CHAPTER 7

THE INDIVIDUAL ETHOS:
A DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC OF
CONTEMPORARY BLACK CONSERVATISM

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The 1991 nomination and confirmation of Clarence Thomas as associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court brought national attention to contemporary black conservatives. Both black and white journalists tried to situate Thomas in a tradition of black conservatism. Leaders from Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X to Martin Luther King were labeled as black conservatives by both black and white journalists. These media reports and the confirmation hearings culminated in scholarly articles, essays, books, and book chapters by African Americans attempting to "demystify" black conservatives and their philosophies. As Claudia Butts, White House liaison to blacks for former President George Bush said of the hearings, "Now is the safest time ever [for black conservatives] to come out of the closet.

One of the reasons for the interests in black conservatism is the current "crisis of black leadership." There has been a void of African American leadership in the post-civil rights era. The ousting of Benjamin Chavis as executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the perceived co-opting of Jesse Jackson, and the middle-class bias of civil rights organizations have resulted in disillusionment with the traditional establishment. The negative publicity that Khallid Muhammad brought the Nation of Islam has called into question black nationalist leadership. The Republican landslide in the 1994 mid-term elections has dissipated the political potency of the nearly all-Democratic Congressional Black Caucus. It is at this juncture in American history that contemporary black conservatives make their bid for political and intellectual hegemony in the African American community. Black conservatives are making a concerted attack on the civil rights establishment and challenging the legitimacy of the black nationalist movement.

The elimination of the traditional civil rights advocates and black nationalists as legitimate leaders of the African American community clears the way for conservative
hegemony in African American leadership. It is necessary for black conservatives to discredit and neutralize these two groups because of the African American community's unwillingness to recognize black conservatives as potential leaders. Although the community recognizes there is a crisis in black leadership, as Henry Louis Gates argues, "The underlying question is who counts as a black leader." Although twenty-five of the Republican nominees for the mid-term elections in Congress were black, only one was elected. Therefore, it would appear as though the problem is not a lack of people who want to lead the African American community. The problem for black conservatives is that the rest of the community does not want to recognize them as leaders. Black conservatives must construct an identity that declares who they are and why they are capable of being leaders.

This chapter explores contemporary black conservative rhetoric in light of black conservatives bid for the hearts and minds of African Americans. The chapter attempts to answer the following set of questions: How does black conservative rhetoric function to call into being a group that can be labeled black conservatives? How do black conservatives define themselves? How do black conservatives define others?

This set of questions examines black conservative rhetoric as it applies to the construction of group identity. Views of rhetoric as constitutive provide the framework for this set of questions. Constitutive rhetoric relates to how individuals or groups identify themselves, and sometimes how they identify others as well. In his discussion of Burke's use of the term "identification" as an alternative to "persuasion," Charland points out that social identifications "are rhetorical, for they are discursive effects that induce human cooperation." He points out why we must understand "how those in Athens come to experience themselves as Athenians" before we can understand why it is easier to praise Athens before a group of Athenians than before another group. It follows that an account of how black conservatives come to experience themselves as such must be given before one can theorize about the persuasive potential of black conservative rhetoric on other African Americans. Stated another way, the identification process (self or internal persuasion) precedes the external persuasion process. Studies have indicated that individuals and groups can identify themselves in relation to others "to locate themselves positively in the symbolic and social hierarchy." An examination of how black conservatives define themselves in relation to other leaders (e.g., civil rights leaders and black nationalists) is necessary for understanding their persuasive potential among members of the African American community.

Many argue that the concept of self-help is what separates black conservatives from other black leaders and organizations, as reflected in such comments as, "The bedrock of black conservatives is self-help." However, self-help has been an essential element of the African American community for centuries. Leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and Ida B. Wells spoke frequently about the internal problems confronting the black community and the need for community members to find solutions to these problems. Contemporary intellectual and political leaders such as law professor Derrick Bell, former Black Panther Angela Davis, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, feminist author bell hooks, Rainbow Coalition president Jesse Jackson, economist and columnist Julianne Malveaux, and Harvard professor Cornel West speak to the importance of self-help. Certainly one would hesitate to refer to these people as black conservatives. Stated simply, advocating changes in