

# Nell Irvin Painter

## Creating Black Americans

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

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
2006

# 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 named "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 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 Mayor of State, or becoming a billionaire. But Cook realizes that when success 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 an increasingly visible diversity among people considering themselves African American.



15.1 Brett Cook (Dizney), "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 we so inclined to fight for a crayon that's not our color anyway?" The crayon says "flesh."

### Racial Politics and Economics after Black Power: Increased Diversity

The post-1980 fixation with individual success contrasts sharply with the race-based emphasis of the eras of civil rights and Black Power. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the most visible black people were in protest against the status quo. They defined themselves in racial terms against white middle-class America. After 1980, however, the most visible black people achieved success as individuals on American society's own terms. Women as well as men rose to the top of companies and institutions serving a broad range of people, nonblack as well as black.

While black people as a group continued to be the poorest, most vulnerable, and most frequently incarcerated Americans, more and more African Americans were able to realize the promise of American life. Fundamental changes in college admissions, hiring and promotion, and family wealth facilitated individual success. These changes opened opportunity for people whose forebears had endured generations of exclusion on account of racial slavery and segregation. The new policies in college admissions and in hiring and promotion were called "affirmative action," a phrase that lumped together various governmental and non-governmental policies aimed at increasing the numbers of blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and white women in institutions that had previously discouraged their presence.

#### Affirmative Action: Controversial And Effective

The phrase "affirmative action" first appeared in 1961, when President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 calling on the federal government to hire African Americans aggressively. Affirmative action became more assertive in the mid-1960s, through Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and President Lyndon B. Johnson's Executive Order 11246, which affected large private companies doing business with the federal government.<sup>2</sup> These companies were required to file plans that included goals and timetables—not quotas—for hiring minority and white women workers.

Affirmative action demanded a rethinking of the meaning of qualification for college admission and hiring and job promotion. Before affirmative action, all-white, all-male student bodies and professional workforces seemed natural and did not cause widespread concern. No means existed to increase the representation of white women or people of color. There seemed little reason to investigate the relationship between admissions and hiring on the one hand and actual effectiveness on the other.

Further complicating the workings of affirmative action was the fact that African Americans usually did not score as high as whites on the objective tests that served as means of accepting and rejecting applicants. Underlying reasons for disparities in test results have not been explained definitively. Among the possibilities that have been advanced to explain differences in test scores are the nation's long history of exclusion and segregation, poverty, substandard K-12 schools, and even genetic difference between

black and white Americans. Amazingly, hard data on the long-term consequences of affirmative action are not readily available. But some information is at hand. A 1998 book by the former presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities found that beneficiaries of race-based affirmative action went on to careers that were productive for themselves and their communities. A study by the University of Michigan found similar results.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the eventual accounting, it is clear that white women have been better able than African Americans to take widespread advantage of affirmative action.

In the 1960s affirmative action was intended to compensate for past discrimination. But rulings by the United States Supreme Court in the 1970s and 1980s barred the use of affirmative action to address discrimination in the past except in extremely narrow circumstances. The most notable among these rulings was the court's 1978 decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*. Before *Bakke* it was assumed that African Americans carried certain handicaps from their past that warranted addressing: in the parlance of the time, the racial playing field was not level. After *Bakke*, the racial playing field was assumed to be level unless proved otherwise.<sup>4</sup> Supreme Court decisions also weakened the use of timetables and goals for achieving results, seeing in them unacceptable quotas. After the *Bakke* decision, "diversity" became the prevailing, acceptable rationale for affirmative action. Any measure smacking of quotas was declared illegal.

In *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the University of Michigan cases of 2003, the Supreme Court decided that affirmative action remained a legal means of achieving racial, ethnic, and gender diversity but narrowed the means that could be used to achieve it. By declaring that each applicant to every educational institution deserved individual judgment without the use of weighted categories, the Court made it extremely difficult for large institutions receiving tens of thousands of applications to pursue affirmative action.

In *Gratz* and *Grutter* the Supreme Court received pro-affirmative action friends-of-the-court briefs from leading colleges and universities, retired officers of the U.S. military, and leading American corporations. The briefs argued that racial, ethnic, and gender diversity served the best interests of American institutions operating in a global setting. Retired generals contended that the U.S. Armed Forces' service academies needed affirmative action. The academies train the U.S. officer corps, a perennial subject of concern for African Americans in every war since the mid-nineteenth century. According to the military briefs, without affirmative action the officer corps would resemble that of the Vietnam War era. In the 1960s and 1970s the difference between heavily black troops and a nearly all-white officer corps badly undermined morale. The lack of black officers in Vietnam diminished fighting effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

Most African Americans support affirmative action, believing that it encourages access to jobs and higher education and discourages racial discrimination. Certainly the vast difference between virtually all-white and all-male student bodies and professions before and diversity after affirmative action supports that reasoning. However, two groups of Americans oppose affirmative action aggressively: first, people who

claim that affirmative action amounts to "reverse discrimination" against whites and entails the use of "quotas"; and, second, African Americans who believe that affirmative action prevents their white colleagues from respecting them as individuals.

A series of Supreme Court decisions and administrative policies have embraced the logic of reverse discrimination and drastically limited the scope of acceptable policies. Many white and black conservatives such as Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas (b. 1948) applaud this trend. However, black people who attended college or got jobs before the implementation of affirmative action recall the stereotyping that affected black people even when they were admitted to college and hired on exactly the same basis as whites. The assumption that African Americans are not qualified for skilled jobs or professional training is much older than affirmative action and runs very deep in American culture. No recent policy created this assumption.

Affirmative action is one of several issues dividing black conservatives (most are Republicans) from the majority of African Americans (who tend to favor the Democratic Party). Black conservatives emerged after the election of Ronald Reagan to the U.S. presidency in 1980. Although there have always been conservatives among the millions of black Americans, for example, Booker T. Washington (see chapter 8), they have never before been so numerous, so visible, and so influential.

#### *Black Conservatives Gain Prominence*

Ronald Reagan won a landslide presidential victory in 1980 with a "Southern strategy" promising to restore "states' rights" and end affirmative action. Reagan's monumental popularity among white voters of all parties sent black people two widely differing messages: Most African Americans heard an attack on black civil rights, if not on black people generally, in the slogan "states' rights." But a minority glimpsed in Republican conservatism the prospect of being respected as individuals, not stereotyped as members of a race.

The Reagan and first Bush administrations of the 1980s and early 1990s made black conservatism a movement to be reckoned with. Black conservatives hold positions such as anti-Communism, the use of strong military power as a tool in foreign policy, opposition to affirmative action and to abortion, support of the death penalty, school prayer, privatizing social security, school choice, and the state of Israel. Black conservatives advocate individualism and limited government, even to redress discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

Economist and syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell (b. 1930) is the elder statesman of black conservatives.<sup>7</sup> Sowell and other black conservatives lay the blame for African Americans' poverty on a faulty black culture and black people's lack of individual initiative. They believe the marketplace, not government, solves human problems most efficiently. (Such an anti-government philosophy is called "laissez-faire," meaning "let-alone.") Sowell was the most influential black conservative of the first Reagan administration.

Conservatives like Sowell oppose the governmental policies that most African Americans believe have helped them, such as the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme

Court decision against segregation in schools, anti-discrimination laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, public education, affirmative action, welfare, and minimum wage laws. They oppose affirmative action even when it helped them gain admittance to law school or lucrative government contracts. While Sowell focuses mainly on economics, black "neo-conservatives" like U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, author and former college professor Shelby Steele, and California businessman Ward Connerly (b. 1939) concentrate more on opposing affirmative action.<sup>8</sup> Steele's widely quoted articles and books argue that black people's habit of protesting against racism has outworn its usefulness.<sup>9</sup> As a member of the Board of Regents of the University of California system, Connerly spearheaded a successful campaign to force the university not to take race into account in admissions. Connerly intends to outlaw the use of race in public life in the United States as a whole. Glenn Loury (b. 1948), a Boston University economist, was the most prominent black conservative of the second Reagan administration. Like other conservatives, Loury opposed affirmative action on two grounds: he felt it imposed a group identity that ran counter to the American tradition of individualism and that it betrayed the creed of Martin Luther King, Jr., that black people should be measured by "the content of our character" rather than skin color.

Another prominent black conservative, Republican Alan Keyes (b. 1950), opposed the income tax and abortion in his 2000 presidential campaign.<sup>10</sup> J. C. Watts (b. 1957) was first elected to Congress in 1994 from a majority white district in Oklahoma. He quickly rose to the position of chair of the House Republican Conference, a high-ranking leadership position in the House Republican hierarchy.<sup>11</sup>

African-American conservatives became leaders in the administrations of President George W. Bush starting in 2001. Those two administrations have included higher ranking black Cabinet officials than any previous administration, notably two black secretaries of state: Colin L. Powell and Condoleezza Rice (b. 1954, who served as national security advisor in the first George W. Bush administration). A beneficiary of affirmative action when Clifford Alexander (b. 1933) served President Jimmy Carter as Secretary of the Army, Powell led the U.S. Armed Forces during the first Gulf War in 1990.<sup>12</sup> He became the first African-American chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President George H. W. Bush.<sup>13</sup> Powell, a supporter of affirmative action and a relatively moderate Republican, stood out as the Bush administration's most internationally minded figure during the war in Iraq of 2003. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, an expert on foreign policy and Russia, comes from an academic background and the provostship of Stanford University. As national security advisor, Rice advocated the controversial policy of "preemptive war," in which the United States could attack any country, such as Iraq, regardless of whether that country had threatened it. Education secretary in the first George W. Bush administration, Rodney Paige (b. 1935) was formerly a coach and dean of education at Texas Southern University and later school superintendent of Houston. Paige accompanied Bush from Texas. Paige opposed the power of teachers' unions and applauded the role of religion in schools.<sup>14</sup>

Black conservatives have prospered since the 1980s. However, two retreated somewhat from their conservative positions—Professor Glenn Loury and former Congressman J. C. Watts. In the early twenty-first century Loury began to disagree with his conservative colleagues over several crucial issues, notably race and IQ, the persistence of racism, and affirmative action.<sup>15</sup> And Watts—after having achieved the fourth-highest position in the Republican hierarchy in the House of Representatives—unexpectedly retired from Congress in 2003. Black Republicans remain relatively rare in American politics, facing ambivalence from both white Republicans and large numbers of African Americans. The great majority of black elected officials and aspiring officeholders are Democrats.

#### *Black Democrats: More Numerous, More Influential*

Bill Clinton's two-term presidency (1993–2001) brought many black Democrats into positions of prominence. Saying he would appoint a racially and ethnically diverse cabinet that “looked like America,” Clinton in 1993 included four African Americans in his first cabinet: Ronald H. Brown (1941–1996), formerly the chair of the Democratic National Committee, as secretary of commerce; Hazel O’Leary (b. 1937), a Minnesota energy company executive, as secretary of energy; Mississippi Congressional Representative Mike Espy (b. 1953) as secretary of agriculture; Jesse Brown (b. 1944), executive director of the Disabled American Veterans, as secretary of Veterans Affairs. In addition, General Colin Powell remained chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>16</sup>

These appointments, in addition to Clinton’s Southern origin and his ease around American Americans, prompted the novelist Toni Morrison (b. 1931) to term him jokingly “America’s first black president.” However, Clinton began the appointments process by humiliating his friend and fellow student from Yale Law School, Lani Guinier (b. 1950). After nominating Guinier for the position of assistant attorney general for civil rights, Clinton quickly withdrew her nomination when conservatives attacked her for being too liberal.<sup>17</sup>

Numerous black presidential appointments bring instant high visibility, but they depend upon the existence of a pool of experienced potential appointees. The post–Civil Rights generation has witnessed the election of ever-increasing numbers of black men and women to political office. Majority black districts in the South and in the urban North and West have elected black representatives (mainly Democrats) to Congress and to state and local offices. In 2000, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 9,040 black men and women were elected officials at all levels of government. With the exception of Illinois and Michigan, all the states with large numbers of black elected officials were Southern.<sup>18</sup> Although prominent black politicians in California and New York have run for governor, the only African American to be elected state governor was L. Douglas Wilder (b. 1931) of Virginia, 1990–1994. In 1992 Carol Mosley Braun (b. 1947) of Illinois became the first black woman elected to a seat in the U.S. Senate. She was defeated in 1998 after one term. The U.S. Senate then remained all-



52. David Hammons, “How You Like Me Now?” 1988

Hammons wonders whether more Americans would have voted for Jesse Jackson if he had been a blond white man with blue eyes. In art viewers attacked this work with a sledgehammer.

white until 2005, when Barack Obama (b. 1961) of Illinois took his seat after defeating Alan Keyes. Keyes had moved to Illinois from Maryland in order to oppose Obama.

The Reverend Jesse Jackson (b. 1941), a civil rights veteran from South Carolina and Chicago, ran for president in 1984. Jackson received some 3.5 million votes and garnered nearly 400 delegates. His presidential run in 1988, managed by Ronald H. Brown, was even more successful. He came in second in the primaries with seven million votes. In 1987 the rapper Kool Moe Dee (b. ca. 1962) recorded "How Ya Like Me Now?" Like much rap music, "How Ya Like Me Now?" featured the ritualized, taunting rhymes of the African-American word game tradition called the "dozens." Also like much rap music, "How Ya Like Me Now?" begins with a "sample" (a spliced-in bit of another recording) from rap's favorite artist, James Brown: "All Aboard the Night Train."<sup>18</sup>

Kool Moe Dee's record inspired the artist David Hammons. In 1988, as Jesse Jackson was making his second and most spectacular run for the U.S. presidency, Hammons reworked Jackson into a winning candidate in "How You Like Me Now?"—a Washington, D.C., billboard that stirred enormous controversy among viewers of all races (15.2).

Jackson's presidential campaigns showed that black voters cared passionately for politics. Many nonblack voters rallied to Jackson's populist campaign that championed the political and economic rights of working-class Americans of all races and ethnicities. With his strong civil rights background, Jackson embodied opposition to racial discrimination. As a successful negotiator who had freed American hostages in the Middle East, Jackson also stood for an American foreign policy rooted in negotiation rather than in war. Jackson did not run for president in the 1990s, but he remained a visible and influential figure in the national Democratic Party headed by President Bill Clinton. In the early twenty-first century, Jackson's son, Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. (b. 1965), emerged as a figure of note in Democratic national politics.

The defeat of Al Gore in the presidential election of 2000 and Republican control of both houses of Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court relegated black Democrats to the sidelines of national politics. The electoral abuses of the election of 2000 spotlighted African Americans' long-standing difficulties in getting their votes fully counted.

#### *Black Voters Disfranchised in the 2000 Presidential Election*

In the presidential election of 2000 African-American voters were disfranchised in ways that recalled the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that had existed all along to a certain extent. The Democratic candidate, Al Gore, actually gained more popular votes than George W. Bush, the Republican candidate. But because the outcome of American presidential elections is determined by votes in the electoral college rather than by popular votes, Bush won. For the first time in American history, the U.S. Supreme Court stopped the recounting of contested local races in Florida. As a result, Florida's electoral votes went to George W. Bush. In 2000, votes in the state of Florida made Bush president. The voting process worked against black voters.

Black voters supported Gore overwhelmingly, but the state of Florida obstructed their

ability to cast votes that would all be counted. An investigation by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights discovered that police had set up irregular checkpoints that delayed and discouraged voters on their way to the polls. The certification of many voters (of all races and ethnicities) who had registered to vote in motor vehicle offices ("motor voter" registration) were not processed. In some counties, ballots were misleading. Some polling places closed early. Translators were not always available for non-English-speaking voters. In general, polling places lacked workers and support. In heavily black districts, voting machines failed to count ballots properly.<sup>19</sup>

The Commission on Civil Rights discovered another underlying problem in Florida related to voter eligibility: the state, controlled by Republicans, had removed felons from the rolls of qualified voters. (Like many other states, Florida deprives convicted felons of the right to vote, even after they have completed their prison terms.) But in 2000 the process had been deliberately sloppy. As a result, some seven thousand Florida voters who were not felons were wrongly eliminated.<sup>21</sup> Had black voters been able to cast their ballots freely, Florida would doubtless have gone for Gore. But problems in Florida disfranchised thousands of black voters and violated the Voting Rights Acts of 1965 and 1975.<sup>22</sup> The Congressional Black Caucus protested against this disregard for black voters, but no senator, not even the losing candidate Al Gore, upheld their complaint to the senate.<sup>23</sup>

The flawed presidential election of 2000 spurred two black politicians to run for president in 2004: the New York City activist Al Sharpton (b. 1955) and the former U.S. Senator from Illinois Carol Moseley Braun.<sup>24</sup> Sharpton and Braun pursued the interests of African Americans, working people, and people of color from within the Democratic Party. While their candidacies seemed to show that the Democratic Party welcomed African Americans, many black activists concluded that neither of the two major parties would adequately serve black political needs.

All across the United States, new, radical black organizations sprang up in the post-Black Power era. They were small and mostly local, but many have organized nationwide. New activist organizations include the black nationalist International People's Democratic Uhuru movement; the anti-Semitic, self-defense-oriented New Black Panther party; the religiously oriented New Nation of Islam; and the left-wing, intellectual Black Radical Congress. All demand Black Power through control of police, schools, health care, and housing. And all denounce police brutality and the wholesale incarceration of black men and women. Often they demand reparations for the injustices black Americans suffered during the era of slavery and segregation.<sup>25</sup>

#### *The Reparations Movement*

While the notion that the United States should repay black Americans for slavery is not new. During Reconstruction after the Civil War, many Americans recognized the need to supply former slaves with an economic stake in society. By the twentieth century, African Americans sought compensation for slavery and discrimination almost alone. However, after the U.S. federal government compensated Japanese Americans for their



incarceration during the Second World War and German corporations and governments compensated Jews and enslaved workers, the black reparations movement gained renewed visibility.

In the late 1980s and early twenty-first century, the issue of reparations gained acceptance. A generation after the Civil Rights revolution, African Americans continued to be discriminated against in health care, housing, and jobs. Entrenched poverty continued to afflict the descendants of slaves. One influential book summed up the economic and intellectual costs to blacks of slavery, segregation, and discrimination: *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000), by Randall Robinson (b. 1941). Robinson's book makes two arguments: first, that black people owe it to themselves to reclaim their past; and, second, that the United States owes black people financial retribution for centuries of unpaid slave labor and discrimination in education and employment.<sup>26</sup>

The heterogeneous reparations movement pursues Robinson's two principal aims. First, the movement seeks to compensate the descendants of workers who were unpaid and subjected to discrimination. The compensation sought by the reparations movement would be institutional, not individual—that is, reparations would advance those institutions that serve the needs of large numbers of African Americans, not individuals. Second, and more important, the reparations movement aims to illuminate the economic dimension of African-American history. Such a discussion would focus attention on issues such as the role of slavery and the enslaved in the U.S. economy, on the loss of wealth on account of federal mortgage discrimination, and on continuing job discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

The reparations movement is part of a wider initiative among African Americans to reclaim their just role in American history. Every year since 1989 U.S. Representative John Conyers (b. 1929), a Michigan Democrat, has introduced HR 40—the “40” stands for “40 acres and a mule.” This bill would create a committee to study the role of black workers—who were enslaved—in the building of the U.S. Capitol and the possibilities for restitution. Every year the U.S. House of Representatives has tabled HR 40 without considering it. In 1994, the Florida Legislature awarded reparations to survivors of a 1923 attack on black people in Rosewood, Florida.<sup>28</sup> In 2000 the state of Oklahoma created the Tulsa Race Riot Commission to investigate the 1921 attack on the city's black community that destroyed a thriving, thirty-five-block neighborhood and killed hundreds. The Tulsa Race Riot Commission concluded its work without awarding reparations. But black Tulsans, including the noted historian John Hope Franklin (b. 1915), sued the state of Oklahoma for redress.<sup>29</sup>

The reparations movement represents one dimension of a broad-based approach to the work of recovering African-American history. Advocates of reparations insist that their goal is aimed principally at getting all Americans to recognize the importance of black people in United States history. Beyond the movement for reparations, hundreds of cultural workers and tourism entrepreneurs have created a network of historical commemorations.

### Reclaiming Black History

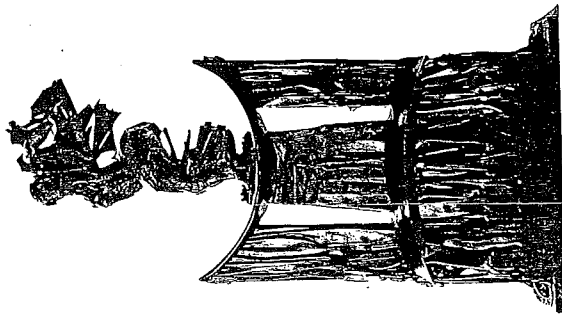
In the generation since the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, black people and their allies have sought to commemorate the struggle for civil rights.<sup>30</sup> They have also built on the cultural nationalism of leaders like Maulana Karenga of the US movement (see chapter 14) by creating black 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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 Catetha Powell (b. 1951) of the African-American Travel and Tourism Association, Inc., and Thomas Donsey (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.<sup>33</sup> The West African nations of Ghana and Senegal invite black Americans to retrace their African roots through visits to coastal slave castles that were their ancestors' embarkation sites.<sup>34</sup>

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 Saartjie Bartmann, the so-called "Hottentot Venus" from South Africa. Below the bowsprit are ropes that bound the enslaved.

uniquely oral and community minded.<sup>36</sup> 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

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 (153). 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.<sup>35</sup> 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

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

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.<sup>38</sup> 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.

#### *African Americans Remake American Culture*

In the post-Civil Rights and post-Black Power era, black Americans became highly visible throughout American culture. They had long appeared as athletes and entertainers. But in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, their popularity reached heights not imaginable before the Civil Rights revolution. Sports figures such as Michael Jordan (b. 1963) not only excelled on the basketball court; they also appeared as well-paid corporate spokespersons. Eldrich "Tiger" Woods (b. 1975) and the sisters Venus (b. 1980) and Serena (b. 1981) Williams dominated the hitherto exclusive sports of golf and tennis. The recordings of musicians Tina Turner (b. 1939) and Michael Jackson (b. 1958) sold sales records. Spike Lee (b. 1957) made movies about black heroes like Malcolm X and, for television, on the football player and movie star Jim Brown (b. 1936), and Huey P. Newton. Bill Cosby (b. 1924) and Oprah Winfrey (b. 1954) became television's most popular personalities. Movie stars Denzel Washington (b. 1954) and Halle Berry (b. 1966) did the seemingly impossible by winning Oscars for Best Actor and Best Actress in the same year (2002). In the single year 1993, Toni Morrison (b. 1931) won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Rita Dove (b. 1952) became the United States Poet Laureate, and Mae Jemison (b. 1956) became the first black woman astronaut. (Guion S. Bluford, b. 1942) had become the first black astronaut in 1983.)

Despite the daily breakthroughs and the emergence of black women as embodiments of beauty in popular culture, many black women, especially those with dark skin,



continued to feel invisible in American culture. Kyra E. Hicks's (b. 1965) quilt, "Black Barbie," says "Barbie, America's Doll was never intended for me" (154).

Black women in the era of hip-hop seized upon dazzling new opportunities, even as they remained vulnerable to racism and sexism that were often intertwined. The idea of American women's femininity continued to be young, white, or light skinned. Meanwhile the idea of black Americans often remained masculine, with black men virtually monopolizing the notion of racial authenticity. In hip-hop culture, black women were often abused as whores and bitches.

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

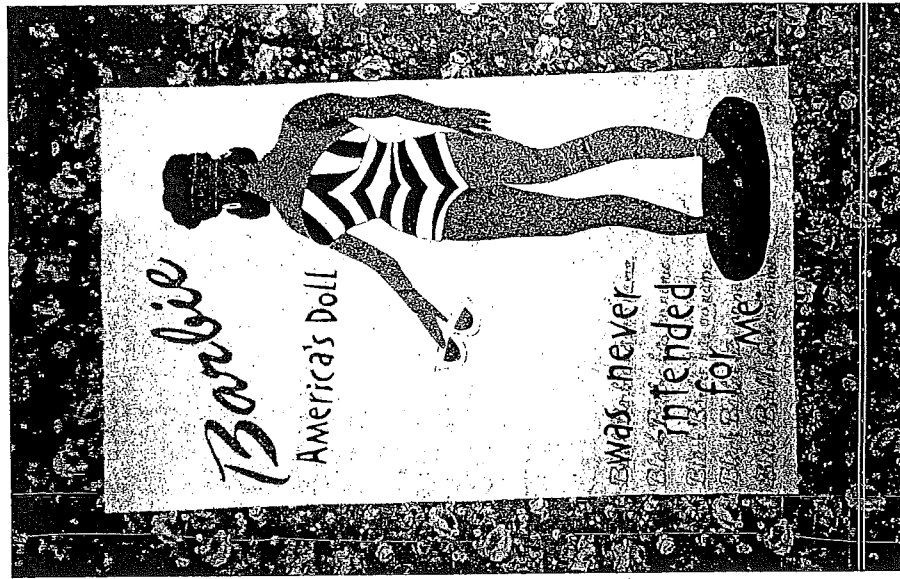
Impoverished inner-city neighborhoods beset by unemployment—the "hood"—that nurture crime and drug abuse and police brutality are the same places that hip-hop culture celebrates.<sup>39</sup> Artists like N. W. A. (*Niggaz with Attitude*) and Run DMZ made records documenting life in the mean streets 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."<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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 cocaine addiction, which ultimately killed him at age twenty-seven.<sup>43</sup>

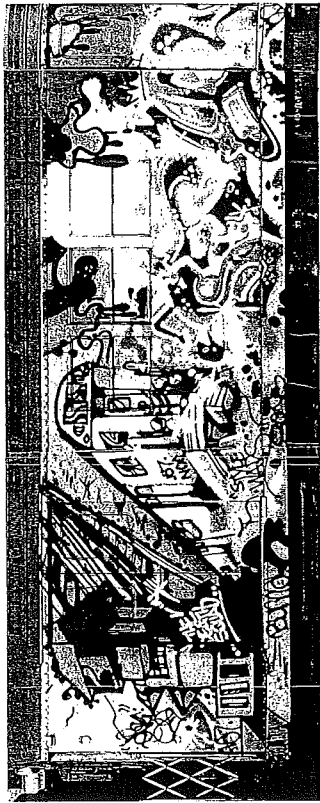
Melvyn Henry Samuels, Jr. "Noe" (b. 1961), created the *Style Wars* subway train graffiti (155). This masterpiece covers the entire seventy-two-foot subway car from end and from top to bottom. The painting acknowledges the older, wild style of letter writing in the middle of the car. Graffiti became a part of fine art during the 1990s. In 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 intensely local. Hip-hop began as outdoor party music, as a way for young people lacking



154. Kyra 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.



15.5. Melvyn Henry Samuels, Jr. "Noc," New York subway car, 1981

Like all graffiti artists, Noc had to create his paintings in secret, while subway cars were garaged overnight. This car shows a subway car on the left, and the words "Style war" painted in two different styles, one early, one late.

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.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup> 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), Lil' 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.<sup>38</sup>

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. 1966) movie starring the NWA rapper Ice Cube, *Boyz n the Hood* (1991); Ricardo Cortez Cruz's (b. 1964) *Straight Outta Compton* (1992) and *Menzies II Society* (1993).<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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, materialist

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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup>

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.

### *Opportunity in the Military, Opposition to War*

For a generation following the war in Vietnam, the U.S. military contended with white supremacy in its ranks. As a result, African Americans encountered a more level playing field there than in civilian businesses, and military service offered thousands of black Americans a relatively open route into the American middle class. The all-volunteer army engaged in combat in the Gulf War of 1991, and the Iraq War of 2003 consisted of young women and men seeking broader economic opportunities, such as college tuition and job training. Many came from the South, where more than half of African Americans still live.

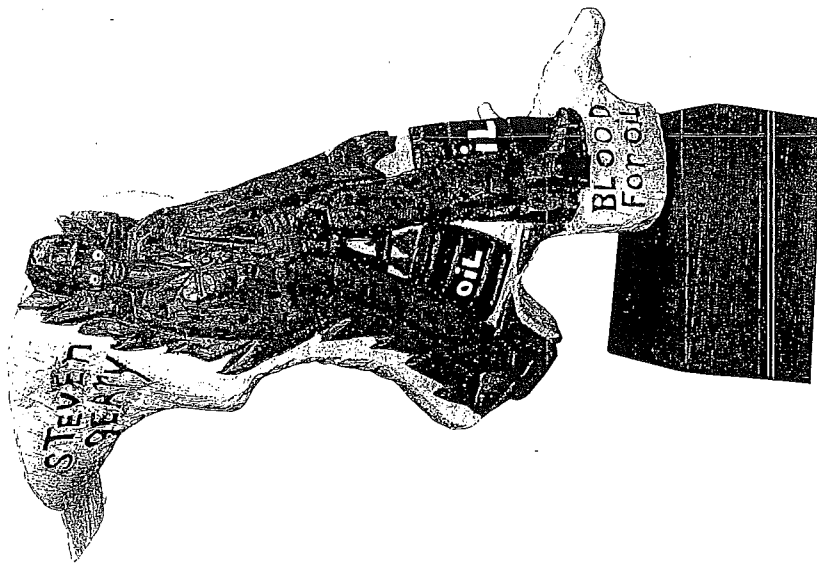
In stark contrast to the situation in Vietnam (and any earlier American wars), 12 percent of army officers were black during the two Gulf wars.<sup>54</sup> During the Gulf War of 1991, General Colin Powell led the American Armed Forces as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In the Iraq War of 2003, other African Americans were especially visible. Vincent K. Brooks (b. 1959), an African-American brigadier general, conducted daily briefings for the press. Enlisted woman Shoshana N. Johnson (b. 1973) was among the first Americans to be taken as prisoner in the first days of the war.

In the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War of 2003, African Americans formed nearly one-quarter of the fighting forces. The self-taught Southern artist Herbert Singleton, Jr. (b. 1945), created a sculpture portraying the trade-off for black enlisted personnel serving in the Persian Gulf: "Blood for Oil" (15.6). Singleton's young nephew, Steven Beatty, was serving in the U.S. Army during the approach of the first Gulf War.

Despite the ubiquity of black servicemen and servicewomen in Iraq, African Americans were the least enthusiastic segment of the U.S. population toward the war. Black opposition surfaced early. Following the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, only one member of Congress, a black woman Barbara Lee (b. 1946), representing Oakland and Berkeley in the San Francisco Bay Area, voted against an open-ended resolution giving President George W. Bush unlimited power to wage a "war on terrorism."<sup>55</sup> The Congressional Black Caucus and the NAACP both opposed the war as a misuse of funds that were needed in black communities and poor neighborhoods.

As the Iraq War approached in late 2002 and early 2003, opinion polls showed that most African Americans did not support the war, although majorities of others favored the policies of President George W. Bush. Polls taken between October 2002 and April 2003 found that between 20 percent and 44 percent of African Americans supported the war, compared with overall American support at around 70 percent. A philosophy student at the traditionally black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania spoke for many African Americans: "Bush is more of an immediate threat to me [than Saddam Hussein] because Bush opposes affirmative action."<sup>56</sup>

African Americans offered many reasons for not supporting the American invasion of Iraq, ranging from opposition to President Bush's policies in general to a sense that color domestic needs better deserved the money spent on the war. However, the Georgian

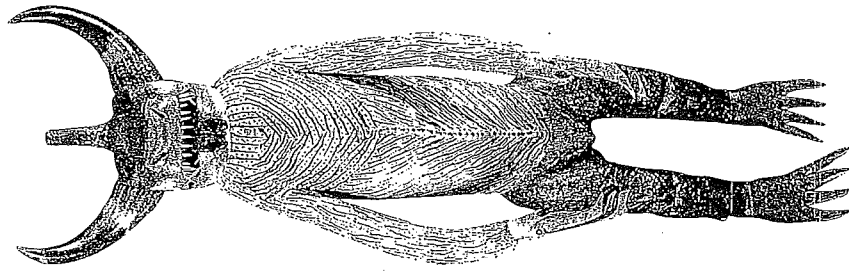


55. Herbert Singleton, Jr., "Blood for Oil," 1990  
The sculpture depicts his nephew, Steven Beatty, who risked shedding his blood for American access to oil in the Middle East. The phrase "no blood for oil" became an antiwar rallying cry during the first and second Gulf wars.

O. L. Samuels (b. 1931) shows that black opinion on policy toward the Middle East is not monolithic. Samuels envisioned Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, as a monster in "Saddam Hussein" (15.7).

### Conclusion

Hip-hop's preoccupation with authentic blackness reflects the increasing difficulty of characterizing African Americans as a whole. During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, black people were both more visible in American culture and more diverse politically. With black conservatives as prominent as rap artists—two black secretaries of state, and a black man and woman running for president—observers have been tempted to call the early twenty-first century the "post-black era."



15.7 O. L. Samuels, "Saddam Hussein," 1992  
In a rare depiction by a black artist of a foreign policy issue, Samuels presents the deposed president of Iraq as a horned monster.