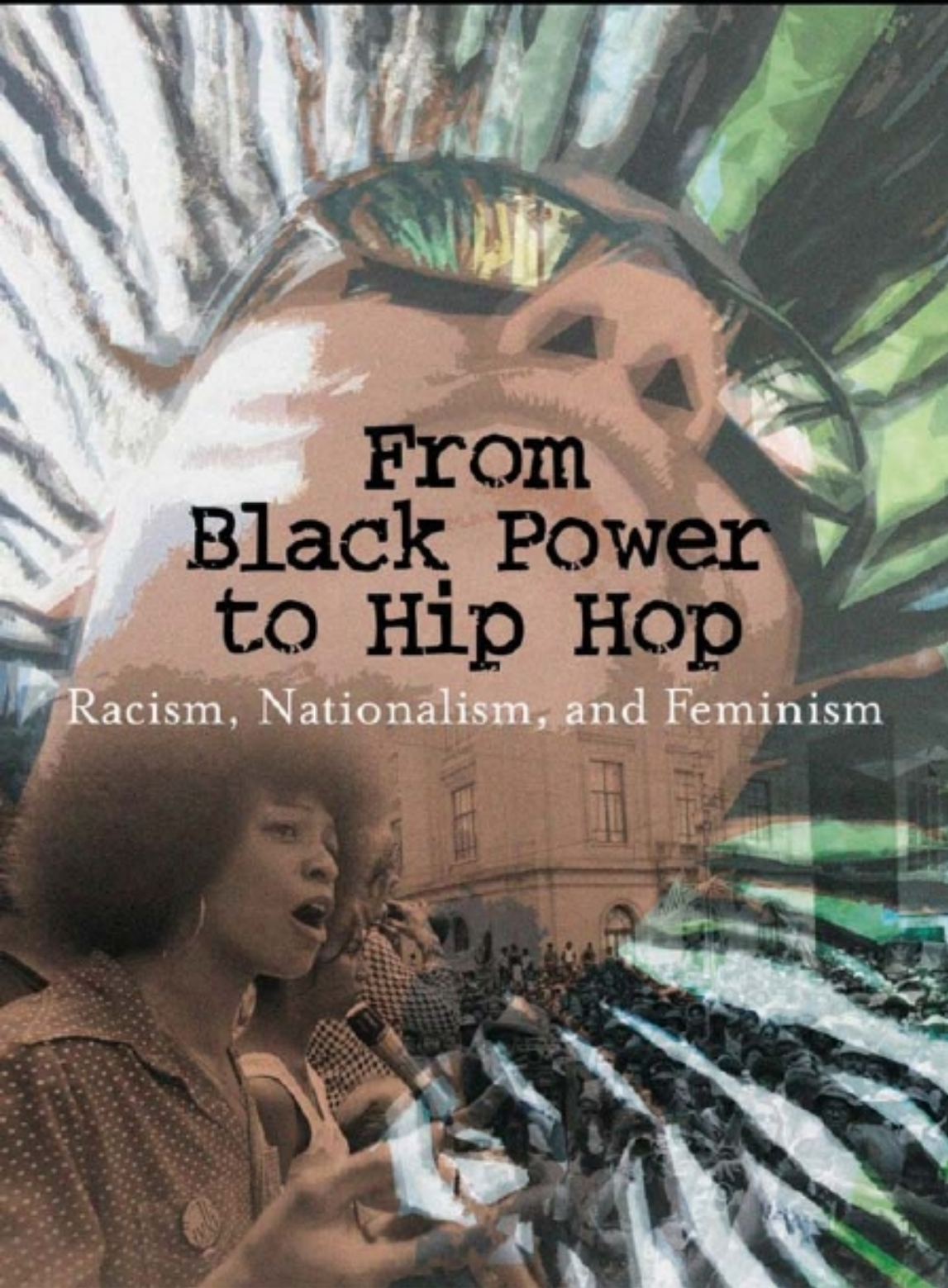


PATRICIA HILL COLLINS

From
Black Power
to Hip Hop

Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism



From Black Power to Hip Hop

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From Black Power to Hip Hop

**RACISM, NATIONALISM,
AND FEMINISM**

Patricia Hill Collins



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PATRICIA HILL COLLINS is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park, and author of *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* and *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*.

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Introduction

From Black Power to Hip Hop

My life was totally consumed by all aspects of gang life. . . . My clothes, walk, talk, and attitude all reflected my love for and allegiance to my set. Nobody was more important than my homeboys—nobody. . . . I was six years old when the Crips were started. No one anticipated its sweep. The youth of South Central were being gobbled up by an alien power threatening to attach itself to a multitude of other problems already plaguing them. An almost “enemy” subculture had arisen, and no one knew from where it came. No one took its conceptions seriously. But slowly it crept, saturating entire households, city blocks, neighborhoods, and eventually the nation-state of California.

—*Sanyika Shakur, AKA “Monster” Kody Scott*

Many in hip-hop are simply carefully navigating the waters of their sexuality. These guys I refer to as homie-sexual are, clinically speaking, homosexual. But they very much take on a machismo that separates them from associations with words like gay, queer, and most especially fag. I would guess that this has a lot to do with safety, and with a culture that hates you because you’re a fag and most definitely hates you because you’re black.

—Village Voice

My father got at least twenty years of good high living out of the [drug] business. . . . That’s power. To be able to set up your own empire in your neighborhood, or even somebody else’s neighborhood for that matter. To buy cars, Jeeps, trucks. To sport the flyest shit made by top designers everyday. . . . To be able to shit on people before they get a chance to shit on you. That’s power. Who could argue with that? A regular nigga worked all week for change to get to work plus a beer to forget about how hard he work. . . . Let’s compare it, ten years

of good living and twenty years of high living versus sixty years of scraping to get by. Enough said.

—*Winter Santiago, fictional character*

I don't act the way society dictates that a woman "should." I am not dainty. I do not hold back my opinions. I don't stay behind a man. But I'm not here to live by somebody else's standards. I'm defining what a woman is for myself. Simply put, I am not interested in subscribing to what society has decided for half of humankind. I am an individual.

—*Queen Latifah*

Gang member Sanyika Shakur and rap star Queen Latifah refuse to "live by somebody else's standards," yet the standards they choose seem diametrically opposed to one another. How should we understand young African American men whose loyalties to their gang surpass their commitment to their families? How will they get along with women who refuse to be "dainty" and who define "what a woman is" for themselves? What are we to make of young gay men who craft "homie-sexual" identities within the hypermasculine trappings of some elements of hip-hop culture, yet eschew self-definitions as "queer" or "fag"? Winter Santiago, the protagonist in rapper Sister Souljah's novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*, bluntly embraces a materialism that seems at odds with traditions of the Black freedom struggle: "To be able to shit on people before they get a chance to shit on you. That's power." Santiago's philosophy seemingly contradicts an ethos of Black solidarity that takes ironic forms in Shakur's words, "nobody was more important than my homeboys—nobody."

During the 1990s, Bakari Kitwana, head editor of *The Source: The Magazine of Hip-Hop, Music Culture and Politics*, began to use the term "hip-hop generation" to define this population of Black youth who were born between 1965 and 1984 and who shared a value system that was often at odds with the generation that preceded them.¹ Describing this same cohort of Black American youth, Mark Anthony Neal uses the term "post-soul" to describe the political, social, and cultural experiences of African Americans since the end of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Neal argues that the "soul babies" of this period have produced a "post-soul aesthetic" whereby the hip-hop generation and the generational consciousness attached to it are now much broader than its origins in Black American and Latino neighborhoods.² Hip-hop

culture is a global phenomenon, yet Black American youth remain its most visible ambassadors. Because they occupy such a visible position within American society, and more recently within global mass media, African American youth stand at ground zero for issues of race, nation, gender, age, and sexuality.

In the United States, the paradoxical beliefs expressed by African American members of this group reflect the contradictions of a new racism. Coming to adulthood after the decline of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary Black youth grew up during a period of initial promise, profound change, and, for far too many, heart-wrenching disappointment. During this period marked by the end of the Black Power Movement and the ascendancy of hip hop, they lived the shift from a color-conscious racism that relied on strict racial segregation to a seemingly colorblind racism that promised equal opportunities yet provided no lasting avenues for African American advancement. Despite protestations to the contrary, this new colorblind racism claimed not to see race yet managed to replicate racial hierarchy as effectively as the racial segregation of old.

The lives of poor and working-class Black youth who symbolize the contradictions of this new racism are especially telling. Ironically, this is a generation whose actual members remain written off, marginalized, and largely invisible in everyday life. Isolated and ghettoized within American society, “domestic” African American youth—namely, those who are neither foreign migrants nor the children of migrants from countries of the Caribbean, continental Africa, or Europe—represent a highly stigmatized yet important population. In 2002, 33 percent of all African Americans were under age 18, compared with 23 percent of non-Hispanic Whites. A larger proportion of Black males than non-Hispanic White males were under age 18 (36 percent compared with 24 percent), a statistic that reflects the shorter life expectancy for African American men. The poverty status of African American youth is especially revealing. In 2001, among all American children under age 18, the poverty rate was 16 percent, but it was three times as high for Black children (30 percent).³

At the same time that Black American youth experience these social problems, their mass-media images tell a different story. In the 1990s, images of poor and working-class Black American youth as athletes and entertainers flooded global popular culture. The actual ghettoization of poor and working-class African Americans may render them virtually invisible within suburban malls, on soccer fields, and in good public

schools, yet mass media created a seemingly authentic Black American culture that glamorized poverty, drugs, violence, and hypersexuality. As a result, representations of these same Black youth became hypervisible throughout far expanses of the globe.⁴ The music, fashion, dance, styles, and post-soul aesthetic of Neal's soul babies seemingly catalyzed a multibillion-dollar hip-hop industry. "To buy cars, Jeeps, trucks," in the words of Sister Souljah's *Winter Santiago*, "to sport the flyest shit made by top designers everyday" appealed to huge audiences that were hungry for these images of Blackness. Apparently, singing and dancing about Black pain and wearing the latest styles while doing it could generate cold, hard cash.⁵

What are the effects on Black American youth of being simultaneously so ignored and so visible? Recently, sociologists have begun to define cohort effects in a more specific way that may shed light on the Black hip-hop generation's curious position of invisibility and hypervisibility. This work stresses the impact of specific historical events on the character of generations. Public events experienced at a critical period in the life course, usually defined as the years of adolescence and early adulthood, may produce a specific set of attitudes in an entire generation that persists throughout its lifetime. Sharing great events may create a distinct generational consciousness. Within this framework, American youth of varying social classes, races, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations who came of age after the victories of the Civil Rights era and became adults during the dual processes of economic decline and the failure of racial integration may share a generational consciousness.

Beyond their actual numbers, the questions that confront African American youth have implications that reach far beyond this particular population. The status of Black youth who came of age during the period marked by the end of the Black Power Movement and the ascendancy of hip hop tests the veracity of core themes of American democracy. The vision of American democracy is remarkable—namely, a belief in the equal treatment of each individual citizen over differential group treatment; the guarantee of basic fairness in jobs, education, housing, and consumer marketplaces; and the promise that, if one works hard, one can have a promising future. For many Americans, these ideas shape their understandings of themselves as Americans and describe their realities. Others take a less sanguine view. For Black Americans, Latinos, indigenous peoples, poor people, racial/ethnic immigrant groups, and many others, these ideals remain an illusive

dream. Despite the currently unrealized potential of this American Dream, its vision remains attractive. If Black American youth as a group achieve success, then African American civil society and American democracy both become stronger. Unfortunately, as the one-third of Black American youth under age 18 who live in poverty suggests, this has not yet happened.

How will Black youth negotiate their generational consciousness, especially regarding issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, and American democracy? How will their diverse patterns of participation in the privileges and penalties associated with the new racism shape their political consciousness? How might coming of age during the period from Black Power to hip hop shape the political responses of this generation toward racism, nationalism, and feminism?

The quotes that opened this introduction demonstrate the contradictions of the value system of the Black hip-hop generation. This cohort embraces the beliefs of American society concerning individualism, personal expression, and material well-being, yet it also sees how social issues such as incarceration, poor schooling, no jobs, drugs, and the erosion of family structures arise not just from individual failures but from racially disparate, group-based treatment. Stated differently, this population has benefited from the Civil Rights Movement to make democracy work for African Americans; from union movements that pressured all levels of government to protect the interests of the most economically vulnerable workers; from Black nationalist-influenced social movements that maintained churches, schools, and other community institutions dedicated to nurturing the next generation of African American leaders; from a women's movement that demanded rights for women and girls equal to those afforded to men; and from movements for sexual liberation that created political space for new identities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people. Yet as a group, Black American youth have also routinely been denied structural opportunities to exercise their citizenship rights and to achieve personal goals. In this sense, the status of Black American youth serves as a barometer for the status of American democracy itself.

Black Political Responses to the New Racism

No longer are state troops used to block entry to schools and other public institutions—segregation's strong arm, states' rights, has found a new home in an economic

gestalt that has simply privatized everything. Whites have moved to the suburbs and politicians have withdrawn funds from black to white areas in unsubtle redistricting plans. No longer is the law expressly discriminatory...yet the phenomenon of laissez-faire exclusion has resulted in as complete a pattern of economic and residential segregation as has ever existed in this country.

—*Patricia Williams*⁶

Pointing to the “phenomenon of laissez-faire exclusion,” the critical race theorist and legal scholar Patricia Williams describes the contradictions of the new colorblind racism. On the one hand, the new racism relies on a longstanding logic of segregation, one where Whites move to the suburbs and Black youth remain within increasingly impoverished city limits. As Williams points out, the result is a pattern of economic and residential segregation that constitutes little change from the Jim Crow patterns of the past. Beliefs in the racial purity of segregated neighborhoods have been discredited (except, perhaps, among readers of Whitesupremacist literature), leaving a new multicultural America that is ruled not by big government, but by fair and open marketplaces. Because racially pure spaces can no longer be mandated by legislation, they re-emerge through custom. On the other hand, the ideologies that uphold these now customary segregated spaces have changed. Trumpeting a belief that American society is a meritocracy, mass media masks the actual segregation in everyday life by pushing an ideology of colorblindness. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres explain how this ideology uses ideas about individual effort to explain the success of Black middle-class people and identifies a deficient Black culture that is riddled with bad values as the ball and chain of poor and working-class Black failure:

The stock story of colorblindness is that the only motive of the civil rights movement was to free individual black people from state-sponsored discrimination. This depiction of the civil rights movement put assimilation (an option available primarily to middle- and upper-class blacks) as the engine that drove the civil rights movement. After formal, state-sanctioned barriers to individual mobility are removed, any continuing inequality must result from the personal failure of individuals or, in its modern iteration, the dysfunction of black culture.⁷

In this context, one can not only celebrate racial and ethnic mixtures of all sorts. One can even develop positive feelings about the music and

dance styles of impoverished Black American youth. Privatization masks these relations. By making the marketplace the final arbiter of all social relations, the segregation and racial hierarchy that does remain can be attributed to the good and bad qualities of people who compete in the marketplace.

This new colorblind racism is also highly nationalistic. A greatly changed global political economy has left America as the sole remaining superpower. In this transnational context, American national identity and nation-state policies (both domestic and foreign) have grown in significance. Within American politics, a series of conservative Republican administrations have redefined American national identity as a *de facto* (White) nationalism that masks its own success. Since the 1980s, the American nation-state has increasingly defined ideas about what it means to be American through ideas of Whiteness, Christianity, wealth, masculinity, and heterosexuality. As a result, social inequality of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and religion, among others, appear to be natural and normal and certainly not socially constructed by public policies and everyday customs. Despite its claims of being a meritocracy, the United States has become highly nationalistic, with the boisterous “We’re Number 1” of sports fans and soldiers drowning out other perspectives where might does not make right. The events of September 11, 2001, served as a tragic reminder that many people in the world hate the United States—or, at least, the version of American nationalism that far too often backs the wrong side of democratic movements.

The simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of Black American youth is situated in this broader context. This contradiction of the invisibility of actual racial segregation and the hypervisibility of a new, mass-media-constructed, multicultural America reflects three important features of the new racism. These features in turn have great implications for African Americans generally, and for Black American youth in particular. First, the effects of globalization have had an especially harsh impact on African Americans, with disparate effects on young Black men, Black women, and Black children. African Americans have not been alone in suffering the economic penalties associated with Blackness. People of African descent and those who are socially constructed as “Black” within their societies (for example, indigenous people in Canada, Afro-Brazilians under policies of racial democracy, and darker-skinned people within the caste system of India) are routinely disadvantaged in this global economy. Under globalization,

corporations make the decisions, and “the company is free to move; but the consequences of the move are bound to stay.”⁸ Globalization is not new, yet the increasing concentration of capital in the hands of fewer and fewer corporations distinguishes contemporary global capitalism from its nineteenth-century counterpart. Moreover, the weakening of democratically elected governments in response to the growing strength of global organizations that set policy and often operate in secrecy effectively elevates marketplace forces over democracy itself. Today, relatively few transnational corporations are driving the world economy, and their decisions affect the global distribution of wealth and poverty. Ironies abound. American commitments to expand democracy through policies such as the war in Iraq seem undermined by the growing ineffectiveness of existing democratically elected governments to improve the economic lives of their citizenry.

Within a global context, because they live in poor countries or because they are “socially Black” within multicultural societies, Black people and people of color are more likely to lose jobs in local labor markets. They are the ones who lack control over oil, mineral wealth, and other natural resources on their land; who lose their land to global agribusiness; and who are denied basic services of electricity and clean water, let alone the luxury goods of the new information age. For African Americans, jobs have disappeared; funding for urban public housing, education, transportation, and health care has eroded; and the American public increasingly blames African Americans for their own fate.⁹

Second, mass media is vitally important within the global social relations of the new, seemingly colorblind racism. Multiculturalism, privatization, and other ideologies that justify inequalities not just of race, but also of class, gender, religion, sexuality, age, and ethnicity, are increasingly reproduced by an influential, global popular-culture industry that needs a continuing supply of new cultural material for its growing entertainment, advertising, and news divisions. Because of its authority to shape perceptions of the world, this popular-culture industry circulates representations of women and men of African descent in domestic and transnational contexts. African American culture can be photographed, recorded, and digitalized and can now travel to all parts of the globe. For many world citizens, news footage of the American presence in the war in Iraq is supplemented by images of Black American basketball players and rap artists. This is the face of America.

The established African American leadership seems incapable of addressing social issues that have disproportionate impact on African American youth. This is a third defining feature of the new colorblind racism—namely, the ineffectiveness of political strategies that strive to resist it. Here African American politics provides a lens into the contradictions of trying to meet new social challenges with old political responses. For a variety of reasons, no one of the four major philosophies that have long guided African American politics has been successful in meeting the challenges of the new racism, especially concerning Black American youth.

Racial integration, the primary strategy pursued by the Civil Rights Movement, has produced unprecedented gains for a sizable segment of the African American population. But it also has failed large numbers of working-class and poor African Americans who continue to deal with higher unemployment rates than Whites, poorer housing, bad schools, and disparate health outcomes. Moreover, despite their accomplishments, many middle-class African Americans express frustration with what they see as the continued barriers that confront them. Through strategies such as offering successful middle-class African Americans as role models for poor Black youth, and affirmative action to force police forces, colleges, suburban neighborhoods, public schools, and other social institutions to accept African Americans, integrationist projects advise young African Americans to assimilate into a social system that repeatedly signals that they are not welcome. Traditionally not deeply concerned with altering the basic values of society or initiating fundamental institutional changes, integrationist and assimilationist movements hoped that collective action by African Americans would increase the opportunities for African Americans as individuals within existing social institutions.¹⁰ No doubt, the new Black middle class owes its success to racial integration. But the one-at-a-time strategy of racial uplift has failed to deliver meaningful change for the majority of African Americans.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in an examination of the life chances of the Black hip-hop generation. Joblessness, illiteracy, unplanned pregnancy, criminal activity, drugs, and alarmingly high rates of HIV infection spark the same response: Black youth are told to “speak proper English, pull up your pants, and take off that miniskirt.” This failure stems in part from the success of the conservative Republican backlash against the gains of progressive social movements. But it also reflects the established Black American leadership’s

continued commitment to racial integration, the crown jewel of the Civil Rights agenda. Working hand in hand with multiculturalism, racial integration is now the official policy of the United States. Yet when it comes to actual social change, more attention has been paid to this ideology than to hard-hitting social policies that might integrate suburban housing or American public schools. The large numbers of African Americans who remain confined to racially segregated, poor neighborhoods, coupled with the staunch resistance on the part of White people to racial integration of housing, schools, employment, and public facilities, leave integrationists apparently out of touch with the concerns of contemporary working-class and low-income African Americans.

The federal government's retreat from enforcing civil-rights legislation has effectively repositioned the state not as a champion of the rights of the dispossessed, but as a defender of elite interests. The global context reflects a similar failure of integration, this time refracted through a global marketplace that seemingly controls everything but in which no one is responsible for the poverty, homelessness, poor health, and hunger that persists among a large proportion of the world's population. Nation-states become the new toothless political units that bear a striking resemblance to American cities that build brand-new sports stadiums for losing teams yet seem unable to fund roads, police forces, and effective public-school systems. When open elections and the vote deliver so little to the dispossessed, democracy no longer seems to matter. Given this reality, many African Americans no longer believe that racial integration constitutes a realistic strategy for Black empowerment. Racial integration may be alive in public rhetoric, but how realistic is it to argue that racial integration will solve the social problems facing Black youth in a domestic and global context?

Black nationalist projects may offer some answers, but they, too, proved to be no match for the new colorblind racism. The broad range of political projects stimulated by the three orienting strategies of Black nationalist ideology—namely, self-definition (cultural), self-determination (political), and self-reliance (economic)—shrank in the context of the new racism.¹¹ In their place, a new politics of representation emerged whereby Black people were integrated into existing social structures one by one. Getting Black individuals jobs or elected to political office supposedly constituted a victory for the entire group. The limitations of this approach soon became apparent. The 1992 appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court signaled

a shift in Black nationalist politics. Despite Thomas's record, Black Americans supported his candidacy because they still espoused norms of racial solidarity associated with Black nationalism. As a result of these types of decisions, African Americans found themselves increasingly represented by "Black" appointees who, often hand-picked by conservatives, failed to represent African American interests. Black nationalism as a political ideology was greatly watered down, leaving a politics of group representation that became increasingly fragmented along social-class lines and subject to manipulation and abuse by individual opportunists.

Ironically, in the context of the new racism, politics has seemingly shifted into the terrain of identity and culture. Projects for self-definition, the portion of Black nationalist projects devoted to values, culture, and new Black identities not only survived the challenges of the new racism but seemingly flourished within the increasingly conservative racial climate in the United States, where cultural arguments that explained class inequalities rose in importance. The Nation of Islam and Black studies programs in higher education that overtly espoused Afrocentric philosophies constitute two nationally visible organizational sites for Black cultural nationalism. With their emphasis on Black identity and culture, these projects maintained their strength via the seeming failure of racial integration. In the absence of a richly textured Black nationalist debate, the ideas and actions of a few organizations became the new archetypes of Black nationalism. A good deal of recent Black intellectual criticism of Black nationalism, much of it apparently quite convincing to others in the academy, seems directed toward a relatively small segment of Black nationalist thought, especially its misogynistic elements.¹² After all, if the Nation of Islam and Afrocentric Black studies programs become the straw men who stand for all Black nationalism, then it becomes relatively straightforward to dismiss Black nationalism in total by criticizing the limitations of these expressions of Black cultural nationalism.¹³

Socialism and similar class-based initiatives, the third major ideology shaping Black politics, also floundered in responding to the new racism. In contrast to the European acceptance of socialism, African Americans advancing socialism since the 1950s have had a hard time being heard in America.¹⁴ Several themes have suppressed socialist ideology within African American communities, among them the McCarthy era of the 1950s and its attack on communism; the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 (when he began to advance

a class-based, global agenda for human rights); and government persecution in the 1970s of Black radical organizations such as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense that offered critiques of capitalism. Moreover, the 1990 collapse of the Soviet Union as a major communist world power simultaneously elevated capitalism's status as the dominant global economic system and nationalist ideologies in which groups competed with one another in the new global marketplace. As a result, socialism has rarely been tested within African American politics, and when it has, its language has been co-opted.

Black feminism, a fourth major ideology shaping African American politics, experienced a renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s but also proved unable to sustain its radical potential in the face of the new racism. Historically, because African American women lived racially segregated lives, Black feminism found expression within the confines of Black community politics. This meant that African American feminism had a dialectical and synergistic relationship with Black nationalism as a "Black feminist nationalism" or "Black nationalist feminism." Black women participated in community politics, and the models that developed there moved into modern Black feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. Individual African American women also participated in and continued to work within U.S. mainstream feminism during this period, a fact that is lost on those who argue that feminism is for White women. African American women have been in feminism since its inception, and during the 1970s and 1980s they launched a distinctive, albeit less well known, Black feminist movement.¹⁵ Like mainstream feminism, conservative forces that set out to dismantle women's rights also affected Black feminist politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Black feminism garnered increasing recognition within the academy, yet it also began to succumb to the pressures of the new racism to eschew group-based politics of all sorts. Currently, the shift away from its roots in Black political activism has led some to ask: What has Black feminism built *within* African American communities?

From Black Power to Hip Hop: Overview of the Volume

Collectively, the six essays in *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* explore the political realities of this period marked by the end of Black Power to the ascendancy of hip hop. I focus on the experiences of African Americans, yet the issues raised

concerning American national identity, public policy, oppositional ideologies and social movements, and reformulated structures of social inequality are broader than this population. The essays focus neither on African American youth nor on hip-hop culture. Rather, they aim to map patterns of converging and cross-cutting racism, nationalism, and feminism that are vitally important to the Black hip-hop generation.

The essays have several defining features. First, they focus on the relationship between new racial formations and on political responses to them. Part I examines the American nation-state and sketches a framework for thinking through how race, gender, and class affect American national identity, especially its impetus toward democracy. Nationalism and feminism, the focus of the essays in Parts II and III, respectively, constitute two powerful ideologies that have catalyzed major social movements and that have shown resilience where other ideas have floundered. I am especially interested in these two belief systems because individually and collectively, these ideologies have been more likely to engage politically active Black youth than ideologies of racial integration and socialism. As ideologies, nationalism and feminism both signal new types of social relations. The group-based, social-justice framework associated with nationalist ideologies has been used by many oppressed groups, not simply by racial/ethnic minorities. At the same time, the individual-rights framework advocated by Western feminism has been central in the global women's movement. Despite their importance within African American politics, integrationist and class-based ideologies are not the focus of the essays, but they do reappear as themes throughout the volume.

Second, the essays rely on a paradigm of intersectionality to explore the connections among race, nation, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. Intersectional paradigms view race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power. Whereas all of these systems are always present, grappling with their theoretical contours is far more difficult than merely mentioning them. The essays in *From Black Power to Hip Hop* should be read in the context of my consistent efforts to theorize intersectionality. The focus here is on intersections of race, nation, and gender, but selected essays also examine how these constructs intersect with other equally important systems of power. For example, while not a major focus of this volume, social class is an important sub-theme. In particular, an increasingly heterogeneous Black social-class structure has brought a greater degree of civil-rights protection to middle-class African

Americans. What are the new contours of race and class-consciousness that accompany these new social relations? Historically, African Americans have shown a strong degree of racial solidarity, largely because they had common problems and saw their fate as intricately linked. Despite significant changes in the post-Civil Rights era, African American voting behavior still shows a noteworthy degree of racial solidarity, one indicator that Black Americans choose race over class.¹⁶ But the race-versus-class argument may oversimplify the complexities of contemporary political consciousness among African Americans across social-class differences. Rather than choosing race or class, a more provocative question concerns the patterns of race/class political consciousness across Black social-class structures.¹⁷ For example, are middle-class African Americans as a group more likely to endorse racial integration as a political strategy simply because they are the group that is most favorably positioned to benefit from it? Will poor and working-class African Americans embrace Black nationalist ideologies because they have greater resonance with the group-based racial discrimination that accompanies racial segregation? The essays do not directly engage these questions, yet these issues run throughout the volume nonetheless.

A third distinguishing feature of this volume is that the essays explore a longstanding theoretical interest of mine—namely, how it is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Today's new colorblind racism in the United States characterizes this curious combination of the old with the new. Such racism is old in that Black Americans and people of African descent in a global context remain disproportionately stuck on the bottom of the racial hierarchy, and White Americans and Whites from former colonial powers continue to enjoy the privileges associated with being on top. Despite massive changes in law, economy, politics, customs, and social norms, the basic racial hierarchy that characterized the founding of the United States, as well as the one that characterized the global colonial period, persists. However, such racism is new in its economic, political, and ideological organization. Specifically, the deeply entrenched legal and customary racial segregation that historically permeated American social institutions has given way to unevenly desegregated schools, job categories, workplaces, neighborhoods, and public spaces. Whiteness is not celebrated to the same degree, although it remains the implicit normative yardstick against which everything else is measured. The essays struggle to understand this process of stasis and change, with an eye

toward conserving those elements of society that are worth keeping and changing those that are not.

Finally, the essays collected here all constitute critical social theory.¹⁸ Critical social theory consists of bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people who are differently placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice. African Americans constitute the group that focuses the theory developed in these essays. As works of critical social theory, the essays presented here use a conceptual framework concerning the intersections of race, gender, and nation to raise questions that may help African Americans, especially Black youth in the hip-hop generation, and their supporters craft more effective responses to the new colorblind racism.

Part I: Race, Family, and the U.S. Nation-State

When it comes to contemporary America, the very meaning of democracy is at stake. Given its current place in global politics, can the United States bring about a democracy that delivers on its promises? Can a nation-state that is composed of so many different kinds of people from all over the world find a way to use that diversity to craft a unified whole that protects and nurtures every single individual? National identity, a form of ethnic identity writ large, is a powerful template for telling us who we are, why we are here, what our responsibilities (or lack thereof) are to one another, and what we can expect for ourselves as unique individuals. Rather than seeing nationalism as a backward, essentialist ideology, I view nationalism as a powerful set of ideas that can be used for a variety of purposes. Elsewhere I suggest that the power of nationalism, like that of religion, lies in its ability to annex expressive needs to political ends. Certainly, conservative Republican politicians who manipulated American patriotism for their own ends—the war in Iraq comes to mind—understand this process. In defining the contours of the nation-state, ideas about patriotism that draw on notions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and age are vitally important. Patriotism asks who is deemed worthy to serve and who should be protected from harm. American nationalism draws on the power of nationalist ideology and is unlikely to disappear in the near future. Thus, questions of what kind of American national identity will emerge from these troubled times of the new millennium are crucial.

The struggles in the 1980s and 1990s over the meaning of American national identity may have been depicted as “culture wars” between

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