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## **Kenneth Clark's Unfulfilled Dream**

**by Derrick Z. Jackson**

The most twisted moment of Kenneth B. Clark's historic psychological research was when he showed a black doll to a black boy in Arkansas. Clark said the boy pointed to the doll, smiled, and said, "That's a nigger. I'm a nigger."

That was the lowlight of groundbreaking findings in the 1940s and early 1950s by Clark and his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark, who found that black children in both the South and the North overwhelmingly said white dolls were nicer and prettier than black dolls, and black dolls were bad. The tests were so traumatic, Clark said, that in Massachusetts, some black children refused to participate, running out of the room in tears. This evidence of psychological damage was so searing that the Supreme Court cited it in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregated schools.

The damage was so deep that in the mid-1980s, as the optimism of the civil rights movement was stripped by the Nixon and Reagan retrenchment, Hofstra University researchers Darlene Powell-Hopson and Sharon Gopaul-McNicol found that two-thirds of black children in the United States and three-quarters of black children in Trinidad still preferred white dolls over black ones. The secretary general of the Trinidad and Tobago teachers union responded to the findings by saying: "Even in Trinidad, where 85 percent of the people are black and we have a black government, we have not recovered from 400 years in which blacks knew the white man as the boss."

The damage was so deep that in a 1995 interview with *The New York Times*, Clark was asked what would the doll test would show today. His said, "The doll test today probably would not be that much different."

That is the most horrible part about thinking about the death this week of Clark at the age of 90. On this issue, time has stood still since that black boy in Arkansas. A half-century later, black boys all over America call themselves the n-word.

The context makes it much worse. That boy in Arkansas knew that if he dared to suggest that he was not the n-word, that if he dared to express manhood, he risked a lynching. Today, black men shout the n-word to announce their manhood. Short of physical suicide, it is the ultimate defeat, dehumanizing themselves among themselves in the streets and declaring themselves to be less than human to all of white America. White Americans now make up the majority of purchases of the hip-hop/rap genre.

Clark did not work hard to see black people sell themselves cheaply. Sure, racism, bad public schools,

and lack of jobs in central cities continue to play a terrible role in depressing black opportunity. But that cannot excuse the fact that all 10 of Billboard's Top 10 rap singles artists at the close of 2004 use the n-word on their uncensored albums.

The rapper known as 50 Cent, the number one rap artist at the end of 2004, is currently causing a stir at school dances with his misogyny. What should be of equal concern is that America's youth, of all colors and in the privacy of their headphones, are under a racial assault. On the same album that has parents aflame about lewd sex, 50 Cent has a track that has 23 uses of the n-word. To be clear, the rappers take the n-word and substitute "as" or "az" for "er." Some say it's just harmless friendship talk. The last time I checked in the dictionary, the n-word means, "a disparaging term for a black person."

James Baldwin once wrote, "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger." When all Top 10 rappers use the n-word, including Kanye "Jesus Walks" West, that is a depressingly wide swath of destruction. Many of the top rappers and hip-hop artists who use the n-word were in the Top 20 of the general Billboard 200 at the end of 2004, such as West, Outkast, Jay-Z, and G-Unit. Often, the n-word is used in conjunction with glorifying violence.

This cannot bode well for the future. Schools a half-century after the Brown decision have become more segregated. The image of black males in the privacy of headphones is more perverted than ever. At some point a black child hears the n-word enough and decides -- through bad grades, pregnancy, or crime -- to destroy himself or herself. At some point a white boy or girl hears the n-word enough and decides -- when they become adults and leaders of industry -- that those people are not worth their time. Clark tried to show us a twisted mirror a half-century ago. It is time for parents, civil rights groups, and America to pick up this mirror and smash it to bits.

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