fast-rapping—“Wake up, wake up, wake up it’s the first of tha month”—to Tupac Shakur writing a

letter to his mama. I related when Tupac confessed, "I hung around with the thugs, and even though they sold drugs / They showed a young brother love."

Hip-hop has had the most sophisticated vocabulary of any American musical genre. I read endlessly its poetic text. But parents and grandparents did not see us listening to and memorizing gripping works of oral poetry and urban reporting and short stories and autobiographies and sexual boasting and adventure fantasies. They saw—and still see—words that would lead my mind into deviance. "By reinforcing the stereotypes that long hindered blacks, and by teaching young blacks that a thuggish adversarial stance is the properly 'authentic' response to a presumptively racist society, rap retards black success," linguist John McWhorter once claimed. C. Delores Tucker campaigned against rap in the mid-1990s. "You can't listen to all that language and filth without it affecting you," Tucker liked to say—just like our parents and grandparents liked to say. The sixty-six-year-old chair of the National Political Congress of Black Women, the venerable veteran of the civil rights movement, kept coming at us like a Biggie Smalls battle rap.

THE NEXT YEAR we left Queens, left the Ave behind, to start our new life in the South. At the end of a school day sometime in the fall of 1997, I nervously made my way to the gymnasium to see who'd made the cut for Stonewall Jackson High School's junior-varsity basketball team.

I walked over to the gym alone. I hated being alone all the time. I did not have any friends at my new high school in Manassas, Virginia. I'd arrived weeks before at our new house in a predominantly White suburban neighborhood. Manassas wasn't the Deep South, but it was unquestionably south of Jamaica, Queens. Our first night there, I stayed up all night, occasionally looking out the window, worried the Ku Klux Klan would arrive any minute. Why did Aunt Rena have to move here and entice my parents?

The word had spread quickly in school that the quiet, skinny kid wearing baggy clothes, Air Force 1s, and Tims, with a weird accent and a slow strut, was from New York. Girls and boys alike were fascinated—but not necessarily reaching out to be my friend. Basketball was my only companion.

I opened a door to the gym, walked slowly across the dark court to the other side, and came upon the JV list. I confidently looked for my name. I did not see it. Startled, I looked again, pointing my index finger as I slowly read each name. I did not see my name.

Tears welled up. I turned around and fast-walked away, holding back my tears. I made my way to the school bus and plopped down like I've never plopped down on a seat before.

My sadness about being cut was overwhelmed by a deeper agony: Not making the team had fully cut off my one route to finding friends in my new school. I was suffering but held it together on my short walk home from the bus stop.

When I opened the front door, I saw Dad coming down the stairs of our split-level home—I stepped inside and fell into his surprised arms. We sat down together on the stairs, the front door still flung open. I cried uncontrollably, alarming my father. After a few minutes, I gathered myself and said, “I didn’t make the team,” only to start crying again and blurt out, “Now I’m never going to have any friends!”

Basketball had been life. It all changed when those tears finally passed.

AT FIFTEEN, I was an intuitive believer in multiculturalism, unlike assimilationist sociologists such as Nathan Glazer, who lamented the idea in his book that year, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*. I opposed racist ideas that belittled the cultures of urban Black people, of hip-hop—of me. I sensed that to ridicule the Black cultures I knew—urban culture, hip-hop culture—would be to ridicule myself.

At the same time, though, as an urban Black Northerner, I

looked down on the cultures of non-urban Blacks, especially Southerners, the very people I was now surrounded by. I measured their beloved go-go music—then popular in D.C. and Virginia—against what I considered to be the gold standard of Black music, Queens hip-hop, and despised it like C. Delores Tucker despised hip-hop. The guys in Virginia could not dress. I hated their Ebonics. I thought the basketball players were scrubs who I had to patronize, a belief that cost me the spot on the JV squad. I walked around during those early months at Stonewall Jackson with an unspoken arrogance. I suspect potential friends heard my nonverbal cues of snobbery and rightly stayed away.

When we refer to a group as Black or White or another racial identity—Black Southerners as opposed to Southerners—we are racializing that group. When we racialize any group and then render that group's culture inferior, we are articulating cultural racism. When I defended Black culture in my mind, I was treating culture in a general sense, not a specific sense, just as I understood race in a general sense, not a specific sense. I knew it was wrong to say Black people were culturally inferior. But I was quick to judge specific Black cultures practiced by specific Black racial groups. Judging the culture I saw in Manassas from the cultural standards of Black New York was no different than White New York judging Black New York from White New York's cultural standards. That is no different than White America judging Latinx America from White America's cultural standards. That is no different than Europe judging the rest of the world from European cultural standards, which is where the problem started, back during the so-called Age of Enlightenment.

“That every practice and sentiment is barbarous, which is not according to the usages of modern Europe, seems to be a fundamental maxim with many of our critics and philosophers,” wrote critical Scottish Enlightenment philosopher James Beattie in 1770. “Their remarks often put us in mind of the fable of the man and the lion.” In the fable, a man and lion travel together, arguing over who is superior. They pass a statue that shows a lion strangled by a man. The man says, “See there! How strong we are,

and how we prevail over even the king of beasts." The lion replies, "This statue was made by one of you men. If we lions knew how to erect statues, you would see the man placed under the paw of the lion." Whoever creates the cultural standard usually puts himself at the top of the hierarchy.

"All cultures must be judged in relation to their own history, and all individuals and groups in relation to their cultural history, and definitely not by the arbitrary standard of any single culture," wrote Ashley Montagu in 1942, a clear expression of cultural relativity, the essence of cultural antiracism. To be antiracist is to see all cultures in all their differences as on the same level, as equals. When we see cultural difference, we are seeing cultural difference—nothing more, nothing less.

It took me a while. Months of loneliness—really almost two years, if we are talking about making true friends. But I slowly but surely started to respect African American culture in Northern Virginia. I slowly but surely came down from the clouds of my culturally racist conceit. But I could not rise above my behaviorally racist insecurity.