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hile hip-hop as a musical form dates back 1970s New York City (specifically the Bronx and Harlem), it did not achieve any level of mainstream popularity until the mid- to late 1980s with Run DMC and the Beastie Boys. Also in this same period, a new generation emerged of independent African American filmmakers such as Robert Townsend and Spike Lee. Lee, who helped reawaken America's awareness about racism and prejudice in his exploration of contemporary African American life in films such as She's Gotta Have It (1986), School Daze (1988), and Do the Right Thing (1989) helped spark a renaissance in African American film.¹ This time period also saw the first publications of the hip-hop generation, and the most appropriate starting point for a study of the writing of this generation is with the writer who positioned himself as its spokesperson, Trey Ellis, whose literary role is similar to that of Lee in sparking a new generation of artists.

Ellis, with his impressive academic background as a graduate of elite Andover College and Stanford University, is the quintessential embodiment of W. E. B. DuBois's talented tenth (DuBois contended that the best hope for African Americans lies in the hands of the African American intellectual elite, the “talented tenth”). Born in 1962, Ellis is a generation removed from established and critically acclaimed African American writers such as Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed. Like others of the hip-hop generation, he came of age after the civil rights movement and thereby has no direct experience of segregation and presumably less direct experience with racism and prejudice as writers of Morrison and Reed's generation. Instead, Ellis, like his peers, was reared on the blaxploitation films of the 1970s and came of age at the very beginning of rap/hip-hop. Like Douglas Coupland, Trey Ellis became known as the spokesperson of his literary generation. Yet unlike Coupland whose novel itself became known as a generational manifesto (Generation X), Ellis made his broad generational claims through an oft-quoted essay, “The New Black Aesthetic,” first
Ellis's first novel, *Platitudes* (1988), portrays a growing schism between the more accepted African American folklore tradition, postmodernist literary experimentation. His writing that followed was new, nearly race-free, and influenced by popular culture. Ellis's next two novels, *Home Repairs* (1994) and *Right Here, Right Now* (1999), indicate that in subsequent years, he chose to navigate a trajectory that was less focused on race. In these novels, on the surface, race takes a back seat to issues of media, adolescence, and sexuality. This, in itself, shows that Ellis believes in the lessening importance of race in contemporary America. However, a closer look at both novels reveals that despite the raceless facades of contemporary America, race still plays a significant role in the lives of these even successful African American protagonists. If these characters are limited or categorized by their race, Ellis suggests, that experience must be nearly ubiquitous among African Americans.

After its publication, “The New Black Aesthetic” sparked divergent reactions from critics. Mark Anthony Neal describes the essay as not only a “generation’s manifesto” but also “a profound rearticulation of the sounds and signs of socially reconstructed notions of blackness” (1998, 8). The essay is not without its critics, though. For instance Madhu Dubey sees the essay’s main argument as a generalization, and that by focusing on the black bourgeoisie, Ellis thereby ignores the crucial issue of class differences amongst African Americans, a point with which another critic, Eric Lott, concurs (Dubey 2003, “Postmodernism as Postnationalism?” 11; Lott 1989, 245). However, Lott also calls the essay “exciting” in its progressive analysis of African American intellectualism by taking a serious look at influential and intelligent race-conscious comics/entertainers such as Richard Pryor and by suggesting that he should be considered as “one of the major thinkers of the seventies” (Lott 1989, 245). That an essay by a little-known writer came to the attention of many prominent African American critics indicates how original and groundbreaking his theories were about the transformation of African American culture and literature and how a new generation of African Americans was beginning to assert a separate identity from those of their forebears. The essay expresses much of Ellis's theories and philosophies about writing and African American culture in the late 1980s.

Ellis's essay begins with an epigraph from James Baldwin's *Price of a Ticket*, in which Baldwin states that even though the portrayal and account of suffering will not be original, the suffering must be told by each successive generation. That Ellis chose to begin with this epigraph demonstrates that he believes serious, even possibly devastating issues were facing the African American community in the late 1980s and that there has, in some ways, been little progress.
since the civil rights movement of the 1960s (a common theme in the writings of the hip-hop generation). He also makes it clear that he wants his ideas to be considered as part of a broader cultural and artistic movement. This is not merely a literary discussion but a cultural manifesto, exploring the status of African American social and political life and the way a new generation of African Americans has been asserting its identity and concerns distinct from that of previous generations.

A by-product of the civil rights movement, black nationalism grew in the late 1960s and 1970s and became accepted on a wider scale. African American literary works published during this time frequently focus on celebrating the achievements of African Americans in part to help to counteract decades of physical and mental oppression. This period of ethnic or self-affirmation, Ellis suggests, has some negative consequences in creating greater barriers between African Americans and whites and by setting up frequently unrealizable cultural standards for African Americans. Instead, in the spirit of black nationalism, it could be construed that embracing the dominant white culture in virtually any way contributes to cultural and personal oppression. In contrast Ellis asserts that the new African American artist of his generation should have the freedom to embrace whatever cultural form he/she prefers, regardless of race, without being prejudged or scorned by whites or African Americans. Ellis suggests that this point of view represents his generation as a culturally hybrid group who “all grew up feeling misunderstood by both the black worlds and the white” (1989, 234). The emphasis here is cultural, for Ellis is not only discussing those of mixed ethnicity but also all African Americans of his generation, regardless of whether they are mixed or not.

On the one hand, Ellis suggests that he and his cohorts are breaking away from standards of so-called authentic or legitimate African American life and behavior, such as the cultural or black-nationalist belief that African Americans should consistently and wholeheartedly embrace African American artists over white artists. According to this polarizing schema, if African Americans embrace forms of white culture, they are labeled, primarily by other African Americans, as sellouts or desirous of being white, but, on the other hand, they can never feel fully included in the white world (nor do they want to be a part of it), which holds its own conceptions of African American authenticity, typically as contemporary noble savages, musically and athletically gifted and above all else physical, not intellectual beings. Ellis writes that his generation rejects this black/white dichotomy, which its members find to be harming rather than helping African Americans, taking away their freedom to choose and to define themselves as they so desire.
Ellis praises the African American punk group Fishbone and the African American rock group In Living Color, who are both unafraid to play a white-dominated music and recognize no limitations or criticisms should be placed on what they do. Hence members of this group will “admit liking both Jim and Toni Morrison” (1989, 234). They could be described as transforming a tool of cultural oppression into one of possibility for African Americans in a similar way to how contemporary hip-hop artists sometimes sample other beats and melodies from mainstream, predominately white pop songs. This “minority’s minority,” as Ellis describes them, does appear similar to W. E. B. DuBois’s talented tenth; Indeed Ellis calls them “junior intellectuals” (1989, 234). Their strength, Ellis suggests, is not through their homogeneity but, rather, in their intellectual, economic, and personal diversity. Even though members of Ellis’s New Black Aesthetic are all African American, like the members of Fishbone, they come from different backgrounds: military, intellectual, and working class, for instance. Their purpose is not necessarily to preserve African American culture, which Ellis regards as an overwhelming and unfair job to place upon any individual or generation. Besides, what exactly does one define as African American culture, and how does one preserve it? If that is done by continuing in the tradition of previous African American writers/artists or exploring the same themes as them, then it can be limiting to any artist. Rather, Ellis argues that African American artists ought to be able to choose what appeals to them regardless of race. For example Fishbone identifies the all-white, experimental rock bank Pink Floyd and the African American funk/soul band Parliament/Funkadelic as major influences. In a way this makes Fishbone an ideal representation of Martin Luther King Jr.’s colorblind society, but it also opens them up to criticism for supposedly betraying their race or being selfish.

Ellis describes his own background as “bourgie,” having grown up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and New Haven, Connecticut (1989, 235). This is closer to the norm for most writers explored in the current volume, most of whom did not grow up in the ghetto or projects. Ellis anticipated the contention that his was a sheltered existence in which he did not face racism or discrimination, hence invalidating his racial theories: “It was not unusual to be called ‘oreo’ or ‘nigger’ on the same day” (1989, 235). Writing at a time when African Americans were reaching unparalleled (up to then) levels in sports and entertainment, Ellis suggests that the decade of the 1980s was a era of the “cultural mulatto” in the ascension of the domestic, middle- to upper-class Cosbys in *The Cosby Show* to the popularity of basketball stars such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, who appear culturally neutral and nonthreatening to whites and are hardly overt supporters of black nationalism or Afrocentrism (at least not in public) (1989, 235). There is a fine line, Ellis suggests, between subverting one’s identity...
to white expectations and being true to one's self or acting "natural," which is what Ellis believes should be the goal of any self-respecting artist, regardless of race (1989, 236). He also distinguishes between "cultural-mulatto, assimilationist nightmares," like Whitney Houston and Lionel Ritchie, and thriving hybrids "like Living Colour—the difference being one tries to please one's self instead of the white and/or black worlds" (1989, 242). Still, Ellis does not suggest that young African American artists ignore other white or African American artists who have helped pave the way for them but that they not be forced to shoulder the heavy, artistically draining burden of having to follow in someone else's footsteps or tradition.

Rather Ellis's vision in "The New Black Aesthetic" is that of a group of artists/intellectuals who do not reject the work of their forebears (Morrison, Reed, and Clarence Major, for instance), but neither do they feel a sense of obligation to follow in their footsteps. He praises these civil rights generation writers for helping to free African Americans from "white envy and self-hate" (1989, 237). Ellis acknowledges that his generation does not have to struggle as much to succeed as the previous ones, especially not in the entertainment industry. However, he also emphasizes, "Despite this current buppie artist boom, most black Americans have seldom had it worse" (1989, 239). This is a sentiment repeatedly seen in the work of hip-hop-generation writers: despite commonly held beliefs, virtually all of them suggest that the contemporary state of African Americans is quite poor indeed. In order to wrest readers out of complacency, Ellis claims that he and other African American artists of his generation practice "Disturbatory Art," which he defines as art that "shakes you up" (1989, 239). What Ellis (as well as other writers of the hip-hop generation) wants his readers to realize is that prejudice and racism still exist, albeit often in subtle, muted forms, a full generation after the civil rights movement. This is the disturbing part of his art (at least disturbing to the large number of Americans who believe Americans live in an egalitarian society). But, Ellis also says, "For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages" (1989, 239–40). In a way this statement seems to promote apathy, and while it may be that some contemporary African Americans ignore race completely, most address it, but they have forgone conventional methods to do so. Historical revisionism, for instance, seems to be largely passé, as is literature promoting the collective unity of African Americans (in the spirit of cultural or black nationalism). Instead, what is done more commonly is an exploration of contemporary African American life, largely unadorned and free of textual and verbal gimmicks.

The ability to express one's self freely and without fear of either whites or African Americans is key to Ellis's argument in the essay, and coming as it did
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in the late 1980s, he views rap or hip-hop as an important medium through which to achieve these goals. Indeed he describes it as “the most innovative sound since rock n’ roll” (1989, 241). Granted, with the rise of groups such as N.W.A. and Public Enemy, rap/hip-hop, at that time, was more socially outspoken, whereas in recent years, it became a big business and arguably has lost a good deal of its social appeal. One suspects that Ellis, had he written his article fifteen years later, would not have been as sympathetic to rap or hip-hop as he was in 1988 and 1989.

Ellis’s first novel, *Platitudes*, was published a year before “The New Black Aesthetic” and garnered impressive accolades from critically acclaimed African Americans authors and scholars such as Reed, Major, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. On the surface, the novel is a metafictional account of two writers (Dewayne Washington, a struggling, divorced African American man who writes in a light, playful manner virtually devoid of any racial motifs or connotations, and Isshee Ayam, a critically acclaimed, overly elaborate African American feminist writer who seems racially obsessed). In opposing ways they each write a basic coming-of-age story and clash over choosing the appropriate form and content with which to tell the story. While their argument seems rather picky and academic at first glance, it has broader significance. What they are actually fighting over is the best literary approach for contemporary African American literature through their opposing use of black nationalism and race consciousness (Isshee) and racial obliviousness (Dewayne). Through this literary dichotomy, Ellis suggests African American writers of his generation are caught in a double bind. They are damned if they do focus mostly on race, as that limits the scope of their work and often forces them to adopt stereotypical plot devices and caricatures, and damned if they do not address race, as that suggests that race does not play a role in the lives of African Americans, which is to not be realistic.

While the feminist author Isshee, who writes a somewhat hackneyed imitation of Morrison and Alice Walker, employs (or at least tries to employ) African American folklore and tends to write historical revisionist accounts of empowered slaves and sharecroppers in the South, Dewayne writes more of a contemporary adolescent coming-of-age story, a romantic and sexual bildungsroman. His narrative could be accused of being white infused or transcending race, depending on one’s point of view. One’s written correspondence, complete with literary criticism and, eventually, literary praise, affects the other’s writing (Dewayne is affected more than Isshee because he is more of the struggling writer, and she is an already established, critically acclaimed writer). Through his account of each author, Ellis presents a schism in African American literature; he also suggests that a medium (possibly a happy medium) can be found somewhere between the rather prurient, race-divorced, semi-experimental writings
Trey Ellis 25 of Dewayne and the traditional, folk-infused, self-important, racially conscious writings of Isshee. The result is a kind of hybrid fiction, characteristic of the literature of the hip-hop generation in that it blends different literary forms and approaches without regard to social or literary conventions.

Although *Platitudes* appears to be a postmodern text in line with that of Reed or John Barth, it actually critiques postmodern fiction as much as it embraces it, just as certain hip-hop artists might berate the seeming sterility of soul, R&B, and disco music in the late 1970s and early 1980s as being overly indulgent and insubstantial while still sampling songs from these eras in their own music. Towards that end, the novel begins with an epigraph from a fictional postmodern literary scholar whom Ellis calls Brian O’Nolan. In a footnote to O’Nolan’s name, Ellis indicates that O’Nolan goes by other names such as Flann O’Brien and Myles na gCopaleen. The use of multiple names indicates that Ellis finds this particular scholar to be shady and untrustworthy, and in turn, finds the same qualities in theories of postmodernity. Furthermore he uses two quotes from O’Nolan’s invented book, *At Swim-Two-Birds*: “The modern novel should be largely a work of reference” (1988, 2). This sounds reminiscent of John Barth, who suggested in “The Literature of Exhaustion,” that because all literary forms have been essentially used up, the new postmodern writer must rely on parody, pastiche, and historical revisionism. The second quote reveals Ellis’s hypocritical attitude towards fiction: “It’s [the novel composed of references] the sort of queer stuff they look for in a story these days” (1988, 2). With these two contradictory quotes, Ellis suggests that this postmodern author is not much more than a literary parrot, content to follow the dominant trends of the time and without thought, something of which both Dewayne and Isshee are guilty. While each believes he/she is autonomous in his/her own way, in reality, each is easily manipulated by expectations of others, Isshee by the African American folk and slave narratives, and Dewayne by Isshee herself. Through these characters and in the novel, Ellis thereby critiques the often-postmodernist fiction of the civil rights generation, which often lays claim to being more autonomous and honest but actually can be just as derivative and formulaic as any literary form. Writers of the hip-hop generation tend to not be so single-mindedly academic or highbrow in their literary approaches.

The novel begins by focusing on the protagonist of Dewayne/ISShee’s story, Earle, who is in many ways the perfect representative of the audience for contemporary, mainstream hip-hop. Earle, a sixteen-year-old high school student, is rather nerdy and largely sexually preoccupied. One of his first activities for the day is to spy upon a woman in an adjoining apartment building from his window as she does her aerobic exercises. At this stage, Washington seems determined to not write about race. The only real indication that Earle is
African American in the first few pages is Dewayne’s mentioning that Earle will be attending the B’nai B’rith–NAACP dance that evening and indeed that Dewayne couples Jews with African Americans indicates his willingness to abandon black-nationalistic themes. Furthermore Dewayne pointedly describes Earle’s mother in a manner to distinguish her from stereotypes of the African American “mammy” figure: “She is neither fat (her breasts don’t swell the lace top of the apron she has never owned), nor has she any gold teeth. She cannot sing, nor is she ever called ‘Mama’ (though that is what she calls her own mother). She does not, not work in public relations and her two-handed back-hand is not, not envied by her peers” (1988, 4). In a way Dewayne’s objective ought to be praised as he is attempting to counteract literary and social stereotypes of African Americans, but he goes too far in the opposite direction to the point of neglecting racial issues, just as mainstream hip-hop tends to do. Aside from that, the first two chapters of Dewayne’s story are rather tedious, bogged down by overly drawn details such as an entire paragraph devoted to description of a punchbowl at an evening’s dance and Earle’s failed attempts to get a girl to dance with him.

If the reader had not already realized that Dewayne’s story is rather clumsy and uninspiring, confirmation comes from an unnamed editor or possibly even Ellis himself who states after Dewayne’s first two chapters: “Well, Earle’s story has degenerated pretty quickly, hasn’t it? If you ask me, it’s got ‘No Sale’ written all over it. But girls, women. Now black women sell, according to a friend of mine who works in publishing” (1988, 10). There is indeed a good amount of truth in what this person suggests, for the most renowned African American authors in the mid- to late 1980s, such as Morrison, Walker, and Maya Angelou, were mostly female, and their fiction often details the lives of women. Similarly the most popular contemporary urban or hip-hop fiction, such as the novels of Nikki Turner, also tend to have female protagonists and/or focus on the lives of women. Aside from the fact that women make up a larger percentage of the reading public than men, the popularity of female authors may also have another cause. Because of lingering stereotypes about African American men being violent, when it is women who write about women or even write about men, as Morrison did in Song of Solomon, they may be less threatening to the white mainstream. They would thereby be more likely to be commercially successful.

As if in response to this criticism and commercial advice, Dewayne continues his narrative by focusing on black women, but, as in popular hip-hop music, he objectifies them mainly as sexual objects, describing a few as “delicate balls of assorted deliciousness” (1988, 10), and he focuses on their appearance rather than making them into substantial, three-dimensional characters.
Even though he does create a reasonable conflict between his new protagonist, Dorothy, and her mother, Darcelle, their minor dispute about homework and Dorothy’s plea to be allowed to go to a party are hardly substantial. In all fairness Dewayne’s portrayal of Earle is rather flimsy, and when he tries his hand writing from the perspective of a teenage girl, Dorothy, instead of the teenage boy, Earle, he continues to resort to flat generalizations. In Dewayne’s story Dorothy is a moody, overworked teenager who wants to have fun instead of working, and Earle is a sexually obsessed but socially lacking teenager. Neither characterization is particularly interesting or important.

Just as the reader’s patience begins to wear thin with Dewayne’s story, Dewayne himself interrupts the narrative by confessing that he’s at a breaking point because he’s having difficulty remembering what it was like to be a teenager: “I’m sorry. I don’t know what more to write” (1988, 14). This shows Dewayne’s lack of imagination. He is writing from only empirical experience, like most hip-hop lyricists do, whereas Isshee, like a postmodernist, civil rights-era writer, is all fanciful imagination and no realism and puts little of herself in her writing. She also lacks sympathy for other people. In response to his plea for help, Isshee writes Dewayne a letter and calls him a “freak,” insisting, “We women of color do not need your atavistic brand of representation, thank you” (1988, 15). Indeed Isshee’s criticism seems remarkably like the kind of criticism that tends to be leveled at hip-hop performers by certain critics. While it is true that Dewayne objectifies women in his narrative, he is not noticeably atavistic, nor is his narrative sexually explicit at this point. However, Isshee sees everything from the framework of being an African American feminist, and so any female characters that do not possess depth and strength make a story or novel fail to her eyes.

Isshee rewrites Dewayne’s story in a heavily descriptive, female-focused manner reminiscent of Morrison. In doing so Ellis lightly mocks the literature of the civil rights generation. Alluding to Morrison, he includes a character called I. Corinthians, who, at least in name, is quite similar to the character First Corinthians, who appeared briefly in *The Bluest Eye* and at greater lengths in *Song of Solomon* as the kindly but repressed daughter of Macon and Ruth Dead. However, Isshee’s I. Corinthians is an amoral servant of the landlord/master of Earle’s family. Instead of situating the story in contemporary times as Dewayne does, Isshee situates it in the segregation-era South (presumably early twentieth century). This allows her to extol the fortitude of her characters in their struggles against racism, and it allows her to provide a clear distinction between good and evil. Not many critics, after all, could really criticize Isshee’s work without at least some fear of being labeled a racist him/herself. Isshee is also able to place her characters in a natural, earthy setting, where she can also
display the physical and emotional strength of her female characters, for Isshee is first and foremost a feminist writer (at least she believes herself to be), immediately apparent by the first simile she uses, which compares the morning to “Mama’s handstarched and sun-dried petticoat” (1988, 16). Aside from Earle, there are no significant male characters in Isshee’s female-dominated tale (Earle’s dopey sidekicks Bassmouth and Cornbread are two-dimensional country-boy stereotypes or do-nothing drunkards or traitors such as I. Corinthians); the women are the life and energy of the house.

Yet in her narrative, even Isshee’s female characters come off as stereotypically folksy caricatures, and her overdrawn descriptions are contrived. Although she writes in a more literarily accomplished manner than Dewayne does, the content of her story is equally vapid to his own. Dewayne’s biting criticism of Isshee in his rebuttal letter to her, in which he describes her revamped version of his story as a formulaic African American “glory” story, has some accuracy to it (1988, 19). The rest of Dewayne’s response is juvenile; after reading Isshee’s overly wrought descriptions, he becomes more drawn to the real and specific, but unfortunately, that does not improve his writing. There is really no rationale for Dewayne providing Isshee with a list of Earle’s supposed favorite things, nearly all nonethnic specific contemporary things such as “sweaters, bikinis, calendars,” except to frustrate her and provide further rationale for Dwayne to keep steady in his insistent and stubborn desire not to focus upon race (1988, 20). At this point, the two are engaged in a heated battle with one another, just as a writer of the member of the hip-hop generation might be at war with a member of the civil rights generation. However, their efforts will eventually lead them both towards literary and personal improvement.

Dewayne goes back to narrating his equally contrived story, now describing Earle as part of a nerdish group, along with two other male teenagers who collectively call themselves the Trinary. Still, one can already see that Isshee’s letter has affected him to some degree, as he devotes several pages to narrating from the point of view of Earle’s mother, who works as a reservation agent at the fictional South African Airlines (SAA). While Dewayne’s description of Earle’s mother is one of a subservient and not elegant person, it is not deserving of Isshee’s categorization as “puerile, misogynistic, disjointed,” and “pathetic pornography” (1988, 39). Her violent reactions can only be explained that subconsciously she realizes that Dewayne may be somewhat correct in describing her work as rehashing African American glory stories and that she may be hypersensitive to the portrayal of female characters.

Instead of working together, the two irrationally attack one another. Here Ellis hints at the dark underside of African American life, whereby these two writers become rather vicious and bloodthirsty in their attempt to outdo,
defeat, and even destroy each other instead of pooling their energies to help one another. This repeatedly is seen in African American literature and history from the literary and philosophical feud between Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston to infighting within the Nation of Islam and, most recently, in the controversy surrounding Bill Cosby’s remarks that exposed the hostility between the civil rights and hip-hop generations as well as the conflicts between African Americans of different economic classes. Indeed these characters, despite being similar in age, represent the conflicts between the civil rights and hip-hop generations.

Unlike Dewayne, Isshee is an established, critically acclaimed writer, so at this point she sees no reason to change her literary style because of a literary nobody like Dewayne, whose opinions, at this point, she does not value in the least. So, when Isshee goes back to writing her revised narrative of Earle’s story, it continues to be overdrawn, melodramatic, and contrived. Her revised chapter is situated in church, and there Isshee is able to extol the virtues of religion as providing community and solidarity for African Americans. This is a common theme in the writings and lives of the civil rights generation, but religion does not play as significant a role in the lives and writings of the hip-hop generation. Although there is truth to what Isshee suggests, she neglects to show the opposite side: how Christianity kept many African Americans figuratively enslaved long after they were emancipated in the sense that Christianity allowed them to be reconciled to oppression and segregation, to see themselves as Christ-like martyrs, to rationalize discrimination and racism as part of God’s plan, or to console themselves with hopes of a perfect afterlife. Her story has much that Bill Cosby might praise because it emphasizes strength in the face of adversity or oppression; still, her characters are not much more than agrarian simpletons.

Above all, Isshee has a typical civil-rights-era message in her writings. She wants to portray African Americans, specifically African American women, as incredibly strong and noble, and she is willing to sacrifice virtually everything to emphasize this message. In part to do that, Isshee describes Earle’s family as being incredibly impoverished, barely having enough food to survive, with Earle having to walk fifteen miles to school (one way). The latter is a good example of the extent to which Isshee is willing to sacrifice realism in order to emphasize hardships, for a fifteen-mile walk would take at least four hours. One of the hallmarks of the hip-hop generation is their desire for realism or to “keep it real,” and Isshee’s work would understandably lose some credibility in the eyes of the hip-hop generation because her writing is overdone for dramatic effect. Furthermore Isshee, in her description of the school, cannot help but interject her own rather melodramatic comments: “All the students pledging
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allegiance to the flag, but not really to the flag, more to a future flag, not only with more stars but with new, invisible stripes, colored rainbow stripes earned by the blood, sweat, and tears of all those Selma grandmothers firehosed into history" (1988, 49). Were African Americans in the early twentieth century really so prophetic and hopeful as to envision a more-egalitarian America, in which they would be treated as equals by whites? It is doubtful, as they had little to convince them that the attitudes of whites would so dramatically change. No doubt this is an aspect of Isshee's writing that Ellis criticizes, for empty platitudes, which is essentially what Isshee writes, are ultimately meaningless. Indeed it is exactly this that members of the hip-hop generation often criticize about the civil rights generation: that they possess pie-in-the-sky idealism about race relations but fail to see the stark realities of contemporary, everyday life.

Isshee's chapters and vehement criticism of Dewayne's writings end up pushing Dewayne in the opposite direction, just as an aspiring hip-hop generation African American writer like Ellis might be inspired to write less–race-conscious prose after reading the contrived, ultra racially conscious prose of a postmodernist civil-rights-generation writer like Isshee. This is a position arguably that many of the hip-hop generation find themselves in. Although similar in age to Dewayne, Isshee really represents the elder African American generation that came of age in and fought for the civil rights movement and for whom racial issues are tantamount, in addition to fostering positive images of the race. Hearing so much about race from their forebears, the hip-hop generation rebels by demanding there is more to contemporary African American life than the struggle for racial equality. Dewayne's desire to frustrate Isshee appears in his next letter to her, in which he sarcastically thanks her for her "oh-so-generous assistance" and responds by giving her "an even longer and less readable list" (1988, 52). Indeed Dewayne proceeds to describe the Trinary (Earle and his two white, nerdy friends) as they spend an uneventful day at Coney Island, unsuccessfully trying to pick up girls and ending up seeing a soft-core–porn movie. His writings are meandering, light, and lack the depth of Isshee's, but it is more realistic in uncovering the relatively meaningless lives of these teenagers. Both authors are egoists, and their letter writing escalates into a war of egos. Isshee accuses Dewayne of "transparent jealousy," while Dewayne scoffs at her writing (1988, 79). Once again, instead of working together and attempting to help each other become better writers or even offering some encouraging words, thereby supporting African American art, they attack one another rather than metaphorically attacking the system that favors Caucasians over African Americans. Time and time again, this interracial fighting is seen in the works of hip-hop-generation writers, who regard it as one of the greatest, if not the greatest threat to the contemporary African American community.
However, *Platitudes* is a novel about making connections between these two disparate groups. Indeed something about the letter from Isshee or the next part of Isshee’s story affects Dewayne enough to change his story and his writing. In part Isshee may have hit close to home when, in her letter, she groups Dewayne with “countless other underachieving middle-aged black ‘artists’” (1988, 79). Her comments, though, are insulting rather than constructive. In addition her subsequent rewrite of Earle’s story with her attention to how Earle is transformed by reading the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar may have affected Dewayne emotionally in the sense that he realizes that she has some good intentions in stressing the importance of African American literature. Furthermore he recognizes the importance of his cultural and literary heritage, which many members of the hip-hop generation seem to forsake, not seeing its direct utility in their lives. Consequently, when Dewayne picks up the story, his writing style veers closer towards Isshee’s. Earlier Dewayne wrote short, declarative sentences: “There she is again, dancing with some girls. The crazy lights darken her hair. Another black young man nears Janey Rosebloom to the beat, groin first. She turns to him to the beat. They dance at each other” (1988, 7). Now, his prose is a little more metaphoric, involved, descriptive, and introverted. For instance, when Earle comes home, Dewayne/Ellis writes, “Kicking the serving tray, the decanters upon it gossip but don’t break. The dim reflection of the dark in the glass over the Impressionist print next to his mother’s door fools him. He steps into the shimmer and stings his nose” (1988, 93). In addition, after a description of John Coltrane’s music, Dewayne switches gears and focuses on his female characters like Isshee does. Instead of treating his female characters as sexual or two-dimensional objects, Dewayne now imbues them with the same three-dimensional qualities as his male characters. His female characters go out shopping, gossip, talk about their personal lives, and get involved with some men in a bar in New York City. Thereby, Dewayne breaks away from the misogyny often associated (rightly or wrongly) with hip-hop music.

Isshee responds with some mixed praise to Dewayne, but her praise is mainly because his writing is becoming more like hers, not because he has necessarily improved his story. With this, Ellis equally criticizes the civil rights generation, who purportedly want to help the hip-hop generation, but they may do so for egoistic rather than altruistic reasons. Rather, there continues to be little or no depth to Dewayne’s main plot. However, Isshee reads more into Dewayne’s story than is actually there, claiming that Dewayne’s descriptions of his female characters include a “dialectic between class struggle and cultural assimilation, the mental anguish of rising from a middle-class Harlem household to the rich, white, New York, controlled-substance-abusing elite,” that “is almost interestingly handled” (1988, 109). However, that scene had nothing to
do with anguish or class differences; rather, the four girls Dewayne portrayed were, according to their own account, merely looking for “the best-looking guys” (1988, 97). Here Isshee is being hypocritical in praising the sexual objectification that she had been consistently criticizing in Dewayne’s treatment of women, because to her, there can be no real sexual objectification (or other forms of objectification) of men. Despite her purported commitment to racial equality, Isshee seems more like she’s ruthlessly arrogant, narcissistic, and condescending and only really caring about how she’s perceived, which again, is how the hip-hop generation can see the civil rights generation in its worst possible light. One gets a sense that Ellis felt this to be a danger of literary success. Along these lines, Isshee not only insists that she made a significant contribution to Dewayne’s novel but also claims that her editor is interested in publishing it. Though she offers, in a rather backhanded way, to compensate Dewayne financially, she also insults him by offering to try to help him get a job as a copywriter (1988, 109).

She concludes the letter, in a rather passive-aggressive manner, by telling Dewayne, “Your position on negritude, sir, continues to befuddle me” (1988, 110). For Isshee a socially responsible African American must have a position on race or write racially conscious fiction; anything other than that would be meaningless and/or unrealistic. At this point, the schism between the two is largely to write about race or not to write about race. This is an unfair dichotomy that writers of the hip-hop generation rebel against. However, it is not a new debate but goes all the way back to the debate between Alan Locke and W. E. B. DuBois during the Harlem Renaissance.

Dewayne responds to Isshee’s letter, claiming that he has now read and appreciated her works, and they have in turn, influenced his own writings. He does so in part out of flattery, being that he is an egotist almost as much, if not as much, as Isshee. Yet, his interest seems to be rather romantic or sexual, as, in order to see if they can meet, he asks Isshee if she will be attending the BAA conference, and he even requests her picture while including a picture of himself with his letter. This does not suggest that Dewayne has grown a social conscience; rather, he is still as self-involved as before, only now he is trying harder to impress Isshee. In turn Earle, instead of being sexually obsessed, is now more romantic and shy, evident by how Dewayne describes him as being content to just “sit there and look at her smile for days like a dopey goon” (1988, 136). However, Dewayne has not yet evolved from being an egoistic and possibly misogynist member of the hip-hop generation. Furthermore, in his desire to impress Isshee, Dewayne makes Earle politically active, joining and volunteering for the Jean Toomer Democratic Club in order to help a prominent African American mayoral candidate get elected. Dewayne wants to portray Earle as
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being responsible and racially conscious because he believes that will help spark Isshee's romantic interest. This is also apparent in how, while at the Jean Toomer Club, Earle discovers many of Isshee's books in a small library, and Dewayne not only shamelessly includes a whole page of his story to describing Isshee's books and quoting from positive reviews of her books, he has Earle eagerly take one of Isshee's books home with him. Far from bothering her, she tells him in her next letter that she is “obviously pleased” (1988, 149). This should come as no surprise as, above anything else, Isshee is an egoist, not a devoted feminist or fighter for civil rights.

All of this does have the effect of warming Isshee up to Dewayne. In so doing, Ellis shows that, at heart, both Dewayne and Isshee are quite similar to one another despite how they attempt to distinguish themselves, just as is the case with members of the civil rights and hip-hop generations. In her next letter Isshee apologies to Dewayne because she claims she has learned he was just “another heartbroken human being,” but it is more likely a result of his flattering comments of her (1988, 148). Despite how Dewayne's story has turned into clichéd melodrama, Isshee praises it: “I believe Platitudes is now coming along rather well. The two-completely-different-types-fall-in-love Love Story is a time-honored favorite. If it was good enough for Shakespeare . . .” (1988, 148–49). Yet her comments only address the surface; Dewayne's work is still lightweight and insubstantial. Although Isshee herself comes across as being almost asexual at first, it can be presumed that her comments were influenced by seeing Dewayne’s photograph, which she praises. Expecting an unkempt or “overweight man,” Isshee is pleased to find that Dewayne looks more like “an athlete” (1988, 150). With this flattery from Isshee, Dewayne, in hopes that it will impress her, continues changing Earle into a more innocent and shyer teenager rather than a hormone-raging adolescent. Indeed it has a positive effect upon Isshee, as noted by her praise for his latest writing, which she describes as “handled wonderfully and, above all, sensitively” (1988, 157). These comments are nothing more than the title of the book—platitudes. While the two writers have warmed up to each other personally, they still have not become better writers or surmounted their egoistic tendencies. However, it is finding this common ground that Ellis suggests is the necessary and important first step in helping to bridge the gap between these two authors and, metaphorically, between the two generations they represent.

Up to this point, Dewayne represents the lesser emotionally and socially developed aspects of the hip-hop generation. That Dewayne's objective is purely romantic or sexual becomes clear when we find out that Isshee stood Dewayne up at a writer's conference for another African American writer, Richard Johnson. Although she apologizes, Dewayne takes it as a rejection.
Consequently Dewayne not only abandons his more introverted, innocent, descriptive, Isshee-influenced narrative but also abandons his original light-hearted approach. Instead, his story turns dark and angry, mirroring his own feelings. In short Dewayne is writing like an individualist, not for the greater collective good, as is more typical with hip-hop generation. When Dewayne picks up the story, Earle gets rejected by the girl he is most interested in, Dorothy (mirroring Dewayne’s own perceived rejection by Isshee). Consequently Earle gives up his political volunteer work, while his mother loses her new, promising job. The extent of Dewayne’s anger is apparent in how Earle explains that he discovers Dorothy in flagrante delicto, describing her as “the only love of my life getting fucked up the ass like a pig” (1988, 161). Along similar lines, Dewayne goes back to writing more sexually explicit prose in part to anger Isshee, but this time it is nearly pornographic in his description of a sexual encounter between Earle and Janey. Isshee, in her next letter, this time being basically accurate, sees the changes in his story as a response to her perceived rejection of him. She believes he has “willfully” sabotaged his own work to cause her pain and that her rejection has demolished his “faith in black women and in our people as a whole” (1988, 171). The latter is an overstatement, of course (a result of Isshee’s narcissism), but it does seem like they are finally communicating to one another. Isshee does seem genuinely regretful, though, as she tells Dewayne that she is not only “fond” of him, but she has decided not to publish her version of the story. Furthermore she tells him that she will “sign over all rights” to Dewayne and then give his version “to my publisher with the highest possible recommendation” (1988, 172). To confirm her interest in Dewayne, she also invites him to dinner.

However, Ellis makes great efforts to show how racial infighting affects both groups and in this case, Isshee as well as Dewayne. For her own part, Isshee’s narrative seems to degenerate as well. Earle and Dorothy kill the evil slave master Wyte and his apprentice, I. Corinthians. Still, her encounter with Dewayne seems to have made her more humble. While at a conference, a person points out to Isshee that some have criticized her for “being anti-male” (1988, 177). She responds to this criticism in an unexpected manner that demonstrates how she has changed, in large part a result of her interactions with Dewayne: “I think to a large degree they are correct, especially in my very early works. I began writing shortly after some rather disastrous romantic encounters, one with a university professor no less, and my early works reflected this misandry” (1988, 177). Now, both characters are changed in positive ways by one another, and while that is not directly manifested in their writing, it seems like this is the starting point for their social and personal development, for they have begun to see their own faults and limitations while they reach out
to one another. In a broader sense we see both generations collaborating with one another, complementing their strengths, and by doing so collectively improving.

The novel ends with Isshee and Dewayne having dinner together and then making love, which, metaphorically, can be seen as a unification of these two generations and literary approaches. However, at first Dewayne has trouble performing, which signifies his own feelings of inadequacy and fear of Isshee. He literally needs to write himself into having more confidence and does so by going back to the story and having Earle act with genuine confidence. The story comes back to Earle and Dorothy, and Dorothy apologizes to Earle for having an affair with someone else. “You’re too pure,” she tells him. Instead of being overwhelmed by his insecurities, Earle acts, kissing Dorothy, who returns in kind. Dewayne, just like Earle, has overcome his own lack of literary and sexual confidence, and the last sentence indicates this: “Now that it presses the underside of his desk, he will go wake Isshee” (1988, 183).

That Dewayne needed to write the scene with Earle before becoming aroused indicates a symbiotic relationship between fiction and real life for Dewayne. Indeed that is part of Ellis’s intentions: to deconstruct the motives of authors. Throughout the novel, Dewayne is clearly motivated by his desire to combat and then connect with Isshee, and although she does not admit it, Isshee is also driven to outperform, rather than to connect with Dewayne. In addition the literal coupling of Dewayne and Isshee at the end of the novel indicates that he believes a middle ground can be forged between what could be described as two extremes of the civil rights and hip-hop generations: the race-conscious writings of the former and race-oblivious writings of the latter. In other words African American writers can address racial issues in a significant way without overwhelming the narrative and ignoring other nonracially specific themes and ideas. This hybridity or at least attempted hybridity is evident in the writings of other members of the hip-hop generation. This is more along the lines of Ellis’s trajectory in his next two novels, *Home Repairs* (1994) and *Right Here, Right Now* (1999), in which he focuses on contemporary life. He does so by blending conventions of the civil rights and hip-hop generations. In these novels race is an issue and theme but not the only one and not necessarily the main one either. However, it is important to note that it is Ellis’s characters more than Ellis himself who make choose not to focus on race. By doing so, Ellis suggests that they are unable to find a satisfying and complete sense of self.

In *Home Repairs*, Ellis addresses race by counteracting stereotypes of black masculinity and by having his characters defy societal expectations. In that sense the novel challenges contemporary hip-hop’s portrayal of masculinity as ultrasexual and ultraconfident. *Home Repairs* is largely a sexual and romantic
bildungsroman of the teenage years and young adulthood of Austin McMillan/Jones (he changes his last name later in the novel), written in a diary form, spanning a nine-year period from 1979 to 1988, in which the narrator is sixteen to twenty-five. One reviewer of the novel, Darryl Pinckney, suggests that the novel is “intended as a rebuttal to modern black women’s charges that the black man has sold out and mistreated them” (1993, 33). Indeed Austin is not a stereotypical sexually powerful African American man as often portrayed in hip-hop music and culture; rather, he is unsure, awkward, and rejected many times before he achieves any measure of romantic or sexual success. Still, for the most part, he treats the women in whom he is interested with respect and courtesy.

Although the racial subject matter and implications in *Home Repairs* lie somewhat submerged in the narrative, they still exist. Austin’s difficulties with women and difficulties establishing a strong sense of self may have a good deal to do with being an African American man growing up in a mostly white environment. From the beginning of the novel, Austin, who is attending a nearly all-white school in New Hampshire, is quite self-conscious about his ethnicity. His subverted, alienated feelings seem to emerge while walking to a school party; he describes “a white Afro of icy wind,” and “Main Street is empty, and its black is washed white with dried salt” (1994, 10). It is as if he feels whitewashed, and he is projecting those feelings onto the environment. When he gets to the party, Austin notes, “I’m the only black kid, so a stranger here, too” (1994, 10). Because of his race, Austin feels he can be nothing but a stranger. When he goes to Cape Cod with his white friend, Morgan, and they meet a seemingly interested white girl, Austin immediately gives up on her, presuming falsely that she will not be interested in him because he’s African American: “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to be white before tonight,” even though he has no indication or way of knowing if this white girl might be interested in him (1994, 38).

None of this is particularly new or specific to the hip-hop generation, but that Austin has to navigate the same issues of racial exclusion that his forebears did indicates that members of the hip-hop generation still have to deal with the same racial issues that members of the previous generation did, despite the perceived advancements made by the civil rights movement. What makes it even more difficult for Austin is that the women he pursues often lose interest in him because he does not express the level of sexual and romantic self-confidence that they have come to expect from other African American men (quite possibly learned from the common portrayal of male hip-hop generation members as hyperstrong and sexual). In other words they buy into the stereotypical sexual bravado of African American men and consider such behavior to be alluring. That part of Austin’s difficulties may result from his own conflicted
feelings about being African American is also evident when he goes to Harlem and feels uncomfortable: “I felt awful being afraid of my own people” (1994, 76). But it remains that he never expresses a fear the of white people with whom he has grown up. No one in Harlem does anything to inspire fear; rather, because of the media and hip-hop culture, Austin has come to associate Harlem and the inner city with violence regardless of whether or not it is true.

In order to combat his conflicted racial feelings, Austin decides to live in a black dorm when he begins school at Stanford University, a move that might very well have been praised by more-radical elements of the civil rights generation. He explains, “It will be good for me. I could have had a black roommate at Andover, but I thought it was stupid, reverse racism. Now I’m sick of being on the outside of everything, the black world and the white. That’s probably why it’s been so hard to get laid. I’m going to be normal, finally, and then we’ll see if my life shapes up” (1994, 99). Austin blames his romantic and sexual failings on his feelings of racial exclusion, but although race might have something to do with it, he uses it more as an excuse to absolve himself from personal responsibility. It turns out that merely being around other black people is not enough to reverse Austin’s losing streak with women, nor does it give him a more stable sense of identity or confidence. Rather, it is a crutch that Austin uses in order to avoid blaming himself. In that, Ellis rejects as simplistic the belief that race underlies Austin’s behavior and failings. He convinces himself that he needs to be surrounded by African Americans in order to feel comfortable and happy. However, neither his time in an African American dorm nor his summer spent amidst a large number of African Americans in Atlanta helps him with his romantic and sexual difficulties.

Austin could be described as representative of the postsegregation/hip-hop generation in that his immediate personal concerns supercede social or racial consciousness; he invokes race only to justify his failings or in times of personal crisis. This is not to suggest that he is necessarily wrong in his assumptions (for he may be right), but he is only concerned with race and the larger African American community when something personal happens to him. Actually Austin is rather egotistical; he is a man on a mission to have a stable, steady, and satisfying romantic and sexual relationship. Even in August 1983 at the twentieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington, Austin is more concerned with getting involved with Calista, the woman with whom he attends the event, than anything else. Still, it’s not just Austin who seemingly trivializes this important anniversary; it seems to be endemic among Austin’s peer group. While on the train to Washington, D.C., Austin notes the “high school and college students masquerading as 1960s–era hippies, nuns, the Red Communist Youth Brigade, and various black Baptist deacons,” as well
as white ultraliberals there singing John Lennon’s “Imagine” and protesting Reagan (1994, 184). Austin and others at the anniversary seem like empty imitators of 1960s idealism, merely mimicking their roles but possessing little or none of the spirit and drive of the original marchers. It would be too easy and unfair to suggest that they are apathetic or vapid, as members of the civil rights generation sometimes do, because racism and prejudice have become so much more nebulous than in the 1950s and 1960s with the end of segregation.

Particular to Austin’s situation as a member of the hip-hop generation is the effect of the media, which ends up being, at least initially, a huge asset to him in his personal life and professional career. Austin becomes the host of a home-improvement show for cable television. This is the only clear way that being African American seems to help him. In this case racial stereotyping works to Austin’s benefit, for despite that he knows next to nothing about home improvement, Austin is hired, and the audience accepts him as a knowledgeable working man because he is black (unlike a more skilled professional such as a lawyer or doctor). Here is the insidious effect of subtle prejudice and stereotypes brought on by the media. The producers want to capitalize on his race when they ask him to consider changing his last name, which Austin willingly does: “They were concerned that ‘Austin McMillan’ sounded more like a British prime minister than a home repairs adviser, so I suggested Jones” (1994, 251). No doubt, the producers of the show are happy with Austin’s name change because to their ears, and the ears of many people, it sounds more authentically African American.

This stereotyping is reinforced by how successful the program becomes and in how it benefits Austin. Living merely off his looks and apparent charisma does wonders for Austin’s social life, which was previously a series of disasters, but it also makes him internally hollow or, by his own account, “a shallow, vapid asshole” (1994, 249). He admits that not only can he not remember the last book he read, he “can’t remember a single class from college” (1994, 273). Still, he has never been more popular and pleased to find out that, according to the African American magazine Chocolate Singles, he’s “the twenty-second of the fifty most eligible black bachelors in New York” (1994, 273). This shows how important the media and entertainment industries have become in the African American community and to the larger world. It also shows how easy it is for Austin, a sham and imposter, to manipulate his audience, who has preconceived notions that an African American man could be an expert at something physical or manual like home improvement. Lastly it shows how the African American community seems to be complicit in rewarding shallow and insubstantial behavior. The result is that Austin’s “successes” become hollow. After a couple of years as the television host, Austin finds that despite his growing
popularity, he has never felt so isolated and empty. Still, he does not quit his job and continues at it until he is terminated because of the increasing costs of the program and Austin’s botched attempt to ask for a raise. This is significant in that the media executives seem to make this decision because they regard Austin as a replaceable commodity, which leads one to wonder how much progress there really has been for African Americans in an area (entertainment) in which they are thought to have the most successes. After he loses his job, Austin decides to turn his life around by applying to graduate programs in African American studies. However, even though he is accepted to Cornell University and plans to begin there in the fall, he is drawn by a more tempting offer: to do his home-repairs show for the Playboy Channel. Although it might seem that this kind of success will only lead Austin into a further emotional downward spiral, it actually has the opposite effect upon him: he no longer enters into unfulfilling sexual and romantic relationships that he began pursuing after he became a television star. Getting what he has dreamt of for so long, being surrounded by a large number of extremely attractive women, shows Austin that he has been living in a dream world all these years because he realizes that what he desired does not produce genuine or lasting fulfillment. This makes him a clear counterpart to many contemporary hip-hop stars who, once they reach the level of Austin’s celebrity or greater, become caught up in a whirlwind of sex, violence, and drugs.

The novel ends with Austin asking his African American assistant Michelle to dinner, insisting that he has matured and that he will no longer fall victim to unrequited love. He has grown comfortable in his own skin and no longer feels dominated by a need to prove himself romantically, sexually, or racially. Although that might seem like an uplifting end to the novel, Austin’s journey is so improbable (specifically, the Playboy offer) that one cannot generalize his experience to other African Americans. He may have been successful in overcoming his personal and racial problems, but what of the millions of others who do not have the opportunities Austin had? It took failing for Austin to appreciate success, and failing and admitting one’s vulnerabilities are not part and parcel of the hip-hop cultural ethos. Indeed this is one of Ellis’s critiques of hip-hop: that the machismo it endorses ultimately does more damage than good to the African American community. Ellis leaves it uncertain as to what might happen to Austin after his success at the end of *Home Repairs*. Will he continue to feel comfortable in his own skin? Will he become a better, more sensitive person, or will he become even more narcissistic and oblivious, despite what he says?

In a way, Ellis’s next novel, *Right Here, Right Now* (1999), situates an Austin-like character, several years later, who becomes somewhat of a monstrosity, a
rather nightmarish end result of the hip-hop generation. The protagonist, a suave motivational speaker named Ashton Robinson, is what Austin McMillan might become ten years later: a rather vapid, fraudulent entertainment entrepreneur/con man with little or no moral concern about cheating his needy “clients” out of money. *Right Here, Right Now* is more of a warning call of what could happen to a person completely devoid of racial or ethnic consciousness as is the case with Ashton. He represents the hip-hop generation run amuck: amoral, scheming, and manipulative and with no allegiance to anyone but himself. The characters in the novel, while often lacking depth, are purposely made to be caricatures, because the book is told from the perspective of Ashton, who is rather shallow himself.

To a large degree, Ashton represents everything that Ellis has come to critique about contemporary society, especially the hip-hop generation. A self-described narcissist and fraud who admits he’s “never been formally trained in psychology, theology, anything,” Ashton becomes successful by promoting the idea that a person can change his/her behavior by changing his/her self-image (1999, 25). In other words acting in a certain way or as a certain type produces that reality if it is done repeatedly, for long enough, and with sufficient belief. Ashton’s typical client is a middle-aged, white man who “stumbled into success early but for some years now has stalled and watched people he had early on competed with and vanquished suddenly overtaken him” (1999, 44). This majority client has no deeper goals other than wanting to appear better or stronger in the eyes of others, just like teenage consumers of hip-hop. Given that Ashton’s clients are not that sympathetic, we do not fault him much for duping them. However, Ashton even convinces a much more sympathetic African American minority recruiter to give up his job and pursue something more financially lucrative: insurance. Ashton has no moral center, no ethnic allegiance, and no desire to help the African American community. In short he has no more important desires other than to become wealthy and desirable. Furthermore, in private, Ashton reveals that not only does he not believe in the message he preaches but also that he’s still “hiding a fragile, frightened wimp within me” (1999, 26). Similar to Austin in *Home Repairs*, the success that Ashton achieves is ultimately hollow and insignificant.

Ashton can be seen as a nightmarish hip-hop generation-era reincarnation of Ralph Ellison’s invisible man (1952), as both lack a stable identity and moral center, a result of implicit and explicit racial reasons. For Ashton (like Austin in *Home Repairs*), it is largely a response to his later youth in which he was often one of the only African Americans around or the only one. After Ashton’s parents move from the predominately African American city of Flint, Michigan, to the predominately Caucasian and Chicano, Santa Cruz, California, he becomes
a worse student and an empty caricature. He insists that he had to adapt or die, and that in order to be accepted or fit in, he needed to either blend in with others by learning “Spanish and how to surf” or pretend to be a more dangerous, stereotypical African American man because that is what his peers want or expect him to be (no doubt due at least in part to media caricatures). Ashton realizes he can fulfill their stereotypes by inventing “an exotic past for myself of urban bravery, college-aged girlfriends” (1999, 53). Ashton attempts to do both and does so successfully: “In four months I had more friends in Santa Cruz than in my lifetime in Flint” (1999, 53). Realizing, then, that “life is acting,” Ashton loses all sense of shame in lying and becomes a living lie, telling people whatever he wants in order to get what he wants (1999, 53). Ellis largely blames racial stereotyping for creating people like Ashton, who, feeling devoid of a stable identity, becomes amoral, and ironically, solipsistic, admitting, “I love me so goddamn much!” (1999, 15).

This is not to suggest that Ellis completely absolves Ashton of blame, for in the novel, Ellis often pokes fun at him for his newfound beliefs in New Age mysticism when he has a vision, hallucination, or religious experience one evening after he drinks an entire bottle of cough syrup. Subsequently Ashton is “visited” by a Brazilian midget who tells he that he needs to find his “ashay,” a “Brazilian Portuguese term imported from Africa that roughly translates to ‘spirit’ or ‘power’” (1999, 120). Subsequently Ashton changes his message from self-serving actualization to an emphasis upon spirituality and the search for meaning in what he now sees as a disposable, empty materialistic life.

On the surface, this seems like a perfectly good change for Ashton to make (and possibly for much of the hip-hop generation). However, Ashton’s “religious vision” is really a manifestation of a suppressed death wish derived from his years of forced playacting as a tough, African American teenager or would-be surfer in a predominately white community and from his real acting as a motivational speaker. In other words Ashton has become nothing but a hollow façade. He somewhat realizes how empty he has become and wants it all to end. Indeed he later defines his objective as to “leave this world and leave our bodies, our personal histories, and in the truth of the Other Side as the pure essence that all humans understand to be their true nature when they are honest enough to see through their socioreligious acculturation” (1999, 170). Up to this point, the novel is concerned with only Ashton, but the power of his rhetoric is strong enough that he is able to gather a small but devoted following that becomes a cult. Similar to the Heaven’s Gate cult, Ashton has them dress identically, although the clothes are from the clothing-store chain the Gap. Ashton’s attempt to make everyone look the same indicates his unwillingness to deal with being an Other and his inability to accept racial and ethnic differences. He
really wants to look like everyone else so that he does not have to deal with painful feelings of exclusion and the self-consciousness that goes along with being African American in his world (at least as he perceives it). In short he is so blinded by the rhetoric of color blindness that it ends up backfiring upon him.

The extent of Ashton’s inner turmoil becomes evident when he attempts suicide by purposely crashing into a building after he had just been devastated by watching an episode of 60 Minutes in which he was portrayed as a corrupt moneygrubber. Throughout his new spiritual life, Ashton has sought to “disappear,” yet he is not aware of how he can do that. Even before his mystical/religious experience, he had already disappeared into the façade and aura he created as a motivational speaker. The book ends with the reader somewhat uncertain as to whether Ashton has died in the car crash, as he is visited in prison (where he has presumably been put for destroying public property and reckless endangerment) by the Brazilian midget/spirit who claims that Ashton did “disappear,” but “we just didn’t count on the air bag” (1999, 285).7 Metaphorically, it makes little difference, as Ashton has been deadened inside for years. He is the possible nightmarish end result of the hip-hop culture, in which, in its worst form, nothing has become valuable except image and perception. Because being African American man is largely a liability in America, Ashton has learned to act in ways that will please others, but he is never able to push himself beyond stereotypical expectations.

What could have helped change Ashton or turn him around? Ellis does seem to suggest that had he remained in his hometown of Flint, Michigan, which is predominately African American, Ashton would have grown up to be relatively stable and content. Or would he? After all, Flint, as portrayed by Michael Moore in his film Roger and Me (1989), was economically devastated at the time when Ashton would have come of age. In order to fit in and be successful, Ashton sacrifices his identity, and while it is conceivable that a stronger or better person might have avoided that pitfall, at least part of the blame ought to be placed upon the expectations of whites around him, who have, in turn, been influenced by the media. Had Ashton not been expected to be an urban tough (presumably derived through listening to hip-hop music or hip-hop videos) or not accepted unless he were like his peers in Santa Cruz, he might have been able to develop his own identity and not be pigeonholed because of his race and thereby might not have grown to be as cynical about the world and chosen to be a phony motivational speaker in order to basically cheat people out of money. Hardened cynicism time and time again shows up in various characters within the literature of the hip-hop generation as a response to the often-subtle but still-lingering stereotypes and prejudice of and against African Americans in contemporary times.
Ellis's work provides no easy solution to the problems facing the hip-hop generation, but in his novels, he suggests that individualism and subsequent narcissism are what mainly endanger the contemporary African American community. Only Isshee and Dewayne in *Platitudes* seem able to achieve any kind of happy medium between hyper-racial consciousness and racial obliviousness, between rampant sexuality and melodramatic love, between overdone caricatures and dull realism, and finally, between the individual and the collective. Ellis suggests that, ideally, the combination of the civil rights and hip-hop generations' ethos can produce personal and community-wide advancements for African Americans. However, such an approach makes sense in theory but is much more difficult to put into practice.