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Table of Contents / Index _____

chapter 2.
KEEPIN' IT REAL VS. REEL

His shadow, so to speak,
has been more real to him than his personality.

—ALAIN LOCKE

The authentic fake.

—UMBERTO ECO

It's a paradox we call reality
So keeping it real will make you a casualty
of abnormal normality.

—TALIB KWELI

I greet you at the beginning of what I hope is the last round of a great battle; an intense struggle that has raged across the treacherous battlefields of media, with blood spilling into our national imaginations, for centuries. A conflict in which victory is a prerequisite to our collective freedom, but that, unfortunately, we've been losing.

RING ANNOUNCER: In this corner, wearing sheen Black skin
crafted by the Most High and manufactured from struggle,

standing tall with the weight of her/his people upon her/his
broad shoulders, with the ability to solve problems and do the
right thing—The Real Black.

[Crowd boos]

RING ANNOUNCER: And, in this corner, wearing blackface
crafted in the most high-rise board rooms by gray suits at
white corporations, standing down and being a weight on
her/his people, with the ability to kill niggas for fun, pimp a
bitch, shuck, jive, and make lies the truth—The Reel Black.

[Crowd erupts in cheers]

I wish, of course, that the above was an effort in fiction, but unfortunately, these images—skillfully spidering into our world and forcing themselves into our lives, our ways of thinking, of seeing—are as real as we believe them to be. “The first step,” a young man from Chicago’s South Side tells me as we build our collective future, “is thinking outside the box, but then that’s hard because the box [TV, mass media] tells us what to think.” Any twenty-first-century discussion of our world, across race, gender, and class lines, must acknowledge and take seriously the notion, the reality, that young people of today derive the bulk of their ideas not from traditional institutions, but from the growing number and more intrusive forms of mass media.

“He was a nice middle class nigga / but no one knew the evil he’d do when he got a little bigger,” Tupac rhymed in “Shorty Want to Be a Thug” through my sputtering speakers as I drove down a desolate, police tape-furled North Philly neighborhood in search of a tall, chestnut-colored man with thin hair and long facial features.
I found *him*.

"Peace," I lobbed as I climbed out of my car.

"'Sup, Malo," he greeted me as I walked into the part-liquor, part-bodega, part-Chinese food spot where we agreed to meet. Hearing that name—"Malo"—took me back. Malo, the last part of my middle name Khumalo, was what I preferred to be called in my early teenage years. When people would ask what my name meant, I would ignore the Swahili definition of Khumalo, which means "prince," and instead offer the Spanish definition of "*malo*," which simply means "bad." I'm reminded of my adolescent confusion every time I snatch a glimpse of my brown bicep where, at fourteen years old, I engraved "MALO" in Old English typeface into my young skin on the day that I was both arrested and expelled from school.

Our warm embrace was interrupted by the screeching of bicycle wheels.

"Yo, what's the deal?" hurled a grown man, his face engulfed in a serrated beard, as he zoomed in on a bright-pink kids' Huffy.

"'Sup, nigga," he threw back as the rider pulled up.

After a three-way dap was exchanged, I watched the two as they told lies to each other; lies about "bitches" that they "fucked" and "bitch-ass niggas" who they "fucked up." After each lie, they'd laugh and dap again. It was pure performance. But neither of them would ever acknowledge themselves as actors, instead it ended with:

"Uzi, you's a real-ass nigga, man. I'm out," the bearded man said as he peddled off, disappearing around the corner.

"Uzi?" I turned to him and asked, thinking about the dysfunctional family of submachine assault guns.

"Yeah—yo, that's what niggas call me 'round here," he briefed me.

Uzi? I'm not callin' him that, I thought to myself. *His mama ain't name him Uzi.*

In fact, not only did his mama not name him Uzi, but she would adamantly disapprove of the name. I knew this, of course, because

she's my mother, too. Our mother—the soft-spoken Queen from Brooklyn—who asks me, every time my big brother is arrested, every time the police trample her door down in search of her firstborn son, or every time the word “nigga” flies from his blunt-burnt lips, “Where does he get it from?”

“I don't know, Mom—not from you, though,” I usually say in assurance, trying to prevent my mother from blaming herself. It's not her fault, it's no *one's*.

My brother, whom I hadn't seen or spoken to in a year because I was away in school and he didn't have a phone, was my childhood and adolescent hero—a “true thug.” I used to boast about him to my awestruck middle-school crew. That was ten years ago. On this day, our reunion, he was homeless, jobless, and on the run from the police.

“Let's go for a ride,” I suggested. I wanted to talk about his performance; to dig deeper into what I remember “Malo” going through as a teenager and what I suspected my brother was still going through. I figured the car ride would be my opportunity.

“Yeah, c'mon,” I said, as we pulled off.

Just ask him. Just ask him why he's frontin', I urged myself.

“So, what's the deal, man?” I asked him.

“What you mean?”

“From my heart, don't take this the wrong way. But sometimes I feel like you're frontin'. Puttin' on an act. You know I know the *real* you,” I explained, putting it all out there.

After a round of awkward silence: “I'm stuck, man. Trapped. Like this is who I've gotta be,” he tells me.

Interestingly, my brother's feeling of entrapment (and he's not alone) supports an idea that writer Alice Walker dubs “prison of image,” whereby society's stereotypes function not as errors, but rather forms of social control. In my brother's case, this prison of image led him to multiple stints in prison proper.

When Black men and women find themselves trapped inside the hellholes of the prison industrial complex, we usually point to poverty, inadequate schools, and/or broken households—all symptoms of institutional racism—as primary antagonists. In my brother's case (and he's not alone), his symptoms were different—since he was raised in a middle-class, two-parent household. However, the cancer of racism was the same. This does not mean escaping personal responsibility; however, many in the post-hip-hop generation have recognized that perhaps the most pervasive form of racism, one that is seldom tagged as such but cuts across geographic, gender, age, and class lines, is representation vis-à-vis mass media. Even in the face of relative progress made in electoral politics and education, African-Americans have made hardly any progress on the critical front of representation in mass media. Of course most Black men and women are in the prison system as a result of poverty rather than pop culture; however, the bombardment of negative stereotypes exacerbates an already dire crisis even further and in some cases, like my brother's, creates crises out of relative stability.

If one simply (and unfortunately) turns on the TV or radio, images of people of African descent remain virtually unchanged from the racist stereotypes promoted before and during slavery. Although there have been minor updates to the Black shadow cast on screen, the formula has remained fixed. Fixed, for the Black woman, has been Jezebel, the lewd mulatto; Sapphire, the evil, sex-crazed manipulative bitch; and Mammy, the Aunt Jemima nurturer whose sexuality has been so removed that she is best portrayed by Martin Lawrence (*Big Momma's House*), Tyler Perry (*Diary of a Mad Black Woman*), or Eddie Murphy (*Norbit*). For the Black man, fixed has been Bigger Thomas, the white-woman-crazed brute; Jack Johnson, the hyper-sexed, hyper-athletic super thug; and Uncle Tom, the asexual sidekick.

Realizing the damage these images had upon the psyches of both

Blacks and whites, Frederick Douglass, in 1848, denounced minstrel shows as "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens." Despite this, however, these stereotypes were highly profitable both economically and politically and continued to invade every form of media available. An early instruction manual for would-be cartoonists advised students:

The colored people are good subjects for action pictures: they are natural born humorists and will often assume ridiculous attributes or say side-splitting things with no apparent intentions of being funny. . . . The cartoonist usually plays on the colored man's love of loud clothes, watermelon, crap shooting, fear of ghosts, etc.

These same characters and stereotypes, introduced at the dawn of cinema when D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that depicts the KKK as national heroes, became the first Hollywood blockbuster, are still alive and well today. Moreover, because of advances in technology and distribution, they have become even more pervasive and widespread and thus more damaging.

The hip-hop and post-hip-hop generations, the first groups to grow up in legally desegregated America, possess a worldview that has not been shaped by the sociopolitical institutions that our parents and grandparents were a part of, many of which, because of desegregation, have since withered away. Where the Black church, community centers, and family were once the primary transmitters of values and culture, today it's a potent mass media concoction of pop music, film, television, and digital content—all of which are produced and disseminated through a small handful of multinational corporations.

Evidence of this intensified mass media onslaught can be seen, for instance, in the astronomical increase in advertising. Corporations,

aware that "pop music, film and fashion are among the major forces transmitting culture to this generation," as noted in Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip-Hop Generation*, have intensified their efforts to reach us. Consider that in 1988, corporations spent \$100 million on advertising targeted at children. By 1998, that number ballooned to \$2 billion, and today that number exceeds more than \$6 billion. In addition, the nature of these ads has morphed from straightforward product promotion to manipulative, sly programming interwoven into shows dubbed "reality" that are anything but. The reality is that while corporate America has realized the vast influence mass media has on youth, national leadership has been lethargic in addressing the ramifications of this reality. This is an area where the post-hip-hop generation, born amid a digital information age and having learned from the mistakes of both the hip-hop and the civil rights generations, must take the lead. Examples of the post-hip-hop generation taking initiative on this can be seen in the proliferation of organizations and individuals dedicated to media education, awareness, and literacy. Individuals like Kiri Davis, a young filmmaker who, at sixteen, directed *A Girl Like Me*, an award-winning short documentary, illustrate the damage of stereotypes on young African-Americans. In the film, Kiri places a black doll and a white doll in front of the children and asks them to choose the doll that is the nicest, the most beautiful, and the doll that they'd prefer to play with. Fifteen out of the twenty-one children preferred the white doll. When asked why he chose the white doll as "the nice doll," one child responded "because he's white." Kiri tells me that although she was saddened by the children's responses, "it's up to us to change that, to create new images and celebrate ourselves."

James Baldwin once said that in order to understand "what it means to be a Negro in America," we must engage in "an examination of the

myths we perpetuate about him." These myths, then and now, are perpetuated primarily by white institutions looking to both meet their bottom line and, by creating and reinforcing "myths" of Black inferiority, justify racist state oppression in the minds of the rulers and the ruled.

Before, during, and after slavery, the white corporate and political structure recognized that control over the Black image is not simply important to enslaving and oppressing Blacks, but absolutely central. Central to both the masses of whites who needed to believe, as "Christians," that Blacks were not human beings in order to oppress them, or at least not oppose their oppression. And central for Blacks, on the other hand, because these images not only imposed an inferiority complex but also validated their oppression. After all, "It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality," Baldwin added. It should be noted that even before European enslavers hit the West African shores of Elmina or Gorée Island, they'd produced and disseminated images of Blackness that supported the notion of white supremacy and justified the institution of slavery. Those that profited from slavery realized early on that their domination was contingent upon their control over how Blackness was portrayed. This notion of image control has been an important one for America not just in its subjugation of Africans, but in various other ideological conflicts. Italians, for instance, have long acknowledged that during World War II, the real victory for America came not from landing in Anzio or Salerno, but rather from Hollywood films that sold Italians on the idea of an American consumer society. The physical battle, in that regard, was a mere technicality.

In her essay "Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation," filmmaker Pratibha Parmar writes that "Images play a crucial role in

defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access." She concludes by reminding us that "the nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves." Without media education and literacy, "we just slot in, we buy into it and accept their depiction of us," a young woman explains at a media awareness conference in Newark.

Dominant images teach us, as a young girl once confided in me, "to hate myself. My hair. My skin. The way I talk. Everything." They tell Black women that their natural state is not beautiful; that they are mere sex objects and "nappy-headed hoes" and push Black men "toward a fantasy of Black hypermasculinity" where "Blackness means a primal connection to sex and violence, a big penis and relief from the onus of upward mobility," as John Leland puts it in *Hip: The History*.

This means that the images produced by and for whites to justify Blacks' oppression, images of savages, of laziness, of pimpism and gangsterism, have been embraced by Blacks. It means that the images that taught white people to hate Blacks, to oppress them, have ultimately resulted in Blacks hating Blacks. And it is this reality that is most tragic. Tragic, not simply because these images are produced, but because they have been accepted and internalized and even reproduced. Baldwin writes in "My Dungeon Shook" that his grandfather "was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him." I knew, as I looked at my brother, that he, we, made the same mistake.

"His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality," is the way Harlem Renaissance scholar Alain Locke, discussing the challenges of the New Negro, put it in his 1925 article "Enter the New Negro." Locke was attempting, by collecting and

publishing the writings of Blacks during his time, to redefine Blackness in the popular imagination. He recognized that the New Negro had to defy the dominant stereotypes not just in art, but in everyday life. He writes:

Could such a metamorphosis have taken place as suddenly as it has appeared to? The answer is no; not because the New Negro is not here, but because the Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man. The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism. The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence. So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be “kept down,” or “in his place,” or “helped up,” to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.

It's startling that today, more than eighty-five years later, we are dealing with the same shadow, a shadow not even cast by our own Black bodies. A shadow that, as Locke writes, is “fiction,” but is paraded as real. And this is *reel* Blackness.

With rap videos, movies, music, news, advertisements, our minds have been shaped by one-dimensional, stereotypical, racist, and, most of all, limiting images of what Blacks can be. Because of the post-hip-hop generation's overexposure to media-recepting technologies, these images—a multiplex of comfortable violence, sexism, machismo, and conspicuous consumption—bombard us 24-7. Although they may not

reflect our reality, their sustained and continuous presence can determine it—determine the real.

The reel becomes the real.

In 1994, at twelve years old, I stayed in the house for nearly a year. When I did go outside, I didn't wander beyond the ring of our home phone.

Why?

Because I couldn't miss the call from my brother.

Brrrrnnnnnggg. Brrrrnnnnnggg.

I was the first to pick it up.

"'Ello," I would say in a budding, out-of-breath voice.

"You have a collect call from the state correctional facility," the operator would say in monospeak. A smile would split across my face as I pressed 1 and accepted the call.

"What's up, lil' brother?" My big brother would ask sincerely. A few minutes into our conversation, he'd say the magic words: "Play some-thing for me," and he called the other inmates to the phone so they could huddle up and listen to my selections. I remember putting the phone to the speaker on my boom box and bumpin' "Life's a Bitch" off of Nas's *Illmatic*:

Keepin' it real, packin' steel, gettin' high

'Cause life's a bitch and then you die.

As a preteen, I became a remote prison DJ and as I rocked the crowd of inmates, I began to see just how powerful hip hop was as my brother and the other inmates erupted in awe, repeating, like scripture, the lines: "Keepin' it real, packin' steel, gettin' high / 'Cause life's a bitch and then you die." It was clear then, as it is now, that the

hip-hop generation was using rap music, almost exclusively, to shape, develop, and define both public personas and personal identities.

Although for the hip-hop generation, "keeping it real" became the ultimate barometer of one's character, the post-hip-hop generation realizes that because we do not control how "real" is constructed, defined, and disseminated, this image is not real at all. Rap may serve as the most visceral example of the performance of reel. As writer William Jelani Cobb, in *To the Break of Dawn*, writes, "'Real' is to the rap industry as 'All-Natural' is to the fast food supplier, as 'New and Improved' is to the ad agency. As 'I Solemnly Swear' is to the politician." Hip-hop culture, and in particular rap music, is particularly unique in this because "The blues artist may sing about evil, but is not required to be it or live it. The rapper is judged by a different set of credentials—the ability to live up to his own verbal badness. To get down to the denominator, hip hop has come to understand itself in the most literal of terms," concludes Cobb.

"I'm trapped between me as a person and me as J.O. the rapper," Baltimore emcee John Jones, who has just come home from serving jail time, tells me. "When I was inside [prison], I was rappin' a lot more positive. But now that I'm out, my rhymes is more on some negative stuff because that's what people want to hear. It's a different kind of prison," he explains. This prison is erected by the need to respond to stereotypical and racist portrayals of Blackness and maintained by our cultural obsession with the "real" and inability to see through the traps. This crowds and distorts not only the aesthetic space that Black artists create in, but also the average Black woman or man, like J.O. or my brother for example. Under the banner of "keeping it real," the hip-hop generation has been conditioned to act out a way of life that is not real at all. The hip-hop *industry* (as opposed to the hip-hop *community*) has been successful in framing an authentic Black identity that is not intellectual, complex, creative, educated, or diverse, but a

monolith of violence (only against other Blacks!) and sexism. These images are not just harmful domestically, but are beamed around the world as a statement about universal Blackness. As a student in London I experienced, firsthand, the effects of this global distortion when my Nepalese roommate, once he discovered we'd be living together, asked to be transferred because he "feared for his life." After a discussion, he confessed that his irrational fears were not the result of ever being around Black folks (he hadn't), but consuming, in Nepal, the negative images about African-Americans. "I thought you'd shoot me," he confessed to me later.

This ethos translates to hip-hop films, as well. Hood films, unlike, say, Italian mafia flicks, are supposed to capture and define what it means to be Black. Take, for example, the fictional film *Menace II Society* whose official tagline was "This is the truth. This is what's real." Filmmaker Byron Hurt, whose documentary *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006, introduces the film with this observation:

We're like in this box. In order to be in that box—you have to be strong, you have to be tough, you have to have a lot of girls, you have to have money, you got to be a playa or a pimp, you have to be in control, you have to dominate other men, other people. If you're not any of those things, people call you soft or weak or a pussy or a chump or a faggot, and nobody wants to be any of those things so everybody stays inside the box.

So why do we continue to stay in these boxes? Perhaps it's because of the American golden rule: those with the gold make the rules. So, essentially, white teenage boys, the primary consumers of rap music, spend billions of dollars on images and music produced by white corporations that reinforce these stereotypes. Fixed on meeting bottom

lines, corporations in turn leverage their excessive amount of capital and power to produce, perpetuate, promote whatever's on sale—thus employing a disproportionate influence on our minds.

This process of white consumerism, which is age-old, has taught Blacks that there are hefty profits to be made by living *down* to white expectations. Many of today's artists feel as prominent Harlem Renaissance novelist Jessie Fauset did when her first novel, *There Is Confusion*, was rejected because, as one editor put it, "white readers don't expect Negroes to be like this."

"Yo, I'll kill you nigga . . . I'm moving kilos of coke . . . I'm strapped with AKs, semis, Glocks, shit from Russia . . . yaddy, yaddy, yah," J. O. tells me about the topics young Black rappers feel they have to discuss. "That's the shit that most niggas is on. Why? Even though it ain't true, 'cause if it was you'd be under the jail, they know, just like I know, that that's the shit that sells. Negativity. Drugs. Guns. Bitches. There really is not an alternative. You either rap like that or you don't sell. That's where you gotta come from if you wanna make it."

"Even if that's not really you?" I ask.

"Yup," he confirms.

My brother felt the same way.

In the hip-hop world, keeping it real has become the measuring stick for one's connection to the ghetto. The ghetto has become the repository of all that is real, and everything else is not. The problem with this is that the ghetto in mass media is not the real ghetto.

The ghetto doesn't exist and the Gulf War never happened. French theorist Jean Baudrillard shocked people when he published the book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Baudrillard argued that the war was largely a TV event, experienced by the masses more like a video game than an actual situation of war. Baudrillard explained this theory as hyperreality and asserted that we can no longer distinguish

between imitation and reality—and that we often prefer the imitations because they have been gutted of any societal consequences.

The ghetto then, as most experience it through mass media, doesn't exist either. It, too, is reel. Wrenched out of its sociopolitical and racial injustice context, it is transformed into an urban playground. It allows people to listen to "ghetto music," without examining the issues that allow such a place to exist.

"What makes it so difficult is to know that we need to be doing other things. . . . They want [Black artists] to shuck and jive, but they don't want us to tell the real story because they're connected to it," says rapper David Banner, who is a graduate of Southern University in Baton Rouge, where he also served as president of the student government. Banner is right on; whites and even upwardly mobile Blacks who consume reel "ghetto" music have made a fetish out of Black disenfranchisement. And because the music is *lite*, they are not forced to deal with the reality that it is racist policies—exclusionary zoning laws, real estate industry discrimination, redlining, parasitic corporate development, and the Department of Transportation's highway projects that tear apart viable Black communities—that create the ghetto in the first place.

On the Black-hand side, Blacks in the ghetto see a highly stylized, depoliticized version of their environment, and on the other, Blacks outside of the ghetto are told their experience is inauthentic. In this market-driven environment, truly important ideas about love, caring, and service are disregarded as incidental or lost completely. For those of us who are already battling issues of inadequate education or poverty, warding off these harmful ideological ideas is even more challenging.

This might help explain a recent article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* entitled "Suicide Rate Climbing for Black Teens: Move to Middle Class May Cause Identity Crisis," which details a federal study that

shows the suicide rate for Black teens has been rising dramatically. Unlike white and Latino teens, the Black teens who commit suicide tend to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than the general African-American population. Many social psychologists speculate that this increase is due to identity crises perpetuated by the mass media.

In bell hooks's provocative analysis on Black masculinity, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, she furthers the discussion, stating:

While we often hear about privileged black men assuming a ghetto gangsta-boy style, we rarely hear about the pressure they get from white people to prove they are "really black." . . . This pressure is part of the psychological racial arsenal for it constantly lets educated black people, especially black males, know that no amount of education will allow them to escape the imposition of racist stereotypes. Often in predominantly white educational settings, black males put on their ghetto minstrel show as a way of protecting themselves from a white racialized rage. They want to appear harmless, not a threat, and to do so they have to entertain unenlightened folks by letting them know "I don't think I'm equal to you. I know my place. Even though I am educated I know you think I am still an animal at heart."

Writer Kheven Lee LaGrone believes that middle-class "Black teens are stuck between the plantation and the ghetto." In the article "The 90s Minstrels," he asks,

Do they feel they are treated like minstrels, the black American "other," or as a "nigger/nigga" defined by white suburbia? This is important, since for many black suburban youth, gangsta rap may represent their only connection to the inner city and to what they consider "true" blackness.

The real Blackness hooks and LaGrone write about, and that my brother spent his life chasing, isn't real at all. It's reel: from the ignorant, womanizing, hypermasculine thug to the oversexed, loud, quick-to-get-an-attitude-over-nothing bitch. It's all reel.

In the case of my brother, who is a few years north of thirty, I hold on to grains of hope that someday he might turn things around, redefine himself and climb out of the prefabricated box he's in. For some though, it's too late.

The late Russell Tyrone Jones—also known as Joe Bananas, Dirt McGirt, Dirt Dog, Ason Unique, Big Baby Jesus, Osirus, and most commonly Ol' Dirty Bastard—died frontin'. Much like my brother, ODB spent his adult life dancing between jail, welfare, and stints with rap success. And also like my brother, ODB vehemently denied his middle-class upbringing, and instead promoted a poverty-stricken, dangerous one (as if being Black wasn't enough). In "Caught Up," he raps:

*I'm a ghetto nigga dog so I get it how I live
Got money, lock 'em off, fuckers still I got drama
Got two strike dog and five baby mamas.*

"I was furious," said William Jones, ODB's father. "You know, that story about him being raised in the Fort Greene [Brooklyn] projects on welfare until he was a child of thirteen was a total lie," he added. When Jones talked to his wife about their son's bogus claims of ghetto-ship, her response was simple: "He did it for publicity." Of course he did. ODB understood that boasting racist and classist stereotypes about Blacks would reaffirm them in the minds of a largely white consumer market. This would explain the correlation between ODB's run-ins with the law and simultaneous spikes in record sales.

ODB's story reminds us that most artists feel that in order to "make it," they need to portray a stereotypical image that is marketable to white America. As a result, artists like ODB downplay their middle-class origins and artists who are from the ghetto avoid portraying and calling out the savage injustices that created their condition. When *Time* magazine covered gangsta rapper Ice-T's upbringing, they noted that "Although he lived in Windsor Hill, a middle-class section of L.A., he claims he began hanging with a rough crowd. He plays up these tough-guy roots to legitimize his hard raps."

It is this type of rhetoric and these decisions by culture makers that has caused "Black" to become synonymous with the "reel ghetto." It is like a person who is seeking to become something that he is not because he is so worried that he will not be accepted by the masses as real. But real is as real believes and lives. You can find it anywhere. Julie Dash, the filmmaker responsible for such works as *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Rosa Parks Story*, reminds me that, "Our lives, our history, our present reality is no more limited to 'ghetto' stories than Italian Americans are to the Mafia, or Jewish Americans are to the Holocaust."

In an article by social commentator Harold Clemens entitled "'Ghetto'—The New N-Word," he describes this usurpation of the Black experience. He writes that the word "'ghetto,' when used colloquially as an adjective, is the most racist, derogatory word in the common lexicon, given its so subtle insinuations and layers. Employed to mean 'uncouth,' 'unruly,' or 'parvenu,' 'ghetto' is the most popular new code word to stigmatize blacks." He goes on:

Evidence of this relationship is the commonality of statements like, "You can be black and not be ghetto," which sounds a hell of a lot like the formerly popular, "You can be black and not be a nigger." People even make comments like "ghetto-ass, white boy." The first remark

obviously insinuates black people are usually "ghetto," or at least that people that are "ghetto" are usually black. The latter obviously insinuates that white boys, and white people in general, usually aren't "ghetto," since the identification, "white boy," is necessary to complete the description.

The ghetto experience in our history in America is an important one, mainly because it represents our historic and contemporary socioeconomic struggles for liberation. Because the real ghetto experience has been highly profitable, it has left all Blacks—in the ghetto or outside of it—feeling inauthentic. The reality is that young, nonviolent Black men are born into a world that has already pegged them as violent criminals. Further, they treat and mistreat them based on this falsehood. It's no surprise then that many youths explained their decision to act out as a giving-in of sorts to a reality that is fixed. The mentality becomes, "If you're going to treat me like a criminal, I may as well get what I can get," because ultimately both fates are the same. My brother and ODB became what society viewed them as, which is always unfortunate.

When I see young people like Alyce Bush, the founder of Roots to Freedom, a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to providing an alternative to the negative images that sabotage our reality, I'm hopeful that we will find a rhythm that helps those of us who have sought authenticity through combing through the most inauthentic places.

In Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Bigger Thomas remarks, "Having been thrust out of the world because of my race, I had accepted my destiny by not being curious about what shaped it." My brother, ODB, and countless others felt that they could not challenge the perceptions. One does not have to go along with any image imposed upon them by the outside. We are not simply to be acted upon; in

some real senses we are actors ourselves, making the world go 'round, and choosing to be what we choose to be. Poet Saul Williams reminds us that "Right now, we are unable to imagine world peace. Why? Because our imaginations have been stolen from us. We can imagine World War III because we've seen it in every movie, every TV show, etc. We cannot imagine world peace because we've never seen it before." If it's not up to the post-hip-hop generation to create alternatives that will reveal their infinite possibilities, then who will produce these images?

Tupac once told us, "Stop being cowards and let's have a revolution, but we don't wanna do that. Dudes just wanna live a caricature, they wanna be cartoons, but if they really wanted to do something, if they was that tough, all right, let's start a revolution." That revolution may not be televised, but with the advent of digital and Web technology, the post-hip-hop generation is utilizing forms of new media to challenge, discover, and influence how we think about our world.