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**FOREWORD**

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## **From *Stupid White Men* to Smart White Man**

### **The Legacy of Black Power and the State of America's "Bad Education"**

I am writing this book because the voice of the Black man—important as it is—is disappearing. In early December 2004, I took a stroll across UC Berkeley's campus. It was a lovely winter day, and I couldn't help but notice the absence of Black students. I was saddened to see so few African Americans on the campus. Where were they?

Heading leisurely down a wooded path on my morning ramble, I passed by the Campanile and Moses Hall; I recalled my days at UC Berkeley, first as a teacher in the English Department in 1968 and later as a PhD student in the early 1990s. I remembered other Black students from those days in my classes.

If I could have put my perceptions into statistics, I walked among a student population composed largely of Asian Americans (40 percent) and Whites (35 percent). As I crossed a small wooden bridge with a brook flowing beneath, I realized I had seen only one or two of us on campus. I thought, where has everybody gone?

It was as if I were one of the characters in the film *Dude, Where's My Car?* and had awakened from a long, extended party, only to realize that I couldn't find my Black presence on campus, which is dependent upon both a strong Black student body and a good Black Studies department. Even further back, say in 1987, you would see a Black presence in all walks of student life at UC Berkeley and,

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indeed, in all walks of life in universities across the country. But now, the number of Blacks that matriculate at UC Berkeley is very small. Even though the university claims to want to attract more good Black students, it seems not to occur to them that hiring more good Black faculty would make the school much more attractive to promising young Blacks.

Earlier that year, I was in my car listening to a radio talk show and I heard a voice say, "I am done with hiring White people. Nothing against them personally, of course. They're a dependable, hard-working lot . . . but they're White and for that reason I'll never hire another White person."

The voice continued, "If you are interested in making film, and you are Black, let me know. . . ."

Who *was* this? Was it a White man? It couldn't be a Black man because what Black man would say such a thing in the time of Bush Administrations? The voice was now clearly that of a White man, but *which* White man? "If you're an African American and you'd like to work in media, then I encourage you to drop me a line and send me your resume." I waited patiently to hear who this guy was. Eventually, the announcer said, "Michael Moore, thank you!"

Michael Moore—the guy who did *Fahrenheit 9/11*?

Michael Moore—yes, it was him. But he sounded like a Black guy. And that was when I realized that he was speaking as a Black man, that the voice of Black people had become so submerged, so suppressed in both the media and daily life, that only a White man had the license to express it. It was then that I decided that the next time Michael Moore was in town, I was going to meet and thank him.

I didn't have to wait long. A few weeks later, a month or so after the 2004 election, I read in the paper that he was appearing in Marin County. I went to San Rafael, a beehive of White, wealthy, well-scrubbed liberals, and waited for an hour. The theater was tense with happy anticipation by the time he finally arrived, late.

Moore's speech was uplifting, full of opportunities to laugh at

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liberal illusions and to bemoan the cleverness of the right wing. Bush, he said—begrudgingly giving the Devil his due—had a plan, he had a “story.” Bush’s story was, he said, “simple and direct.” It was that Bush had gone to New York City after September 11, 2001, and he had seen there was an enemy out there, and he had decided to go after that enemy. “His story,” Moore said, “was ‘I will protect you.’ Very simple.” Then he asked the audience, “What was Kerry’s story?” The audience laughed. “Kerry’s story was, ‘My story is like Bush’s story!’”

The audience was working toward a catharsis. Michael Moore made us feel better about losing the election, about being Blue. After that he launched into an attack on the weak Democratic Party in Sacramento. We had many a good laugh that evening.

During the question and answer period, I raised my hand. He acknowledged it and, when I stood to ask my question, I could see the surprised look on the faces of the two hundred or so upper-class, Marin County Whites. They hadn’t expected to see a Black man in their midst.

“I heard you on the radio, and you said you wanted to help African American filmmakers. You said that you wouldn’t make a film without having Blacks work on it. Why are you doing this? What is the basis of your goodwill towards Black filmmakers?”

To my surprise, the audience broke out into applause. After a few moments, Moore raised his head and said in a muffled, inarticulate stammer, “I was thirteen years old, getting out of the car with my parents. Somebody said, ‘They just shot Martin Luther King.’ A cheer went up. I was thirteen. Uh, this was one of those moments when you go, ‘Okay, fuck this. I want out of this place.’” That experience, hearing someone cheer the assassination of Martin Luther King, made him want justice for Black people from then on.

“I started there. As soon as I could, I started doing stuff, like helping get a Black mayor elected. Then I started working for him.”

This personal confession revealed a new side of him. I think it surprised the audience, too. He was saying that this was the way he

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reacted as a White person. What about other Whites? He was telling the White audience, if you were smart, you would get your house in order, too.

“After I had made a lot of money with *Roger and Me*, I turned to my wife and said, ‘What can we do with this to help somebody?’ I had read somewhere that Hollywood had never distributed a film made by an African American woman, ever. Blacks are 12.5 percent of the population but they have no voice in it. So we set up a foundation to help Black Americans make films.” He turned to the section where I sat and looked at me: “Thank you for remembering that. The end of the story is that we helped get out the first one, *The Girl On The IRT*, a debut student film about a young Black girl’s life in New York City. It was a minor success in film festivals for a few years. Still, it was enough to help Leslie Harris, the director, writer, and producer, land the job of directing Oprah Winfrey’s adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.”

Michael Moore saw the world from a Black point of view. Several times in his speech, he referred to Black people as an example of life on the underside of the American nightmare. “The bottom line,” he concluded, “is if you haven’t lived the life of a Black American, you don’t really know. Ask our friend there. Or anybody who is Black.”

If Michael Moore can speak up for us, then why can’t I, as a Black man, speak up for myself? And what do I want to speak up about? The disappearance of young Blacks from our universities. It is a sign of a disaster for our cities, for our states, and for our country. The Jim Crow system that we found so hard to eradicate in the 1960s has returned in a new form with a silent and deadly mission.

## The Plan of this Book

My title is an allusion to the movie *Dude, Where’s My Car?* When I asked my nephew, who was then twelve, for a review, he said, “It’s tight,” meaning it’s a good movie.

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This popular teen comedy was so bad it attracted critical attention. In the liner notes for the DVD, Bret Fetzer writes, “If Samuel Beckett had written lubricious babe and stoner movies, he would have written [this film].” But I doubt Beckett would have been interested in the topic.

I went to see to see it because I wanted to find out what my nephew considered a great film. In the first part, Jesse and Chester, played by Ashton Kutcher and Seann William Scott, wake up one the morning and can’t remember what they did the night before. Apparently, they were so stoned they forgot the events that had transpired. They do remember, however, they have to buy anniversary presents for their girlfriends. When they go outside to get the car, it’s missing, and Chester says to Jesse, “Dude, where’s your car?”

Like Chester and Jesse, we have forgotten what happened to our car—culturally, that is. We have awakened from a slumber, stumbled outside, and now realize that our way of life is missing. There was a time when, if one visited Berkeley, California, one could hear Black Americans playing jazz and blues. Now, one can only hear Whites playing jazz and blues. Since the passage of Proposition 209, and the concomitant absence of Blacks from elite campuses across the state, Blacks rarely come to Berkeley from surrounding cities. With the “whitification” of Berkeley comes the growing interest by Whites in Black culture, especially jazz and blues. The Jazz School, Anna’s Jazz Island, and Jupiter are three clubs where, nightly, one can hear jazz and blues. In most cases, the musicians are White, the audiences are White, but the content is Black. In one club, I listened to a White jazz band playing a jazz classic to a White audience. The waitress and I were the only Blacks present.

I felt as if I had walked outside and realized that my car had been stolen. In the Jazz School, Whites flock to learn a Black musical art from other White teachers. I am embarrassed for them and myself because I am conscious of the absence of Blacks and their cultural expression. There is no way that Whites can know, or even need to know, the insult they cause to Blacks. Again, it’s like walking outside

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and realizing that your car has been ripped off—it hits you in the gut.

The first part of the movie sets up the problem. I have tried to do the same in the first part of my book. Black students—like Jesse's car—are missing from American college campuses. Why are they missing? There are three interrelated causes: First, university officials have sent mixed messages to the Black community; second, university officials have reacted with moral panic at the sight of Black students; and third, the culture of hip-hop has replaced college in the minds of many Black students.

In part two of the movie, Jesse and Chester decide to “retrace their steps” so that they can enter the state of mind they were in the night before. This will lead them, presumably, to the whereabouts of the missing car. So, in the second part of my book, I retrace the history of Black Studies on American campuses to get into the state of mind, as it were, to see what happened to the missing Black Studies departments.

Jesse and Chester encounter some amazing characters on their adventure: Christie Boner, hot chicks from outer space, a pot-smoking dog, khaki-wearing cultists, a herd of wild ostriches, and Tania, the girl with a penis.

While I cannot promise such outrageous characters, I am as wide-eyed at the emergence of Caribbean wannabe hip academics as “post-modern” Black culture as Jesse and Chester were surprised at some of their strange “Others.” I believe an encounter with the Black man without a Black American past is a perilous pseudo-amnesia on the American scene.

My story involves other minorities—Asian Americans, Chicanos and Latinos, and women. What is their relation to the disappearance of Black students on campus? The relationship between women and Blacks is relevant only insofar as White women are being accredited when Blacks are being discredited. All of these groups, these “Others,” by their very existence explain why Blacks have vanished from campus life.

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In the last part of the comedy, Chester and Jesse find a missing transmitter that aliens are looking for and thus solve the puzzle of where Jesse's car is. Similarly, in the third part of my book, I finally find the new Black Studies. It's not where it used to be, for it has moved to the public space of the community and out of the university. In this section, I hope to show the cultural significance of the rise of the hip-hop generation and how hip-hop is taking Black Studies into the curriculum of the streets.

Case in point: African Americans have disappeared from UC Berkeley at a supersonic rate: from a high mark of 32 percent of incoming freshmen in 1989 (about two thousand) to about 3 percent in 2005. By the way, the dropout rate for African Americans in high schools in California was near 50 percent in 2006.

Part of the diagnosis here is to acknowledge the conflict between oral and written traditions, something we will be discussing throughout this book. The SAT favors White and Asian students. Social studies policies have long shown that the SAT is racially and culturally biased, yet the UC system continues to use it as the main criterion for admissions.<sup>1</sup> New technology influences African Americans—who have had a long history of being denied literacy—differently, so they are put at a cultural, not an intellectual, disadvantage. They are judged according to the written tradition, even in the use of that technology.

Yet the realm most students are learning from today is an oral tradition—the world of hip-hop and the Internet. The real conflict is not between race and culture, but between oral traditions and literary traditions and the impact that an electronic culture is making on both.

The university has found no effective way to reach Black students because they have neither designed nor desired an entrance examination that tests abilities which have been informed and shaped by the oral tradition. The SAT has become the main criterion for admissions, and the oral world that many students—Black and White—live in has been ignored.

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How does Black Studies fit into all this? Not as much as it should. According to the great Columbia University Professor Manning Marable, “With a few important exceptions,” he wrote, “African American Studies scholars were strangely outside of the national discussion on affirmative action.”<sup>2</sup>

“There must be a revolution in Black Studies,” he says, “That revolution—a fundamental restructuring—must involve the full incorporation of digital technology into how we produce knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, race itself has disappeared as a criterion. The unacknowledged reason, according to Bob Laird, author of *The Case for Affirmative Action in University Admissions*, is an old one: race makes Whites uncomfortable, and oral culture reminds everyone of race.

University officials find African Americans difficult to deal with, so they solve their diversity problem with politically correct replacements: Caribbean professors, Asian Americans, and women. These groups unintentionally have contributed to the disappearance of the Black American student from the universities in America.

In Nazi Germany, not all Germans joined the National Socialist party, the official organ of the totalitarian regime, but many people secretly favored the party's treatment of Jews. The Germans called this group the *mit laufer*, an expression that came to mean (more or less) “to go along with,” or “to run with.” I think many people who did not vote for Proposition 209 silently “ran with” its godfather, Ward Connerly (then serving on the University of California Board of Regents), to keep Blacks out of UC Berkeley. Proposition 209 was a statewide ballot initiative that passed in 1996 that made it illegal for race to be used as a standard for public university admissions; its designers cleverly called it the “Civil Rights Initiative” and made the wording of the resolution confusing to garner more votes. I am certainly not comparing supporters of Prop. 209 with the Nazis. The reason I use this example is that Ward Connerly's tactics in forcing Prop. 209 through had much in common with the Nazi strategy of manipulating language to hide the truth: Prop. 209 was named the “Civil Rights Initiative” even though it served the purpose of reduc-

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ing Black access to education. We could just as easily use the example of the American South, where there were many Whites who were not themselves slave owners, but who enabled slavery to exist by participating in an economy built by slave labor. These people were also manipulated and disenfranchised at the ballot box.

With this book I hope to show that a terrible injustice has been done to African Americans at UC Berkeley and, by extension, at other public and elite institutions. The UC Berkeley admissions office has gone too far. Excluding a vital aspect of the world we live in as a way to deny equal opportunities sets a bad precedent and has far-reaching consequences.

