

# Race and Counter-Cultures in the United States

An Interview with Jeff Chang

*By Andrew Diamond*

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**According to journalist and critic Jeff Chang, Trump’s appeal partially lays in culture war politics dating back to the 1990s, when the ideas of multiculturalism and post-racialism clashed intensively. It now remains to be seen whether justice movements activated on the ground can come together to resist the new president’s policies.**

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Jeff Chang is the Executive Director of the [Institute for Diversity in the Arts](#) at Stanford University. He has written extensively on culture, politics, the arts, and music. His books include [Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation](#), [Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop](#) (Picador, 2005), [Who We Be: The Colorization of America](#) (St Martin's Press, 2014). His latest, [We Gon' Be Alright: Notes On Race, Culture, and Resegregation](#) (Picador) was published in September 2016. His next book will be a biography of Bruce Lee. Jeff co-founded [CultureStr/ke](#) and [ColorLines](#). He has been a USA Ford Fellow in Literature and the winner of the Asian American Literary Award. Jeff Chang will be one of the participants of [“City/Cité : a transatlantic exchange. Which future for urban democracy?”](#) taking place at the Cent Quatre in Paris (December 9 and 10, 2016). Andrew Diamond is the scientific curator of the event.

*Books & Ideas:* Your first book, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, is widely considered to be a critical intervention on the history of hip-hop. I think that one of the book's most important aspects is the generational focus—the ability to identify what Karl Mannheim long ago termed the “generational location” of the “millennials” coming of age in the American metropolises of the 1980s and 1990s. Your story ends off in 2001, a moment of rupture in American political history. Is this the end of the “hip hop generation,” in some sense? Does hip hop still play an important role for the new generation coming of age in the first few decades of the twenty-first century?

**Jeff Chang:** When I wrote the book around the turn of the millennium, I must admit that I tried to have it both ways in the book, titling it “A History of the Hip-Hop Generation”, but then also starting the book by writing “Generations are fictions.” I had been skeptical—and quite full of youthful rage—about the typology invented by the historians-turned-business consultants William Strauss and Neil Howe to classify American generations<sup>1</sup>. Both were Baby Boomers who had created a kind of a generational horoscope of sorts, assigning a cycle of traits to each cohort from 1584 through unborn generations well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and offering a generalized reading of each's predestined course. (Their generation was defined as “prophetic”; mine, the so-called “Generation X”, they called “nomadic.” You can imagine why I might have been offended.)

Now when I teach the book to students who are the ages of my sons, I find myself very aware of the age gap between me and them. In retrospect, aside from my idiosyncratic biographical details—losing my job in 2001 and selling the book proposal, having my second son at about the same time—the book does seem to have become a kind of *Bildungsroman* for those of us born at or after the end of the 1960s and the peak of the Civil Rights Movement and global anti-colonial uprisings. We came of age during a period defined by culture wars, provoked by older generations' fears of migration and demographic change and the unleashing of a political revanchism organized around race and age.

Much of that history was being lost in real time even as I was writing in the early 2000s. In that regard, hip-hop remains extremely relevant to my students and my children. For years, Boomers have peddled competing mythologies—the glorious Sixties versus the decadent Sixties, the beginning of a great global rainbow transformation versus the fall of nations into dark barbarism. By contrast, hip-hop has offered personalized narratives of what it means to attempt to survive such Manichaean worldviews.

Hip-hop, for instance, offers a counter-narrative to the triumphal story of middle-class Boomer youths who dreamed a new society and brought it into being by loudly taking to the streets from Paris to Chicago. The neighborhoods that gave birth to hip-hop, especially the Bronx, had been abandoned by government and industry, full of empty streets destroyed by arson and neglect. At the time they were thought to be the last places history could be made. But hip-hop arts—from the block parties that produced DJing, rapping,

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<sup>1</sup> William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (Strauss and Howe, 1991), *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (Three Rivers Press, 1997), and *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (Vintage, 2000).

and new forms of urban dance to the subway trains and city walls taken over for manipulation by graffiti artists—were about loudly saying, “We are still here.” In its truth-telling and aesthetic complexity, hip-hop denies both the “post-racial” feel-good liberal image of diversity and the conservative apocalyptic narrative of multiculturalism as evidence of the decline of Western civilization. My students feel as if they are approaching the actual texture of history when they talk about hip-hop, a vein of warning and possibility.

**Books & Ideas:** In the last part of *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, you begin to think about the global implications of hip-hop. Hisham Aidi's recent book *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Vintage, 2014) shows that Muslims in France and elsewhere continue to connect with the African American experience through hip-hop. What is your own view of the French hip-hop scene in the twenty-first century? Can we speak of a hip-hop generation in France?

**Jeff Chang:** I can only speak as an American of Asian and Pacific Islander descent who feels a kind of kinship with French hip-hop artists of minority and resistant identities. The U.S. likes to tout itself as a model of a racial future for European cosmopolitan cities and suburbs—we have perfected the picture of diversity. But Americans also like to act as if Paris 2005 was merely our Los Angeles 1992. I think it's just as likely that Ferguson 2014 was Paris 2005. So I want to try to be precise and not aggrandize in making comparisons.

One point of comparison may be France's own “culture wars”. After the Los Angeles riots in 1992, American politicians on the right and the left successfully pressured record companies to drop from their rosters hundreds of rappers deemed too controversial, particularly for their views on policing and the failure of government. Bill Clinton's rebuke of misquoted comments by Public Enemy-affiliated rapper Sister Souljah on the riots is a moment now understood to have been crucial in mobilizing white constituencies to support his election. Since at least 1995, French rappers have found themselves hauled into court for censure by politicians. These cries intensified after the 2005 riots in Clichy-Sous-Bois when hundreds of national politicians joined to attempt to censure seven rap groups they accused of sparking the uprisings and “inciting racism.”

By now hip-hop in France has shaped at least two generations of immigrants' sense of identity. Hip-hop has been key to circulation and concretizing of their ideas about who they are and what they have been born to do. So it would be wrong for an American to say that French hip-hop tributes in song and text to, say, Malcolm X are about evoking some “golden-age” nostalgia for late 1980s artists like Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions. They are about the construction of radical identities of power, expression, and belonging for French of North African, African, and Asian descent amidst a real-time context of state surveillance and violence.

This latter question seems to me the major question for young French hip-hop artists. What happens when the state and industry move to co-opt or silence them?<sup>2</sup> What are the structures and forms for artists to reach their audiences? I am hopeful that they are building an infrastructure that protects uncensored expression. That kind of development would be powerful for their communities, the nation and all of us who want to build a better world

**Books & Ideas:** Political and cultural historians in the United States seem to be just getting around to the 1990s, a moment that witnessed a particularly intense clash between the ideas and languages of multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity, on the one hand, and those of colorblindness and post-racialism, on the other. Both *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* and *Who We Be: A Cultural History of Race in Post-Civil Rights America* converge on this transformational moment. How important is this story to understanding the meteoric rise of Donald Trump?

**Jeff Chang:** I think it's central to understanding Donald Trump's success. From the mid-1980s through the 1990s and into the new millennium, the U.S. was deeply engaged in an era of culture wars, wherein the Right mobilized white fears of people of color to maintain political power. This kind of racialized politics drove a new politics of containment—transforming everything from tax policy to immigration policy, expanding the reach and militarization of policing and swelling the prison-industrial complex to world-historic levels.

So even though the U.S. media's insisted that this election was about the economy, the facts show that Trump's appeal lay in the same culture war politics. Clinton won a majority of voters who chose the economy as their top issue, as well as a majority of voters who earned under \$50,000. Trump won huge majorities of voters who chose terrorism and immigration as their top issue, as well as pluralities of the comfortable classes.

**Books & Ideas:** One of the biggest challenges in building contentious political movements in the United States for as long as we can remember is building bridges across ethnoracial lines. In recent years we have seen some positive developments, such as the Chicago teachers' strike of 2012, which successfully challenged the politics of austerity by mobilizing a multiracial coalition of grassroots organizations. And yet, other signs leave us less optimistic, such as a recent Pew Research Center survey revealing that only 33 percent of Hispanics expressed support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. It goes without saying that the need for building multiracial coalitions is now more urgent than ever. What do you see happening on this front during the Trump years?

**Jeff Chang:** What is different about this moment than other post-presidential election moments over the past half century is that justice movements on the ground are activated. Over the past five years, young people have energized the Occupy movement for economic justice, the undocumented immigrant movement for migrant justice and immigrant rights,

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2010/08/13/dix-ans-de-combat-entre-politiques-et-rap\\_1398798\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2010/08/13/dix-ans-de-combat-entre-politiques-et-rap_1398798_823448.html)

and of course, the Movement for Black Lives. More recently, the climate justice and indigenous rights movement has come together at Standing Rock to stop the siting of the Dakota Access Pipeline across Native American lands and the Missouri River. And, shocked by Trump's misogyny and the ongoing attack on reproductive rights, women's groups are at a state of high mobilization.

Trump's presidency could mobilize an opposition ready to go mainstream in the way that Obama consolidated the fringes of the right. One possible future has feminists, environmentalists, Muslims, African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans coming together against a common foe. The missing piece is whether this left can make an appeal to the white working class. If it can, then it's possible there may be seeds for a realignment in some not-so-distant election.

**Books & Ideas :** In your latest book *We Gon' Be Alright*, you take on the task of exploring Asian American identity in the United States. Such reflections on Asian identity in the French context have been rare, even as a rather powerful anti-racist movement has emerged within the Chinese community in Paris. In September some twenty thousand marched against anti-Asian racism after a deadly attack on a man of Chinese origins. Chinese residents in culturally diverse neighborhoods like Belleville have complained of being targeted by youths of African and North African descent, stoking fears of "communautarisme." Can you explain a bit about the "in-between" nature of "Asian Americanness" in the United States? How does the Asian experience in the United States help us to understand the problems Asians in France are currently dealing with?

**Jeff Chang:** Asian Americans are situated in between Black and White in the U.S. racial hierarchy, which means we (Asian Americans) are racially othered while being afforded certain kinds of racial privilege. Race appears as a visual problem—it emerges between appearance and the perception of difference. In our difference, it is often difficult to "pass," and so our very difference signals a permanent foreignness. We are the irreducible stranger.

Stereotypes as old as colonialism, such as the trope of the "sickly Chinese," signal our weakness. These combine with newer stereotypes that East Asian immigrants tend to hoard their money, whether by keeping it in their homes or by carrying large bills. In this way, opportunistic thieves come to target immigrants. These kinds of "knowledges"—as often untrue as they are true—have had broad circulation. That's how the return of the story of robbery and protest—a story that goes back to the arrival of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. in the mid-1800s—echoes again America to Europe to Africa.

In-betweenness for Asian Americans means that in battles over race, one can afford to sit on the fence, decide not to take a stand, to always reserve the privilege to disengage. But it also means that if one does choose to take a stand, they may choose to side with racial power—the kind of power that restricts the rights of others—or with racial equity—the kind of equity that opens up more freedom for all. The Movement For Black Lives has called Asian Americans to choose the latter, but Asian Americans have been split in their response.

Late in 2014, after the protests against the police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner had national demonstrations that were joined by many Asian Americans, Brooklyn rookie cop Peter Liang drew his gun while on a vertical patrol in an East New York housing project. He opened an eighth-floor door with the gun and, startled by a sound, fired a bullet into the unlit stairwell. It ricocheted and struck Akai Gurley, a young Black father, dead in the heart. Gurley had done nothing but decide not to take the elevator in the moment before Liang fired his gun. As Gurley lay bleeding to death, Liang offered no medical aid and fretted to his partner that he would lose his job.

When he was indicted, months after the officer who had strangled Eric Garner was let off, Chinese American protestors raised signs saying “Justice For Peter Liang! Stop Scapegoating!” One spokesperson for a supposed Asian American civil rights coalition that no one had ever heard of before said: “If it was not for Ferguson and not for Staten Island, Peter Liang might not have been indicted.”

Their argument seemed to be that the killing of Akai Gurley was less indictable because it came at the hands of an Asian American officer. Further, they seemed to be saying that if hundreds of thousands of people had not taken to the streets in a freedom movement against state violence, this Chinese American police officer would have been afforded all the privileges offered a white cop who had taken the life of a Black person. They wanted Peter Liang to be seen as white, and Asian Americans to be afforded all the privileges of whiteness. When Liang was convicted, they cried out again over the supposed injustice of it all. But when Liang was sentenced, by an Asian American judge no less, to five years’ probation, they were silent.

In-betweenness means that the choices we, Asian Americans, make when engaging in racial politics are fraught with peril. But neither can we afford to stay silent on racism. In the end, we need to be able to take a stand for an ethical and equitable society for all, one free of racial privilege.

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