

Black Men and the Choice of Masculinity

An interview with Thomas Chatterton Williams

By Ivan Jablonka & Pauline Peretz

Why has authentic blackness been conflated with “being cool” in Northern American inner cities? Thomas C. Williams, an African-American writer living in Paris, is exploring other ways to authenticity and masculinity.

Thomas Chatterton Williams is the author of *Losing My Cool. How a Father's Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture* (Penguin Press, 2010) and a contributing writer to *The New York Times Magazine*. He currently lives in Paris.

Books & Ideas: In your book you defend the idea that young black males in the U.S. have segregated themselves, when the previous generations suffered from a discrimination imposed from outside. Is this something one can freely write today as an African-American without being accused of teaming up with the conservatives?

Thomas C. Williams: In my book I write a lot about how young blacks often end up self-segregating or cordoning themselves off from the wider mainstream culture. It is something that is very controversial to say today. There is a tendency not to want to make cultural arguments. There is an idea that when you criticize non-systemic factors, non-institutional structural factors, you are blaming the victim, which is not at all what I intended to do. But there is a real phenomenon in black life where a kind of oppositional culture can develop where you take yourself outside of the mainstream, you do things as you define yourself as opposed to white values. I read a lot about how book learning or scholarship or developing your intellectual interests is seen as something that is white; there is the idea that school life is not authentically black. This is certainly not universal, but it is a pernicious undercurrent that can happen and that can be glorified and glamorized. The hip hop culture celebrates the inner city and the ghetto as the Mecca of black life. So I think there is an element of self-segregation that exists, but it is tricky to say these things today. We always fear that we are kicking down or blaming victims, but I think that if we are serious about equality, then to deny that different cultures celebrate different values, the way different families can, you are not going to solve the problem if you take an enormous aspect of how life is lived off the table.

Books & Ideas: Are the heydays of African-American culture really over today? Is there nothing to save from the hip hop culture? And would you say this is the reason why racial pride is mostly gone?

Thomas C. Williams: I don't think that racial pride is gone. I think we live in a moment where there is quite a bit of racial pride, and that's a good thing. I think the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and his reelection in 2012 somehow permanently changed the image of blackness in America. I know that there has been an enormous amount of disappointment since we seem to have slid back into a populist era with Donald Trump. But I think that actually we are going to come back and look at this moment as a minor setback and that the country is really trending towards something that is much better than what was captured in the movement towards what Obama exemplified. I think that the social justice movement that has happened around « Black Lives Matter » that spilled into #MeToo— #MeToo was started by a black woman—has profoundly affected contemporary American life. I think that there is quite a lot to celebrate and be proud of.

A lot of good has come out of hip hop. It has certainly made quite a lot to make black culture, life, esthetics visible to the world. France is the second largest market for

hip hop in the world. Hip hop has done something that has seduced and captivated the world. I never critiqued it on a musical level, never comment it from the point of view of a jazz snob. It has an enormous amount of creativity. I just think that hip hop transmits values, content. We have to take a serious look at which type of values are celebrated, glorified and commercialized. In that sense, I think that it has done some social harm. It has conflated an idea of authentic blackness with street credibility. But there is plenty to be celebrated and to be preserved.

Books & Ideas: How would you define “being cool” in American inner cities today?

Thomas C. Williams: I still think that being cool is in a lot of portions of America—not just black America, but certainly Latino America and increasingly in white America—has always been largely tied to a rejection of the intellect. There has always been a strong anti-intellectual current in American life. This pervades American life across ethnic categories. But I think it is particularly dangerous to minorities and people without a lot of social and network capital to protect them. Blacks and Latinos can get caught up in a downward cycle of emphasizing adolescent values, athleticism, promiscuity, being a player with the opposite sex, things that really work well when you are a teenager but that rapidly decline in value once you reach your adult years. And if you don't have the kind of social safety net to break your fall, I think that's a very dangerous charade to get caught up in. Nothing in the book is inherently black but some of these traps can particularly hurt vulnerable populations which happen overwhelmingly to be black.

Books & Ideas: If love and literature helped you “losing your cool”, would you express this in terms of gender? For example, did your father exemplify a kind of “feminine masculinity”, in opposition to a masculinity based on violence, money, drug dealing and women as lures? Do you feel your father “saved” you from a dangerous masculinity?

Thomas C. Williams: I do think my father saved me from a dangerous masculinity, what we would call in today's parlance “toxic masculinity”, that gets celebrated in hip hop culture, in a lot of sports culture, in a lot of Hollywood culture. I don't think that the kind of masculinity he personified was a feminized masculinity. He was a very

masculine man. The values that he modeled for me—integrity honesty, loyalty, generosity—he is probably the most generous human being I have ever been around. He takes care of his family. Not to say that these are not feminine values, but he embodied the kind of stoicism that we classically think of as being masculine—suffering and sacrifice for the next generation. Now that I am a parent—I have a five-year old daughter and an eleven-month old son—I don't think you have to sacrifice the masculine ideal to be able to embody it with integrity.

Books & Ideas: Some people question black fatherhood in the US. Is there any relevance in this questioning?

Thomas C. Williams: There are a lot of received stereotypes for hundreds of years now in the United States about black fatherhood. Some of them come from the very real fact that, under slavery and after, black families were forcibly separated, marriage was something that was denied to black families. It comes back to what I was saying about black culture. It is very difficult to believe that for generations and centuries, you could forcibly break up families, sell children and mothers away from fathers, force men to couple with women that were not their wives if you were breeding slaves. It is strange to think that you could do this for generations and that there would not be social residues from that, that there would not be cultural practices that were harmful that would be inherited, ways of life that have to be overcome.

So while it is true that statistically there are lots of problems that you can break down into the black community—with absent fathers—a lot of that is also exacerbated by the fact that many fathers are removed from their neighborhood within an extraordinarily punitive criminal justice system. There is nothing inherently wrong with black fatherhood, but it is true that this demographic faces quite a lot of challenges and has quite a lot of adversity to overcome. So my father or the type of father that I have become, I think that it is an authentically black way of being a father, but I do think there is a lot of progress to be made still.

Books & Ideas: You are an African-American writer. You currently live in Paris, like many prestigious black American writers before you. What did you come for? To what extent does it affect your racial identity?

Thomas C. Williams: You only realize in retrospect that you have become a cliché. I was always struck by a quote that Richard Wright wrote: he said that there was more freedom in one square block in Paris than there was in the entire United States of America for him. James Baldwin said that he would have been destroyed if you he had not found a way to leave New York with 40 dollars in his pocket and come to Paris.

I ended in Paris first as a 20-year old student at Georgetown who desperately had to finish his French requirement. I came to Tours and then to Paris to try to get some credit in my language class, fell in love with my French Teaching Assistant, and like many people, initially came to Paris because I loved a girl. France felt very much like home, but part of feeling at home in Paris was a result of the fact that I think it was the first time in my life I existed out of the white/black binary that does define so much American life. I just felt myself to be an American here, which was really a liberating kind of sensation. I came back to write my book, *Losing My Cool*, at a friend's studio in Montmartre and eventually, through a group of friends, met my wife and ended in Paris again. But I probably would have stayed in Paris because there is here a kind of liberation. I can go weeks without being conscious of my own racial identity in my day-to-day life. I am always conscious of my racial identity in my work, but it becomes an abstraction that I am free to turn off when I go out on the street. I am not always watching for where a police officer is standing and I found that's the type of freedom of movement, freedom in my life, that I would not likely trade back now.