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BLACK
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Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

June 11, 2009 - Issue 328

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**Children of the Recession:
Remembering "Manchild in the Promised Land"
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From the cover from "[Manchild in the Promised Land](#):"

If Reno was in a bad mood - if he didn't have any money and he wasn't high - he'd say, "Man, Sonny, they ain't go no kids in Harlem. I ain't never seen any. I've seen some real small people actin' like kids, but they don't have any kids in Harlem, because nobody has time for a childhood. Man, do you ever remember bein' a kid? Not me. Shit, kids are happy, kids laugh, kids are secure. They ain't scared- a nothin'. You ever been a kid, Sonny? Damn, you lucky. I ain't never been a kid, man. I don't ever remember bein' happy and not scared. I don't know what happened, man, but I think I missed out on that childhood thing, because I don't ever recall bein' a kid."^[1]

-Claude Brown

When Claude Brown published "Manchild in the Promised Land" in 1965, he wrote about the doomed lives of his friends, family and neighborhood acquaintances. The book is mostly remembered as a brilliantly devastating portrait of Harlem under siege, ravaged and broken from drugs, poverty, unemployment, crime and police brutality. But what Brown really made visible was that the raw violence and dead-end existence that plagued so many young people in Harlem, stole not only their future but their childhood as well. In the midst of the social collapse and psychological trauma wrought by the systemic fusion of racism and class exploitation, children in Harlem were held hostage to forces that not only robbed them of the innocence that comes with childhood, but also forced them to take on the risks and burdens of daily survival that older generations were unable to shield them from. At the heart of Brown's narrative, written in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the 1960s, is a "manchild," a metaphor that indicts a society that is waging war on those children who are black and poor and have been forced to grow up too quickly. The hybridized concept of "manchild" marked a space in which innocence was lost and childhood stolen. Harlem was a well contained, internal colony, and its street life provided the condition and the very necessity for insurrection. But the many forms of rebellion young people expressed - from the public and progressive to the interiorized and self-destructive - came with a price, which Brown reveals near the end of the

book: "It seemed as though most of the cats that we'd come up with just hadn't made it. Almost everybody was dead or in jail."[\[2\]](#)

Childhood stolen became less a plea for self-help - that short-sighted and mendacious appeal that would define the reactionary reform efforts of the 80s and 90s - than a clarion call for condemning a social order that denied children a future. While Brown approached everyday life in Harlem more as a poet than as a political revolutionary, politics was embedded in every sentence in the book. Not a politics marked by demagoguery, hatred and orthodoxy, but one that made visible the damage done by a social system characterized by massive inequalities and a rigid racial divide. Manchild created the image of a society without children in order to raise questions about the future of a country that turned its back on its most vulnerable population. Like the great critical theorist, C. Wright Mills, Claude Brown's lasting contribution was to reconfigure the boundaries between public issues and private sufferings. For Brown, racism was about power and oppression and could not be separated from broader social, economic and political considerations. Rather than denying systemic, structural conditions, as in the discourse of individual pathology or self-help, Brown insisted that social forces had to be factored into any understanding of group suffering and individual despair. Brown explored the suffering of the young in Harlem, but he did so by refusing to utterly privatize it, to dramatize and spectacularize private life over public dysfunction, or to separate individual hopes, desires and agency from the realm of politics and public life.

Nearly 50 years later, Brown's metaphor of the "manchild" is more relevant today than when he wrote the book, and "the Promised Land" more mythic than ever as his revelation about the sorry plight of poor and minority children takes on a more expansive meaning in light of the current economic meltdown. The suffering and hardships many children face in the United States have been greatly amplified by the economic crisis, and in some cases the effects and consequences of that suffering has been captured in images, interviews and television programs that have born witness to what has become the shame of the nation. For example, "CBS Nightly News" with Katie Couric has been running a probing and poignant series called "Children of the Recession," which foregrounds the suffering and despair faced by so many millions of young kids today. Many of these images portray kids who, through no fault of their own (or their parents for that matter), are homeless, lack food, health care, adequate shelter, clothing, even spaces to play. They are forced to inhabit a rough world where childhood is nonexistent, crushed under the heavy material and existential burdens they are forced to bear.

Current statistics paint a bleak picture for the nation's young people. 1.5 million are unemployed, which marks a 17-year high. 12.5 million are without food, and a number of unsettling reports indicate that the number of children living in poverty will rise to "nearly 17 million by the end of the year."[\[3\]](#) In what amounts to a national disgrace, one out of every five children live in poverty, while nearly nine million lack any health insurance. School districts across the nation have identified and enrolled over 800,000 homeless children. Their numbers are growing at an exponential rate as one in 50 kids are now living in crowded rooms at motels like the Budget Inn, in seedy welfare hotels, in emergency shelters or with relatives, or are they simply exist on the streets with their parents. What is unique about these kids is not just the severity of deprivations they experience daily, but how they have been forced to view the world and redefine the nature of their own childhood within its borders of hopelessness and despair. Unlike Brown's narrative, there is no sense of a bright future lying just beyond highly policed, ghettoized spaces. An entire generation of youth will not have access to the jobs, the material comforts or the security available to previous generations. These children are a new generation of "manchilds," who think, act and talk like adults, worry about their families, headed by a single parent or two out of work and searching for a job, how they are going to get the money to buy food, what it will take to pay for a doctor in case of illness. These children are no longer confined to so-called ghettos. As the burgeoning landscape of poverty and despair increasingly find expression in our cities, suburbs, farms and rural areas, these children make their presence felt - too many to ignore or hide away in the usually contained and invisible spaces of disposability. They constitute a new and more unsettling scene of suffering; one that reveals not only vast inequalities in our economic landscape, but also a voice that portends a future that has no purchase on the hopes that characterize a vibrant democracy. And their voices must be heard, and their stories made

public.

In one episode of "Children of the Recession," a 12-year-old, Michael Rotundo, living in a motel room with his parents, complained that he can't think straight in school and is failing. His mind filled not with the demands of homework, sports, girls or hanging out with his friends, but with grave concerns about his parents not having enough money to rent or put down a payment on a house. His voice is eerily precocious as he tells the interviewer that he dreams about having a normal kid's life, but is not hopeful. Another child, when asked what he does when he is hungry, stated, with a sadness no child should experience, "I just cry." In another episode, a young boy said the unthinkable for any child. He said that his life is ruined and that all he now thinks about is death because he doesn't see any way out of the circumstances he and his family find themselves in. A sweet-faced 13-year-old, Lewis Roman, told an interviewer he wanted to get a job to help his mother, and when asked how he copes with being hungry, he said he hides it from people because he doesn't want them to know. His only recourse from gnawing hunger is to try to fall asleep.

Millions of children now find themselves in the richest country in the world suffering social, physical, intellectual and developmental problems that, thus far, go unacknowledged by the Obama administration, as it bails out the automotive industries, banks, and other financial institutions. What kind of country have we become that we cannot protect our children or offer them even the most basic requirements to survive? What does it mean to witness this type of suffering among so many children and not do anything about it - our attentions quickly diverted to view the spectacle and moral indifference that defines so much of the world of celebrity entertainment or the bombastic, even demagogic, editorialists and talk-show hosts that bookend the evening news? How do we reconcile all of this pious talk by the Obama administration about renewed democracy, truth and justice as the essence of what America is all about when so many of our children are suffering, plagued by psychological and physical problems that are entirely unnecessary in country that can spend \$534 billion dollars on a military budget, "account for roughly half of the world's military expenditures,"^[4] and trillions more on wars abroad, but cannot liberate children from the pain of homelessness, poverty, sickness and a mounting inability to just simply be kids. Children should not be reduced to statistics, commodities or disposable populations; they represent a window into the failure of the United States to take heed of the crisis of young people seriously and to uphold their end of a social contract that guarantees them a decent future. It may be tempting to ignore these children, to look away, to blame them for their plight or to allow a generation of "manchild" to develop because of our political indifference and lack of social responsibility. But they will not go away, and as their ranks swell, not only will the Obama administration lose its moral and political credibility, but we all will become contaminated by a level of suffering and hardship that will only get worse. Of course, we need more than the mobilizing influence of shame, moral outrage and social responsibility. We need more than a president who speaks movingly about children, but does little to address the urgency of the immediate crisis. We need more than sloganized language of "change" and "hope," one that goes well beyond philanthropy and individual charity and transforms government in the interests of both children's and democracy's future. Have we so lost our moral and political bearings that we cannot raise our voices in protest, forge social movements and promote direct action that makes children the center of our politics and the call for democratic renewal? I hope not.

When Claude Brown wrote "Manchild in the Promised Land" in 1965, he recognized clearly that the future and morality of any society is intimately connected to how it treats its children, and that such an insight becomes relevant to the degree that it generates a politics informed by the courage of conviction and moved by a public consciousness of compassion and justice.

[1] Claude Brown, "[Manchild in the Promised Land](#)" (New York: A Signet Book, 1965).

[2] Brown, *Ibid.* p. 419.

[3] Cited in Bob Herbert, "Children in Peril," *New York Times* (April 21, 2009), P. A25.

[4] Robert Weissman, "The Shameful State of the Union," *CommonDreams.org* (January 30, 2008). Online: <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/01/30/6725>.


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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Henry A. Giroux holds the Global TV Network chair in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Canada. Related work: Henry A. Giroux, "[The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence](#)" (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). His most recent books include "[Take Back Higher Education](#)" (co-authored with Susan Searls Giroux, 2006), "[The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex](#)" (2007) and "[Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics Beyond the Age of Greed](#)" (2008). His newest book, "[Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?](#)" will be published by Palgrave Mcmillan in 2009. Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Giroux.

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