

Not Another Remix: How Obama Became the First Hip-Hop President

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January 20, 2009 marked the inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama as the first African-American president of the United States. Political commentators are busy making sense of Obama's candidacy and election, but not enough attention has been given to how youth have made sense of Obama. As I show in this article, young people—so-called “hip-hoppers” and “millennials”—used their unique sensibilities, technologies, and music to help define and elect the first black, hip-hop president.

This article examines “Obama-Hop,” rap music about Barack Obama, and the 2008 presidential election.¹ Rap songs about election year politics were a highly visible aspect of the election (Hamby; NPR). This study provides the first systematic analysis of the political, racial, and gendered discourse of the Obama-Hop movement. While Obama's campaign was discussed in the framework of “post-racialism” (Crowley), this study shows how Obama's black masculinity became a major source of identification for rappers. The paper explores how Obama was depicted, embraced, and defended from scrutiny in hip-hop. Based on the review of ninety-seven Obama-themed mixtapes, I show how music was used in an attempt to energize youth toward voting and embracing Obama's political messages.

The exploration necessarily informs the larger debate over hip-hop politics. The “hip-hop wars”—as Rose (2008) labels the persistent controversy over rap—are currently being waged over the political relevance of the music. Representing a generational divide over the meaning of political activism (Boyd), there has been resistance to the claim that hip-hop is indeed “political” (Bynoe; McWhorter 2008). Hip-hop academics are increasingly concerned that corporate control and media consolidation are destroying rap's political significance (Asante; Rose; Powell). This article addresses the debate by considering the political content of digital mixtapes, which are non-commercial compilations of music, news clips, and photos. The proliferation of Obama rap mixes provides evidence that hip-hop continues to be used toward political ends. This paper shows how Obama's campaign

and subsequent victory put in motion a new wave of explicitly political rap, but one that still includes many of the same problematic tropes around race and masculinity.

The discussion of Obama-Hop is also used to extend previous lines of inquiry into political discourse and “new media.” Research suggests that poor and black youth—those supposedly represented by hip-hop culture—are not participating in online, Internet media such as YouTube, MySpace, and blogs (Linda A. Jackson 2008; Linda A. Jackson et al. 2008). These online spaces are increasingly sites of political discourse and organization (Xenos and Foot; Montgomery; Muir). This study of internet mixtapes is used to address concerns about the new media “participation gap.” I argue that the production and distribution of Obama songs is one example of minority youth making their voices heard through peer-to-peer (P2P) technologies and the Internet.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, I provide background on hip-hop politics, new media, and racial identity. This brief synthesis provides the much-needed context for understanding how and why rap, in the form of user-generated, digital compilations, could emerge as an important platform for Obama’s candidacy. The data set and methodology are described in Section 2. Five aspects of Obama-Hop mixtapes are explored in Section 3 to show how Obama was constructed as the black, hip-hop president. I conclude by discussing the findings in light of the existing concerns about hip-hop and online participatory democracy.

Hip-Hop Politics, New Media, and Racial Identity

The Question of Hip-Hop Politics

The 2008 presidential election involved the conflation of hip-hop politics, new media, and shifting racial identities. Born in 1961, Obama is not a native hip-hopper. He predates the 1965–1984 cohort that is commonly labeled the “hip-hop generation” (Kitwana 2002) or “post-soul generation” (George). At the same time, Obama does not share the lived-experience or worldview of 90s babies. Today’s college-aged youth—so-called “millennials,” “Joshua Generationers,” or “second-generation-hip-hoppers”—possess no memory of Jim Crow apartheid, the Los Angeles Race Riots of 1992, or the OJ Simpson murder trial.² The worldview of these youth was shaped by rap music as popular music, that is, music that white youth and white corporations deem palatable (Kitwana 2005; Tanz).

2008 also denotes a year in which hip-hop fans seemed to abhor rap music more than the general public. Rap music has traditionally been viewed

as the purveyor of evil in society (see Binder for review), and older African Americans have always feared that hip-hop represented the moral deficits of the young, urban, and poor (see McWhorter 2003 for recent expressions of this fear). But black youth also seemed disenchanted with the “dumbing down” of the music. As one black teenager informed Asante (9), “hip-hop don’t speak *to* or *for* me.” The meme “hip-hop is dead,” spurred by a number of popular rap songs bearing the title, articulates the disappointment with the music.³

Criticism of rap has become the cornerstone of the emerging “hip-hop studies” literature. The first line of Tricia Rose’s *Hip-Hop Wars*, for example, provides an ominous appraisal: “[Hip Hop] is gravely ill. The beauty and life force of hip hop have been squeezed out, wrung nearly dry by the compounding factors of commercialism, distorted racial and sexual fantasy, oppression, and alienation” (ix). Academics regularly chronicle the pervasive violence (Kubrin 2005; Hunnicutt and Andrews), sexism (Pough; Sharpley-Whiting), and nihilism (Kubrin 2006; West) in the music. Heaggans’s declaration that hip-hop has become the “21st century minstrel show” is typical of what respected rappers Nas and Chuck D (of Public Enemy) can be heard lamenting in their rhymes. The cultural repertoires of hip-hop have always been circumscribed by the imagined ghetto (Forman), but these critics argue that rap now panders the worst stereotypes about the urban poor as “keeping it real.” These perceived problems are not new, but the faithful used to argue that rap could serve progressive means even *while* advocating the interpersonal politics of misogyny and violence (Dyson).

Most observers agree that rap music in the 1980s and 1990s contained a meaningful political discourse (Ogbar; Perry; Boyd), but this aspect of the music has faded since the mid-1990s rise of “gangster rap.” As rap historian Powell (61) documents, political rap of the late 1980s was replaced with “pornographic music videos, extreme materialism, individualism, and anti-intellectualism . . .” The shift from Public Enemy’s “Fight The Power” (1988) to Snoop Doggy Dogg’s “Gin And Juice” (1994) is usually attributed to the influx of corporate money and the willingness of white suburban teens to pay top dollar for racial stereotypes (Asante; Rose; Powell). The perceived relevance of hip-hop has been undercut further by scathing reviews that dismiss the social-realist gangster tales of police brutality, limited economic opportunity, and daily violence as not-real-politics (Bynoe). According to this narrow understanding of the “political” advocated by John McWhorter (2008), for example, simply rhyming about urban social conditions (“political mindedness”) is not the same as encouraging people to change

those realities through organization, volunteerism, or voting (“political activism”).

The supposed death of political rap music coincides with a renewed interest in hip-hop activism. Under the auspices of “Rap the Vote,” hip-hop-inspired political organizations such as the Hip-Hop Action Summit attempted to engage black and Latino youth during the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections (Kitwana 2002; Watkins).⁴ Although these voter registration efforts garnered much media attention, most agree that they did little to galvanize youth. Instead of representing an organic, ground-up expression of youth concerns, these efforts were “clouded by dollar signs” and “reeked of a marketing plot” to sell soft drinks, cell phones, and other lifestyle products to youth consumers (Kitwana 2002: 189). Media moguls such as Russell Simmons and Sean “P. Diddy” Combs designated themselves leaders of a new “hip-hop voting bloc,” with little input from actual youth (Watkins). The top-down creation of hip-hop politics, combined with the music of violence, homophobia, and ghetto fabulous excess, provided a shaky foundation for uniting a multicultural, hip-hop community.

Rather than politicize young voters, these missteps in the 2000 and 2004 elections further inflamed what Perry calls rap’s “outlaw culture” of alienation and separation. In response to P. Diddy’s call to “Vote or Die,” rapper Jadakiss released the song “Why?” (2004) to explain why blacks should not cooperate with “the system.” Reinforcing hip-hop’s usual narrative of “racial paranoia” (John L. Jackson 2008), the song argued that the criminal justice system is designed to destroy blacks, the government is withholding the cure for HIV-AIDS, and that President George W. Bush was secretly behind the September 11 attacks. Likewise, Nas branded pro-voting rappers as potential race-traders:

Rap guys get bank [wealthy] and think they messiahs, but they liars
Vote fo [for] who now? You’re red, white and blue?

...

Talkin ‘bout “Rap the Vote,” you ain’t thought about
The black vote mean Nathan [nothing], who you gonna elect
Satan or Satan? In the ‘hood nothin’ is changing, uh

(Nas, “American Way,” 2004)

The lyrics recounted the belief that America’s political system is hopelessly racist, and Nas mocked black politicians as “coon Uncle Tom

fools.” This backlash provided a powerful message that systemic inequality, poverty, and oppression are too entrenched to be redressed through the political process.

How did hip-hop circa 2008 escape the problems of corporate influence and political nihilism that defined the 2000 and 2004 elections? Given Obama’s disconnect from the lived (and imagined) experience of the hip-hop and millennial generations, how did Obama become the first presidential candidate endorsed by hundreds of rap songs?⁵ Complete answers to these questions are revealed by the analysis, but two other antecedents made Obama-Hop possible: the Internet and new racial identities.

New Media and Digital Democracy

The supposed death of hip-hop coincides with the crisis of “old media,” the centralization of media production and distribution in the hands of a few corporations. By 2004, the “Big Four” music labels (Warner Music, EMI, Universal, and Sony/BMG) owned the rights to distribute over 80% of the world’s commercial music, while Radio One controlled the “hot-urban” radio stations in most major cities. Yet, the potential homogenization of music has been undermined by the countermovement of P2P file sharing. Beginning with Napster and the MP3 digital file revolution of 1999, the music industry has been in a free-fall as physical media sales and brick-and-mortar stores decline. Since its peak in 2000, US album sales have plummeted 55% between 2000 and 2009 (Resnikoff), while rap retail sales declined 44% between 2000 and 2007 (Coates).

Music consumption over the last three elections (2000, 2004, and 2008) shifted from buying music to “sharing” music.⁶ The propagation of always-on, ubiquitous Internet connectivity and low-cost computer technology has spurred the “social media” revolution, which blurs the traditional lines between producer and consumer. Beginning in 2005, “Web 2.0” sites such as YouTube began distributing user-generated music and videos, making the most important media conglomerate—according to the Time Magazine 2006 Person of the Year—“You.” In this new age of social media (e.g. Twitter), news reporting, and knowledge creation and distribution (e.g. Wikipedia) occur in decentralized social interactions. With applications like MySpace and Facebook linking millions of users and their homemade media, it was possible in 2008 for a majority of interpersonal contact to occur digitally (Conley). Obama-Hop emerged in the first presidential election in which it was commonplace for non-celebrities

to directly influence youth engagement with politics. It became possible to record one's own rhymes about the importance of voting, mix it with the hottest beats, and distribute it to millions. As is apparent in the explosion of Obama-themed content on the internet, anyone with a cell phone or web-camera could broadcast themselves dancing, rapping, and singing about election politics.

The 2008 election was the first in which political participation and civic engagement moved to digital, online communities (Xenos and Foot; Montgomery; Muir). Wikis, blogs, text messages, and YouTube became the purveyor of political capital for campaigns and individual citizens. A far cry from the fireside chats of Franklin D. Roosevelt via the radio in the 1930s and 1940s, politicians emailed, text-messaged, and "Facebooked" potential voters and contributors. Obama announced Joe Biden as his nominee for Vice-President to his Facebook "friends" before informing the mainstream press.

Being political in 2008 increasingly meant participating in digital democracy, but this presents an important complication for the realization of a hip-hop politics. The virtual world is linked to real world socioeconomic and racial (dis)advantage. While scholars have focused on the "digital divide" between blacks and whites, poor and affluent (Judge et. al.; Kress; Becker; Wilson et al.; Mossberger et al.), new research suggests that black youth *with* access may not be contributing to new media technologies (Linda A. Jackson 2008). Specifically, there are concerns that black boys are being left behind in the YouTube era. Young African-American males exhibit the lowest levels of computer and Internet use of any subgroup while being engaged in high rates of video game play (Linda A. Jackson et al. 2008). The black male trend is especially problematic given that video games are linked to low academic achievement (Vandewater et al.), and often contain themes of hyper-violent black masculinity (Everett and Watkins).

New Black Identities in the Age of Obama

Finally, the making of the first hip-hop president took place in the shifting winds of identity. Racial understandings are created at the intersection of large historical movements and micro-level symbolism, as language and fashion change to reflect how people perform racial scripts (John L. Jackson 2001; Austin). A generation of hip-hopping and worshipping black-megastars (e.g., Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan) has provided an unprecedented amount of cross-racial interactions

(or at least exposure) that would have been unimaginable a generation prior. Black-other marriages have expanded and the US government acknowledges the plausibility of a biracial or multiethnic identity (Qian). With formal prohibition against anti-black racism and endorsement of “colorblind” behavior, American society maintains the appearance of a non-racist society (Bonilla-Silva). The necessity of an essential black identity has also been negated by generational cleavages, the expansion of the black affluent, black immigration patterns, and gender/sexuality dynamics.⁷

When Obama began his run for the White House, these transformations in the racial ecology were articulated as the beginning of a “post-racial” America (Crowley). The post-racial framework predicted an end of racial stratification and the restoration of meritocracy, an age in which objective characteristics of talent and qualifications would trump preoccupations about racial identity. Ironically, the possibility of a black president also provoked Islamophobia (e.g., Obama is secretly a Muslim terrorist), fears of white-black sexual desire (the “Obama Girl” music video), and a resurgence of hate groups (Fraser). Some black Americans wondered whether Obama, with his privileged upbringing and lack of connection to slavery, was really “black enough”; his association with Reverend Jeremiah Wright—the Afrocentric leader of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago—caused some in the white media to attack Obama as a black radical.

In addition to racial sensationalism in the public discourse over Obama, the lived realities of minorities did not neatly confirm to the image of a post-racial America. While the topography of race had changed in significant ways, racial inequality in terms of poverty, wealth, education, and incarceration remained an enduring feature of American life (Roediger). Skeptical about the possibility of a new racial era, some vocally warned that a black president was a way to preserve the existing status hierarchy while obscuring the historic and contemporary mechanisms of that power. “Having a black man ‘in charge,’” according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (233), “. . . allow[ed] whites to tell those who research, write, talk, and organize against racial inequality that they must be crazy.” Similarly, White Studies guru Tim Wise described post-racialism as “Racism 2.0,” in which a black family moves into the White House, but whites maintain control over the ground rules, language, and conclusion of racial discourse.

Obama himself never used the post-racial phrase (see Asim), but his performance of post-raciality included the proposition that “hope” and “hard

work” could help all Americans, regardless of race, to reclaim the American Dream. Moving beyond racial politics to embrace a generic American identity was imagined in 2007 and 2008 as an “audacious” politics. The deracialized campaign strategy was an attempt to emulate the success of other black politicians who have gained widespread support by emphasizing universal problems over race-specific ones. Since William Julius Wilson’s *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), an early statement on the need to focus on race-neutral policies, so-called “post-black” politicians have won elections by deemphasizing racial grievances and identity politics, while stressing faith, voting, fiscal responsibility, and community service (Marable).

In sum, these dynamics of hip-hop politics, technology, and new racial identity provided the context of the 2008 election. It was the conflation of these factors that made it possible for Obama’s campaign to be totally infused with the soundtrack, logic, and branding sensibilities of hip-hop. In the rest of the article, I explore the construction of Obama-Hop, and demonstrate how music was used to endorse Obama as the official hip-hop candidate.

Analytical Strategy and Data

These dynamics of identity politics, new media, and digital democracy can be seen in Obama-Hop, rap music about Barack Obama, and the 2008 presidential election. This study focuses on “free” mixtapes appearing on the Internet. Mixtapes occupy a gray area in the music economy, as many of the images, sounds, and lyrics are used without the permission of copyright holders.⁸ This research strategy provides access to a less filtered sampling frame that is relatively free of corporate censorship, payola, and industry interference that may homogenize or destroy the political content of music.

I focus here on songs appearing on the Internet, as “file sharing” and other music downloads have replaced physical distribution of compact discs and cassette tapes. In addition, internet music provides insight into youth culture in the age of “new media.” Rap enthusiasts can actively create a digital culture by producing their own rhymes about Obama, mixing it with the latest commercial hits, and sharing it with millions via the Internet. The digital collections analyzed for this study contain YouTube clips, commercial and self-produced songs, news and interview excerpts, and spoken messages that are shared in the form of Obama mixtapes.

Given my emphasis on digital distribution, this study does not address mixtapes sold or exchanged in neighborhood stores, barbershops, or music festivals.

Obama-themed mixtapes were downloaded via P2P trackers (search engines), social networking sites such as MySpace and YouTube, hip-hop music blogs, and mixtape websites such as DatPiff. Undergraduate assistants were instructed to search for related phrases such as “Barack/Obama,” “president,” “election,” “vote,” “White House,” “change,” and “inauguration.” Following a snow ball sampling technique, the location of individual Obama-related songs was used to discover full mixtape compilations, which were then used to find websites linking to previously undiscovered materials. This collection process was conducted to the point of “saturation,” when mixtapes containing new material could no longer be located. This resulted in a rich, though non-random sample of ninety-seven Obama-themed mixtapes that were readily accessible on the internet between October 2008 and April 2009.

These Obama-themed digital albums contained 1970 total tracks. The number of tracks per mixtape ranged from a low of ten (*All Eyes On Me EP*) to a high of thirty-eight (*Audacity of Hope Mixtape*). A database of digital music files, album artwork, song descriptions (equivalent to liner notes in the days of vinyl and cassettes), and song lyrics (if available) was created. MAXQDA2, a qualitative computer software package, was used to manage and analyze the data. When identical tracks appeared on multiple mixtapes, I eliminated all but one entry. The second step was to identify tracks that broadly addressed Obama, American politics and government, and the election. The result was a purposeful collection of 637 non-duplicate tracks about Obama and American politics.

The aim of this research strategy was to better understand how Obama was imagined in the music, how hip-hop handled Obama’s racial identity, and to establish what political discourse was created by the mixtapes. To answer these questions, I spent six months listening to the music and using the computer software to code emerging themes across the mixtapes. Following previous hip-hop researchers (Cobb: 22–23; Perry: 60–67; Forman: 42–44), I paid special attention to rap’s strategy of “signifying,” word play that contains multiple meanings intended to reject dominant ideas. The analysis was guided by “intertextuality,” the belief that the meaning of texts or songs is created in the interconnectedness and backdrop of multiple songs (Gracyk). Content analysis of rap music is not a straightforward task, as researcher status, context, and the very act of analysis can alter the

meaning of the music (Kubrin 2005; Hunnicutt & Andrews). Others may find it possible to uncover different meanings than the ones discussed here. I offer the following observations about hip-hop during the 2008 election.

How Obama Became The First Hip-Hop President

The mixtapes demonstrate how music was used to engage the presidential election. First, the analysis reveals that hip-hop appropriated and remixed Obama's rhetoric of "hope" and "change" in order to energize unlikely black voters. Second, rap attempted to racialize Obama as meaningfully black by making him an honorary member of the hip-hop community. The collections of Obama songs reveal a gendered and racial discourse that dismissed Hillary Clinton as a reasonable candidate. Fourth, the election of a black president was imagined as an important symbol of black progress since Civil Rights. The racialization of Obama as the black (male), hip-hop president was at odds with the image of Obama as the post-racial candidate for all Americans. Rappers also had to negotiate the status inconsistency of being Obama supporters and self-proclaimed gangsters. The fifth thematic section explores how Obama-Hop attempted to resolve these contradictions.

Tell Ya' Mama To Vote Obama!

One of the primary messages found in rap during the election year is to vote for Obama. Of the 637 unique tracks across the mixtapes, 253 (about 40%) contain explicit directives to vote for Obama. Wordplay usually associated with violence and conspicuous consumption is used to instruct listeners to vote. "Rep[resent] Obama," put "votes on deck," "ride for Obama," and "lick a shot [shoot guns] for Obama" are some of the colorful ways in which the music instructs listeners to become politically active. Ghetto tales of drive-by shootings and million-dollar drug sales are supplanted by descriptions of verified thugs at the voting booth. As the FMB Crew declare on their Obama song, "We Hood, We Votin'". Over bass-heavy tracks, DJs and rappers yell "Rockthevote.org" and "Barack the Vote" while providing voter registration phone numbers. School children sing "Go tell ya' mama [to] vote for Obama" and demand to be taught about the Electoral College (J Xavier and YG Nation, "Tell Ya Mama Vote 4 Obama"). The terse instruction by rapper Ludacris encapsulates the pro-voting messages of the songs: "Get off yo' ass black people/it's time to go vote!" ("Politics: Obama Is Here").

The digital compilations are organized around the slogans and personality of the Obama campaign. Carrying such titles as *Barack Obama: Yes We Can*, *Change is Now*, and *One Nation*, the mixtapes borrow heavily on Obama's platform of uniting the nation and enacting change through a populist movement. According to the lyrics, a vote for Obama is a vote for the abstract ideals of "hope," "change," and "believing." Eighty-six percent (217 of the 253) of the vote-for-Obama tracks invoke these principles.

The idealism platform is achieved through the extensive use of Obama's speeches. Samples from Obama's most notable campaign speeches appear on ninety-seven different tracks, as artists sample, scratch, and mash-up quotes of "a better America" and "change the world." Much of the rapping, singing, or yelling is done over Obama's voice. For example, Will.I.am's "Yes We Can" features an explicitly multi-racial cast singing along with Obama's "Yes We Can Speech." Excerpts from Obama's autobiographical books *The Audacity of Hope* and *Dreams of My Father* have a prominent presence. The mixtape *The Audacity of Hope*, for example, is a remix of the audiobook layered with pounding beats and original songs that recount the themes of the book.

I Am Obama: Appropriating the Image of Obama

Intrinsic to hip-hop aesthetics is the sampling and appropriation of popular and obscure cultural imagery (Cobb). In Obama-Hop, this includes using the motifs of "change" and "hope," and constructing alter egos around Obama. The mixtapes contain sixty-five songs in which rappers take on the image of Obama or a presidential candidate. One strategy is to combine Obama with previous monikers to create a new but recognizable name. For example, rappers and DJs call themselves "Barack Odrama" (DJ Drama), "SportObama" (John Sportin), "Barack Scobama" (Young Scolla), and "AgObama" (Agallar). A second and related gimmick is to adapt Obama's name to the hardcore, street sensibilities of "gangster rap." Calling themselves "The Block Obama," "Barack Oburna" (a burner is a gun), and "Gotti Obama" (like the mobster), street conscious MCs also take on the character of Obama.

The blending of hip-hop personas works to reinforce the message that the rappers support Obama. Also, it creates a narrative space in which rappers can leverage their coolness ("swagger") and street credibility to make Obama authentically black. By saying "I am Obama," rapper Double DZ attempts to

minimize the perceived social distance between 'hood representatives and the candidate hoping to represent the nation (Double DZ, "I Am Obama"). The device is used to create a parallel discourse in which rappers could imagine that they were "running for president" in the world of hip-hop. On mixtapes entitled *Big Drew For President*, *DJ Drop For President*, *Pess for President*, *Vote for Baku Obama*, and *Remy Ranthoven 4 President*, amateur and "underground" artists announce their candidacy for best rapper.⁹ By calling themselves the "Obama of the rap game," unknown rappers connect the virtues of Obama with their own lyrical agility. The metaphor works to normalize Obama in a cultural space that would otherwise disassociate blackness and voting.

Ride For Obama, Not Clinton

As an honorary hip-hopper, Obama is provided the symbolic and physical protection that members of rap cliques, crews, and labels receive. The mixtapes provide scathing attacks on Obama detractors, including fifty-one songs "dissing" Republicans John McCain or George W. Bush, and thirty aimed at Democrats Jesse Jackson and Hillary Clinton. The mixtape entitled *Fuck Jesse: We Gettin' Jacksons*, a pointed response to Civil Rights veteran Jesse Jackson, is a case in point. Jackson, initially critical of Obama's socioeconomic background and weak connection to black communities, was recorded off-air threatening to castrate Obama for his perceived arrogance. Jackson felt Obama was "talking down" to black people by telling them not to rely on government assistance. In response to the controversy, the *Fuck Jesse* compilation provides songs that threaten physical violence against Jackson and reconfirm support for Obama.

The visual organization of the covers reinforces the idea that rappers are willing to perform murders to preserve Obama's masculinity. The *Fuck Jesse* artwork features superimposed images of rappers standing behind Obama. Young Jeezy, The Game, and Lil' Wayne provide grins ("mean mugs") and menacing "b-boy stances," a not-so-subtle suggestion that, if need be, the gang will provide physical protection for the future president. Two naked women, draped only in American flags, complete the collage of race-gender symbolism to counteract Jackson's emasculating comments. Backed by real gangsters, strippers, and the declaration of "getting money" ("getting Jacksons" is slang for \$20 dollar bills), the effective message is to avoid messing with Obama—he is a real black man. Similarly, the same strategy is used on the cover of the mixtape *Obama and Friends*. Obama's

rap posse, along with a woman exposing her chest and butt, suggest that hip-hop stands with Obama. Other mixtape covers portray rappers, military tanks, and Apache helicopters all patrolling the new “Black House” in the nation’s capital.

Hip-Hop’s political aspirations are evidenced in “Obama-Hop,” not “Clinton-Hop,” as no similar campaign was launched for the other Democratic hopeful Hillary Clinton. In the wider black community, the primary contest between Obama and Hillary Clinton split opinions of whether to support the Clintons (and perhaps the first female president) or Obama (potentially the first black president). No such debate occurred in the world of hip-hop, as these mixtapes make clear that the official hip-hop candidate was the black, male candidate.¹⁰ This is communicated, for example, on the cover of FGA’s *Black President Mixtape*. The artwork features a portrait of Obama punching the former president Bill Clinton. A comic-book-like “POW!!!” is featured above Bill Clinton’s head. While Clinton’s close connection to black communities garnered him the reputation as the “first black president,” the album art shows that Obama will become the first racially black president.

Lyrically, rap songs spare no sexist attack on Hillary Clinton. She is dismissed as an “irrelevant bitch” by Ludacris (“Politics: Obama Is Here”) and a “dyke” by Nimrod (“Barack Boys”). On the track “Doeboy,” rapper Gorilla Zoe affronts “Miss Hillary” in a clever drug allusion when he claims that cocaine is the only “white bitch” he has ever promoted (“Doeboy”). Fabulous, known for his wordplay, labels Hillary as “white trash” when he jabs, “I’m like Obama to these muthafuckers/you niggas is [Hillary] Clinton, Hill-Billy muthafuckers” (“Mille Freestyle”). Though linguistically creative, these examples show that hip-hop’s engagement with electoral politics comes with a continued emphasis on sexist and misogynistic interpersonal politics.¹¹ In terms of race, lyrics question Hillary’s allegiance to black communities. For example, the song “Letter to the King,” a dedication to the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr. and Obama, features The Game asking whether Hillary would march with King if he was still alive: “If Dr. King was alive today, would Bill Gates march?/I know Obama would, but would Hillary take part?” (The Game, “Letter To the King”).

Makin’ History Like X and King

The narratives of Obama-Hop are centered on identity politics, as the songs are primarily about the symbolic significance of having a black man in

the White House. The governmental policies of an Obama administration and how these policies might impact black communities are not a major part of the discourse. As the mixtapes *March on Washington* and *National Upheaval* suggest, electing the first black president is presented as a revolutionary moment akin to the social activism of the 1960s Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Forty-nine tracks review the long scope of black history and Obama's place in it. To make this connection, the music mixes the speeches of black icons such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X with those of Obama. The lyrics indicate that voting for Obama is a way to honor these black freedom fighters. The following verse by A.P.T., an underground rapper whose Obama music video was viewed over 3.5 million times on YouTube, demonstrates how this is achieved lyrically:

He's making history like X, King, and Douglass
 And RFK [Robert F. Kennedy], Obama he's that new black, do that
 Vote Obama in and I promise
 We won't turn back into some Uncle Thomas
 No Aunt Jemima or Kentucky Fried Chicken
 (A.P.T., "Obama-A-Mille")

The verse is packed with symbols that connect Obama's presidency to the long scope of black history. Obama's presidency is linked to Frederick Douglass's escape from slavery in the mid-nineteenth century, and the Civil Rights strivings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X in the mid-twentieth century. Obama is portrayed as both the extension of historic black heroes and a "new black" leader for the future. In addition to the historical significance of the election, the verse indicates that an Obama presidency will counteract disparaging racial caricatures of the past. Obama's image of blackness is juxtaposed with the servility of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 character of Uncle Tom, and Aunt Jemima, the "Mammy-like" pancake icon since the early 1900s.

The connection of Obama to the collective struggles of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the civil rights efforts of the 1960s is certainly meant to make an Obama presidency seem important. But the association of Obama with great and painful collective memories is also part of hip-hop's attempt to racialize Obama and grant authentic membership into the imagined black community. "Struggle" has historically done the boundary work of black collective identity by recreating the confines of black experience,

solidarity, and authenticity (see McDonald, chapter 4 for a review). The invocation of historical epochs in Obama-Hop provides the foundations of a black collective identity or “we-ness” whose relative progress can be forwarded by a black president. According to the songs, electing the first black president represents the end of the struggle since the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Solidifying Obama’s insider status is important, as his mixed-race heritage, lack of biological connection to slavery in the West (Obama’s father is African), and privileged Hawaiian upbringing might have otherwise been seen as alien. The association of Obama with the struggle further solidifies Obama’s authenticity as a race man.

After the election, hip-hop songs celebrated the inauguration and attributed Obama’s historic election to the efforts of hip-hop. The discourse shifts from the speculative “Yes We Can” to the foregone “Yes We Did.” The mixtapes attempt to capture the exhilaration of electing the first black president. The track listing for DJ Alphadaviz’ *Inaguration*, for example, comprised feel-good, party songs including “Blame It On the Alcohol Remix” (Jamie Foxx, T-Pain, Busta Rhymes), “Pop Champagne” (Jadakiss), “Blow the Bank” (Jim Jones), and “Crack A Bottle” (Eminem). To remind listeners that all the references to expensive liquor, sex, and money throwing are in celebration of the new Obama era, the mixtape concludes with a post-election remix of “My President is Black” by Jay-Z. The updated track reinforces the message that Obama’s presidency begins the next stage of black progress since civil rights: “Rosa Parks sat, so Martin Luther [King Jr.] could walk/Martin Luther walked so Obama could run/Barack Obama ran so all the children could fly” (Jay-Z, “My President is Black Remix”). Other mixtapes provide an equally celebratory soundscape by mixing rap songs with such soul/funk classics as “I’m Black and I’m Proud” (James Brown) and “Good Times” (Chic). Besides linking Obama to the black past, the mixtapes say that Obama is indebted to hip-hop in the future. As Mekka Don concludes on his Obama tribute album, “I believe you are committed, [and] will pay us back for voting” (“Dear Obama”).

“I Rock Wit Obama, But I Ain’t No Politician”: The Contradictions of Obama-Hop

For those lamenting the end of hip-hop as a political space, this embrace of election year politics should be a welcome sign. Yet, like hip-hop’s fledging engagement with the 2000 and 2004 elections, the Obama-Hop movement had to deal with the contradictions created when rappers previously opposed to civic engagement switch their focus from

anti-establishment rhymes to community service. To account for hip-hop's reversal on politics, the mixtapes contain spoken interviews in which rappers articulate why they now rhyme about the importance of voting. For example, a CNN interview clip features Snoop Dogg telling Larry King that Obama, unlike Jesse Jackson, represents the concerns of the new generation ("Black President/CNN Interview Snoop"). Nas, reversing his stance that black politicians are sell-outs, says that voting for Obama will address the problems facing inner-city America (see Nas quote above). In a similar interview clip, Young Jeezy says that he finally registered to vote at the age of 30 due to Obama's candidacy ("My President/CNN Interview"). These high-profile rappers sound sincere when they recount how Obama's promise of hope helped rehabilitate their nihilistic views. The inclusion of the clips helps alleviate what might be heard as hypocrisy on the part of rappers for their new political identities.

The creative and symbolic energy of hip-hop was leveraged to help elect Obama, but rappers also make clear that their civic engagement has not completely replaced their street sensibilities. As Jay-Z puts it, "I rock wit Barack/but I ain't no politician" ("Jockin' Jay-Z"). He claims to be politically connected to the White House while still associating with "thugs and gangstas." The practice of rappers combining their moniker with Obamaesque personas, as discussed above, supports these new hybrid identities. By becoming a variation of Obama as "Barack Scobama," the rapper Young Scolla can simultaneously drop verses about the importance of democratic participation and "pimpin' hoes." Barack Oburna can acknowledge the healthcare crisis on one track, and then return to tales of gunplay on another.

Obama's promise to unite all Americans toward a brighter future is not a natural fit for rap music. The mixtapes provide a glimpse into how Obama navigated the pitfalls of the hip-hop endorsement. Featured are interview clips of Obama discussing his apparent appreciation of rap music, the business savvy of rappers, and the various tracks that are currently on his iPod music player. However, Obama's proclaimed interest in hip-hop is balanced with a critique of materialism in the music ("Material Things Interlude"). Given the history of politicians demonizing rap, Obama's symbolic gestures to the hip-hop community seem positive in comparison.¹² It was only in response to Ludacris' "Politics: Obama Is Here" (2008), in which he calls Hillary an "irrelevant bitch" and George W. Bush "mentally handicapped," that the Obama campaign attempted to distance itself from hip-hop.¹³

Hip-Hop's embrace of politics during the 2008 election was due to the candidacy of an African-American man. As the mixtapes *The Black President Mixtape*, *Tapemaster's My President is Black*, and *My President is Black: The Mixtape* indicate, Obama's phenotypical dark skin is a major source of excitement. Thirty-two of the ninety-seven (33%) mixtapes analyzed contained at least one "Black President" track, and I was able to locate sixteen unique remixes of the original "Black President" song. When young black men yell "*my president is black*," one can hear an enormous sense of pride and psychological catharsis. As the phrase implies, ownership and investment in civic life is predicated on the blackness of the president. The preceding review of the soundscape, discography, and lyrics shows how racializing Obama as meaningfully black is an important aspect of the mixtapes. There is, obviously, a fundamental conflict between the proposition of Obama as the first "black, hip-hop president," and the post-racial platform of the Obama campaign.

The presentation of Obama as black is accompanied by an attempt to show how Obama transcends the limitations of racial categorization. While pleading that a vote for Obama is a way to honor blacks who died for the right to vote, the lyrics insist that the election is "not about race" (e.g., Illadel, "Stand up, Electo Obama"). The tensions between these two statements reveal how hip-hop counteracted the post-racial framework. There are cross-competing pressures to claim Obama as "our black president" and avoid the suggestion that the only reason to vote for Obama is because of that blackness. This anxiety can be heard in Young Jeezy's and Nas' "Black President," the most prominent black president track during the election.

The track celebrates Obama's skin color by associating blackness with expensive consumer goods that confer high status and importance in hip-hop: "My president is black/My Lambo's [Lamborghini] blue, and I be goddamned if my rims ain't too" (Young Jeezy, and Nas, "My President is Black"). To complicate the significance of Obama's blackness, the song concludes with Young Jeezy reminding listeners that "Obama [is] for mankind." Their remix of "Black President" further downplays racial identity in favor of universality. During the introduction Young Jeezy yells, "This is not a race remix," suggesting that an entire song about Obama's blackness is not really about race ("Young Jeezy and Nas, "My President is Black Remix").

Instead of dealing with the meaning of bi-racial blackness, or the implications a black president might have for future race relations, the dominant pattern is to imagine Obama as black but "transracial." For

example, on the track “Barack Obama: My Life,” Wale and Rhymefest repeat the mantra that “It ain’t about his race.” The line, “cause it ain’t about race now” loops indefinitely on the beat, while an excerpt from Obama’s book *The Audacity of Hope* plays. This layering of meaning creates a particular tension: the spoken text of the book details the significance of Obama’s mixed-race heritage, while the rap lyrics maintain the relative insignificance of Obama’s race.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has explored the soundscape, discography, and lyrics of rap songs about Barack Obama and the 2008 presidential election. It was shown how digital mixtapes were used to repackage and amplify the language and political platform of Obama in hopes of exciting “hip-hop voters.” The songs and images of the Obama-Hop movement created a political narrative in which Obama became the official hip-hop candidate based on his blackness and perceived importance for advancing black progress. The mixtapes encouraged listeners to vote for Obama through the wholesale appropriation of the rhetoric, images, and persona of Barack Obama. Given hip-hop’s legacy of anti-political discourse, divisive language, and reliance on racial understandings, the adoption of the Obama platform created fascinating contradictions.

Like the inauguration of Obama as the first African-American president, the proliferation of Obama-Hop is both the result of and evidence for important shifts in American social and political life. During its thirty-year history, hip-hop has typically found itself “fighting the power” or defending itself against governmental censorship. But in the 2008 election, hip-hop mounted a musical campaign to help decide the power. As Jeff Chang (2010) speculates, hip-hop may have contributed to the Obama victory: youth voter (under 30) turnout in 2008 was its highest since 1972. Determining the impact of the music on actual voter mobilization is outside the scope of this analysis. Likely, a confluence of social and political factors played a role in this historical achievement. But contrary to the negative portrayals of hip-hop as nihilistic and apolitical, this analysis shows that rap in the Obama moment adopted an explicitly optimistic political bent. In the six months surrounding the election, rappers could be seen and heard yelling “Barack the vote” and “change the world.” Rap remixed Obama speeches with the latest club beats to reverberate the message that this generation could affect important social change through civil engagement.

The extent of hip-hop's involvement with the 2008 presidential election may not have been possible without the new advances in Internet technology. As this study of digital mixtapes has shown, "social media" and file-sharing technology allowed for hip-hop enthusiasts to (re)create and (re)distribute Obama's message of hope to millions. Some of the songs and images described here involve megastars beholden to "old media" corporations. But the "new media" revolution allowed others to remix and sample Jay-Z or Lil' Wayne, edit together CNN interviews, and combine excerpts of Obama speeches to produce a new political discourse beyond the immediate control of corporate conglomerates. For those concerned that corporations threaten the political message of the music, this study suggests that the Internet may provide a safer space for "real hip-hop" to thrive. The mixtapes analyzed in this study do represent a direct challenge to corporate, top-down control of information. It is likely that the continued distribution of these materials will occur on direct P2P file sharing networks, as sites like MySpace and YouTube are pressured to remove copyrighted materials. Therefore, it is unclear whether the 2012 presidential election will feature another wave of pro-Obama mixes. This article only addresses music, so further research will be needed to determine if and how hip-hop-inspired organizations were able to use the Internet to distribute their own message, and if the abundance of Obama songs increased their memberships.

The emerging concerns about the "participation gap" are disheartening, as we want all youth to be engaged in cutting edge technology and global communications. As democratic participation continues to move online, mastery of computers and the Internet will further define the haves and have-nots in society. This study shows that the Obama election provided many opportunities for black youth, especially black males, to have their voices heard. In all but a few cases, the rhymes and freestyles, the images (judging from the album covers and videos), and mixes found in this sample appear to be produced by young men of color. More research is needed to determine whether online music sharing is a space in which black boys are finding their niche in the new digital world. To be sure though, the lack of female voices should raise concerns. The political discourse and images of Obama-Hop are overwhelming male-centric and at times blatantly sexist and misogynist. Only six female rappers (Angie Martinez, Lady Five, Amanda Diva of Floetry, Kaneri Diamond, Lola Fitz, Christina K) appeared to contribute any lyrical content to the songs appearing in this study. Hip-Hop aspired to "change the world" but did not aspire to change its own pattern of excluding and silencing the voices of women.

Intelligent rap has certainly persisted on the margins and in the “underground,” but the politicization of hip-hop around the images of mainstream rappers (i.e., Jay-Z, Nas, Young Jeezy, etc.) may represent a significant shift in the music. We will see if the Obama election represents a “post-gangster rap era” in which authentic, hip-hop coolness—and by extension, authentic black maleness—will continue to involve voting instead of crime. A cynical interpretation is that rappers were simply exploiting the Obama-mania to promote themselves and their future merchandising plans. All the amateur and novelty raps about Obama may have been the latest gimmick to increase traffic to personal MySpace pages and blogs. Individual motives aside, the cumulative effect was a unique hip-hop political discourse that sampled, mimicked, and competed with traditional media outlets.

Notes

1. The terms “rap” and “hip-hop” are used interchangeably in this article. The author acknowledges the poignant debates over these terms. There is no agreed-upon definition of these terms in the existing literature. Some intellectuals invoke rap to mean only the music and artistic aesthetics, while describing the identity or culture attached to it as hip-hop. My choice to use these words broadly should not be interpreted as significant. Likewise, the word rap should not suggest a subgenre of music that is more intense or controversial than hip-hop.

2. Despite its aging fan- and artist-base, the existing literature and public discourse on hip-hop still perceive it as youth culture. These generational monikers are admittedly broad, but are given meaning due to the popularity of their use to describe youth. The “Joshua Generation” is a term used by Obama to describe the children who have benefited from the efforts of the Civil Rights /Post-War Generation, but never experienced racial conflict firsthand. “Post-Hip-Hop Generation” or “second generation hip-hop” is meant to describe a similar experience of coming to age in the 1990s after the mainstreaming of blacks in popular culture.

3. Of course, apprehension that hip-hop is becoming corrupt can be traced all the way back to the late 1970s with the transition from live performances to recorded songs (Kugelberg), while alternative rappers De La Soul foreshadowed the “hip hop is dead” meme on their 1991 album *De La Soul Is Dead*. Concern about the death of hip-hop seemed to reach an all-time high in 2008.

4. “Rap the Vote” was broadly similar to the efforts of the MTV-sponsored “Rock the Vote,” as the campaign attempted to attack voter apathy among 18–24 year olds. While these voter registration efforts maintained a non-racial stance, they tended to focus on underrepresented minorities. Using hip-hop to politicize

youth is not an entirely new concept. Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation has linked rap music to interpersonal politics since the late 1970s, but the efforts since 2000 have emphasized national, electoral politics.

5. To note, Melle Mel (of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five) urged rap fans to vote for Jesse Jackson on the funky track "Jesse" in 1984.

6. These practices have strong roots that predate recent technologies within black communities. Cheap tape-cassette recording technology in the early 1980s caused music to be dubbed, mixed, and passed along in low-income communities; hence, the original meaning of the term "mixtape."

7. See Collins for a comprehensive explanation of how hip-hop is involved in the intersectionalities of black identity after the Black Power era.

8. To avoid legal repercussions from copyright holders, Internet mixtapes are typically free, though some websites charge a small fee (often 99 cents per album) to cover their bandwidth costs. All of the mixtapes analyzed in this study were available for download without charge.

9. The production value and album artwork of these works can be described as "low budget" or "homemade." These unknown artists are sometimes referred to as "MySpace MCs," though this designation often carries a derogatory tone. Major label MCs like 50 Cent (*50 Cent is President*) also found their unreleased records repackaged with election year themes, but the works readily available for download featured lesser known artists.

10. Support of Obama is cast as racial solidarity, with no serious discussion of the Green Party candidate Cynthia McKinney. This provides further evidence that racial solidarity in rap is a masculinized one.

11. Some of this ill-will might also reflect past strained relations between rap and the Clintons. As Chang (2005: 394–396) points out, President Clinton's 1992 crusade against Public Enemy's Sista Soulja for her alleged anti-white speeches caused some blacks to question their support of the Clintons.

12. Obama did make an off-the-record comment that rapper Kanye West was a "jackass" for interrupting the acceptance speech of Taylor Swift at the MTV 2009 Video Music Awards. Obama's comments were interpreted as an indictment of West, and not the wider rap community.

13. On the pro-Obama track, Ludacris asks to be made Obama's vice-president. However, the punch-line, "McCain don't belong in any chair unless he's paralyzed," an ageist and disparaging remark against the disabled, completes the triad of divisive comments that made Ludacris an unlikely nominee.

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Not only is President Barack Obama the first black president of the U.S., but it's safe to say he has been America's first hip-hop commander-in-chief, for his embracing of the genre and its artists. Social Sharing. 'It will probably be a long time before we see another president do something like this,' says Ice Cube. Jonathan Landrum Jr. Throughout his presidency, which ends when President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Friday, Obama paved a way for several rap stars to enter the White House for political discussion and musical performances. Socially conscious rapper Common, seen at a White House state dinner in May 2016, became a regular at White House events. (Andrew Harnik/Associated Press). What hip hop tells us about President Obama. 'Just another talking head telling lies on teleprompters'. While Obama rose to become the leader of the free world, lyrics show that he was simultaneously viewed as a victim of the American establishment and as a mouthpiece for a capitalistic, imperialist superpower that has kept people of color down. "The Republicans said on day-one they're going to make him a one-term president, and that they're going to give him hell," Crooked I said. Hip-hop lyrics show that as first lady, Michelle Obama was more insulated from political critiques than her husband. "A bar has been raised by Michelle Obama for what we expect out of the first lady," Rapper and singer Lizzo told CNN. "She's like the Beyonce of first ladies. When he became the first rapper to ever open the State Of The Union Address. Since Woodrow Wilson's presidency every United States President (excluding Herbert Hoover) has given at least one State Of The Union speech and for Obama's final address he wanted Wale to open for him. His history with the President goes back to being invited by Michelle Obama to be a speaker during 2015's Beating The Odds Summit. From Kanye to Doug E. Fresh there are so many rap artists who you can draw a connection to the President. Hip-Hop might not have a big part in Obama's legacy but his face will be in the hip-hop history books. Hopefully the future continues to prove that rap artists can stand beside politicians and U.S. Presidents. This is "Is Obama the first hip-hop president? (2010)" by Todd Johnson on Vimeo, the home for high quality videos and the people who love them. These cookies allow us to count visits, identify traffic sources, and understand how our services are being used so we can measure and improve performance. If you do not allow these cookies we will not know when you have visited our site, and will not be able to monitor its performance. Cookies Details. 16 Travis L. Gosa, "Not Another Remix: How Obama Became the First Hip-Hop President," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 22, no. 4 (2010): 389-415. 17 Citing historian and journalist James G. Spady's description of hip hop as an "art form/forum," Alim and Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman, "My President's Black, My Lambo's Blue": Hip Hop, Race, and the Culture Wars, in *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 136-37). Nonetheless, Obama's candidacy was not universally embraced by the hip hop community.

The Hip-Hop Studies Reader Utvalgte artikler. Gosa, Travis L. 2010 : Not Another Remix: How Obama Became the First Hip-Hop President. Guaman Poma de Ayala, Felipe 1516: The capture and execution of Tupac Amaru Inka. Henderson, Errol A. 1996: Black Nationalism and Rap Music. Holen, Åyvind 2010: Gangster og Gentleman. Johnson, Kenneth D. 2011: Five Theses on th Globalization of Thug Life and 21st Century Missions. Kubrin, Charis E. 2005: "œœ see death around the corner"œœ. Nihilism in Rap Music. Neal, Mark Anthony 2003: Tupac's Book Shelf. When Barack Obama won the 2008 Presidential Election, persons all over the USA poured into the streets to joyously celebrate. The next day, a vast majority of the USA were amazed that the first African-American President of the USA had won, and the entire World rejoiced that if Barack Obama wasn't assassinated, a new era in World History had started. 3. Related Answer. I fear another person of color will not have an opportunity to make amends to America for the mistakes and treasonous behavior of Obama for Many years to come. With this being said... We negotiate with Terrorists with gives them. Barack Obama isn't just the 44th President of the United States"he was the first commander-in-chief to bring hip-hop to the highest office in the land. The next four years is going to be unpredictable and probably frightening, and we may never get another president that connects politics and pop culture in the way Obama did. In honor of the end of Obama's presidency, here are some of our favorite hip-hop references of the 44th president of the United States. In the beginning Over a decade before Obama became the president of the United States, Tupac" in his first posthumous single off the "R U Still Down? (Remember Me)" album in 1997"asked the question of whether America was ready to have a black president. Not only is President Barack Obama the nation's first black president, but it's safe to say he has been America's first hip-hop commander-in-chief. Obama embraced hip-hop more than any of his predecessors: He's referenced Jay Z's lyrics and Kanye West in speeches, released playlists on Spotify that included Nas, Chance the Rapper, Mos Def and Method Man, and was caught dancing to Drake's "Hot Line Bling" at a White House event. Throughout his presidency, which ends when President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Friday, Obama paved a way for several rap stars to enter the White House for political discussion and musical performances. "Hip-hop doesn't hurt anybody," said Nas, who has visited the White House. "It helps people. Not Another Remix: How Obama Became the First Hip-Hop President. By Travis Gosa. The culture industry, hip hop music and the white perspective: how one-dimensional representation of hip hop music has influenced white racial attitudes. By Walter Edward Hart. Download file.