The Destruction of the Young Black Male: The Impact of Popular Culture and Organized Sports

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> Mama: Big Walter used to say, he'd get right wet in the eyes sometimes, lean his head back with water standing in his eyes and say, "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the Black man nothing but dreams—but he did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile" [Hansberry, 1981: 33].

For more than 400 years each generation of Black people in America has prayed, struggled, and sacrificed, hoping that their children would be a part of that generation in which Blacks in America would receive equality. Each time the dream of equality has attempted to take root in the rich soil of the American dream, it has been strangled by fear and racism. It attempted to take root with the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, and the civil rights legislation; each time the dream has been deferred. With the erosion of each hope, the echoes of the prophesy of Chancellor Williams (1974: 319) in *The Destruction of Black Civilization* become louder:

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> The outlook is grim. For the Black people of the world there is no bright tomorrow. The Blacks may continue to live in their dream world of singing, dancing, marching, praying and hoping, because of the deluding signs of what looks like victories—still trusting in the ultimate justice of the white man; but a thousand years hence their descendants will be substantially where the race was a thousand years before. For the white people, still masters of the world, do not have to yield. They have never changed their real attitude toward Black people during all the passing centuries, and there is absolutely nothing upon which to base the belief that they will change in the centuries to come.

Current data on the status of Black Americans provide little support to refute Williams's perception.

Numerous Black and White scholars have addressed the plight of the Black American, providing scores of perspectives and analyses. An effective assessment of the current status of Black Americans necessitates individual analysis of the plight of the Black male and the Black female. Although Black males and females bear the scares of racism, Staples believes that the Black male's status merits special note. Staples (1982: 3) asserts,

> In the black community, it is the men who need attending to. They are the ones who are failing in school, losing ground in the labor market to white and black women, filling up the prisons and dying slowly through drugs, alcohol, violence and adventurism.

Staples's analysis is supported and expanded by Grier and Cobbs (1976: 49) in their assessment of the Black man's struggle for manhood:

> For the black man in this country, it is not so much a matter of acquiring manhood as it is a struggle to feel his own. Whereas the white man regards his manhood as an ordained right, the black man is engaged in a never-ending battle for its possession. For the black man, attaining any portion of manhood is an active process.

The failures of the Black man have a direct impact on his relationship with the Black woman. The extent to which the Black male and female are able to establish and maintain a strong dyadic relationship will have direct influence on the future of the Black family. Destruction of the Black male also means destruction of the Black family.

This article will argue that two major components of contemporary American society—the negative aspect of popular culture and organized sports—are major contributors to the destruction of the current generation of Black males. Also, that as a result of the impact of these two components, the adult Black male frequently finds himself on a fantasy island lacking the skills necessary to propel himself into the flow of mainstream America. I believe that this isolation from the American mainstream deprives or severely restricts the Black male's ability to develop the self-concept and the economic potential necessary to develop and nourish a long-range dyadic relationship with the Black woman.

The major premise of the argument presented in this article is built on two primary sources. The first source, the product of a composite of my perceptions and experiences while working with Black males, is a poem entitled *I Was Cool* (Gaston, 1983). The second source is the description of the negative aspects of popular culture presented in Maulana Karenga's (1980) Kawaida Theory. Although Kawaida Theory does not limit its focus to the negative aspects of popular culture, these aspects merit special attention due to their crippling impact on the progress of Black people. Organized sports, a microcosm of popular culture, will be examined in order to provide an overview of its current impact on Black males participating in football and basketball at the high school and college level.

It is not the objective of this article to review the literature on social development of the Black child or the social impact of organized sports, but rather to suggest how popular culture and organized sports influence the developmental process. For the purposes of this article, culture will be defined as the sum total of the learned experiences of a group of people living in a

central geographic area. It is passed on from generation to generation and is slowly but constantly changing. Popular culture is defined as a fashionable lifestyle that reflects the values, perceptions, and attitudes glamorized by the mass media.

Dedicated to all the cool young brothers

I Was cool

They said the doors of opportunity were closing fast,
and all the signs said that the good times weren't going to last,
but that didn't bother me,
because I was cool.

My teachers kept trying to get me to learn read'n, writ'n and math,
talking about you need that stuff to make it down life's paths.
But I just looked at them, and laughed.
I said, "Ya'll might need to know that stuff, but not me,
because I'm cool."

Them teachers was always getting on my case,
and I told them I knew that it was because of my race.
They just couldn't deal with me,
because they was square,
and I was cool.

I use to be so clean everybody would stop and stare,
'cause I was looking good with my curl free on my hair.
Hey, if you've got it, you've got it,
and I knew I was cool and looking good.
I didn't learn nothing in school, but they still let me pass.
I was sho gett'n ova,
even if I was at the bottom of my class.
But they still let me grad-u-ate from high school.
I definitely got ova!
But you can do that when you're cool.

After grad-u-ation I got clean and went to look for me a job.
I knew I was going to make me some long bread, buy me a new ride,
and stay clean and cool everyday!
I was definitely going to have everything my way!

But trying to read them job applications was far from a charm,
and I told the dude at the employment office I couldn't write too good,
'cause I'd hurt my arm.
But the look on his face told me that he didn't really believe that,
and the dude wasn't hardly impressed by my bad new hat.

Well to make a long story short, I finally got me a job,
but I don't get much pay,
and from the way things look its always gonna be that way.
I didn't learn much in school,
and you sure don't get paid much when all you can do is be cool.

If I could go back to school I'd learn all I could,
and everytime I talk to other brothers I tell them they should.
I realize now that my future's not too bright,
and without education it's kinda hard to make things right.

You know now that I think about it,
maybe some of those teachers that I thought was getting on my case,
were actually trying to help me in the education race.
It sure hurts when I realize that with my abilities,
I could have been anything that I wanted to be,
if I had applied myself in school.

But instead of learning all I could in school,
I spent most of my time,
sitting in the back of the room,
looking good,
and being cool [Gaston, 1983: 46].

This poem attempts to capture the perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, lifestyle, and hindsight of Black males who are unconscious victims of the social and institutional racism that has conditioned their actions. Although the poem's content is self-explanatory, briefly exploring the cause-effect relationship of the parts to the whole clearly reveals the web in which the Black male finds himself entangled. The end product of this entanglement is the economic, psychological, and social destruction of the Black male. This unproductive lifestyle develops mainly from the media's impact on the young Black male's

perception of reality. The media's influence on the Black male is strengthened in the absence of a strong cultural base. Karenga (1980) maintains that Blacks have a popular culture rather than a national culture. Karenga (1980: 18) further believes that popular culture is "the unconscious, fluid reaction to everyday life and environment . . . social thought and practice defined and limited by its unconsciousness, fluidity and reactiveness." Although the accuracy of the Kawaida perception may be argued, it presents an interesting perspective from which to analyze the life of the Black male.

In order to illustrate the cause-effect relationship of various negative components of popular culture on the poem's moral, the analysis of *I Was Cool* (Gaston, 1983: 46) is divided into four parts. Part one, the first four stanzas, depicts the young man's actions, values, and self-concept, which are products of an unrealistic view of reality. He is conscious of the warnings of changing socioeconomic conditions, yet unconscious of the long-range impact of his actions. The student's responses suggest that either he perceives himself as being a part of a segment of society immune to the pressures, demands, and discipline required for academic development, or he is aware that his prior academic preparation has been inadequate and he lacks the academic skills necessary to compete with his peers. If he lacks the skills to compete, his ego may dictate that he "buck the system," and establish his own norms. However, the educational expectations of the dominant culture ensure that the long-range impact of his self-imposed isolation will be destructive to his manhood. Identification with media and/or other "cool" role models who appear to refuse to bow to the demands of the system provides the young Black male with a framework for what Karenga (1980: 19) describes as "a high level of present time orientation." This exaggerated self-concept is a trademark of the young Black male speeding down the road to self-destruction. Malcolm X (1964: 78) described such an experience in his autobiography:

> "Man, you can't tell him nothing!" . . . And they couldn't . . . I'd go through that Grand Central Station afternoon rush-hour

> crowd and, many white people stopped in their tracks to watch me pass. The drape and cut of a zoot suit showed to the best advantage if you were tall—and I was over six feet. My conk was fire-red. I was really a clown, but my ignorance made me think that I was "sharp."

It is obvious that those on parade and the parade viewers interpret the world differently.

Part two, the fifth stanza of the poem, is the most tragic. The student's unrealistic self-concept, disregard of the warnings of the changing socioeconomic climate, and basic ignorance of his own status have been sanctioned by the educational system's failure to correct his inaccurate perceptions. The educational institution has tolerated the student's presence but has not accepted the responsibility for his education. Unaware of his contribution to his own destruction, the "cool young brother" is convinced that he has "definitely got ova!" Karenga (1980: 19) points out that one of the negative aspects of popular culture is its "hustler values," characterized by a "high level of myth orientation and grandiose dreams."

In part three, the sixth stanza, the young man's goals reflect what Karenga (1980: 19) describes as a "high level of simple survival orientation—cockroach existence, just getting by, making it and nothing more." Finally being outside of his "educational" environment, the cool young brother experiences a major confrontation between his reality and that of the dominant society. The media has taught him the power of money. It has also made him a consumer. The educational institution, however, has given him a certificate of attendance but not the education that would provide the skills to earn money. This dilemma poses a direct threat to his manhood. Grier and Cobbs (1976: 50) point out the relationship between masculinity and making money:

> As boys approach manhood, masculinity becomes more and more bound up with money making. In a capitalistic society economic wealth is inextricably interwoven with manhood. Closely allied is power—power to control and direct other men, power to influence the course of one's own and other lives.

Without education, power, and glamour, the "long bread, new ride, and being clean and cool everyday," are mere fantasies. The excuses and hustler skills that were effective for the Black male in school cannot determine or manipulate the rules in this alien environment. The cool young brother is forced to accept the reality that "Rolaids don't always spell relief."

Part four, the last four stanzas, summarizes a grim reality. The current generation of Black males may easily be the most talented and most intelligent generation ever born in America. Legally, this generation has the greatest opportunities ever afforded Black people in America. Yet comparatively, these young men may be the least productive of the "emancipated" generations of Black males due to their lack of knowledge of their own history and their inability to avoid being caught in the web of American racism. Unless there is significant change, this generation of Black males, and its offspring, must learn to live with the psychological and economic consequences of not developing its potential or being able to determine its own direction. They will continue to find themselves stranded "on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity" (King, 1971: 153). The extent to which this generation of Black males can salvage the remnants of missed opportunities and misdirection and recognize and confront the forces that control the direction of their lives will determine the extent to which they will become victims of drugs, alcohol, suicide, and homicide. How well these challenges are handled will determine the degree to which the Black male will be able to contribute to the development of strong Black families.

The media serve as the vehicle that carries the fantasies consumed by young Black males. Few media items are consumed more completely by the Black male than professional sports. Professional sports are perceived as being the shortcut to the pinnacle of American society. The professional athlete enjoys "the long bread," a "bad new ride," plus a high degree of social acceptance. A young Black male struggling to develop a positive self-concept in a racist society can turn on the television set and see Black athletes being cheered and sought

after by fans and reporters. Whether he is on the East Coast, West Coast, Midwest or Deep South, the Black professional athlete is a hero.

It is not difficult for the young Black male to envision himself as a professional athlete surrounded by admiring fans seeking autographs. The realities projected by the media make the young Black male's dream of becoming a professional athlete seem far more feasible than envisioning himself as a member of a surgical team at a major hospital. Therefore, rather than perceiving himself as an M.D., the young Black male sets his sights on the NBA and the NFL. Ironically, if the hours spent preparing to get into the NBA or NFL were spent preparing to get into medical school, the odds of the young Black male becoming an M.D. would be significantly greater than of his becoming a professional athlete.

The number of Black males who have been victims of the dream of becoming a star in professional sports are legion. The path to their demise is paved with newspaper clippings, tarnished trophies, and former "friends" and well-wishers. Basketball is the premiere sport in the Black neighborhood. Its mastery is a part of the rite of passage for young Black males. The genesis is the gift of the first basketball, followed by thousands of hours on the basketball court, dreams of superstar status, and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. For those who are "a cut above the rest," with rare exceptions, basketball has redefined the educational system. Rather than young Blacks perceiving high school as the first step on the ladder to higher education, it has been diminished to a vehicle for transporting the young "stars" on the first leg of their journey to the NBA. Their vision becomes myopic.

I'm Going to the N.B.A.

Hey, I'm sorry Miss Teacher,
I don't have time to stay after school for no help today.
I've got to go practice . . .
Cause I'm on my way to the NBA.

Hey, I sleep with my converse beside my bed while visions of
basketballs are dancing in my head.
Everybody in town done heard about me,
folks say my game is a sight to see.
Hey, don't get me wrong . . .
I'm not opposed to education.
I thinks it's a necessary thing . . .
If you don't have nothing else going for you.
But you see teach, . . . I am talented!
If I ever need a degree, . . . I'll buy me one.
So what if I can't read,
I'll hire somebody to read to me.
The only math I'll need to know is the numbers of my bank
account and my accountant's telephone number.
Say teach, you all right, . . . but all you think about is books.
Check me out. . . . You are looking at true talent!
Hey, I could dunk when I was ten, and everybody knows I play to
win.
I can hit from half court, . . . on a bad day.
I'M JUST GOOD!
What can I say?
I'm on my way to the NBA.
Hey, they think Andrew Toney and "Magic" Johnson are bad, and
that "Dr. J"
can fly and Moses Malone can't be stopped, . . . but that's because
they haven't seen ME.
They call me The Rabbit.
One who moves like lightning . . . is smooth as silk, . . . and can fly
like a bird.
They say that my ball handling is poetry in motion, and that my
shot ought to be outlawed.
When I shoot, ALL I use is NET!
My shot is so sweet I'm embarrassed when it hits the rim . . .
I think using the backboard is for sissies!
On the court I move like a well oiled transmission.
I can change gears or direction at any speed.
I usually have to slow down so the ball can catch up with me.
Hey look teach, . . . I appreciate your concern,
but don't worry about me.
My future is bright, . . . as you can see . . .

Cause the NBA is waiting for me.
The only words in my prayers are these . . .
"LORD PLEASE DON'T LET NOTHING HAPPEN TO MY KNEES."
What do you mean what am I going to do *IF* I don't make it?
Hey teach, I GOTTA MAKE IT to the NBA! . . .
Cause, PLAYING BASKETBALL IS *ALL* I KNOW HOW TO DO [Gaston, 1983b].

This limited vision is a culmination of years of conditioning starting with "bitty basketball" and progressing through junior and senior high school. The perceptive coach identifies promising athletes at an early age and takes special interest in their development. Parents are also caught up with the success of their son. In single-parent female-headed households, the coach may serve as a surrogate father. The coach's interest is usually welcomed because he helps to keep the energetic Black male out of trouble and promises to help him to "make something out of himself." The talented youth is passed on through a network of coaches, most of whom are more concerned with his motor skills than his cognitive development. The athlete is skillfully maneuvered around any potential academic roadblocks. With his coach "running interference," the naive young Black athlete can maneuver his way through high school and four years of college eligibility, without ever being emerged in the pool of knowledge, "on his way to the N.B.A."

The cardinal sin of this seemingly well-meaning gesture, on the part of all concerned, is that no one who expressed interest in the young man's future had bothered to develop a "plan B" in case "plan A" failed. Nor had serious thought been given to his life after the NFL or the NBA, if he became a part of that fraction of good athletes who are fortunate enough to have made the professional ranks. The statistics on the number of athletes who survive the screening from high school—to college—to the pros is staggering. It is estimated that approximately 700,000 boys play basketball in high school and over

one million play football. At the varsity level at NCAA institutions these numbers are reduced to 15,000 in basketball and 41,000 in football (Underwood, 1980). Reality comes into focus when these figures for the professional ranks are revealed:

> In the NFL, about 320 college-draft choices come to camp each year; roughly 150 make it. On the average, those rookies who succeed play pro ball for 4.2 seasons. About 4,000 players complete their college basketball careers each years; approximately 200 get drafted by 22 NBA teams; around 50 actually make the team. The average NBA career lasts 3.4 seasons [Underwood, 1980: 60].

Newspapers and magazines across the country carry stories of former professional athletes who have fallen from the rosters to the unemployment line. The majority have no college degree to cushion their fall. I have witnessed the trauma of numerous former high school, college, and professional athletes who either did not make the transition to the next level, used up their eligibility, or suffered a career-ending injury. Major injury is followed by abandonment by formerly loyal coaches, fans, and teachers, for the new superstar.

James Harris, a former NBA player, is an example of the talented young athlete who became a victim of the NBA myopia. In an interview, Harris described his development and treatment as a star athlete; the special treatment, the priorities, and having to come to grips with harsh realities when the dream ended: "I went from being almost like a god to no one really caring" (Underwood, 1980: 53, 54, 57). The exploitation of James Harris is especially significant due to his above average intellectual ability and academic skills. There is little doubt that he "had potential."

The case of Dave Stallworth may be more typical of the abuse and limited options of most former Black star athletes. Dave "The Rave" Stallworth was a former All-American basketball player at Wichita State University and a star with the New York Knicks until he was sidelined with what was

believed to be a heart attack. A 1982 article on Stallworth in the Wichita *Eagle-Beacon* revealed that at age 40, "Dave the Rave" was unemployed, divorced, and still had not completed his college degree (Campbell, 1982).

The NCAA's controversial Proposition 48 (Ransom, 1983; Cobb, 1983) is designed to limit future abuse and foster the development of student-athletes; however, significant changes in rules and attitudes must occur before most high schools, colleges, universities, and coaches perceive Black athletes as more than a source of advertisement and revenue. If there were a genuine interest in the athlete's education, with their vast reservoir of resources these institutions could ensure that student athletes were the best educated of all their students.

The exploitation of the Black athlete is not a new phenomenon. Black sociologist Harry Edwards (Underwood, 1980) has been attempting to bring this abuse to the attention of the public since the 1960s, but his cries have been drowned out by the roar of the fans and the power of the dollar.

It is not the intent of this article to infer that organized sports are intrinsically evil, but rather to illustrate how sports can be a very effective tool with which to exploit and destroy Black males and the Black family. Karenga (1980: 20) points out that our overemphasis on fun and games has gone so far "that athletics and entertainment have become our most well-known activities."

Although the skills of talented Black males on the basketball courts and football fields personify music and poetry in motion, it is painful to acknowledge that in sports dominated by Blacks, Blacks do not own any of the teams, or stadiums, or courts on which the games are played. Nor do Blacks manufacture any of the balls or other equipment that they use in the game. Black participation in professional sports is basically reduced to being the "capital" that makes the business profitable. It should be noted that the conditioned lifestyle and the miseducation of the Black male are only symptoms of complex social and political issues that are the manifestation of racism in America, and are beyond the scope of this article.

Even the young Black male who is not cool and the athlete who obtains a degree are confronted with society's preoccupation with their pigmentation rather than their education or other skills. Therefore, social conformity and the amount of formal education are only excuses used to justify the racist treatment of the Black male.

Black people must allow the media to determine their lifestyle or culture. The salvation of the Black male and the Black family necessitates that immediate steps be taken to protect the futures of Black males participating in high school and college sports. It is the Black community that must demand that educational institutions provide Black athletes a quality education. The argument, posed by college coaches and administrators across the country, that even if a Black athlete does not graduate he will be better off for having been able to attend college is not justification for exploitation. Talented Black youth need all of the support, wisdom, and guidance the Black community can give them. They are the future of the Black community. Their perception of reality, the needs of the Black community, and the impact of the direction of their lives on the Black family cannot be overemphasized. They must be taught their past and the needs of the future.

Few social observers would argue the seriousness of addressing the current status of Black America. In his book, *There Is A River*, Vincent Harding (1981) metaphorically describes the history and progress of Black people as the flow of a great river. In describing his perception of the direction and future of the river, Harding (1981: 24) expresses the following concern:

> Considering the precarious terrain of our current lives, I am concerned about the one force that may surely stop the river: the self-destructiveness and despair that overwhelm us when we no longer know our own course, no longer remember our origins.

A clear sense of history is critical to understanding the problems of the present and protecting the future of the Black

family. Karenga's (1980: 44-46) Nguzo Saba, The Seven Principles—Unity, Self-Determination, Collective Work and Responsibility, Cooperative Economics, Purpose, Creativity, and Faith—provide a strong foundation on which to build a strong Black community and a strong Black family.

The Black community has never been envious of its talented gladiators who have attempted to use their skill as a ladder to climb out of their economic cave. That same community has also understood when their young warriors were beaten by the system, stripped of their manhood, and returned to the cave. Whatever the Black community may lose, if it can maintain its love, it has the foundation for survival.

> Beneatha: Love him? There is nothing left to love.
>
> Mama: There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. . . . When do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so. When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is [Hansberry, 1981: 125].

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