

The Shaping of Black Identities

*Redefining the Generations
through the Legacy of Race and Culture*

Jimmie R. Hawkins

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“Kudos to Jimmie Hawkins, who has done it again. Like his first book, *Unbroken and Unbowed*, that offered a necessary history of African American movements of resistance and liberation, this book provides requisite insight into the evolution of African American culture and identity. With the careful analysis of a historian of religion and the commitment to understanding shifts in African American identity of a justice practitioner, Hawkins reminds us not only how identity has shifted but also why it matters. Further, while many talk about what Black people think, this book explodes the mythology of an essentialist monolithic view of Black thought and explores the various contextual contingencies that shape Black reality throughout several generations. I highly recommend this book to all who wish to understand the changing complexities of Black identity and the significance of its responsiveness to the concerns of each historical moment.”

—Rodney S. Sadler Jr., Associate Professor of Bible and Director of the Center of Social Justice and Reconciliation, Union Presbyterian Seminary

“*The Shaping of Black Identities* meets people through a lens of lived experiences of Black Americans and their generational pursuit for a better life. It helped me to see my own biological family differently through the eras that shaped and impacted their lives. In my efforts to navigate identity of self, culture, and God throughout ministry, I find this book helpful in acknowledging who I am, who I serve, and how I serve them.”

—Cecelia D. Armstrong, co-moderator of the 226th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and associate pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church

“What does it mean to be Black in America? Hawkins’s analysis of ‘Black generational uniqueness’ is a weaving of history, sociology, pop culture, and the spirits of each generation from 1900 to present. From the cultural and historical moments to the movements and slogans that define generations, *The Shaping of Black Identities* is a necessary read for those both inside and outside the Black experience. For us outsiders, Hawkins provides a necessary grounding and understanding of each generation at precisely the time when anti-Black sentiment and racial tensions are high. Highly recommended for those interested in the liberation and freedom of all people.”

—Patrick B. Reyes, dean at Auburn Theological Seminary and author of *The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive*

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Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to my family. My wife, Sheinita; daughter, Kaela; and son, James, have been extremely supportive and understanding during the writing of this book. The encouragement of our extended family, including my sisters, Vanessa, Bonita, Karen, and Tina, has been so impactful. My brothers, Neal and Edward, are always a part of my life. Our mother, Elsie Lee, is the bedrock of the family and has helped make everything I do possible. Sheinita's mother and sisters, Mary, Deidre, Denise, Diane, and J.P., have made our family circle more intimate.

I want to thank my colleagues at the Office of Public Witness and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations for their friendship and support and constant commitment to justice. As always, I want to remember professors of the past who have inspired me by their scholarship, mentorship, and faithfulness to justice and advocacy. The Drs. Earl E. Thorpe, Gayraud Wilmore, and, more recently, Brian Blount, have contributed to academic excellence for people of faith and all Americans.

I acknowledge that God, the creator of heaven and earth, enables each one of us to know ourselves as those created in the image and likeness of God, a God who gives us identity and purpose and who calls us to care and respect one another.

Introduction

Defining a generation can be challenging, and years don't always exactly correlate with people's experiences. In fact, it's so hard that the Census has given only one generation exact dates: the baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964. Various researchers have defined millennials as being born anywhere from 1978 to 2004. Neil Howe and William Strauss, who are known for being the first to name a generation "millennial," include those born between 1982 and 2000 (later they amended it to 2004). *Time* used the years 1980 and 2000 to define the generation, as did the Obama administration in a report the White House issued in 2014. For this project, I defined a millennial as anyone born between 1980 and 2000, roughly anyone between the ages of eighteen and thirty-seven in 2018, though most of my interviewees line up with the Pew Research Center's new definition of a millennial as being born between 1981 and 1996. I was born in 1981, one of the earliest millennials. Sometimes I am grouped under generation X, or more commonly a micro-generation called the xennials, often identified as being born between 1977 and 1983. This microgeneration grew up in an analog world and came of age in a digital one.¹

—Reniqua Allen, *It Was All A Dream*

This book is about Black identity. It is about how identity is formed and shaped by internal and external forces. It is about collective memory and the stories told to each succeeding generation about the lives of the preceding generations. It is about ancestors and the veneration they are due. It is founded in the categorization of generations of African Americans who lived in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the impact living in America has had on Black people. Most of all, it is about belonging.

For all people, identity is vital to developing a healthy psyche, and it provides a sense of belonging. Americans have been assigned subsets of identity profiles by a series of markers based on regional, biological, or racial connections. Nothing has impacted an individual's sense of identity as much as racial identity. Race has been one of the greatest demarcation lines for every racial and ethnic demographic. It serves as a tribal connector and generates commonalities in groupthink and communal aspirations. *Scholars have long concluded that race plays a determining role in the formation of self-awareness.* African Americans were divided into caste rankings based on how light or dark they were. In the 1800s Eastern and Southern European immigrants faced racial qualifiers that limited citizenship to "free white persons." Liebler and Zacher's 2016 study analyzed the impact that history, geographic region, and race have on a person's identity. They stated, "A person's race can impact their interaction experiences, interests, opportunities, health, and wealth, among other things. . . . The race history of a place is connected with the current identity claims of people who live there."² According to a 2019 Pew Research study, 52 percent of Black adults stated that their race played a significant role in how they defined themselves. Being Black was central to their ethnic identity and helped them express how they felt about their lives, while only 15 percent of whites responded in a similar manner. Eighty-one percent felt a sense of connection to a wider Black community, with 36 percent replying that they felt "very connected." This intuitive connection motivated 60 percent of respondents to identify that their participation in philanthropic service derived from a desire to help others overcome their common adversity.³

For Black people, the search for meaning is pivotal and ongoing. Black identity is rooted in the existential experience of being Black in America. For Blacks, racial identity is intimately connected to American identity, with a constant pull from each for dominance. It is a struggle that for many remains unresolved, despite the adoption of African American as an identity brand, though many prefer to be labeled as Black. Historians and sociologists often discuss the uniqueness of identity cohesion despite, and in many ways because of, the race-conscious nature of a society that constantly reminds Black people they are considered to be "outside of the norm." Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and other people of color live under similar societal pressures. Blacks, with the exception of indigenous Americans, are the only people who did not migrate to this land. Instead, they were kidnapped and violently trafficked for the purpose of commerce. Many are offended by those who ardently proclaim that America is a land of immigrants.⁴

Unlike other racial-ethnic demographic groups, Blacks are the only Americans whose heritage resides more in the color of their skin than in a connection to a foreign land or tribe. Few have an emotional attachment to the

continent of African nations, as few rituals, beliefs, or customs survived the cultural extermination of slavery. The vast majority have no family memory of the tribes from whence their ancestors originated. For most, their story starts and ends in America, and they openly reject an African legacy. According to professor Howard W. French, the combination of American politics, popular culture, and miseducation prevented the development of a close relationship between African Americans and African people. Blacks were “denatured,” separated from an association with Africans emotionally or mentally:

For a very long time in the twentieth century, during the Jim Crow years in particular, African-Americans were encouraged to shun the idea of a connection to Africa, to think poorly of Africa—to celebrate traits in themselves, which supposedly distanced themselves from Africa, in other words, to think of themselves as more cultured, more Christian, more White, more civilized than Africans and therefore to look at “Africanness” as a matter of shame or a kind of taint that needed to be avoided.⁵

Not only is there a disconnect with Africans but also with other Americans. Separatist inclinations exist between African Americans and whites concerning politics, society, and thoughts about life in general. A 2020 survey reported that Blacks were much more focused on issues of racial justice. While more optimistic about the future, they were more engaged in social justice issues than whites and complained that racial justice did not get the level of attention needed to implement change. They defined whiteness as a privilege, and 80 percent stressed that Americans needed to become more informed on the history of white supremacy and racial injustice.⁶ Seventy-one percent of Blacks described U.S. race relations as “generally bad” while 50 percent did not believe that Blacks would ever be treated equally to whites. Only 7 percent of whites agreed. Seventy-three percent of Blacks blamed Donald Trump for a worsening in race relations while only 49 percent of whites blamed Trump.⁷ Scholar Anna Brown’s 2019 research found that 78 percent of Blacks believed that the country had not made enough racial progress in granting Blacks equal rights while only 37 percent of whites agreed. Blacks were far more likely to have reported instances of discrimination. Fifty-nine percent of Black respondents viewed slavery as having a lasting negative impact, and 84 percent thought that race was a major factor in limiting opportunity.

Whites (54 percent) disagreed that being Black was a disadvantage or that their whiteness provided advantages. Whites attributed family instability and a lack of parental role models as prevailing causes for the inability of Blacks to advance. Political parties registered a huge racial disparity. White Republicans were far less likely to align with Blacks on issues of race. Whites as a whole

reported that they were less likely to talk about racial issues with those outside of their racial grouping.⁸ There were evaluative differences when listing the most significant lifetime events. Blacks were the only demographic for which any historic event matched the significance of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as 60 percent listed Barack Obama's election as one of the top ten historic events of their lifetime. Among whites, Obama's election was a distant second (36 percent) compared to the 80 percent who prioritized September 11. Blacks ranked the Civil Rights Movement in third place behind the election of Obama and 9/11, while it did not rank in the top ten most significant events for whites.⁹

This book is about Black life, identity, and culture. It creates a new listing of six generations emerging out of an examination of the Black experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It follows the organizational outline developed by Pew Research Center in its outlining of Americans who lived between 1900 and 2020. It covers the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century, from 1900 to 2020. Six sections outline the generations and the perspectives adopted by those who lived the experience of that generation. It contains an analysis of the various cultural climates that have influenced Black life and culture. There is detailed information on the formative years of each generation to help readers understand general attitudes and perceptions and how they are influenced by the cultural, political, economic, and racial environment of the nation. It is the only book that names and characterizes all six generations from an African American worldview.

The most widely accepted identity charting by generation has been via the categories introduced by Pew Research Center. Pew's registry details generations throughout the twentieth century to the first two decades of the twenty-first century, stretching from 1900 until 2020. They are listed below along with their 2020 Black population.

- Greatest Generation (1900–1924): 2,200,000
- Silent Generation (1925–45) (population is included in the Baby Boomers total)
- Baby Boomers (1946–64): 8,300,000
- Generation X (1965–80): 8,900,000
- Millennials (1981–96): 11,000,000
- Generation Z (1997–2020): 11,600,000¹⁰

While Pew's generations are widely accepted, it is a tremendous undertaking to lump groupings of disparate people together and come up with universally accurate descriptions when the only consideration is period in time. There exist distinctions between perspectives even when persons are of the

same age and geographical region. There is a need for reexamination in distinguishing generational uniqueness by creating a more diverse range of categories. Pew admitted as much in 2023 when it revised the way it would offer descriptions of categorized groups. It determined, “Even when we have historical data, we will attempt to control for other factors beyond age in making generational comparisons. . . . [V]iews have been influenced by external forces that uniquely shaped them during their formative years. These forces may have been social changes, economic circumstances, technological advances or political movements.”¹¹

There have been several efforts to expand Pew’s chart in order to add greater specificity within generational groupings. Duke Research studied the ways in which local history impacted identity formation and determined that a person’s identity can’t be understood outside of societal influences. University sociologist Mary Elizabeth Hughes surmised that, due to different periods and regions, Baby Boomers not only differ from all other generations but from each other. She stated, “Who are the boomers? The boomers are a lot of people. Ironically, we fall into talking about them as if they are a cohesive group. But they are the most heterogeneous generation so far.” She surveyed their characteristics and found the disparities so great that she divided them into two categories. Those born between 1946 and 1955 were labeled “early boomers”; those born between 1956 and 1964 were called “late boomers.”¹² Beverly Mahone, in a *HuffPost* article titled “When Will African American Baby Boomers Be Counted?” called for racial specificity as it relates to healthcare:

As an African American Baby Boomer and journalist, I am always amazed at the studies that come out involving members of my generation. Rarely do I read any health studies or statistics exclusively for older Black adults. . . . The overwhelming majority of those studies cater to older white adults. But the cold, hard truth is we get the same diseases, and we should be studied individually for possible trends in health conditions. . . . It’s as if African American baby boomers don’t exist, or our issues aren’t important enough to be studied at-large.”¹³

Investigation into Black generational uniqueness has been undertaken by researchers to assign Black identity labels. Undergraduate students at Rice University produced the “Kinder Houston Area Survey.” It determined:

Different generations of African-Americans grew up in worlds with measurably different opportunities, and their experiences may have had a lasting impact on their worldviews. The *Silent Generation* (born 1928–1945) endured the full effects of the Jim Crow laws. *Baby Boomers* (1946–1964) were the children of the Civil Rights Movement.

Generation X (1965–1980) came of age during the Fair Housing Act and the Black Power Movement. *Millennials* (1981–2000) benefited greatly from these major successes, despite the continuing realities of racism and discrimination.¹⁴

Denise G. Yull's 2014 paper on the impact of "race and space" in public education proposed that Black children needed an educational program influenced by the circumstances of their environment. She developed four generational groups that included Elders/Silent Generation (1930–49), Black Power/Baby Boomer Generation (1950–69), Generation X/Hip Hop (1970–87), and Generation Y/Millennial (1988–95).¹⁵

Ellis Cose, in *The End of Anger: A New Generation's Take on Race and Rage*, maintained that race must be considered in any investigative efforts to discern generational uniqueness. His study researched Blacks and whites according to their proximity to the Civil Rights Movement. He analyzed their judgments, ways they engaged with each other, and resulting perceptions. He summarized, "How Blacks and whites view each other has a lot to do with the era that spawned them. . . . The civil rights revolution fundamentally transformed Black-white relations and every generation since then has seen a further shift in that relationship. . . . Generations matter deeply, because experiences, and hence expectations, differ profoundly depending on the era in which one came of age."¹⁶ He analyzed more than five hundred questionnaires and two hundred interviews and created three generations. Blacks were listed as "Generation 1: Fighters," "Generation 2: Dreamers," and "Generation 3: Believers." Whites were labeled as "Generation 1: Hostiles," "Generation 2: Neutrals," and "Generation 3: Allies." Generation 1 (born before 1944) introduced a new age in America as they disrupted the hold of Jim Crow on Black life. They broke down the walls of discrimination but were deeply scarred and therefore unable to trust whites. Generation 2 (1945–69), children of "the Dream," took advantage of available opportunities but still experienced lingering prejudice. Generation 3 (1970–95) was described as the one most unlike the other two. They were more hopeful and acknowledged that while racism existed, it could be overcome by hard work and perseverance.¹⁷

Bakari Kitwana's *The Hip-Hop Generation* examined how the post-civil rights era generation was the first to live without the stigma of Jim Crow segregation. While it was influenced by the previous generation, it also rejected many of its standards and looked inward for meaning. He contended that hip-hop culture manufactured the worldview of individuals who lived within its sphere of influence. "Collectively, hip-hop-generation writers, artists, filmmakers, activists, and scholars like these laid the foundation for understanding our

generation's worldview." He noted that, ironically, the same power structures that hip-hop raged against for causing the plights of urban youth ultimately control hip-hop.¹⁸ *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop*, by M. K. Asante Jr., focused on the generation following the Civil Rights Movement and dissected the influence of hip-hop. He documented, through a series of interviews, the contention that hip-hop was not the panacea it marketed itself to be.

The term "post-hip-hop" describes a period of time—right now—of great transition for a new generation in search of a deeper, more encompassing understanding of themselves in a context outside of the corporate hip-hop monopoly. While hip-hop may be a part of this new understanding, it will neither dominate nor dictate it, just as one can observe the civil rights generation's ethos within the hip-hop generation, yet the two remain autonomously connected.¹⁹

Nelson George, in *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos*, explored the generation born after the Civil Rights Movement and created four distinct categories of Black young adults.

There is the Buppie, ambitious and acquisitive, determined to savor the fruits of integration by any means necessary; the B-Boys, molded by hip hop aesthetics and the tragedies of underclass life; the Black American Princess or Prince a/k/a Bap, who, whether by family heritage or personal will, enjoys an expectation of mainstream success and acceptance that borders on arrogance; and the Bohos, a thoughtful, self-conscious figure like *A Different World's* Cree Summer or *Living Color's* Vernon Reid whose range of interest and taste challenges both Black and white stereotypes of African American behavior.²⁰

Reniqua Allen has written extensively on "Black Millennials" and has a number of informative articles on the age group. Her book, *It Was All a Dream*, examined the struggles of young Blacks between the years 1981 and 1996. They initially believed in the promise of America but became disillusioned by societal barriers placed before them. Regardless, they refused to give in to despair.²¹

Utilizing Pew's timeframes, this book reworks Pew's initial six classifications into six African American generational listings. It presents a stratificational framing of Black people by creating six categories from the twentieth century to the start of the twenty-first. Over 120 years of generational descriptions are provided exploring how Black people born within historical time frames responded to life in America. Each contains the African American experience within segments between 1900 and 2020.

The generational categories are:

- *New Negro Generation* (1900–1924)
- *Motown Generation* (1925–45)
- *Black Power Generation* (1946–64)
- *Hip-Hop Generation* (1965–80)
- *#BlackLivesMatter Generation* (1981–96)
- *Obama Generation* (1997–2020)

Each generational charting explores the societal factors that played a role in the development of a collective spiritual, emotional, and psychological worldview as generations developed an identity shaped by their collective life experience. Each generation differed not only from white Americans who lived in their time period but also from previous Black generations. The *New Negro Generation* (1900–1924) were the children of enslaved men and women with high illiteracy rates and few institutional resources. They knew oppression and hunger during the Great Depression and responded by vacating the South. Members of the New Negro Generation are fewest in number and are over one hundred years of age. The *Motown Generation* (1925–45) were byproducts of the Great Migration, with parents born in the South and children born in the North. The *Black Power Generation* (1946–64, aged 56–74 years) grew up in the aftermath of a world war and the resulting prosperity. They were the children of veterans and benefited from limited application of the New Deal toward people of color. The *Hip-Hop Generation* (1965–80) lived during the Civil Rights Movement, the urban insurrections, the Great Society, the New Frontier, and Affirmative Action. The *#BlackLivesMatter Generation* (1981–96) witnessed openings in business, education, and entertainment. The *Obama Generation* (1997–2020) grew up believing, “Yes We Can!” They marched in protest of racial injustice and helped vote into office the first female vice president. This generation has the youngest members, with a scarcity of information available.

The development of each generation is studied within an examination of the political climate in which they lived. The generations responded to the harsh realities of life by blending attitudes and strategies into a communal response to advance the cause of racial equity. Tactics involved political confrontations, entrepreneurship, societal acceptance, and personal improvement. An examination of contextual American society for each generation reveals important information on factors that influenced each generation. The microscope shall be focused on the political landscape, with specific viewing of the role presidents have had on Black life. The expansion, or destabilization, of Black rights can be measured by the policy positions of an administration and the personal opinions of the one holding the office. Blacks understand that the *president* can have unparalleled impact on American society, especially on race relations. A 2020 *Smithsonian* article reported that presidents have immense

impact on racial progress. “For better and for worse, the presidency, and its stewards over more than 200 years of history, plays a unique role in the racial relations of the country. The president has a tremendous ability to defend the civil liberties of the most vulnerable citizens and help heal racial divisions. Alternatively, the president can exacerbate racial tensions and enflame violence.”²²

While not widely reported, Blacks have been immersed in presidential politics in each epoch of American history. For generations, Blacks were legally and societally prohibited from holding office and even voting; nevertheless, they lobbied, advocated, and confronted those in office. During each presidential administration, Blacks lobbied, harassed, and confronted the president of their day, attempting to probe consciences and solicit protection of Black rights. No president escaped reproach as anti-slavery advocates made their case. Beginning with George Washington, presidents received letters, telegraphs, and personal visits.²³ Woodrow Wilson did not hide his endorsement of white supremacy and had to contend with William Monroe Trotter, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet” pushed him to support anti-lynching legislation, or at the very least to condemn lynching. Eleanor Roosevelt’s record on civil rights and alignment with the goals of Blacks was far and beyond the efforts of any president, including her husband. Walter White, head of the NAACP, met with each president between Calvin Coolidge and Harry Truman. Truman grew in his racial sensitivity after the blinding of a Black soldier awakened an officer’s empathy. Eisenhower was akin to Lincoln when his desire to preserve the Union forced him to take decisive action on behalf of Black people. John F. Kennedy was beloved in the Black community as African Americans gained access to his administration. Lyndon B. Johnson’s legacy was rescued by his advocacy for civil rights even as his deceit concerning the Vietnam War marred his presidential reputation. Bill Clinton is a beloved white president, as he bonded with Black folk on both personal and presidential levels. Barack Obama will be forever esteemed by Black America for providing hope, inspiration, and dream fulfillment through the image of a young Black boy gingerly touching his hair.

Each generation has often been disappointed by the lack of political courage and has judged presidents harshly for their inaction. In 1948, historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. asked a group of fifty-five historians to rank presidents from George Washington to Franklin D. Roosevelt, utilizing personal opinion as a tool to evaluate office performance. Not one of the historians was Black. His son, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., did a similar study in 1996 utilizing the same five categories of rank: “Great, Near Great, Average, Below Average, and Failure.” Arthur Jr. had one Black historian out of a group of thirty-two. African

American professors Hanes Walton Jr. and Robert Smith surveyed forty-four Black political scientists and historians on their evaluations of presidents. They arrived at differing rankings than either Schlesinger. Presidents were placed in categories ranging from “white supremacist,” “racist,” “racially neutral,” “racially ambivalent,” and “anti-racist.” George Bush, Dwight Eisenhower, and Gerald Ford, for example, were labeled as “racially ambivalent” and Ronald Reagan as “racist.”²⁴ In 2017, Walton and Tillery created an Editorial Opinion Score (EOS) from 9,406 African American newspaper editorials drawn from 43 papers published between 1900 and 2016. Nineteen presidents were ranked according to “presidential greatness.” Lyndon Johnson was ranked number 1. Surprisingly, Obama was number 5 in the “overall EOS” and number 7 under “civil rights.”²⁵

This book is intended for all who want to understand Black identity and the generations that produced a legacy of accomplishment through struggle. It is for those who want to understand how Black identity has been shaped by internal and external factors and the response of an oppressed people. Each generation’s story is a collective narrative that is still being written. We are all on a journey together, and we all want to better understand one another as well as to be understood. We all wish to truly know ourselves as individuals and as a part of a group of people united in history and desires. To be human is to be able to articulate one’s hopes and dreams. By having a sense of personal and communal identity, we are able to connect with others. Knowing the details of the Black experience familiarizes us with the American experience and the connections we all have.

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