

Creating Black Americans

African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present

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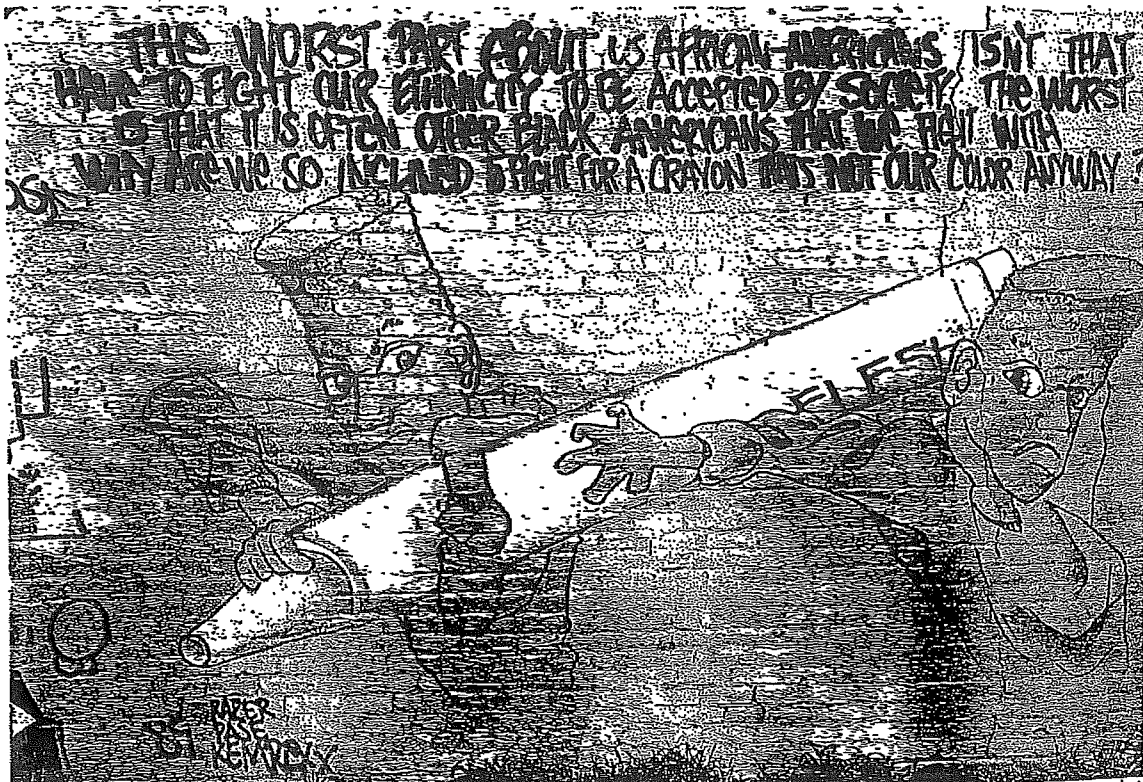
Authenticity and Diversity in the Era of Hip-Hop

1980–2005

Brett Cook (Dizney) (b. 1968) painted the graffiti-style mural "Why Fight for a Crayon That's Not Our Color?" in California. Graffiti is one of the five dimensions of hip-hop culture. (The other four are DJ-ing, rap music, break dancing, and clothing.) Hip-hop has exerted tremendous influence on popular culture all over the world since its appearance in New York City in the late 1970s. Cook says his mural depicts the struggles of his generation of black Americans, a generation born since the mid-1960s and variously termed "hip-hop," "post-Black," "post-Soul," and "post-Civil Rights." Even though racial obstacles still exist in American society, younger black people have far more access to opportunity than their elders.

This first generation of African Americans to grow up free of legalized segregation has often succeeded beyond their parents' and grandparents' imaginations. Each week seems to bring the announcement of a black person's heading a Fortune 500 company, being crowned Miss America, winning at golf or tennis, being appointed secretary of State, or becoming a billionaire. But Cook realizes that when success often seems to demand turning white, it tempts younger black people to compromise their black identity (15.1). Like hip-hop artists, Cook wants young African Americans to remain true to their blackness. After the end of legalized segregation, the notion of authentic blackness became a preoccupation of the hip-hop generation. The need to define what constituted authentic—as opposed to inauthentic—blackness related to the increasingly visible diversity among people considering themselves African American.

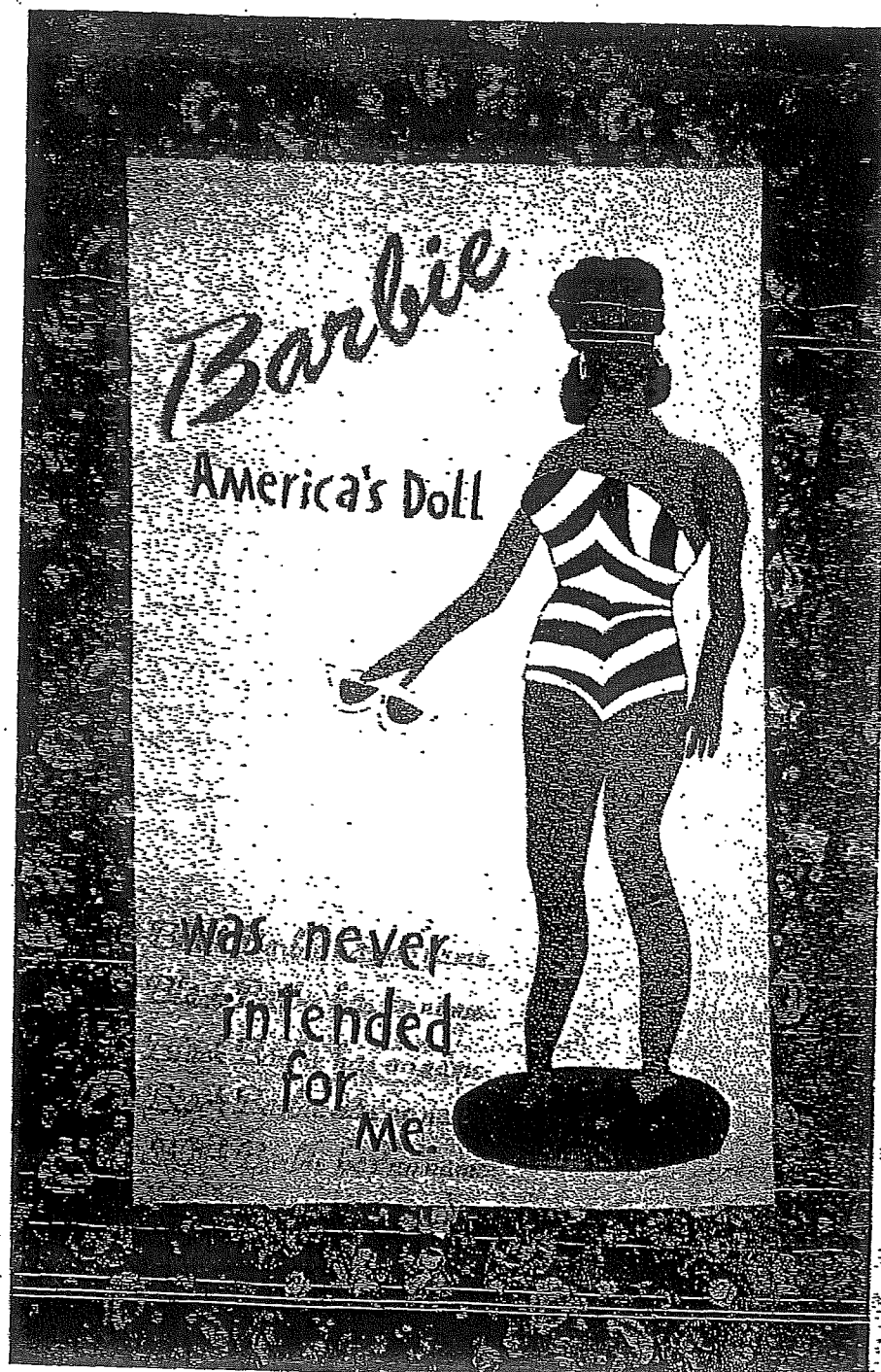
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15.1. Brett Cook (Disney), "Why Fight for a Crayon That's Not Our Color?" 1988. Psycho City, San Francisco, California. Approximately ten-feet high.

Cook says, "The worst part about us African-Americans isn't that we have to fight our ethnicity to be accepted by society. The worst part is that it is often other black Americans that we fight with. Why are so inclined to fight for a crayon that's not our color anyway?" The crayon says "flesh."¹

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15.4. Kyrá E. Hicks, "Black Barbie" quilt, 1996

Hicks's quilt corrects her suspicion that "Barbie, America's [tall, thin, fashionable] Doll was never intended for me." Hicks invents a brown Barbie with a fuller figure, one more akin to the bodies of black women.

Hip-Hop Culture Presents a New Vision of the Inner City

Impoverished inner-city neighborhoods beset by unemployment—the “hood”—that nurture crime and drug abuse and police brutality are the same places that hip-hop culture celebrates.³⁹ Artists like N. W. A. (Niggaz with Attitude) and Run DMZ made records documenting life in the mean streets of the ‘hood. The rapper Ice Cube (b. 1969) said, “We call ourselves underground street reporters. We just tell it how we see it, nothing more, nothing less.”⁴⁰

Hip-hop culture symbolizes the younger generation of urban African Americans born since 1965. More than just rap music, hip-hop culture encompasses music, dance, graffiti artistry, sampling, clothing, and the claim of authentic blackness.⁴¹ Hip-hop culture conveys an attitude and a style as well as its specific art forms. One index to the spread of hip-hop culture is the growth of rap music. Over the course of a quarter century, rap music grew from a purely local performance style in the Bronx of New York City in the 1970s to become the top-selling musical format in the United States in 1998.⁴²

Graffiti art appeared on walls and subway cars in New York City in the late 1960s, earlier than rap music and break dancing. Most graffiti artists attain only local success, because building owners and the New York Transit Authority try to clean buildings and subway cars as quickly as possible. However the most famous graffiti artist of the 1970s and 1980s, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), realized commercial success at an early age. His “tag” (the label he wrote on buildings and subway cars) was “SAMO,” meaning “same old shit.” New York gallery owners discovered Basquiat in the early 1980s. His work was subsequently exhibited internationally. Basquiat was subject to paranoia and heroin addiction, which ultimately killed him at age twenty-seven.⁴³

Melvyn Henry Samuels, Jr. “Noc” (b. 1961), created the Style Wars subway train graffiti (15.5). This masterpiece covers the entire seventy-two-foot subway car from end to end and from top to bottom. The painting acknowledges the older, wild style of letter painting in the middle of the car. Graffiti became a part of fine art during the 1990s. In the early years of the twenty-first century it made a comeback as outdoor art.

From its earliest beginnings, hip-hop culture has drawn on international sources, notably the Jamaican reggae that was developing at the same time. Yet it also remains intensively local. Hip-hop began as outdoor party music, as a way for young people lacking

other outlets for recreation to have a good time. Jamaican popular music (“dub” and “dance-hall”) inspired the basketball court parties where hip-hop originated.

The acknowledged founder of hip-hop, DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell), was born in Jamaica in 1955 and immigrated to the Bronx in 1967. He blasted out the music on giant speakers, which he called “Herculords.” As a DJ, Kool Herc worked two turntables at a time, playing two copies of the same record. He not only selected the records; Herc would stop one record, then the other, repeating favorite phrases to create looping “break beats.” Working the turntables, Herc improvised rhymes to recognize friends or convey messages of political import. His rhymes followed in the tradition of Gil-Scott Heron (b. 1949) and the Last Poets, who were also active in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During Herc’s break beats, “B-boy” dancers (and very occasionally “B-girl” dancers) would get up on the stage and dance jerky and original moves. Herc was also a break dancer and graffiti artist.⁴⁴

Among the other early DJs were Afrika Bambaataa (b. 1955) and Grandmaster Flash (b. 1958). They divided the Bronx into personal territories and battled against each other in non-violent competitions.⁴⁵ The DJs’ rhymes or “raps” offer playful alternatives to physical violence. Break dancing also simulated battles, in which dancers competed with one another without touching. Graffiti artists also tried to outdo one another to see who could write his (or, very occasionally, her) name or “tag” the most often or make the most creative art with spray paint.

Grandmaster Flash perfected the critical rap music innovation of scratching. He used two turntables, scratching one record in rhythm or against the rhythm of another record while the second record is playing. Scratching, like break-beats and sampling, makes turntables into musical instruments.⁴⁶

Rap music is the most widely circulated aspect of hip-hop culture, in large part because music can easily be mechanically reproduced in studios and sold for profit. (Graffiti art and break dancing are much harder to reproduce and distribute by the millions.) Sylvia Robinson (b. 1948) of the small, independent Sugar Hill Records produced the first hit rap record in 1979, the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight." Within a few months "Rapper's Delight" sold millions of copies, reaching the top of the pop charts. "Rapper's Delight" demonstrated rap's money-making potential.⁴⁷ In the early 1980s rappers began to appear on the popular television show "Soul Train." Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five recorded the first socially conscious raps, and "Planet Rock" by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force sold 100,000 records (that is, it "went gold"). Rap's first decade—the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s—is fondly remembered as "Old School," or "Back in the Day," an era when rapping was not commercial, and rappers created music out of personal experience in their disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Rap music's preoccupation with police brutality and graphic sex made it controversial. Nonetheless the genre continued to make headway in American popular culture. Political rap surged to the top of the charts during the golden age, 1988 to the mid-1990s. Police brutality remained a staple topic in rap. The artist KRS-1 (n.d.) presents just one example in "Who Protects Us from You?" (1989):

You were put here to protect us, but who protects us from you?
Everytime you say, 'that's illegal,' does it mean that it's true?

In "Illegal Search" (1990), LL Cool J (b. 1968) spins out a drama of racial profiling (selectively targeting black motorists on the basis of their race) on the New Jersey Turnpike inspired by incidents then in the news:

The car, the clothes, and my girl is hype
But you want to replace my silk for stripes.
You're real mad, your uniform is tight
Fingerprint me, take my name and height
Hopin' it will, but I know it won't work.
Illegal Search.⁴⁸

The first women rappers to achieve great success were the group Salt 'N' Pepa. Their debut album, "Hot, Cool and Vicious" (1986), sold two million copies (that is, "double platinum"). Music Television (MTV), which had first refused to feature black artists, began to broadcast rap music, including an entire show called "Yo! MTV Raps!" in 1989. Starting with *The Source*, magazines devoted to rap began to circulate. Rap's fabled golden age lasted from 1988 into the mid-1990s.

Rap's golden age inspired gritty movies about inner-city life in the 'hood, such as Mario Van Peebles's (b. 1957) *New Jack City* (1991); John Singleton's (b. 1968) movie starring the NWA rapper Ice Cube, *Boyz n the Hood* (1991); Ricardo Cortez Cruz's (b. 1964) *Straight Outta Compton* (1992) and *Menace II Society* (1993).⁴⁹ Tough, violent, and sexist, these films attracted white and Latino as well as black audiences. They glamorized the raw masculinity of poor black men battling the evils of white supremacy and finding wealth in drug trafficking.

During the golden age of rap, Los Angeles joined New York City as a major source of rap. West Coast rappers specialized in criminal-minded, blood-curdling, woman-beating lyrics, earning their art the name "gangsta rap." In the mid-1990s, the competition between East Coast and West Coast rap turned violent, spawning fights and, ultimately, sensational murders. The 1996 drive-by shooting deaths of Tupac Shakur (1971–1996) and the Notorious B.I.G./Biggie Smalls (Christopher Wallace [1972–1997]) ended rap's golden age. Years after his death in 1996, Tupac Shakur remains the representative figure of the hip-hop generation. He was born into a family of Black Panther activists that experienced poverty and drug addiction.⁵⁰ A beautiful, heavily tattooed artist whose demons included weaknesses for drugs, sex, and violence, Shakur combined political and artistic sophistication, the materialism and violence of the thug life, and the sexual abuse of women in his music and his life. As gangsta rap's most influential star, he symbolized the many contradictions of hip-hop culture and embodied its fetish for young black male authenticity.

Rap music defies easy characterization, for its messages are varied and even conflicting. Rap music is many things: politically critical, culturally astute, hedonistic, social realist, degrading to women, homophobic, homoerotic, moralizing, feminist, materialis-

tic, violent, black nationalist, entertaining, pornographic, and just plain fun—sometimes all at the same time. Women rappers like Lil' Kim (b. 1975) and Foxy Brown (b. 1979) produce some of the raunchiest raps. Others, like Salt 'N' Pepa, Queen Latifah (b. 1970), and Lauryn Hill (b. 1975) rap as feminists.

Rap artists use the word "Niggaz" to designate a particular group of black people who are said to be authentically black—the young, poor, oppressed black men of the ghetto. They are the victims of police brutality, the drug culture, and a lack of opportunities for legal success. Niggaz come from the impoverished 'hood to which they are fiercely loyal. Rappers surround themselves with their friends from the 'hood, their posse or crew. Their songs evoke the 'hood in specific terms, and their videos are set in the heart of the rapper's own 'hood. Niggaz cannot be middle class, because in hip-hop culture, the black middle class cannot be authentically black.⁵¹ Even hip-hop artists who once were considered Niggaz can lose their authenticity by selling out through too much American material success. They might sell their music to advertisers, become movie stars, or seem to go out of their way to seek the approval of white people.⁵²

In addition to rap music, hip-hop culture has given rise to its own versions of movies, poetry, and fashion. Hip-hop culture has also brought new wealth to artists and behind-the-scenes professionals, including producers, talent scouts, camera operators, editors, and recording executives. In 2001 Antonio "L.A." Reid (b. 1958) moved from a small hip-hop and R & B company to head Arista, a major pop label. Russell Simmons (b. 1958), founder of Def Jam Records, created television and Broadway shows with music, comedy, and poetry. In 1999 Lauryn Hill (b. 1975) was nominated for eleven Grammy Awards and won five, including Album of the Year and Best New Artist. She appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine.⁵³

As the best-selling genre of popular music in the early years of the twenty-first century, rap music reaches millions of non-African-American consumers all around the world. Similarly, rap artists now come from every country. Rap in other countries gives voice to the poor, the oppressed, and the youth in revolt against official harassment.

Rap music and hip-hop culture create a coherent image of black people as centered in poor, urban neighborhoods. At its best, it levels a powerful critique against injustice in the name of black people as a whole. At its worst, it treats women as objects of abusive sex and glorifies bloodshed. In hip-hop culture, the middle-class, wealthy, and educated black people who were becoming more numerous either disappear or pose a threat to authentic African Americans.

Monuments, commemorations, Afrocentrism, and hip-hop represent important outgrowths of the cultural nationalism that flowered in the 1960s and 1970s. Although cultural nationalism began with an emphasis on the African dimension of African-American identity, much of that emphasis has shifted with the passage of time. The opening of American institutions to black people offered new opportunities, especially to the young. As one of the core institutions of American culture, the U.S. military presents a prime example.

Reclaiming Black History

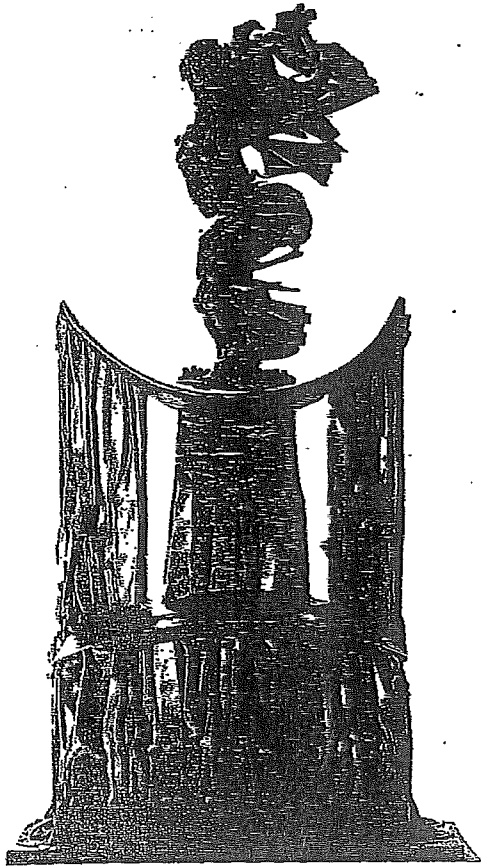
In the generation since the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, black people and their allies have sought to commemorate the struggle for civil rights.³⁰ They have also built on the cultural nationalism of leaders like Maulana Karenga of the US movement (see chapter 14) by creating black and African-American studies departments, studying African languages, wearing African-inspired clothing, and preferring to be called "African Americans" rather than "Negroes."

The Kwanzaa holiday provides one telling example of the way cultural nationalism became an accepted facet of American life. At the same time that hundreds of local organizations were spreading Kwanzaa as a black nationalist holiday, Americans as a whole were becoming more self-consciously multicultural. Schools and museums realized that Kwanzaa offered a way to attract black support in cities that were now majority African American. Corporations saw Kwanzaa as a way to proclaim their fair-mindedness. In 1997 the U.S. Postal Service issued a Kwanzaa stamp. Maulana Karenga published *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* to go along with the stamp and codify a regular ritual. In thirty years Kwanzaa had gone from a new, separatist black nationalist observation to a corporate celebration of American multicultural marketing.³¹ Afrocentric values turned out to resonate well with nonblack as well as black Americans.

Black cultural (or heritage) tourism originated in the desire of African Americans and their allies to preserve the memory of the heroic struggles of the Civil Rights era so that they did not disappear as activists aged and died.³² Civil rights museums now exist in many places in the South: they include the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center, Atlanta; Freedom Park/Kelly Ingram Park, Birmingham; the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute; the Voters Rights Museum and Rosa Parks Museum, Montgomery, Alabama; and the Memphis, Tennessee, National Civil Rights Museum.

Black heritage tourism is now big business. Two of its pioneers were Calettha Powell (n.d.) of the African-American Travel and Tourism Association, Inc., and Thomas Dorsey (b. 1951) of Soul of America. American cities and states have joined African-American travel agents inviting tourists to historic black neighborhoods, such as Harlem in New York and Roxbury in Boston. Slavery, too, has spawned tourism, to sites such as the slave market in Charleston, South Carolina. The United States National Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg, Virginia, still in the planning stage, will open in 2007.³³ The West African nations of Ghana and Senegal invite black Americans to rediscover their African roots through visits to coastal slave castles that were their ancestors' embarkation sites.³⁴

States, localities, and the federal government foster the commemoration of black history out of a variety of motives ranging from commercial to civic. The United States designated the annual federal holiday marking the birthday of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1986. In the fall of 2003 the United States government sponsored two important events making black history more prominent: In October the U.S. General Services



15.3. Barbara Chase-Riboud "Africa Rising," 1998

Chase-Riboud's monumental sculpture recalls the bowsprit (female figure on the bow) of sailing ships like those transporting African captives to the Americas. Chase-Riboud gave the bowsprit prominent buttocks to honor Saartje Bartmann, the so-called "Hottentot Venus" from South Africa. Below the bowsprit are ropes that bound the enslaved.

Administration joined the Schomburg Center of the New York Public Library and Howard University to re-bury the remains of four hundred enslaved people in the African Burial Ground. (Their remains had been taken to Howard University for anthropological study.) A twenty-foot-tall monument by the sculptor Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939) in the new federal building erected over the burial ground commemorates the tragedy of New York's enslaved (15.3). In November 2003 Congress finally passed legislation to build a National Museum of African-American History and Culture. The measure had originally been requested by black Civil War veterans in 1915.³⁵ The envisioned museum will be part of the Smithsonian Institution and contain information on four hundred years of African-American history at a site to be determined in 2006.

Afrocentrism Provokes Controversy

In contrast to black heritage tourism and historical commemoration, which stress the Americanness of the African-American past, Afrocentricists stress the African-ness of black Americans and their relation to others in the African Diaspora. The broad intellectual tendency known as Afrocentrism encompasses a variety of ideas and practices. Afrocentrism puts black people at the center of historical narrative. Certain tendencies also insist on the greatness of ancient Egypt and African Americans' direct descent from the pharaohs. Some Afrocentrists, such as Molefi Kete Asante (b. 1942), believe that African-descended peoples are

uniquely oral and community minded.³⁶ Other Afrocentrists go so far as to draw sharp contrasts between black "Sun people" and white "Ice people," ideas that simply reverse the assumptions of white supremacy.

The tenets of extremists made Afrocentrism controversial in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By that time, Kwanzaa commemorations were becoming widespread, and a white scholar, Martin Bernal, had published a book defending black nationalists' claims that ancient Egypt had inspired European civilization. The ideas have been around since the nineteenth century and lived on in the twentieth century in the work of Chancellor

Williams (1902–1993), George G. M. James (n.d.), Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986), and Ivan Van Sertima (b. 1935).³⁷

The fight over Afrocentrism was in some ways a battle over African-American studies departments and programs, in which people of African descent formed the core of an academic curriculum. By the mid-1990s there were some 380 academic African-American studies programs and departments, at least 140 of which offered degrees. Black faculty represented only about 5 percent of college and university faculty. (Not all of them taught in African-American studies.) But even so small a number of black professors challenged older notions of what should be taught and by whom in colleges and universities.³⁸ Even when African-American studies did not draw lines between the races, many in academia found it difficult to accept black people as the subjects of scholarship and black professors as full-fledged scholars. By the end of the twentieth century, the Afrocentric controversy had largely subsided. African-American studies and African-American faculty have become permanent—though vulnerable—features of American academic life.

Quarrels over Afrocentrism and African-American studies took place among people engaged in higher education. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, young people in the streets were creating new cultural forms called hip-hop that in a quarter of a century remade American popular culture.