

“Are You an African?” The Politics of Self-Construction in Status-Based Social Movements

Jill McCorkel, *Villanova University*

Jason Rodriguez, *University of Massachusetts–Amherst*

Current debates over identity politics hinge on the question of whether status-based social movements encourage parochialism and self-interest or create possibilities for mutual recognition across lines of difference. Our article explores this question through comparative, ethnographic study of two racially progressive social movements, “pro-black” abolitionism and “conscious” hip hop. We argue that status-based social movements not only enable collective identity, but also the personal identities or selves of their participants. Beliefs about the self create openings and obstacles to mutual recognition and progressive social action. Our analysis centers on the challenges that an influx of progressive, anti-racist whites posed to each movement. We examine first how each movement configured movement participation and racial identity and then how whites crafted strategic narratives of the self to account for their participation in a status-based movement they were not directly implicated in. We conclude with an analysis of the implications of these narratives for a critical politics of recognition. Keywords: identity politics, social movements, race, self, hip hop.

Demands for recognition and respect have become core components of social justice campaigns over the last quarter century. Such concerns and the identity-based movements they have given rise to also occupy a central place in debates among social scientists. Theorists, for example, grapple with how to best calibrate the significance of cultural forms of injustice—denial of recognition, misrepresentation, appropriation, disrespect—for understanding and remedying social inequality. Beyond this are concerns regarding the implications of identity politics for social movements and for democratic politics. Do status-based movements foster a selfishness that undermines the broader public good or do they create possibilities for a truly multicultural and participatory democracy?

These issues have proven quite fertile for theoretical meditations on the relationship between power and representation, as well as for empirical research on the significance of identity, experience, and culture for social movement outcomes (e.g., see reviews by Bernstein 2005; Cerulo 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001). We are similarly interested in exploring the relationship among identity, politics, and power but we want to examine more explicitly the issue of situated selves and social change. Political debates regarding the desirability and implications of status-based social movements are brokered, in large part, over competing visions of the self. Critics of identity politics contend that it promotes in-group/out-group distinctions and self-interested claims-making. This, in turn, destabilizes coalitions and undermines the possibilities for progressive social change (Gitlin 1995; Harvey 1996; Hobsbawm

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1996; Tomasky 1996). In this account, the self is rigid and parochial, incapable of transcending its own narrow field of experience and essentialist interests. In contrast, advocates for multicultural democracy argue that status-based claims are a crucial element of progressive politics and fully participatory democracies (Duberman 1999; Fraser 1997; Fraser and Honneth 2003; West 1993; Young 1990). According to this perspective, the self is reflexive and mutable, capable of recognizing and respecting others who are differently situated while critically appraising its own situatedness. Notably, a critical self such as this is a project rather than a settled accomplishment.

Recent research on social movements offers two sets of findings that are particularly relevant to the question of situated selves and progressive social change. First, studies of status-based movements find that identities are deployed strategically. For example, whether movement members choose to present their collective identity as similar to or different from the dominant group is the product of thoughtful and often exuberant deliberations about movement goals and political processes (Bernstein 1997; Rupp and Taylor 2003). This research reveals that the relationship between identity and political action is mediated by considerations of political goals, movement resources, broader cultural constructions, and collective debate (Calhoun 1994; Gamson 1997; Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994; Meyer, Whittier, and Robnett 2002; Naples 2003). Second, research demonstrates that discussions about identity within movements extend beyond instrumental efforts to recruit new members or to achieve political goals. Movements offer spaces where members can experiment with new identities, alter their conception of self, and critically reflect on political interests and collective identity (Blee 2005; Gamson 1995; Lichterman 1999; Melucci 1995; Snow and McAdam 2000). Whether identity talk in these forums is critical and multivalent or narrow and self-interested depends on the organizational structure of the movement, as well as the broader cultural and institutional referents used to frame social identity (Lichterman 1999). Taken together, research in each of these areas demonstrates that status-based social movements are not as parochial and self-interested as many critics have claimed. At the same time, this research suggests that the extent to which status-based movements are capable of engaging issues across differences of identity hinges on how self and identity are conceptualized, discussed, and enacted.

Our study extends this line of inquiry by investigating how status-based movements shape processes of self-construction among members. Specifically, we argue that social movements shape participants' beliefs about who they "really" are and what they are capable of becoming and, in turn, these beliefs about the self create openings and obstacles to mutual recognition and progressive social action.¹ Here we build on James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's (2000) formulation of the self as an institutional project, as well as research by social movement scholars that demonstrates that a person's definition of self is not neatly and automatically aligned with collective identity, even in status-based movements (Bernstein 1997; Klandermans 1997; Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker 2000). Since the self is comprised of an array of identities beyond those associated with a given movement, members may act "in ways not necessarily benign or reinforcing with respect to movement identity and ideology" (Stryker 2000:29). Subsequently, how movements engage the self of members holds important implications for organizational dynamics, political outcomes, and movement success (Hunt and Benford 1994; Kiecolt 2000; McAdam 1982).

In this case, we are interested in how the demands a movement makes on the self and the resources it provides for self-construction condition the possibilities for mutual respect and recognition across status divides. In other words, we aim to understand how status-based social movements facilitate or impede what advocates of multicultural democracy envision as a critical self. It is important to emphasize that we are using the term critical self to make

1. We are not arguing that a "real" self in the sense of a coherent and unified core actually exists. Rather, we treat the self as a cultural construction and institutional project. For elaboration, see Holstein and Gubrium (2000).

an analytic distinction between the enactment of a critically reflexive, multivalent selfhood versus a self that is more parochial, strategic, and self-interested in its organization and engagements. A critical self is one that is capable of seeing beyond its own delimited experiences and focal concerns through the recognition of multiple, and often conflicting, subject positions. Paul Lichterman (1999) explains that this is a self that “avoid[s] narrow horizons—not by speaking as generic members of society, but by speaking from specific identities all the while receptive to others’ identity claims” (p. 101). This is accomplished, in part, through meaningful exchanges and relationships across enduring social divides like race, class, and gender. Critics argue that status-based movements preclude the possibility for such a self, but we approach this claim as a question to be investigated rather than as a statement of fact.² Indeed, we want to understand the social conditions that make such a self possible or not possible in identity-based movements.

Our analysis is based on comparative, ethnographic study of two distinct, racially progressive social movements. The first is an offshoot of the anti-death penalty movement known as “pro-black abolitionism.” The second is a subgenre within hip hop music. It is referred to as “underground,” or “conscious” hip hop, and is characterized by its critical race politics and Afrocentric cultural sensibilities. In this article, we have chosen to focus on white activists in race-based movements they are not directly implicated in. Doing so allows us to investigate the significance of race, particularly whiteness, for how status movements define their members and, in turn, how participants strategically situate their claims about the self in the movement and beyond.³

When we began data collection, we assumed that each movement offered a best-case scenario for mutual recognition and political engagement across differences of identity. After all, here were anti-racist whites who voluntarily joined pro-black movements where other alternatives existed.⁴ They were routinely exposed to discourses that put the issue of white privilege and racial inequality front and center. They interacted in social contexts that were organized around the concerns, history, and experience of African Americans. Nonetheless, participants in each movement fell far short of achieving a critical politics of recognition. In this article, we will demonstrate that their failure is fundamentally linked to limitations in the ways each of the movements engaged the selves of their participants.

In the sections that follow, we briefly review the literature on self and identity in social movements and elaborate on the concept of a critical self as we use it in our analysis. We next provide a description of each of the field sites and then turn to an analysis of self-construction within each of the movements we studied. Our analysis is divided into two parts. In the first, we consider the discursive resources and interpretative demands that confronted participants in pro-black abolitionism and the underground hip hop scene. We show that while both groups strongly disavowed essentialist constructions of race and identity, they struggled with what criteria to use to distinguish “members” from “supporters,” “true” fans from “backpackers.” In the second section, we examine how white participants crafted strategic narratives of the self to simultaneously respond to both movement’s demands for authenticity and to broader ideologies about race and whiteness. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these narratives for the practice of a critical self and the possibilities for progressive social change.

2. Piore (1995) argues that status-based movements preclude cross-boundary exchanges because they isolate and inscribe members in exclusive “communities of meaning.”

3. Space limitations prevent us from offering a comparative analysis of identity construction among African Americans and whites in each movement. Although each movement strongly disavowed essentialist constructions of race, there were differing sets of expectations for African Americans and whites. Where possible, we have noted this in the analysis.

4. There were plenty of abolitionist groups available to whites interested in protesting the death penalty. Similarly, white fans of hip hop could easily participate in more mainstream genres.

Literature Review

The complexity of achieving mutual recognition and nurturing solidarity across avenues of difference is evident in empirical studies of identity-based tensions in social movements (Bernstein 1997; Gamson 1995; Mohanty and Alexander 1997; Polletta 2002; Ryan 1991; Solomos 1998; Taylor and Rupp 1993). These tensions and fissures are of primarily two types. First are those that emerge when a movement falsely universalizes identity (as in the case of the women's movement largely neglecting the concerns of women of color and working class women). Second are those that emerge when discrete groups aim to build coalitions to achieve common political goals (e.g., welfare rights groups working with gay/lesbian groups to defeat a right-wing politician). Our study involves a unique version of the latter. Here, anti-racist whites aimed to join race-based movements they were not directly implicated in. In so doing, they endeavored to define themselves, if not as racial insiders, then as political comrades. This is a form of coalition building in the sense that our respondents endeavored to gain entree and acceptance within the movement. Doing so meant subsuming or merging their own interests with that of the pro-black movements they endeavored to join. As we will show in the analysis, this proved to be a challenging undertaking.

All social movements rely on collective identity to make collective action possible (Calhoun 1993; Friedman and McAdam 1992; Hunt et al. 1994; Morris 1992; Rupp and Taylor 1999). According to Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992), collective identity is a shared definition of a group membership. It primarily stems from similar experiences and common interests. Feelings of "we-ness" and cohesion that emerge among members are actively constructed and sustained through interaction within movement communities. However, it is not the case, even in status-based movements, that collective identities are simply and unreflectively derived from status categories like race/ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Naples 2003; Stryker 2000). For example, research on the gay and lesbian movement has demonstrated that a collective identity organized around sexuality still demands solidarity and coalition-building across gender differences (Bernstein 2002; Clendinen and Nagourney 1999).

Solidarity and the sense of we-ness is accomplished across two levels of identity work. The first is at the level of collective identity. Shared definitions of collective identity are facilitated not only through reinforcing commonalities among movement members, but also in drawing boundaries that mark an "us" from a "them" (Phelan 1993). Much of the movement literature considers how solidarity is enhanced through forms of direct exclusion that target political enemies and hostile institutions (for an overview see Hunt et al. 1994). However, boundary work occurs internally as well—often with different implications for movement solidarity and cohesion. For example, Joshua Gamson's (1997:180) study of boundary maintenance at the Michigan Womyn's Festival and within the International Lesbian and Gay Association demonstrates that "thems inside" emerge as particular subgroups become visible and vie for power and/or legitimacy. These internal disputes over who is a true member erupt because of the political significance of symbolic membership. In the case of the Womyn's Festival, for example, internal disputes over the status of transsexuals were based on concerns that their inclusion would alienate the festival's main base of support (those born with female bodies). Gamson (1997) concludes that internal battles over "who we are" are linked to changes in the political landscape and the movement's communication environment. Internal boundary work can have a negative impact on movement solidarity as members focus on what divides them from one another.

The second level of solidarity building occurs at the level of the self. As we noted earlier, the self encompasses a range of identities. In order to sustain a feeling of we-ness and solidarity with other movement members, participants must align their self-identity with collective identity (Snow and McAdam 2000). In other words, members must expand their definition of self to include the collective identity of the movement (Gamson 1992:60). Failure to do so

can negatively impact the intensity and duration of individual participation, cohesion among members, and movement outcomes (Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker 2000). Movements facilitate identity alignment through framing processes and collective action (Hunt et al. 1994; Naples 1998; Snow and McAdam 2000). Beyond this, movements provide a forum in which members can experiment with new identities, reconstruct their biographies, critique collective identity and political claims, and relate to others who are differently situated (Bernstein 1997; Lichterman 1999; Snow and Machalek 1984).

These movement forums are not only crucial for aligning self-identity with collective identity, they also shape how members understand and situate their identities in relation to others in the movement and beyond. This is useful for understanding how participants in status-based movements negotiate identity differences internally (as in the case of transsexuals at the Womyn's Festival) and how they negotiate differences of identity across coalition groups. Lichterman (1999) argues that the direction identity talk takes (whether it is narrow and self-interested or multivalent and public-spirited) is influenced by the structure of talk within the forum. To demonstrate this, he compares identity talk in two groups with overlapping membership. One group was devoted to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism and the other was an anti-right coalition group comprised of many of the same LGBT activists. In the former, identity talk was open-ended, critical, and multivalent. Members critiqued the group's political claims by referencing other status categories such as race and class. In contrast, identity talk that occurred in the coalition group was narrow and partisan. Lichterman concludes that differences in identity talk cannot be adequately explained by either organizational imperatives or pre-given interests. Instead, he suggests that there are "*culturally* structured ways of talking identity in the public sphere" (p. 103, emphasis in original). Whether identity talk is critical and multivalent or narrow and self-interested depends on two elements of movement structure. The first is the form that solidarity and togetherness take (i.e., how members relate to one another). The second, and related, element is the cultural and institutional reference points members use to construct their collective identity. Participants in each group mapped their identities against different reference points in wider society. This, in turn, shaped the kind of solidarities they developed toward one another. Lichterman (1999) observes that solidarity and collective identity "structured what activists could discuss critically, and what they needed to affirm without comment or else to suppress so as to avoid threatening group solidarity and members' identities" (p. 106).

Our study builds on Lichterman's (1999) by examining how status-based movements make demands and provide resources for narrative constructions of the self. A critical politics of recognition depends on how talk about group identity is structured, but it also hinges on how activists come to define and enact their self-identities. As Holstein and Gubrium (2000) note: "In today's world of proliferating sites and scenes of identity work, the self is increasingly an institutional project, something persons must continually manifest as a basis for making sense of their conduct and personal relationships" (p. 12). Within status-based social movements, the self is center stage, serving as a source of political demands and claims-making, a site of political struggle, and a key criterion for membership. The self is located and constructed within "competing cultural discourses and social practices, each of which tend to assert claims to priority" (Davis 2000:2). We argue that the claims and demands status-based movements make on the self have important implications not only for how activists come to engage one another across status divides, but for the narrative strategies that activists use to articulate a self that fits with movement demands and the world at large.

To examine the relationship between self-construction and mutual recognition within status-based movements, we borrow the concept of the critical self from the political theory literature. The term critical self is a heuristic device used primarily by theorists of multicultural democracy to conceive of a political order in which discrete status groups come together in pursuit of shared political goals while recognizing and respecting each others' different

histories, cultures, experiences, and needs.⁵ We might imagine such citizen-subjects speaking “as African Americans in support of lesbian and gay rights, rejecting a false choice between pursuing ‘essential’ group interests and upholding a generic common good” (Lichterman 1999:101, emphasis in original). The concept can be traced to Hegelian philosophy’s emphasis on recognition among subjects. Among contemporary critical theorists, the denial of recognition based on status differences such as race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality serves as a constitutive element of social inequality. Achieving recognition across status divides like race, class, and gender requires, at least at the micro-level, a bundle of practices (reflexivity, responsiveness, engagements with others who are differently situated, equal and open communication, and recognition of the moral worth of all human beings) that allow for a critical enactment and vision of self and other. The term critical self, then, is shorthand for this bundle of practices.⁶

The concept has previously been put to use in a handful of sociological studies on racial inequality and urban poverty. Chicago School ethnographers like Elijah Anderson (1990, 1999) and Ruth Horowitz (1995, 2001) suggest that the bridge over the racial divide may well be based on the emergence of a critical self. They formulate this in Meadian terms. The critical self is one that is capable of transcending local settings (i.e., “the code of the street”) through an “expansion of a generalized other” (Horowitz 2001:501).⁷ The focus of their work is on African Americans and Latino/as living in poverty and near-poverty conditions. Their research subjects struggle to assert their dignity and counter material disadvantage by mobilizing available symbolic resources, including self-presentation, to achieve middle class respectability. Both Horowitz (1995, 2001:489) and Anderson (1999) argue that overcoming disadvantage requires mastery of norms that govern life in one’s immediate community, as well as mastery of the expectations and values of the dominant group. In other words, members of socially marginalized groups must relate to the self not only from the perspective of others who are similarly situated, but also from the perspective of the dominant group.⁸

In contrast to these studies, our focus is on how members of *dominant groups* navigate differences of identity and power in the context of a status-based social movement they are not directly implicated in. Although we are interested in the ability of white, anti-racist activists to master normative codes within pro-black movements, our principle concern is the extent to which they are capable of recognizing themselves as socially situated and supporting the political claims and interests of African Americans. This involves more than simply signing a petition or showing up at a concert. The political aims of each of the pro-black movements we studied include a redistribution of power and a valuation of black cultural forms. We might imagine that

5. The critical self is one of a number of related concepts in use among theorists of multicultural democracy to describe practices and ethics associated with respect, mutuality, recognition, and communication free from domination (Fraser 1997; Honneth 1995; Mouffe 1992; West 1993). Related concepts include an “ethos of critical responsiveness,” “parity of participation,” and “critical discourse” (Connolly 1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003; Habermas 1987). For this article, we favor the term critical self because we are primarily interested in those micro-level practices associated with identity play that make mutual recognition possible across status differences.

6. Feminist standpoint theorists have similarly been concerned with issues of recognition, particularly as it involves the relationship between power and knowledge (Collins 1990; Harding 1986, 1991; Hartsock 1996; McCorkel and Meyers 2003; Naples 2003; Smith 1987). This literature also considers how feminists might organize across status divides so as to avoid falsely universalizing the category of “woman” (Anzaldúa 1987; Collins 1998; Naples 1998, 2003; Smith 1997). The strategies standpoint theorists pose for fostering solidarity across status divides and “borderlands” are those consistent with theoretical constructions of critical selfhood: reflexivity, responsiveness, critical talk, and mutual engagements.

7. It is important to note that both authors recognize that structural transformation and reorganization of the political economy is a necessary and urgent precondition for the eradication of systems of inequality. Horowitz (2001:489) notes that a critical self is a necessary but not sufficient element for securing a more just society.

8. The ability to see the self from multiple vantage points and alter one’s presentation of self accordingly is frequently referred to as “code switching” in the literature on racial/ethnic inequality. The concept dates to DuBois’s (1903) analysis of “double consciousness.” DuBois argues that African Americans experience a double consciousness and a “twoness” that is the product of a racial caste system in which African Americans are forced to adopt the (racist) perspective of white others toward the self.

a critical self in this context requires that white activists not only recognize their race and class privilege, but that they also work together with African American activists to challenge racial privilege and redistribute social power. In this case, a critical politics of recognition requires two things. The first is a willingness on the part of white activists to disrupt and/or challenge the broader social arrangements that advantage them. The second is that they do so in ways that respect the political analyses and claims of the pro-black movements they are a part of.

In this article, we draw a distinction between the enactment of a critical self and a “strategic self.” We are using the term strategic self to refer to a form of self-identity that falls short of achieving the reflexivity and the political and personal engagements we have described above.⁹ For example, activists may engage in practices that threaten and/or undermine movement goals and ideology (Stryker 2000). Such practices may occur within the context of the movement or outside of it. In addition, activists may fail to develop a critical awareness of their social location relative to others. This theme is particularly evident in studies of contemporary race relations given the pervasiveness of colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Collins 2004). In both cases, activists may be able to gain entree to an identity movement they are not otherwise implicated in, but they are unwilling or unable to engage in the sort of reflexivity and interpersonal engagements that would facilitate a critical politics of recognition.

It is important to emphasize that in a movement context such as this, developing a critical self is distinct from achieving identity alignment (Snow and McAdam 2000). In fact, mutual recognition, solidarity, and feelings of we-ness cannot be achieved by white activists endeavoring to align their self-identity with the collective identity of the movement. Doing so would falsely obscure how whites are situated relative to African Americans. Instead, solidarity is facilitated through an expanded sense of reflexivity such that whites construct their self-identity with an awareness of how they are socially situated relative to others. This shapes the kinds of engagements that are possible across differences of identity and the direction political claims take. Here, solidarity is forged by aligning the political claims of white and African American activists such that both groups work toward advancing the political and/or cultural goals of the movement.

Data and Method

Our study design approximates Lichterman’s (1999) in that we elected to do a comparative analysis of two status-based movements that were organized around a similar set of identity claims (in this case, race). Doing so allows us to examine how differences in movement structure contributed to the kind of claims each movement made about the selves of participants and the resources that each movement provided for self-construction. It also provides us with an opportunity to understand how broader cultural referents and ideologies about race are interpreted and acted on within race-based movements. We elaborate on the logic of case selection below and describe each of the movements in greater detail.

We selected these sites for three reasons. First, both pro-black abolitionism and underground hip hop began as projects that were self-consciously organized around race-based claims. Both originated in the African American community and share the goal of enacting an explicitly pro-black political and/or cultural agenda.¹⁰ Initially, membership in each

9. Our use of the term strategic self should not be confused with Bernstein’s (1997) concept of strategic deployment of identity. Her term refers to how activists strategically use collective identity to achieve political goals. In contrast, we are describing a form of self-identity that undermines mutual engagements and critical recognition.

10. We argue that both pro-black abolitionism and conscious hip hop are social movements in the sense that they serve to articulate a collective identity and a political agenda (see Polletta and Jasper 2001; Rupp and Taylor 2003; Stryker, Owens, and White 2000). Perhaps more importantly, participants define each as a social movement. As Meyer (2002) observes of social movements: “[they] include diverse individuals and groups whose primary focus at any one time may vary tremendously, but who are united by a generally shared view of the world and their place within it” (p. 12).

movement was exclusively (or nearly exclusively) African American and both movements claimed to represent the concerns and interests of the black community. Within fairly short order, however, both movements attracted a following of anti-racist whites who sought opportunities for participation and membership. The presence of whites in a status-based movement that they were not otherwise implicated in generated considerable debate among movement participants and would-be participants about the relationship between experience and identity, respect and authenticity. It offered us a unique vantage point to understand the demands movements make on the selves of their participants and the implications of these demands for movement outcomes and a critical politics of recognition.

The second reason we selected these sites is that differences in membership roles and the nature of participation provide a useful point of comparison for considering how structural features of each movement condition the possibilities for self-construction. Pro-black abolitionism relies on traditional organizing strategies and tactics for forging collective identity and pursuing political goals. Participation occurs primarily through membership in formal, volunteer organizations. Potential members are vetted and membership is contingent on candidates' knowledge of and dedication to the political demands of the movement. Much of the work of the movement involves letter writing campaigns, petitions, vigils, public demonstrations, leafleting, and fundraising.

In contrast, underground hip hop is a cultural movement that endeavors to balance political sensibilities with market-driven concerns. Here, participation requires little in the way of formal commitment and is open to anyone with knowledge of and access to the scene. Membership is diffuse and loosely structured. Although underground hip hop does not primarily rely on traditional organizing strategies, we argue that it is nonetheless a movement—one that forges collective identity and generates political action through cultural performance. "Conscious" artists and performers aim to collapse the distinction between commercial entertainment and politics (Kitwana 2005; Stapleton 1998; Watkins 2006). Leila Rupp and Taylor (2003:217) argue that cultural performances become political when they meet three criteria: (1) the performance is a site of contestation where symbols and identities are subject to scrutiny, debate, and negotiation; (2) performers intend for the performance to serve as a strategic platform for political expression; and (3) the performance serves as an arena for the enactment or reinforcement of collective identity. While commercially successful hip hop performers like Sean "Puffy" Combs, Jay Z, and Kanye West do not consistently, if ever, meet these criteria, the lesser known, conscious artists we examine in this study do. It is also important to emphasize that when artists, music critics, scholars, and fans proclaim underground hip hop a movement, they are referring not only to the politics embedded in the performance but also to the political organizing that emerges in the wake of performance (Coates 2003; Collins 2004; Kitwana 2005; Stapleton 1998; Trapp 2005; Watkins 2006). Nonprofit organizations like the Hip Hop Action Summit Network and the National Hip Hop Political Convention were founded by a coalition of artists, members of the entertainment industry, civil rights activists, and fans in the interest of advancing a pro-black political agenda ranging from the repeal of New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws to the eradication of poverty.¹¹

The third reason we selected these sites involves the complexity of contemporary race relations in the United States. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001) and Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argue that the "new racism" relies on colorblind ideologies to stabilize and reproduce institutional and social forms of exclusion, and to discursively cloak the existence of structural hierarchies. The new racism shapes interaction orders by simultaneously universalizing white

11. For example, the mission statement of the Hip Hop Summit Action Network reads: "HSAN is dedicated to harnessing the cultural relevance of hip hop music to serve as a catalyst for education advocacy and other societal concerns fundamental to the empowerment of youth. HSAN is a nonprofit, nonpartisan national coalition of hip hop artists, entertainment industry leaders, education advocates, civil rights proponents, and youth leaders united in the belief that hip hop is an enormously influential agent for social change which must be responsibly and proactively utilized to fight the war on poverty and injustice" (HSAN 2007).

positionality and limiting the possibilities for counter-hegemonic practices, discourses, and identities (Collins 2004). Indeed, efforts to bring racial structures into view are often dismissed as “playing the race card” or are problematized as forms of “reverse racism” (Doanne and Bonilla-Silva 2003). The pervasiveness of colorblind ideology, even among progressive and well-intentioned whites, contributes to the persistence of racial tensions and inequalities in social movements and elsewhere (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Gallagher 2003; Lewis 2004; Wellman 1977). By examining white participation in pro-black abolitionism and the underground hip hop scene, we are able to investigate how broader racial ideologies inform participation and self-construction in race-based movements.

It is their shared emphasis on pro-black politics, as well as significant differences in the structure of participation, that render comparative analysis of the two particularly compelling. In the sections below, we offer an overview of each of the movements we studied before moving on to an analysis of how each movement shaped processes of self-construction among participants.

Pro-Black Abolitionism

McCorkel conducted participant observation research with two organizations that are part of the pro-black abolitionist movement: Justice 4 All (J4A) and Committee to Free Political Prisoners (CFPP).¹² Pro-black abolitionism emerged, in part, because a number of black activists felt that the broader anti-death penalty movement downplayed the significance of race and racism in shaping the use and justification of the death penalty in the United States. Karl, a founding member of CFPP, differentiates pro-black abolitionists from “mainstream” anti-death penalty groups by noting: “If they want to fix the [criminal justice] system because they are ‘anti-racist,’ we say dismantle the system because we are pro-black.” In addition, founding members of both groups felt that their perspectives and concerns were dismissed by the predominantly white leadership of mainstream abolitionist organizations. Karl explains, “What was the point of a sustained power struggle when ultimately our perspectives are so different? We just decided to go ahead and do our own thing.”

McCorkel conducted participant observation with Philadelphia-based J4A from 1995 through 1997, and remained in contact with J4A’s directors, former associates, and supporters through the period of its unraveling—from April 1997 to August 1998. She was a participant observer in the Chicago abolitionist movement and with CFPP over a nine-month period from 2001 through 2002. In addition to collecting participant observation data, she conducted interviews with 20 members and affiliates of J4A, 10 members of CFPP, and had informal conversations with dozens of anti-death penalty activists, criminal justice officials, and current and former prisoners on Illinois’s death row. Data used in this analysis also include annual reports, letters, e-mails, and organizing fliers that J4A and its affiliates produced between 1995 and 1998 and that CFPP produced between 2001 until its demise in 2002.¹³

Both groups were at the height of their organizing momentum during the period of study and both followed similar and rapid trajectories to dissolution. J4A was founded in 1990 by the family and close friends of an African American death row inmate. The group’s initial focus was to provide direct action work in the form of legal assistance, fundraising, and public demonstrations on his behalf. By 1996, the organization had grown considerably. It had

12. These are pseudonyms. Although respondents did not request anonymity (and much of the data are drawn from publicly available documents and open meetings), both organizations work on behalf of incarcerated men and women whose lives literally hang in the balance. We do not want to compromise the legal and political struggles of those persons on death row by revealing identifying information that may have an unforeseen impact on funding and public support.

13. The director of J4A and several former members continued to forward McCorkel all of the correspondence sent between various affected parties (donors, the death row inmate, legal teams, family members, each organization and its supporters) long after the parties had stopped meeting as a group.

nearly 20 “regular” members,¹⁴ 6 of whom were middle and upper middle class whites, and hundreds of donors from all across the country. In 1998, the organization came to a very public and bitter end amidst accusations that several of the white members in the organization had engaged in “racist exploitation” by prioritizing organizational imperatives over the needs of the death row inmate and his legal team.

CFPP’s mission was the abolition of the death penalty and securing the release of “political prisoners.”¹⁵ The organization was founded in the late 1990s by three African American community organizers and a white lawyer who were involved in civil rights and social justice causes in Chicago dating back to the late 1960s. They endeavored to raise public awareness about specific cases, organize fundraising drives to pay for investigators, forensic experts, and legal strategists, and they pressured correctional authorities to provide humane conditions in prisons. In addition, they wrote letters, distributed petitions, held rallies, and organized eleventh-hour vigils to stop impending executions. Their visibility was enhanced following the governor’s imposition of a moratorium on the state’s use of the death penalty in 2000. At its apex in 2002, CFPP reported a total of 750 supporters and 34 members.¹⁶ CFPP’s demise occurred in 2002 when several white members objected to the leadership’s decision to abandon calls for a new trial for several inmates and instead demand their release. Shortly thereafter, the organization disbanded and dissolved.

McCorkel gained entree into the pro-black abolitionist movement primarily through her involvement in providing legal assistance to death row inmates.¹⁷ She was active in the mainstream abolitionist movement in the mid-1990s and worked with several key members of J4A to raise public awareness about the death penalty. By the time racial tensions began to surface in J4A, she had developed a close working relationship with a well-respected African American death row inmate and his wife. Although McCorkel is a white, middle class woman, the complexities her race and class may have posed for undertaking a study of racial tensions in J4A were largely circumvented through her personal relationship with this prisoner and his wife. He wrote letters encouraging leaders in J4A and later, in CFPP, to meet with her. His wife brought her to J4A’s leadership meetings and introduced her to several influential community organizers and pro-black activists. In a relatively short period of time, she developed close relationships with both white and black members of J4A. Indeed, it was two African American leaders of J4A who, in addition to the death row inmate, vouched for her and helped her gain access to CFPP.

Without exception, whites and blacks in both organizations were anxious to discuss race in interviews and, in particular, to vent their frustrations over racial tensions. The interviews were a place where respondents shared interpretations and perceptions that they often did not express publicly within their organizations. This was particularly the case with white activists. Most regarded McCorkel as someone who shared their political sensibilities. They routinely prefaced their responses about race and African Americans with statements like “you know what I mean.” It would often take several follow-up questions to get whites to fully elaborate their responses. When tensions reached their apex in J4A, McCorkel was pressured by white members to “take a side.” She declined and ended her fieldwork just as the organization was disintegrating. There was not pressure on her to take sides in CFPP’s dispute, perhaps because she was seen strictly as a researcher (rather than an activist) in that organization. In both

14. Regular members were those who were listed on organizing documents and who routinely participated in group activities over a period of a year or more.

15. They argue that the war on drugs and the “tough on crime movement” are core elements of a “U.S. government war on the African American community.” In this formulation, they regard most incarcerated African Americans and Latino/as as political prisoners.

16. Members included community organizers, family members and friends of death row inmates, former death row inmates, lawyers, academics, students, health professionals, and city workers. Supporters included anyone who donated money, signed a petition, or joined the mailing list.

17. For a personal account of her work as a sociologist on anti-death penalty cases, see McCorkel (2007).

organizations, both white and African American members continued to forward her their e-mail exchanges and to share their private observations and opinions about what was happening throughout the period of organizational dissolution.

Conscious Hip Hop

Rodriquez conducted participant observation research on the underground, conscious hip hop movement for just over a year, from June 2002 through August 2003. For the purpose of this article, we are defining conscious hip hop in accordance with artists, cultural critics, scholars, and fans who differentiate it from other genres by pointing to its politically progressive and racially conscious lyrical content (Chang 2005; Dyson 2001; Rodriquez 2006; Watkins 2006). Like the pro-black abolitionist movement, artists and producers of conscious hip hop differentiate their work from that of mainstream hip hop by pointing to its pro-black, racially progressive themes and aesthetics. A lyric from The Roots declares their music “ain’t plastic, it’s pro-blackness” while the artist Talib Kweli declares himself “pro-black Kweli.”¹⁸ These lyricists in particular, and conscious hip hop artists more generally, rap about racist hypocrisies, black nationalism, black solidarity, gender politics in the black community, and African American history and culture. On occasion, they chide mainstream rappers for overt displays of sexism, materialism, and “thug mentality.” In addition to the critical racial politics that animate lyrical content, conscious hip hop artists enact a form of political theater at their shows. At nearly every performance rappers dramatically stop the show and take a few moments to engage the audience about a variety of domestic and foreign policy issues affecting the African American community such as mandatory minimum sentencing, reparations, and the “wars” on welfare, poverty, crime, drugs, and terrorism.

The underground movement materializes most visibly at the shows of conscious artists and for this reason, Rodriquez began the research project as a participant observer in the clubs and concert halls where conscious rappers were performing. He attended 20 such shows over the course of this research project. Most of the concerts took place in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts (approximately 90 miles west of Boston), two were set in Boston, and one was in Providence, Rhode Island. Nearly all of the concerts were in small (500 persons or less), general admission clubs that book a wide variety of musical acts. Among the self-identified conscious hip hop artists who performed in shows included in this study are Dead Prez, Talib Kweli, The Roots, Blackalicious, Black Sheep, and Common.

At the start of data collection, the racial composition of the audiences reflected what longstanding members of the scene characterized as a dramatic shift. While performers, musicians, and their road crews continued to be comprised almost entirely of African American men in their twenties and thirties,¹⁹ audiences had (apparently) shifted from predominantly black to overwhelmingly white.²⁰ With one exception, the audiences at the shows Rodriquez observed were almost exclusively white, young (between the ages of 18 and 24), middle class, and male. The show that was the exception was headlined by a conscious artist named Ghostface. There at least a third of the audience was African American. This show occurred at the beginning of data collection. At every subsequent show, audiences were overwhelmingly white. The demographic shift was the subject of a good bit of speculation among artists, fans,

18. From “Sacrifice” and “Rolling with Heat” on The Roots album *Phrenology* (2002).

19. Conscious hip hop, like the alternative hard rock movement Schippers (2002) studied, embraces an anti-sexist and at times feminist sensibility. Nonetheless, men make up the majority of artists and fans, with the notable exception of pioneering women rappers like Bahamadia and Jean Grae. For more on gender and hip hop, particularly with respect to women’s involvement as artists, see Collins (2004) and Rose (1994).

20. Several respondents reported a time when they were one of very few white members among an otherwise black audience. There is no way to gauge the accuracy of this claim, though what is clear from these reports is that whites’ perception of the racial composition of audiences had changed.

and critics, and later became a basis for membership claims as many white participants strove to distinguish themselves as true fans.

In addition to collecting participant observation data at the shows, Rodriquez conducted interviews with 32 white audience members. He typically approached fans before the show started or in between acts and introduced himself as “a student doing a project on hip hop.” Like most of the audience members, Rodriquez is a white, middle class man in his mid-twenties. This, combined with his knowledge and appreciation of hip hop music, facilitated an easygoing rapport with fans. Indeed, all but one of the people he approached agreed to be interviewed for the study. The interviews at the clubs were informal and focused primarily on how fans distinguish mainstream from conscious hip hop, and how and why they ended up at the show that night. Seventeen respondents agreed to participate in follow-up interviews that were generally conducted a few days after the show. These interviews were formal and semi-structured, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes in length. Fans were asked more pointed questions about their history and involvement in the underground hip hop movement, their sensibilities about race and class, the racial politics of the movement, and their racial identity. Although it is difficult to gauge, it is likely that Rodriquez’s status as a white male worked to his advantage in getting whites to speak frankly about race and racial politics during these formal interviews. As researchers like Kristen Myers (2003) and Bonilla-Silva and Tyrone Foreman (2000) have demonstrated, middle class whites are careful when publicly speaking about race, often articulating racist ideas in subtle and coded ways while simultaneously asserting their own colorblindness. In the context of underground hip hop, Rodriquez found that white fans were more willing to engage in lengthy and frank discussions of race and racial politics when those conversations took place away from the clubs and other fans, and when questions about race were embedded in the context of a broader conversation about music and culture. In these interviews, respondents regularly cast Rodriquez as a racial insider—someone who shared their sensibilities about African Americans, hip hop music, and racial politics writ large. Indeed, like white respondents in the abolitionist movement, they often truncated their answers to questions with the phrase, “you know what I mean,” which meant that he had to prod them to elaborate on their responses.

Rodriquez did not have access to performers during the course of this research project. The social distance between performers and the audience was fairly significant. Fans might be able to get a performer to sign an autograph or pose for a photo immediately before or after a show, but they did not have access to the backstage nor did performers enter the main part of the clubs. This may itself reflect the changing character of the underground movement. Artists typically left the club shortly after finishing the last set. Although this study is focused primarily on white audience members, Rodriquez did endeavor to include the voices and perspectives of performers and artists. He did so by supplementing field observations with archival documents including interviews with artists and performers that appear in magazines and Web sites, as well as statements that performers post on their own Web sites and in online discussion forums.

In the analysis that follows, we consider how each of these social movements shaped how our white respondents conceptualized self and other. Both movements make a set of claims about the self that serve to distinguish what kind of people can become members and participants. Race is a basis of membership claims, but neither the pro-black abolitionist movement nor conscious hip hop positioned race as a sole or exclusive criterion for membership. Whites were not barred from participation on the basis of their race, but their involvement demanded that they provide an account of their motives and authenticity (Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968). Occasions for accountability varied considerably according to the differences in structure between pro-black abolitionism and conscious hip hop. In the first section of the analysis, we examine these occasions and the demands each movement made on the self. In the second section, we explore the narrative strategies that whites used to craft a self that was accountable to movement demands as well as to broader expectations of whiteness. In our conclusion,

we consider how movement structure and discourse simultaneously enabled and constrained the production of critical selves.

“Are You an African? Do You Know What’s Happening?” Occasions for Accountability

Although neither movement configured consumption and engagement with pro-black discourse as a racially exclusive project, an influx of whites raised questions about what kinds of people could and should participate. Pro-black discourse is primarily produced by and directed to racial insiders. It presumes a critical awareness about race, class, and social structure that is driven by individual and collective experience. On occasion, it indicts racial outsiders such as well-to-do whites, who, like most of our respondents, enjoy numerous social and economic privileges. For example, a lyric from *The Coup* notes: “Let’s call ‘em the bosses/they take money while the people take losses/they stole black folks from Africa/to work for free,” while an organizing flier from CFPP proclaimed: “[we] condemn the stand of white people who have always turned their backs on the conditions and struggles of African and other colonized people.” Since both movements defined themselves, in the words of a CFPP member, as “of and for the black community,” the presence of whites, even those with progressive racial politics, was regarded by both white and black members as anomalous and something that occasioned an account (Scott and Lyman 1968).

Indeed, our respondents’ desire to become members of each of these movements is unusual in that it is driven by an explicit set of concerns about race that extend beyond their particular political and aesthetic tastes. Consumers of hip hop, for example, have myriad choices beyond the underground, conscious style. Conscious hip hop is decidedly less accessible than more mainstream variants given that it does not enjoy much airplay on radio and cable television. The small, independent labels that sign conscious rappers do not have large budgets for marketing and promotion. As a result, most conscious artists begin their careers playing small clubs and community centers in predominantly black, urban neighborhoods. Many rely primarily on word of mouth to sell albums, merchandise, and tickets. Given patterns of residential and social segregation in American cities, it is hardly surprising that early audiences were overwhelmingly African American. The “underground” is quite literally something that most middle class whites have to actively seek out.

Whites interested in pro-black abolitionism face a different and more difficult set of challenges in terms of access. In their case, the problem was not discovering that either organization existed since both J4A and CFPP were visible and well known within the broader abolitionist movement. Rather, the problem was getting in. Neither group actively recruited white members (for example, CFPP declared itself, “for black people, by black people”). Whites who expressed interest were often redirected to other abolitionist groups and/or offered “supporter” status, which meant they could sign petitions, donate money, and assist with fundraising.²¹ Becoming a supporter was not the same thing as becoming a member. Both organizations subjected would-be members to either a formal or informal vetting process. Membership was contingent on individuals’ knowledge of and agreement with the group’s political demands, as well as their presentation of self.

Taken together, cultural and structural obstacles meant that white participation was relatively rare in both movements. As we will demonstrate, structural differences in access

21. At the height of the moratorium/abolition campaign in Illinois, there were no fewer than 11 active groups in Chicago and several of these had grown so large they spawned multiple neighborhood and suburban chapters. With few exceptions, groups were organized around the concern for civil rights and social justice. They varied in terms of the priority they assigned to racial inequality (most prioritized poverty) and their willingness to define the criminal justice system as “racist.”

across each movement contributed to distinct differences in identity demands placed on participants.

Pro-Black Abolition Movement

Outside Philadelphia's city hall, members of J4A held placards demanding the release of a death row inmate and calling for the recusal of a conservative appellate judge. Among the handful of black demonstrators was a white, undergraduate student from an Ivy League university who wore his shoulder-length, brown hair in dreadlocks. He was holding a sign that read, "Jail Racist Killer Cops." About ten minutes into the demonstration, the student was approached by one of the members of J4A who asked him why he was there. He appeared surprised and stammered: "To fight the system and, um, to fight against racism." Later he told McCorkel that his answer to the question was "stupid" because it came across as "naïve liberalism." He then added: "His question caught me off guard and I thought it came off as a little hostile, like 'what do you—a white guy—know about racist cops?'"

Accountability tales like that offered by the undergraduate student figured prominently in every white respondent's explanation of his or her entree into the pro-black abolitionist movement. Indeed, members of both J4A and CFPP made it a point to question newcomers about their motivations for getting involved. Although questions were directed to both black and white participants, members in both organizations acknowledged that they did so with more frequency and directed a good bit more suspicion toward whites. CFPP's minister of information explained during an interview that she wanted white newcomers to be clear on the organization's goals: "We aren't trying to convince white people—there are other groups doing that—we answer to the black community." Abdullah, a self-described black political prisoner who was released after proving his innocence, told McCorkel that he made a habit of asking white supporters about their motivations to get a sense of who they really are. He elaborated: "No disrespect at all, I'm fine with whites getting involved. Shit, they should be involved. But they not black, right? So I just want to verify they know where they at."

Race did serve as a proxy for membership status, in the sense that members believed they had a better understanding of the motivations of African American newcomers and that African American newcomers more so than whites had a better understanding of "where they at" relative to the goals of pro-black abolition. Members in both organizations, however, were quick to point out that their sentiments regarding race were based on "community" and "history" and not on essentialist constructions of identity. A founding member of J4A noted that most of the group's "regular" members were friends and family members of the death row inmate. He elaborated, "It's obvious why black folks are here, this is what's happening in our community." A CFPP member made a similar point during a monthly meeting:

The death penalty is happening to us, to our community, and it's been a part of the history of our community in this country, of racial domination in this country. It's good other groups are protesting it as a policy, but we black people need to be here, to protest it specifically as a strategy of racial domination.

As the work of both organizations became increasingly prominent in the broader anti-death penalty movement, white activists sought opportunities to join. Abdullah recalls the debates that the presence of whites inspired in the organization:

One of our founding members is white, but he's different in the sense that he's not trying to steer the ship. He has a long track record in Chicago, with the black community, and black folks trust him. But others, it just took us by surprise, you know? Why would they [whites] want to join when there are so many other groups? . . . We came to the conclusion that we can't prevent anyone from joining because they white, but we do want to know what their politics is, where they're coming from, and be sure they understand this ain't gonna be their show to run.

Sam, a longstanding member of J4A, recounted a similar set of conversations regarding the status of whites who were interested in providing more than passive forms of support to the organization:

We debated it and debated it. We did have a few white members already, people we knew and trusted. Finally, we said ok, but it's on our terms and we're going to be clear about that up front. This is a radical, black organization and that's it. If you don't like it, don't join. And, yeah, we reserve the right to check people out and call people on their bullshit . . . if they ain't real, this just isn't the place for them.

At the root of their concern was the fear that extending membership to whites would dilute the radical politics of the organization and/or that whites would endeavor to dominate the organization's leadership. Several African American members from both organizations recounted troubling, civil rights-era experiences with middle class whites who were involved in community organizing in predominantly poor, black, urban neighborhoods. As Sam explained, "you ended up with suburban whites *taking over* community organizing in our neighborhoods because in the end, despite all the lip service they gave to having black leadership, they believed they knew best. People walk away from organizing experiences like that with a bad taste in their mouths. We're not going down that road again" [emphasis his].

Both organizations responded to challenges and concerns presented by white newcomers by endeavoring to vet incoming members and by formalizing the distinction between "members" and "supporters." While anyone could be a supporter by virtue of donating money or signing a petition, members were vetted. J4A did so informally as in the example with the undergraduate student recounted above. CFPP vetted prospective members formally, requiring that they attend one of the group's monthly meetings and share with the group their reasons for wanting to join. As the above interview excerpts suggest, candidates were expected to demonstrate their sincerity, their commitment to the organization's mission, their progressive racial politics, and their "realness."

It is the latter category, realness, that is comparable to theoretical constructions of the critical self. As the quotes above suggest, realness directs would-be white participants to demonstrate both an awareness of their social location relative to African Americans as well as a certain level of reflexivity regarding "where they at" with respect to the pro-black abolitionist movement and the black community more generally. According to this formulation, whites who are "real" understand and are sympathetic to the goals of the movement and recognize their secondary place within it. As interviews with African American members such as Abdullah suggest, realness is equated with "difference" from other whites as well as acknowledging one's place within the movement and wider society. But there was also something intangible about realness. As Sam said in an interview, "You either real or you not, and it comes across at a gut level. It would be hard to define it, you just know, this person is real." As we will shortly see, demonstrating difference and realness proved difficult for whites who, like the Ivy League student, worried they would come across as "naïve" or inauthentic.

Conscious Hip Hop

Dead Prez had been on the stage for nearly an hour when Mutulu Olugbala ("M1"), one half of the rap duo that describes itself as "emcees and activists," paused the high energy show. Behind him, a screen flashed images of iconic figures including Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, Huey Newton, and Bobby Seal. As the images flashed behind him, he began speaking to the predominantly youthful, middle class, white crowd, reminding them of the legacy of Garvey and the Black Panther party, and calling for "revolution-minded brothers." He paused again to peer across the sea of white faces and aloud observed, "there are a lot of white cats in the audience." In the song that followed, M1 pointed at audience members and shouted, "You a African? You a African? Do you know what's happenin'?"

Shows such as this one served as one of the few occasions when participants in the underground scene were confronted with a call for accountability. Given the nature of the interaction between the performer and the audience, these occasions are largely rhetorical and quite a bit different than the highly structured exchanges between members and newcomers in the pro-black abolitionist movement. Audience members, even those who are singled out, enjoy anonymity and are under considerably less pressure to craft suitable responses. Their access to the scene is not threatened or restricted as a consequence of what they say or fail to say. Nonetheless, the audiences at these shows routinely responded with a sort of collective account. Following the lead of M1 and the handful of African American fans in attendance, whites in the crowd threw their fists in the air and chanted, "I'm a African, I'm a African, and I know what's happenin'!"

The influx of white fans raised a similar dilemma for black artists involved in the conscious hip hop movement as it did for the organizers of pro-black abolitionism. Specifically, how does the movement preserve its pro-black orientation in the presence of an increasing number of white participants? This question is further complicated in conscious hip hop as musicians and artists endeavor to balance political goals with the profit-driven demands of the recording industry. Unlike pro-black abolitionists, conscious MCs are not in a position to vet their fans. In recent years, questions about the demographic shift in the fan base routinely come up in media interviews with conscious hip hop artists. M1's response in a recent interview is consistent with how other artists in the underground scene attempt to balance the economic pressures of the market and the politics of pro-blackness:

It's good when we can talk to our people; we make our music for our people but we have come to understand that hip hop is marketed towards those who buy, and those who buy aren't necessarily Black and Brown. So we do end up with a huge fan base that includes white consumers who can sympathize with our music. So I do find myself in front of thousands of people saying, "I'm an African!" and they're white! But it's all good, because they know what we mean and they're supporting, and that's good (Anonymous 2006).

According to this formulation, the presence of white fans does not dilute or otherwise compromise the race politics of conscious hip hop. Indeed, while it is marketing (rather than politics) that bring white fans to the scene, the whites who become true fans are assumed to both understand and support the movement's radical race politics. As such, they do not compromise the underground hip hop scene as a black space. Like pro-black abolitionists, conscious hip hop artists resolve the dilemma of white participation by making a set of claims about the selves of their fans.

Their assumptions about the self are similar to those offered by pro-black abolitionists and consistent with the concept of the critical self. These expectations are communicated in song lyrics, in interviews with underground artists appearing on Web sites and in hip hop magazines, and most explicitly at live shows. Conscious rappers expect all fans, both white and black, to love the music and to be willing to learn and appreciate the politics and aesthetics of underground hip hop. As the above statements from M1 demonstrate, they also assume that white fans are sympathetic to pro-black politics and supportive of the scene. For example, at a Black Sheep show that took place at a club in Northampton, Massachusetts, the rapper Andres "Dres" Titus bantered with the overwhelmingly white audience about the racial politics of the town. He deadpanned, "We were walking around Northampton earlier today. You probably heard about it on police scanners." Northampton is well known as a progressive, liberal town, but it is also racially homogeneous. The joke that Dres expected his audience to get is that even politically progressive whites can exhibit racially discriminatory behavior and act on the basis of racial stereotypes.

Conscious hip hop artists, like pro-black abolitionists, also expect white fans to understand their social location within a pro-black movement. Many artists communicate this by distinguishing two categories of fans. For example, in the Dead Prez show featured above, the performer distinguishes audience members as either revolution-minded brothers or "white cats." These exist as mutually exclusive categories and membership in one or the other is brokered,

in part, by race. As in the pro-black abolitionist movement, blackness alone is not sufficient to establish one's membership in the movement. Rather, African Americans are expected to demonstrate their progressive political ideology and their "revolution-mindedness." However, political ideology and racial awareness does not confer whites with the status of "brothers." Instead, they attain a more conditional form of membership: white cats. The emphasis on revolution-minded brothers as opposed to just brothers is what sets underground hip hop apart from mainstream hip hop and the distinction between revolution-minded brothers and white cats is, in part, what marks the underground movement as pro-black.

Given this, what allows white fans at the shows to apparently sidestep racial distinctions by proclaiming, "I'm a African and I know what's happenin'"? The answer is linked to the structure and organization of the conscious hip hop movement. Although membership distinctions and expectations about the self are similar to those found in the pro-black abolitionist movement, the structure of membership is much looser. Anyone can become a fan provided they have knowledge of which artists "count" as conscious MCs and where and when shows will be held. Further, since whites make up the vast majority of fans in the audience of the shows and serve as a crucial source of revenue for conscious artists, they have more interpretative control over which aspects of identity are salient for establishing membership claims. Indeed, performers rarely, if ever, discounted the membership claims of audience members. In the case of white fans shouting, "I'm a African," M-1 responded by simply pointing out the few African Americans in the audience and shouting back, "*I'm a African*" (emphasis his).

In fact, white fans did not embrace the distinction between white cats and revolutionary brothers. Instead, they endeavored to establish membership in the scene by emphasizing their political commitments. It was commonplace for concertgoers to literally wear their politics on their bodies. White fans regularly ornamented themselves with shirts and pins bearing slogans such as "War is not the ANSWER" and "It doesn't matter what your color, creed, race, or size, ARISE!" Further, they developed their own distinctions to categorize audience members at the shows. These distinctions preserved politics as a relevant aspect of identity and membership, but downplayed the significance of race. Thus, for whites there were two kinds of people at the shows: true fans and backpackers.²² True fans were those who were committed to the leftist political platforms of the underground scene, while backpackers were constructed as inauthentic poseurs. As one long time fan noted of backpackers, "I think also a lot of them just like to listen to hip hop just for the beats and just to go to a party, and I think that's one of the fundamental differences between people who are really into it and backpackers, is that it's less about dancing and partying, it's more about really getting into a movement."

Like the pro-black abolitionist movement, the underground hip hop scene made demands on the selves of participants. Unlike pro-black abolition, the conscious hip hop movement did little to vet would-be members or call on white fans to account for their participation. Here membership distinctions articulated by conscious artists are brokered partially, but not exclusively, on race. However, given the structure of the scene and the fact that whites predominated in the audience and the marketplace, they were able to circumvent the distinction between revolution-minded brothers and white cats by inventing their own membership distinctions (true fans and backpackers) that avoided race entirely.

Down and Different: Strategizing the Pro-Black (White) Self

While both movements made demands on the self, it was not the case that movements dictated the self-constructions of white participants. In the pro-black abolitionist movement, participants were expected to showcase a self that was racially competent and real.

22. The distinction was normative and the term backpacker derisive. In interviews and informal conversation, no one admitted to being a backpacker.

Although the rules for demonstrating racial competence were fairly straightforward (e.g., knowledge of the movement and black politics), there was considerable ambiguity with respect to realness. There was, in other words, slippage between the movement's expectations for what realness should look like and the resources the organization provided for constructing and narrating such a self. In the underground hip hop scene, fans were able to leverage their own definitions of self based on political sensibilities over and against the race-specific distinctions offered by performers and artists. As we will demonstrate in the section below, white participants in both spaces creatively and strategically narrated a self that was at once responsive to the movement as well as to wider cultural discourses about race and whiteness.

Pro-Black Abolition Movement

White participants in pro-black abolitionism, including those who ultimately became regular members, expressed a great deal of anxiety and concern over how they presented themselves to African American members. Marilyn, for example, characterized her experience speaking before CFPP as a candidate for membership as "intimidating" because she regarded the audience of members as "suspicious of most whites" and "hostile." In recounting her strategy for navigating the required membership interview she explained, "I tried to show I was down, you know, with the whole race thing." As is evident from an excerpt of the prepared speech she gave, Marilyn crafted a narrative designed to showcase her knowledge of black politics (being "down" with race) and to bolster her claims to "being different" from other whites:

I'm here because I'm committed, sincerely, fiercely committed to freeing political prisoners from this racist criminal justice system and to supporting the black community and its political struggles against this racist government. Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Geronimo Pratt . . . These are my teachers, heroes, who have made me see that we don't have a just system . . . I know that it may seem unusual for me to become a member . . . I'm a white kid from [affluent Chicago suburb] and I haven't been touched, personally, by the system like so many people here. But I'm seriously committed, I've been involved in anti-racist work for several years . . . I'm probably different from a lot of other white kids but for me it's not a trendy thing or a hobby or something. I feel really, really outraged by the injustice of this system and I think if more white people were outraged by this system, it wouldn't exist. I see this as my responsibility, and I don't want to cover my eyes. I want to see it, to understand it, and to do whatever I can to stop these executions . . .

Other white respondents similarly characterized both impromptu and organizationally scripted demands for accountability as "hostile," "intimidating," or "unwelcoming." Beyond this, they frequently interpreted even banal interactions with African Americans as calls to accountability. For example, during an appellate hearing an African American member of J4A approached a white intern for the organization and said, "Do you know who's side your on?" She nodded furiously and chirped, "The African people's." He grinned and nodded in the direction of where she had been sitting in the courtroom. "You were sitting on the prosecution's side," he said as he walked away.

For whites like Marilyn and the J4A intern, "being down" involved demonstrating their knowledge of black politics and history, as well as their difference from other whites. April explained her strategy during our interview:

Most whites have a naïve view of how the world works. I don't and that's what I say when people in [J4A] ask why I'm involved with them. I'm not saying that I didn't grow up in the suburbs or have that kind of privilege, but I am saying that I see the world differently and I think differently about race.

In the following exchange between a leader in CFPP and a middle-age white woman who expressed interest in membership, “difference” was central to the her presentation of self:

CFPP member: Do you mind if I ask, why us?

Activist: I want to do more direct action, but also my racial politics are just different, you know, more radical than other groups. I don’t believe they’re doing enough, you know, or that white people should be calling the shots and organizing all the campaigns.

CFPP member: [laughing] But you are white!

Activist: [laughing] Right, but I’m different.

This narrative strategy worked for whites interested in gaining membership status in both J4A and CFPP. As one of CFPP’s founding members recounted about sudden increases in the number of white members in the organization: “We took all people at their word. If they wanted to be a part of us and they understood what we’re about and how they fit, then we were willing to give it a shot.”

However, it also created tensions as several white members in each organization began to present their difference as a sort of rarified racial competence—one that gave them license to depart from each organization’s official script. For example, in CFPP white members were directed to do organizing in the “white community.” This meant speaking on college campuses and holding fundraising drives in suburban areas. The narratives whites used in these settings were markedly different from the ones they used in response to African Americans involved in pro-black abolitionism. They downplayed their involvement in pro-black abolitionism (often characterizing it more broadly as anti-death penalty work) and recast pro-black rhetoric as a political commitment to “freedom,” “equality,” and “anti-racism.” The latter characterization provoked a good bit of controversy in CFPP. Pro-black abolitionist groups define themselves in contrast to “anti-racist” efforts, decrying these as forms of naïve liberalism, and “vanilla politics.” While the vast majority of McCorkel’s respondents were well aware of this critique and embraced the distinction in their interviews as well as in pro-black milieus, several employed the rhetoric of anti-racism in the motivational accounts they offered to fellow white activists and supporters. Marcus explained that on his Ivy League campus, “I broadcast it [his involvement in CFPP] as a higher form of anti-racist work.” Treating their involvement in CFPP or J4A as “higher” or “purer” forms of anti-racist politics was accomplished, in large part, by demonstrating that such work had given them a rare racial competence not shared with their fellow white anti-racists. At a meeting of a local chapter of the Green Party, Jon, a supporter of CFPP, offered to help his all-white chapter recruit new members from an adjacent, predominantly black neighborhood. He did so by emphasizing his “good rapport with black folks” and his “unique familiarity and insight [regarding] black issues and concerns.”

These apparently contradictory accounts of the self contributed to simmering racial tensions in both J4A and CFPP. White members in CFPP complained that African American members did not trust them to know how to “deal with whites.” For their part, African American members complained that the tactics white members were using diluted the goals of the movement and, further, were evidence that whites were not truly willing to take a secondary role in the organization. The issue came to a head in CFPP when the membership divided on racial lines regarding the strategy to pursue in a death penalty case. The debate quickly moved from differences regarding legal strategies to differences regarding race, authenticity, and respect. As the following exchange reveals, at issue was what whites’ claims to difference meant for the realness of the self and the integrity of the movement more generally:

African American member: You say you’re different and you’re down but you’re not acting like it when you’re at rallies. Who are you? You say you’re one thing but how would I know that based on your actions and the position you’re taking on this?

White member: I'm telling you who I am. It's disrespectful to say you don't believe me—

African American member: Did you just say, "disrespect." Whoa, did you forget where you are? You're gonna come in here, with everything you have and say you got disrespected? Oh, that's *real* all right, real ignorant [emphasis hers].

At issue in both pro-black abolitionist organizations were the ways in which white members strategically narrated the self. Within the context of pro-black abolitionism, whites emphasized their political and intellectual competence and sought to demonstrate their realness and reflexivity by suggesting that they were different from other, similarly situated whites. Outside of this context, among other whites, respondents folded their organizational commitments into a more general form of progressive activism and/or treated it as a higher expression of their anti-racism. In the case of the latter, they reported on their interactions with African Americans to demonstrate a rarified type of cultural competence. Like other types of accounts, these strategic narratives of the self performed an integrative function (see Scott and Lyman 1968). They facilitated interactions across racial boundaries and simultaneously shored up their identities within wider occupational, educational, political, and familial settings. However, in doing so, white members appeared unconcerned or unaware that they made use of not one but two types of account narratives, each of which appeared to undermine the other.

Conscious Hip Hop

There are marked differences between the narratives constructed among white fans of pro-black hip hop and white activists involved with pro-black abolitionism. Most notably, it was *not* the case that fans of conscious hip hop developed dueling narratives to justify their participation in the scene. They did not have to given the looser organizational structure of the movement and the underlying influence of the recording industry and the market writ large. The only time white fans offered something resembling an account for their participation was during the political theater at the shows. Rarely did these occasions involve face-to-face encounters with African Americans because the scene at the shows was predominantly white. The lone exception to this was at a Ghostface concert, one of the earliest shows that Rodriguez attended. In this instance, a third of the audience was African American. The scene inside the venue was striking in the sense that white and black fans appeared to self-segregate. It was not that one group was closer to the stage (perhaps indicating that they had arrived earlier) and another further away. Rather, it was that each group occupied a different side of the venue. There was little in the way of visible interaction across these groups suggesting that even in the case of a more diverse audience, white fans did not find themselves having to interact in meaningful ways with African Americans.

Further, even when white fans did offer a narrative account of the self, it did not impact their access to underground hip hop one way or the other. Indeed, while white fans struggled to present a self that was revolutionary minded, they were not in the position of having to justify that self within the parameters set by performers. Whether they were regarded as revolutionary minded or not, they were able to attend shows, buy albums, and participate in Web-based chat rooms devoted to their favorite artists. As a result, white fans did not have dueling narratives of the self, one for the scene and one for elsewhere, but instead developed a narrative account that acknowledged their race and class positionality while simultaneously showcasing their capacity to overcome this positionality (as evidenced in their chanting, "I'm a African" at the shows). Although they noted that being white and middle class limited their access to African Americans and the experiences of racism and poverty that many of the performers sang about, they also believed they could transcend their own delimited race and class experiences and embrace those of differently situated others. The theme of racial transcendence—specifically, downplaying or rejecting their identities as white outsiders while presuming the status of racial insiders—was particularly pronounced in interview data.

For example, at the Dead Prez concert described above, Rodriquez met Jeff, a 17-year old high school senior. During an interview a week later, Jeff proffered an elaborate discussion of his racial transcendence in response to a question about the racial composition of the neighborhood he grew up in:

I never lived in lower class neighborhoods. I never thought black people were any different . . . It's really hard to get a feel for the ghetto when you live in a 2,500-square-foot house in the middle of a completely all white neighborhood. So I think that kind of narrowed my horizons in terms of relating to people. But I've been looking at the world as a whole and the U.S.A as a whole, Massachusetts as a whole, trying to see big pictures, trying to see how that guy right over there [he points over my shoulder to an apparently homeless, African American man sleeping outside] relates to the country. And um, I think a person can step outside of their neighborhood or their life and look at the bigger life and people all over the world. So I don't think it matters that I grew up in a completely white neighborhood, because now I'm growing up in a completely racially diverse world, and I realize that.

Like the anti-death penalty activists, white fans of conscious hip hop posit themselves as different from other whites as well as from themselves at earlier points in time. It is their sense that they are different and that this difference is characterized by their transcendence of racial categories that serves as the primary way they account for their participation in the underground scene. Indeed, they use the fact of their transcendence to explain their consumption of pro-black music rather than the other way round (that through hip hop they are able to transcend their race/class positionality). So Jeff, like other informants, constructs a racially transcendent self as a strategy for claiming authentic membership in the scene (e.g., he is not just a white cat incapable of relating to others who are as different from him as the man sleeping on the sidewalk, but a true fan who can "step outside" his world).

There are ironies embedded in these accounts. First, the significance of difference and transcendence led nearly all of the informants into a curious logic, one which suggested that that their consumption of racially conscious hip hop precisely indicates the irrelevance of race. Frank told Rodriquez, "I was raised in Cambridge, Boston, what not, and up here on the coast it doesn't really matter as much what race you are in terms of what types of music you appreciate." Another informant said, "hip hop is so *not* a black/white thing" and added, "[hip hop] is a great music art form and it's for everybody to appreciate and I don't think it matters what color you are." Jeff observed, "when black people are talking about freeing black people, I can't imagine that someone who wants to free their people, free people they are close to, would not want to free everyone . . . it's, it's all the same sort of message of freedom, independence."

Further, respondents used their own claim of having transcended race to situate and inform aesthetic distinctions (Bourdieu 1984). For instance, Frank, a recent college graduate who reported listening to conscious hip hop because it is "socially and politically inspiring" quickly added:

And I just want to say, I don't know maybe this is totally random, but I want to specify between what I consider to be hip hop and what I consider to be just mainstream, just rap, and/or R&B, a lot of which I can't stand personally. All the "bling bling" shit, some of it may have good beats, but a lot of these guys are just playing into what makes them money and they are objectifying women and they are talking about how much cash they have and things like that, which entirely negate what I just said about hip hop. A rapper, you know a mainstream rapper who, you know, *supposedly* does hip hop, but has kind of a more R&B style because of the beats and the rap, they are not really a hip hop artist that's true to what hip hop should be, and has been from the beginning (emphasis his).

Here, white fans distinguish hip hop from the mainstream in terms of their own political and cultural sensibilities. It is important to reiterate that respondents regularly defined the politics of the artists they listened to as "left wing" rather than as race conscious. While there is no question that the two overlap, the music and performances are self-consciously Afrocentric. Focusing on conscious hip hop's left-wing political elements while not "seeing" its deeply

Afrocentric orientation is itself a product of white fans' devotion to color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Gallagher 2003).

This corresponds with their feelings regarding cultural projects as well. When asked if they thought of hip hop as a part of black culture, respondents indicated that it was at one time before going on to discuss, often at great length, how they feel that hip hop has transcended racial distinctions. One informant was particularly adamant in his response regarding the evolution of hip hop:

There are so many black people who have no idea or don't give a fuck about break dancing, or graffiti, or Rakim, or KRS-One. They really don't. And I think white people contribute so much more to the mystique of hip hop than black people now. It will always be a black art initially, but not anymore.

Another noted: "when it comes to participation it doesn't matter what ethnicity you are, or anything, all that matters is that you have skills."

When asked whether whites were appropriating hip hop in a manner consistent with the evolution and consumption of rock and roll, respondents often had difficulty in forming a response they regarded as adequate. One respondent commented:

Umm, I don't know, that's a good question, umm . . . I don't know, I think emphasizing like the whole race card, I don't know, I'm not big on it. It just seems to drive up more divides than anything else. Sure it's a black art and like, I don't know, I'm gonna think about it because I can find definitely some other analogies, in other mediums . . .

White fans acknowledge their race and class positionality but suggest that their consumption of hip hop allows them to transcend these categories. They are true fans who appreciate the left politics of the movement. Although they are able to achieve a certain level of reflexivity, their emphasis on transcendence obscures how they are situated relative to African Americans. While they acknowledge hip hop's origins in the black community, they argue that it is no longer anchored to this community. Instead, they claim that "white people contribute so much more" and that hip hop is about "skills" rather than being a "black/white thing." They downplay the critical race politics of the music, choosing instead to emphasize universal themes of peace, love, and freedom. While hip hop serves as a medium for fans to "step outside their world" and connect to the experiences of others who are differently situated, they largely fail to recognize their power as consumers in the movement and beyond.

Conclusion: Critical Selves in Status-Based Social Movements

Contemporary debates over the character and consequences of identity politics for social movements and democratic politics are brokered, in part, over competing visions of the self. At the heart of the matter are concerns regarding how status-based social movements condition the possibilities for selfhood. Do identity-based movements give rise to a parochial and strategic self, one that is incapable of moving beyond a narrow range of self-interested claims and demands? Or are identity-based movements capable of generating a critical self, one that is reflexive and capable of recognizing and respecting others who are differently situated? Our comparative study of two distinct, racially progressive social movements allowed us to investigate these questions and, in particular, to understand how social movements and broader cultural sensibilities about race shape the social organization of the self.

Building on Holstein and Gubrium (2000), we argue that social movements make claims on the self and offer a set of resources and guidelines for self-construction. This involves more than facilitating certain kinds of identity talk, though movements surely do that (Lichterman 1999). Both the pro-black abolitionist movement and the underground hip hop scene made claims and demands on the selves of would-be participants. Although both movements were

careful to avoid making racially essentialist claims about who could be a full-fledged member, an influx of progressive whites generated an interesting set of dilemmas. This was particularly evident in each of the abolitionist organizations. When anti-racist whites sought opportunities for full-fledged membership, both organizations began the practice of vetting newcomers. They did so out of concern that whites would drain resources from the movement, either by demanding the time of members (who would have to educate them on pro-black politics) or by diluting the mission of revolutionary change. Incoming members were expected to demonstrate their knowledge of politics and their loyalty to the cause, and, for whites, their realness and awareness regarding their social location in the movement and within wider society. In the underground hip hop scene, the membership categories established by artists and performers were racially distinct. There, knowledge of politics, black culture, and hip hop were requisites for both blacks and whites to be regarded as authentic members, but only African Americans were accorded the status of revolutionary-minded brothers while whites occupied a more conditional category, white cats.

While movements made demands on the selves of participants, they also provided resources and guidelines for self-construction. Although neither movement entirely dictated the self-construction of participants, it is clear that each varied in terms of how much direction was provided to assist newcomers in fashioning selves that met the expectations of the movement. Each of the abolitionist organizations provided occasions for newcomers to account for not only their interest in the organization, but for the character of their selves. These were often directed exchanges between members and newcomers, with newcomers endeavoring to showcase their understanding of black politics as well as their awareness of their social location as whites. Demands for accountability were virtually absent in the underground hip hop scene. Indeed, white fans were able to create their own membership distinctions, notably between true fans and backpackers, categories that differentiated participants solely in terms of politics.

Although each movement held a similar set of expectations regarding the selves of participants, particularly as this related to race and whiteness, white fans and activists navigated their participation and strategized their presentation of self in different ways. In the abolitionist movement, white activists endeavored to demonstrate their realness by acknowledging their social location while simultaneously asserting that they were different from other whites. This, combined with efforts to demonstrate literacy in black politics, was an effective strategy for becoming a regular member of pro-black abolitionist organizations. However, it led to problems later in that several white activists used their membership in the movement to claim that they had achieved a rarified racial competence—one which gave them license to depart from organizational rhetoric and political strategy. This claim contributed to mutual hostility and suspicion between whites and African Americans, claims of disrespect across lines of racial difference, and ultimately contributed to the dissolution of each organization.

White fans in the underground hip hop movement constructed the self differently. In contrast to abolitionist members who routinely acknowledged their whiteness, fans routinely denied it. They boldly proclaimed themselves “Africans” during hip hop shows, and they sidestepped the issue of racial difference by crafting their own membership categories in the movement: true fans and backpackers. In interviews, fans argued that transcendence of their own whiteness had occurred prior to their participation in the scene and, in fact, the very act of their involvement in a pro-black movement demonstrated their ability to overcome the limitations, parochialism, and isolation of whiteness.

Differences in the strategies of self-presentation among whites in each movement can be traced to the structural features that distinguish each movement. Participation in the pro-black abolitionist movement occurs primarily through membership in formal volunteer organizations. Although neither CFPP or J4A could be described as highly regimented, each had established leadership and a set of guidelines that formalized political priorities and regulated the conduct of members. In contrast, participation in conscious hip hop is open to anyone

with knowledge and access to the scene. Membership boundaries are fluid and relatively porous. Over time, whites fans began to predominate in number within the underground movement. Numerical dominance and market power created opportunities for whites to develop their own distinctions regarding membership. The radical departure of white fans' distinctions from those of black artists and performers are testament to the amount of sway whites held in the underground scene. In fact, white fans of conscious hip hop were able to participate in the movement without ever engaging in significant interactions with African American.

This brings us to the key question regarding status-based movements and the self. Did either movement provide the resources for the construction of critical selves? Sociologists like Horowitz (2001) and Anderson (1999) formulate this in Meadian terms. Critical selves are those that are capable of transcending local settings and moving across racial divides to develop an expanded sense of the generalized other. Radical democracy and feminist standpoint theorists offer a more extended formulation—critical selves are those that are capable of mutuality of recognition, reflexivity, and responsiveness (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Young 1990). We build on these formulations to suggest that in the instance of dominant group members joining status-based movements they are not directly implicated in, achieving a critical self requires: (1) a critical awareness and reflexivity regarding how one is situated relative to others in the movement and beyond, and (2) a willingness to work toward redistributing power and valuing cultural forms in ways that honor and respect the political ideology and demands of the status-based movements of which they are a part.

In the case of the pro-black abolitionist movement, whites' failure to sustain a self that was perceived by African American members as accountable to movement demands and ideology led both African Americans and whites to claim that they had been disrespected. Although whites in this movement made considerable efforts to arrive at an understanding not only of black politics but where they as middle class whites stood in relation to black politics, they were unable in the end to establish and sustain the authenticity of their self-presentation. Indeed, both African Americans and whites were hard pressed to develop a normative model for what anti-racist white participation might look like in the movement. In the end, conflicts over political strategy became conflicts over self-identity and respect.

In contrast, the underground hip hop scene is marked by the relative absence of conflict. Of course, this is likely a function of the fact that white fans are not called upon to provide accounts of their participation to African Americans. The relative absence of demands for accountability and the underlying pressure of the market meant that fans were able to construct themselves in ways that departed significantly from the racially marked categories offered by the movement itself. In their accounts of participation, white fans routinely drew on an ideology of colorblindness. They report having "stepped outside" their social locations to embrace a broader, more diverse world. Fans argue that their consumption of hip hop and participation in the underground scene is evidence of their ability to transcend their middle class whiteness. Although this vision of the self is closer to what some liberals have in mind when they discuss the progressive possibilities of identity politics, it is clear from fan participation in the underground scene that mutual recognition and respect remain elusive concepts. White fans deny the significance of race for making membership distinctions in the movement and downplay its role in framing the political demands and cultural expressions of conscious artists and performers. This undermines rather than facilitates mutual recognition as it obscures how white fans are situated relative to African Americans and all but ignores the pro-black ideology and demands of the movement.

In both movements, whites' narratives of the self ultimately worked to minimize (at least to themselves) the political and cultural significance of race and threatened to undermine the movements of which they were a part. In the end, our respondents did not develop a critical self so much as they developed a strategic self—one that facilitated access to black political and cultural spaces but that did not ultimately serve to undermine the structural advantages of whiteness. This raises the question of whether critical selves might ever be strategic. For example,

it is plausible that white abolitionists might strategically draw on anti-racist rather than pro-black rhetoric when doing organizing work in the white community. This need not take away from their own personal commitment to pro-black ideology or to eradicating structures of power. In our study, of course, white activists failed to get permission to go off script from their organizations. In so doing, it appeared to African Americans as if whites were unwilling to honor the political ideology of the pro-black movement and their secondary role within it. In the instance of dominant group members joining status-based movements they are not directly implicated in, we do not think that critical selves can be strategic without undermining a critical politics of recognition.

In our study, the failure to facilitate mutual recognition across categories of racial difference is not so much a function of the limitations of pro-black movements or of the people who join them, as it is a function of broader cultural sensibilities about race. Although both movements were critical of racially essentialist claims and endeavored to decouple membership from racial identity, neither was able to adequately articulate how anti-racist whites might participate in ways that preserved the political and cultural integrity of the movement. For the most part, the anti-racist whites who endeavored to participate in each movement were well intentioned and were anxious to abandon racially essentialist concepts and categories. However, in an effort to strategize their participation in the movement and wider society, they drew heavily from dominant cultural codes invoking colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Collins 2004; Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004). Such codes erode the possibilities for mutual recognition and respect by denying the significance of race and of white privilege. This is true even in the instance of white abolitionists who acknowledged racial inequality and their own social location as whites. They failed to see how departing from organizational scripts was an exercise of white privilege. We believe that the failures of the movements and their participants are a function of the cultural silences that attach to race. Indeed, discursive constructions of race are organized around one of two poles: essentialism or colorblindness. There is no critical middle ground in which alternative configurations of whiteness, selfhood, and racial politics might be imagined and enacted. In the absence of such a space, identity politics and race-based social movements are limited in the extent to which they can overcome racial fault lines and facilitate the emergence of critical selves.

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