

From "The Lower Economic": Three Young Brothas and an Old School Womanist Respond to Dr. Bill Cosby

by David Kirkland, Jeffrey Robinson, Austin Jackson, and Geneva Smitherman

*We don't own no boats
We don't own no planes
We don't make no cellophane
We just caught up in the game.*

— Hip Hop artists, dead prez,
"Window to My Soul" (2003)

RECOGNIZING that authorial positionality is crucial, we begin with a brief disclosure of our backgrounds. In order to minimize any pain that would be inflicted upon any family members who might read this essay, we will speak collectively, rather than identifying ourselves individually. All four of us hail from what Dr. Cosby labeled the "lower economic"—from Southern rural sharecropping society to ghetto hoods on Southside Chicago, from Black Bottom and Lower East Side Detroit, and from impoverished post-industrial Upstate New York. Two of us have mothers we desperately loved, whom the world labeled "dope fiends." One of us has a mother who was both loved and respected, who fed her addiction by any means necessary—including selling her beautiful body to violently desperate men. One of us grew up sleeping on the floor, dodging rats and venturing out at night in search of food, in a house filled with ten people crammed into four rooms. One of us is the product of historical rape and incest committed by a black man driven to the brink of insanity under the yoke of neo-enslavement and economic bondage. None of us got caught up in the dope game, though. We're not "criminal-minded," and we don't have a house full of

"outside" kids. We often talk about how it is nothing short of miraculous that all four of us are highly literate and now find ourselves up in the Academy. For there are many thousands gone, who, like us, were once young, gifted and black. We four just got lucky.

FOR THE THREE OF US who were not just poor, but "PO'," it was a long time before we were able to answer a fundamental question that the "RBG (Revolutionary but Gangsta)" duo, dead prez, poses: "Why did black life, my life, end up so bad?" At first we blamed our parents. But then we had to ask the dead prez question about them, "Why did black life, their lives, end up so bad?" After all, to paraphrase Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago, in his sermon, "When You Fail in Your Trying" (1997), nobody started off a thug, drug dealer or gang banger—all were once beautiful little babies and children. And even after they grow up and go astray, we still believe that, as Hip Hop artist Kanye West puts it, "Jesus walks with them too" (2004).

One of our mothers once said that she gets high because it helps her cope with "the shit that life puts you through." Getting high made life a lot simpler for her. It was as if, through intoxication, life became somehow clearer, and the issues that plagued her reality gained a temporary distance. Dr. Cosby's statements remind us of this take on life: intoxicatingly simplistic. But the world is indeed bitterly complex, and many, including Cosby, refuse to swallow that pill. His sardonic commentary and the audience that

reacted to his remarks with laughter are only masking their deepest insecurities.

Poor blacks have always been an easy target, an easy way to rationalize society's social ills. But in condemning them, Dr. Cosby is sadly denying the Real. The issues plaguing Black America are far deeper than poor parenting or June Bug gone wild. If we are to advance the Struggle, we must go beyond simply cataloguing crises and lambasting our people caught up in the societal whirlwind.

Brothas On Lockdown

AS THREE YOUNG BLACK MEN (apart from the Old School Womanist), now with young sons of our own, we agonize over the number of Brothas who are incarcerated, a number that seems to be increasing exponentially. Dr. Cosby characterizes the situation thus:

In our own neighborhood, we have men in prison...these are not political criminals. These are people going around stealing Coca-Cola. People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake!...What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand?...Fifty percent drop out, rest of them in prison. (May 22, 2004)

Bringing to bear a more precise analytical lens on what has been called "mass incarceration" of the black community (*Black Commentary*, 2004), we note the disproportionate number of blacks in prison. Blacks account for only 12% of the US population, but 44% of all prisoners are black. Indeed, in every state, the "proportion of blacks in prison populations exceeds the proportion among state residents," and in twenty states, the percent of incarcerated blacks is *five times* greater than their share of resident population (*Human Rights Watch Backgrounder*, 2003; italics ours). Nationwide, "black men of all ages are incarcerated at more than *seven times* the rate of white men" (Justice Department, 2002; italics ours).

We have to call into question the disproportionate number of black men on lockdown. All national data on incarceration indicate that the overwhelming number of blacks are *not* in prison for violent crimes,

but drug offenses, primarily in connection with being users of drugs. These same databases indicate that white drug offenders are not imprisoned at anything like the rate of blacks. The proportion of all drug users who are black is 13% to 15%, but blacks are 36% of the arrests for drug possession. *Human Rights Watch Backgrounder* (2003) reports that "In at least fifteen states, black men were sent to prison on drug charges at rates ranging from twenty to fifty-seven times those of white men." Further, according to the Justice Policy Institute (2002), sentencing guidelines have made the punishment for distributing crack cocaine (primarily a "black thang") a hundred times greater than the punishment for powder cocaine (primarily a "white thang"). So, yes, it is true that today's incarcerated Brothas and Sistas are not political prisoners in the sense that Angela Davis, Kwame Ture, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were back in the Day. However, unless one is prepared to argue that blacks are genetically inclined to drug offenses and criminality, one must concur with *Human Rights Watch*: "The high and disproportionate rate of minority incarceration, particularly in the context of the war on drugs, is a grave challenge to the country. It exposes and deepens the racial fault lines that weaken the country; contradicts principles of justice and equal protection of the laws; and undermines faith among all races in the fairness and efficacy of the criminal justice system." Or as *Black Commentator* put it succinctly: "The evidence is irrefutable: mass incarceration of African Americans is national policy."

Education

DR. COSBY BEMOANS the large drop out rate among black youth. But we must ask, what kind of schooling is taking place in black classrooms? Are these students being taught to respect and love themselves and their foreparents? Are they being given a sense of identity and rootedness? Are they being taught the real history of this country and the African role in the making of America? Spend some time in these classrooms and you will witness the answers to our

rhetorical questions. Dr. Cosby disavows any connection to Africa: "We are not Africans. Those people are not Africans, they don't know a damned thing about Africa." But that is precisely the problem, that black youth have no sense of their role and purpose in history, no understanding of where they came from, and consequently, no vision for the future. As Howard Dodson, Chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, put it:

Imagine...if our children understood the monumental sacrifices made by generation upon generation of their ancestors just so they could have *the opportunity* to learn—that most slaves were prohibited by law from learning how to read and that those who chose to do so, or who taught fellow slaves, faced severe punishment, even death. Getting up and going to school to learn might not seem so unreasonable. Imagine for a moment if they knew about the courageous boys and girls, their age, who walked through cordons of bricks, bullets, and hateful diatribes just to walk into the school building, much less sit down and learn to read or write. Then perhaps behaving in the classroom or doing homework might be cool. But because our children don't know these fundamental facts about their heritage, it is easier to understand why so many of them accept the lure of the street. It is easier to understand why so many accept the destructive notion that they can't learn; why so many equate intellectual achievement with trying to be "white."...Why don't they know the truth...and understand the greatness that lies within themselves? Because the history being taught in most of our schools some 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* still does not begin to reflect the base of knowledge in the field of African-Diasporan and African-American Studies (Dodson, 2004).

FROM OUR WORK OVER THE YEARS at Malcolm X Academy, an African-centered kindergarten-eighth grade Detroit Public School, we bear witness to the power of black youth being in subject position, rather than the object of history and intellectual inquiry. Cornel West argues in *Race Matters* that self-loathing and poverty are our major problems. A solid sense of self, which African-centered education provides, attacks at least one of the problems. Or perhaps, indirectly, both problems. As Kanye West puts it, in his top-selling single, "All Falls Down" (2004): "They taught us to hate ourself and love they wealth."

Crucially, black leadership needs to question the role of education for black youth in the Twenty-First Century. While the nation is concentrating on "No Child Left Behind," in order to be left behind, black children have to be in the race—and they aren't! When one objectively analyzes those those supposedly "paved" roads left by *Brown v. Board of Education*, all one finds are condemned and dead-end roads of failure and continued oppression. Many of these roads are filled with the potholes left by inequities in state funding for black children that exist in every state in the Union. Many of these roads lead to our children being subjected to racially biased and culturally insensitive, standardized tests, which they do not perform well on, and which are used to determine funding that they don't get much of. Further, many black school districts are financially stranded on roads that leave them unable to provide teachers with decent salaries and adequate resources to provide the best possible education for our children.

EVEN WITH A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA, there is no guarantee of employment as manufacturing jobs dry up, and de-industrialization and technologization continue unabated. In fact, even a four-year college degree is no longer sufficient guarantee of employment, as many recent college graduates are finding out and are returning to universities for advanced or professional degrees. The Old School Womanist notes that "back in the Day," as an undergraduate student, she earned extra money for tuition and fees by working as one of numerous registration clerks at her university. However, this is not a job option for today's three young Brothas. At most major universities, such as ours, students now register by computer.

We are not here arguing for the elimination of schools. Rather, we call for a new vision of schooling, or more precisely, a return to the vision articulated by our elders, Drs. Carter G. Woodson (1933) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1930). They advocated schools that would relocate African people from the margins of history to the center, before moving youth on to learn about the culture and experiences of other groups. Further, these

elders taught that the goal of education has to go beyond teaching black students how to make a living, to helping them understand how to make a life. As Du Bois put it, the "function of education is not to make men carpenters, but to make carpenters men" (1930).

Youth Culture

DR. COSBY TAKES BLACK YOUTH TO TASK for their clothing styles and adornments, such as body piercings. He says: "People putting their clothes on backwards. Isn't that a sign of something going on wrong?...people with their hat on backwards, pants down around the crack...Isn't it a sign of something when she's got her dress all the way up to the crack and got all kinds of needles and things going through her body," (Cosby, 2004). To the Old School Womanist in our crew, this aroused back-in-the-Day memories of young blacks being soundly criticized by older blacks for their natural hairstyle and even for wearing colorful African style clothing. She also remembers that in the early 1970s, young women, both black and white, wore extremely short shorts, which were dubbed "hot pants," and she and her girls wore "micro-minis," which were dresses "all the way up to the crack." Fashion fads can't predict the future of *any* young black person. Nor can musical tastes. If Dr. Cosby has forgotten, let the Old School Womanist remind him how raunchy and full of raw sexual lines the Blues were, e.g., Jelly Roll Morton. Or how about Rock n' Roll songs, like "Work With Me, Annie," answered by "Annie Had a Baby, Can't Work No More"? While all of us still love Hip Hop Culture, we too take issue with the misogyny and violence in some quarters of this youth culture. At the same time we note the diversity of Hip Hop Music, which ranges from so-called "Gangsta Rappers," to progressive Rap artists, such as Common, The Roots, the Coup, dead prez, and Kanye West. And even Gangsta Rappers have within their artistic repertoire songs about lost love and fathers who failed to show up (e.g., Jay-Z's "Song Cry" and "Daddy, Where Have You Been?").

Parenting

RATHER THAN BEMOAN THE PARENTS who aren't, we say that the community must become surrogate parents, mentors, and role models. This was the impetus behind the establishment of My Brother's Keeper, a mentoring program for black boys, ages 11 to 13, in Detroit. Saturday mornings you will find us, along with three mini-van loads of Michigan State University (MSU) students making the 75-mile journey from the uneventful solitude and cozy comfort of the MSU campus to Malcolm X Academy in the heart of the bustling West Side Detroit 'hood. On weekends and in the summer we welcome our Malcolm X mentees to the campus, where they stay with us for extended periods immersed in our college world. This is one of our ways of giving back. Rather than just bemoaning the problem, we are attempting to be part of the solution to the problem. Of course, pragmatic realists that we are, we don't think that our efforts alone can save the children. We know it takes a village. We simply seek to take our place in it.

Language Use

THE LANGUAGE USE and practices of the black community, African-American Language or US Ebonics, come in for a good deal of Dr. Cosby's critique. He says:

It can't speak English. It doesn't want to speak English. I can't even talk the way these people talk. Why you ain't? Where you is...And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. Then I heard the father talk. This is all in the house. You used to talk a certain way on the corner and you got into the house and switched to English. Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with "why you ain't." You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth...There's no English being spoken...It's time for you to not accept the language that these people are speaking, which will take them nowhere...We got these knuckleheads walking around who don't want to learn English, (Cosby, 2004)..

This is not the first time that Dr. Cosby has weighed in on black speech. He was as vociferously oppositional—and inaccurate—in his reaction to the December, 1996 Oakland,

California School Board's Ebonics Resolution. But that was almost eight years ago, and we had assumed that Cosby had learned over the years by consulting the research and publications of linguists on our language. But obviously not—same song, different verse. There is a voluminous body of research literature on Black Language patterns, such as "Why you ain't," dating back to the 1960s. Linguists have demonstrated that patterns of Ebonics spoken in the U.S. are governed by rules, the same as any other language. Of course black parents and children speak the same language. The same for white parents and white children. The same for Chinese, Spanish, Zulu, or whatever-speaking parents and children. Children acquire the language spoken in their environment. This is true of children all over the world. Further, some forms of African-American language have served to enrich the language of the White Mainstream—e.g., words like *tote*, *banana*, *hip*, *bad* (meaning "good") and the celebratory practice of "high five," all of which have been shown to have roots in West African languages (see e.g., Turner, 1949; Dalby, 1971; Dillard, 1977; Smitherman, 2000).

MANY SCHOOLS, for their part, continue to do a very poor job of teaching black youth the Language of Wider Communication (LWC; also referred to as "Standard English"). This is primarily because of the rejection of the home language. That is a turn-off to all children anywhere—when teachers reject their language, which is intrinsic to their identity and all that is real to them. This is the fundamental issue that the 1996 Oakland School Board sought to address in their "Ebonics Resolution." You start where the child is, accepting and valuing what she brings to the classroom. From that vantage point, the sky is the limit in terms of what you can teach her. This is the approach that was fought for back in 1979 in the *King* ("Black English") Federal court case in which the Old School Womanist was the chief expert witness and advocate for the children who sued the Ann Arbor, Michigan School District and won. Schools need to return to that Old Landmark. Finally, when

it comes to U.S. Ebonics, we need to remind Dr. Cosby about the black-talking and "non-verbal" cartoon characters he created in "Mush-Mouth" and "Fat Albert," from which he made millions.

Conclusion

WHAT DR. COSBY fails to acknowledge is that many of us have been seduced, doped up, by the education he so badly desires for the "lower economic." This (mis)education dims the bright light that would reveal the complex textures of the Black American Experience. Cosby is sadly preoccupied with our children's "begging" and the possibility that his thoroughly seduced elite might have to "pick up the tab." Yet, in spite of the many millions that he has been blessed to have earned (sometimes at the expense of the economic poor he now criticizes), he has done relatively little to encourage economic growth and advancement among the black poor. While he has been an active contributor to black college funds, he has demonstratively removed himself and his wealth from poor black communities. This distance isn't simply the arbitrary result of economic circumstance. It also manifests itself through his words, which articulate the distance he feels so secure in embracing: "*Their* end of the deal," "*They're* pregnant without a husband," "*These people...*" (Emphasis ours.) Such distant pronouns are reflective of the absence of the higher economic in the village. Their participation has been continuously suspect, from the flight of the higher economic from urban centers to the discouraging disdain that many middle- and upper-class blacks express about Black Popular Culture, Hip Hop, Black Language, and Black Fashion.

While the material conditions that Cosby comments on are not a remarkable revelation to any sober individual who has agonized over the condition of black people in the past two decades, there is something remarkable in his statements. It is not what he says that is revelatory, but what he cannot and will not say: "Something is going on in Black America, and I am not quite sure how to fix it, because I am no longer very connected to Black America."

DR. COSBY NEEDS TO EXAMINE his generation's disconnectedness from the needs and harsh realities of black people. Unlike him, we do not blame those who are victims of neglect, but those who allowed it, those blacks who had a chance to make a difference and did not; those who benefited from the dreams and sacrifices of the previous generation but then turned their backs on the next generation. Cosby is right about parenting, but it is much broader than mother-father parenting. There is a need for one generation to parent another, to provide for the cultural and historical transference of ethics and morals that will ensure the continued resilience of African America. As we ponder the intoxicatingly simplistic attitudes and profound disconnect of Cosby and other higher economic blacks, we find solace in the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The great liability of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands. They end up sleeping through a revolution." Someone needs to wake Dr. Cosby up!

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