AMERICAN PARADOX

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AMERICAN PARADOX

YOUNG BLACK MEN

Renford Reese

Carolina Academic Press
Durham, North Carolina

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reese, Renford, 1967 -
American paradox : young black men / by Renford Reese.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-89089-568-6
1. African American young men--Social conditions. 2. African American young men--Psychology. 3. Masculinity--United States.4. African Americans in popular culture.5. Men in popular culture--United States. 6. African Americans--Race identity. 7. United States--Race relations. 8. United States--Social conditions--1980- 9. Popular culture--United States. I. Title.

E185.86.R385 2003
305.242'1'08996073--dc22

2003060282

Carolina Academic Press

700 Kent Street
Durham, North Carolina 27701
Telephone (919) 489-7486
Fax (919)493-5668
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America

To: Earnest & Artelia Reese

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gina & Al

CAP Editor: Bob Conrow

Copy Editor: Cheryll Greenwood Kinsley

Nu Rho

CW, MW, KH, LS, MJ, RL, YT, CO, KF, MK, LL, SB, DL, JM

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Introduction

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (Ellison 1947, Prologue)

More than a half-century after Ralph Ellison wrote the classic book Invisible Man, black men in America are still trying to become visible. An intense quest to become seen, heard, and felt has manifested itself in rebellious and counterproductive behaviors. Whether it is the baggy pants, the bandana, the braids in the hair, the earring, or the tattoo, black men have desperately striven for visibility. Perpetual gang warfare and an overemphasis on living a glamorous lifestyle have had detrimental consequences on an entire generation of young black men.

Young African American males have unwittingly accepted one model of black masculinity. The acceptance of the "gangsta-thug" model-that of the "tough guy"—has derailed many young black men from achieving success in the United States. Black-on-black violence is one consequence of this hypermasculinist behavior.

This book attempts to shine a light on the most pressing problem facing young African American males,the acceptance of the gangsta-thug image and the enthusiastic embrace of society's stereotypes. It also probes the unkindness of "the system." One would be naïve to dismiss the historical impact of discriminatory policies and the systemic perpetuation of stereotypes in U.S.society. Hence, this book examines the internal and external influences on the current black male identity.

A number of books address the complex issue of black masculinity. However, this one departs from the others because it is based not only on my interpretations, perceptions, and contextual analysis, but

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also on data in support of my thesis. In 2002, I conducted a survey of 756 African American males between the ages of 13 and 19 in Los Angeles and Atlanta. This survey gauges the attitudes, perceptions, and basic knowledge of young African American men regarding black public figures. One component of this survey is a Realness Scale that I constructed to examine the perceptions of young black men regarding the "authenticity" or "realness" of black icons. Along with data collected from the survey, I interviewed a number of young black males to find out why they, or many of their peers,have embraced the gangsta-thug persona. The results of the survey and the interviews are fascinating—and revealing. For example, the bad-boy NBA player Allen Iverson is rated overwhelmingly as being more of an "authentic" black man than David Robinson, the clean-cut graduate of the Naval Academy. As a political science professor and the director of the Colorful Flags program at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, I was interested in why this might be so.

This book grows from my desire to build healthy race relations in the U.S. I and many others were galvanized in March of 1991 when an African American teenager named Latasha Harlins walked into a South Central Los Angeles convenience store and got into a tense argument over a bottle of orange juice with the Korean American merchant. The clerk shot Harlins fatally in the back. This tragic incident, which partially involved miscommunication,increased ethnic tension in Los Angeles. In 1993, as a second-year doctoral student and Presidential Fellow at the University of Southern California's School of Public Administration, I responded to the Harlins incident and the 1992 Los Angeles riots by creating the Colorful Flags Human Relations Module in August 1993 as an experiment in multicultural education.

Colorful Flags teaches individuals five human relations statements in the five languages most commonly spoken in their communities. The human relations statements are: 1) Hello. How are you doing? 2) What is your name? 3) Thank you. You're welcome.4) Please. Excuse me. 5) Good-bye. Have a nice day. These are universally important statements.

The Colorful Flags program uses language as a passionate and intimate instrument to reduce mistrust and stimulate cultural curiosity. The program suggests that language is a powerful instrument to

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show people we respect them and their culture. What matters is not perfect grammar or syntax; instead, it is the genuine effort to learn something about other cultures and the sincere attempt to use what we have learned. This program is a proactive- interactive approach to bridging cultural differences in schools. It is a human relations module that involves multilingual workshops geared to children, teenagers, and adults. The program has been shown to make a significant difference in reducing ethnic mistrust and increasing cultural curiosity.

Colorful Flags has served approximately 130,000 K-12 students in 17 school districts in Southern California. This program has also been implemented in police departments, hospitals, and various other organizations. In 1996 the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission endorsed the Colorful Flags approach as one of its seven recommendations to stem racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in Los Angeles.

Although this book does not discuss the Colorful Flags program, it does suggest that in order to be successful in life, young black men must move beyond the gangsta-thug model to embrace a diverse pool of knowledge and various perspectives and world-views.

Chapter One examines the controversial issue of academic underachievement among African American students and suggests that the African American community has embraced a culture of underachievement. It is this acceptance of low standards that is the most detrimental threat to the academic success of a generation of young blacks. Chapter Two examines the legacy of racism in the U.S. on the black male identity. The harshest forms of punishment and control in U.S. history have been directed towards the black man. Perhaps his rebelliousness today is a consequence of decades of systematic persecution.

Chapter Three treats my ostracism by Jim Brown—the famous NFL player, actor, and activist—for not being a "real" black man. As a graduate student, I attempted to join his nonprofit gang-violence prevention program "Amer-I-can" but was shunned (in my view) because I was too clean-cut.

Chapter Four examines the various symbols of defiance that the young black man has embraced. Earrings, tattoos, anti-intellectualism, and hypermasculinist behavior are all symbols of black male de-

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fiance. Popular culture has wrapped itself around the defiant symbols of black masculinity, but so has the criminal justice system. Whereas these symbols may be tolerated and condoned by the entertainment and sports industries, this imagery is having a tragic effect on young black men caught up in the criminal justice system.

Chapter Five analyzes the current black athlete in the context of black sport icons of the past. Today's black athletes have rebelled against the "Ideal Negro" image of Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, and Jackie Robinson and fully aligned themselves with the "Bad Nigger" image of the great heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson. I have integrated my personal experiences as a college player in NCAA Division I football into my discussion of this topic.

Chapter Six explores how young black men have squandered opportunities to address publicly the most pressing problems facing their population: lack of equal opportunity, for example, along with appalling police brutality, an unjust criminal justice system,AIDS,and inadequate health care. Whether in sports or music, high profile blacks have not taken full advantage of their currency to influence the system.

Chapter Seven looks at the influence of young black men on popular culture. Society has created various stereotypes of black men. Today's young black men have enthusiastically but unwittingly embraced these negative images as fundamental components of their black male identity. The issues of "white privilege" and the commodification of the gangsta-thug are also explored in this chapter.

Chapter Eight examines the impact of discriminatory policies in the criminal justice system. I use my personal knowledge of issues regarding police brutality and racial profiling to enhance the discussion. For example, I counseled Rodney King between 1997 and 2000. I incorporate my thoughts about Rodney and his infamous beating into my narrative.

Chapter Nine treats the ongoing problem of black-on-black violence. As a four-year resident of South Central Los Angeles during the height of gang warfare in the early 1990s and as a board member of the Charles Drew Child Development Corporation in Watts, Califor-

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nia, I acquired a substantial understanding of the causes and consequences of black violence in the inner city.

Chapter Ten consists of brief biographies of black icons and their rankings on my Realness Scale. This chapter also includes interview comments from youth, explaining why they ranked certain individuals in the ways that they did. Their comments are insightful and intriguing.

In the Chapter Eleven, I conclude by discussing the challenges of redefining authenticity among young black men. This chapter explores the issues of embracing new icons and new values. It summarizes the American Paradox.

It is my intention to give the reader of this book a better grasp of the various dynamics influencing the identity of young black males in the United States during these first years of the twenty-first century. It is my hope that the reader will be inspired to do something to counter the negative internal and external influences shaping the lives of a generation of young black men.

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