Putting Hip Hop in Context

The history of urban life for African-Americans pre-1970s
The Great Migration

Refers to the massive internal migration of African Americans from the Jim Crow South to the industrializing North.

From 1910-1970, 40% of all African Americans relocated to cities in the North and West (with less migration during the decade of the Great Depression, the 1930s.

In 1900, three out of four African Americans lived on farms in the South. In 1970, only one out of four did.
The Great Migration “changed American culture as we know it. The migrants brought the blues, and birthed whole genres of music - jazz, rock, rhythm and blues, hip hop… (T)he migration spread the issue of race relations across the United States, forcing the entire country to face its centuries-old demons.”

-Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*
How our cities became segregated

Definitions:

1. Restrictive Housing Covenants: Agreements among white homeowners to sell property only to other whites.
2. Redlining: Drawing a line on the map of a city around an area where banks will not invest.
3. Race Riots: White looting of black neighborhoods. For example, in 1919 white Chicagoans rioted for 13 days, destroying the homes of 1,000 black families, injuring 537, and killing 38.
Sundown Towns

...why the Great Migration was directed toward cities, not towns.

Enforced through laws, intimidation, and violence.
Creating the “Inner City”

After the end of WWII in 1945, new US wealth inspires two Utopian visions:

1. Suburbs - neighborhoods surrounding the city with single-family homes
2. Public Housing - multi-family units in cities for low-income families
Suburbs

- affordable mortgages for veterans
- pre-fabricated houses all look similar
- inspire White Flight via blockbusting

Would you like to live in a suburb? Why or why not?

Architect: William Levitt
Projects

- affordable rent for low-income families
- maximize number of people on expensive downtown lots in cities
- clear land via “urban renewal”

Would you like to live in a housing project? Why/why not?

Architect: Le Corbusier
1950s-1970s:
Construction of the projects concentrates impoverished African Americans in neglected apartments. Meanwhile, African-American professionals move into (formerly segregated) city neighborhoods vacated by “white flight.”

In your own words, explain why the black community was not segregated by class until the construction of the projects and the suburbs.
1970s: Decline in US manufacturing jobs leads to underemployment
Inner-City School Problems

- funding tied to property values
- “desegregation” fails to create integration
  - closing of African-American neighborhood schools
  - firing black teachers
  - bussing students to suburbs
  - white families create private schools
- when bussing programs end, inner-city schools are worse-off; by 1980, many have 50% drop-out rates
Perfect Storm

+ concentrated poverty (due to white flight and construction of projects)
+ lack of businesses/jobs (due to redlining)
+ decline in school quality (due to failed integration efforts)
+ disappearance of factory work (due to competition overseas)

= so much for the American Dream of class mobility

... and then, add cheap, addictive drugs
It’s a classic psychological strategy. As Michelle Alexander writes in her recent book, “The New Jim Crow,” embracing your own stigma is a political act, “an act of resistance and defiance in a society that seeks to demean a group based on an inalterable trait.” These men saw themselves in a nation that assumed they were criminals — so they went with it. As Redman said in his 1998 song “I’ll Bee Dat!”: “If you gotta be a monkey, be a gorilla.”