

Conscious Hip-Hop, Change, and the Obama Era

by Murray Forman

This article identifies a particular aspect of hip-hop's range of cultural production – conscious rap – in order to isolate one of the more politicized discursive options available to youth in America and a site where critical perspectives on post-Civil Rights America have emerged most forcefully. It further suggests that Obama's political rise corresponds with a new phase in hip-hop and has impacted the ways in which its creative artists frame and articulate issues of race, class, and identity.

In 2002, media and hip-hop scholar Todd Boyd wrote, “we cannot live in the past forever. Civil rights had its day; now it is time to move out of the way” (Boyd, 2002: 152). Six years later, during the 2008 U.S. presidential election year, Double O (of the rap group Kidz in the Hall) declared, “I think hip-hop culture has helped a younger generation see race in a slightly different perspective” (Hale, 2008: 64). These statements, each uttered under different conditions and in separate contexts, ultimately address a transitional phase and a new emergent sensibility pertaining to cultural politics in the United States. For many, U.S. President Barack Obama's 2008 campaign and subsequent election signal a decisive break from the Civil Rights era, providing a crucial moment in the transformation of the nation's discourse around race, culture, and identity. As I endeavor to explain, for all the talk about America entering a “post-racial society,” race remains a central issue in American social debates and hip-hop often provides some of the most convincing articulations of its continuing resonance in American cultural politics.

Defining Hip-Hop: A Brief Introduction

Despite its contemporary expansion and appeal across racial and cultural sectors, hip-hop is an unambiguously African-American cultural phenomenon that emerges within a complex amalgam of hybrid social influences. In passing references among those with little or no connection to hip-hop there is a recurrent tendency to isolate and emphasize the musical component “rap” at the exclusion of other factors and forces that comprise hip-hop as “a whole way of life” (Williams, 1983; Forman, 2002). In the often-quoted words of hip-hop veteran KRS-1, “rap is something you do and hip-hop is something you live.” His statement was originally a response to those who insisted on conflating rap and hip-hop, ignoring the elaborated cultural patterns and attitudes that produced an overarching sensibility within which rap was located.

Rap is the verbal and musical domain of hip-hop, an expressive oral form through which personal and social perspectives are amplified. It is a means of communicating a “new worldview” (Kitwana, 2002: 9) that is shared by an entire generation of African-Americans and, increasingly, non-Black citizens of the U.S. as well as a growing international cohort. While rap music displays diverse formal aesthetics, multiple discursive themes, and encompasses a wide array of topics it is also frequently derided among its detractors for its rhythmic intensity or tendencies toward vulgar, violent or sexist lyrical content, factors that are, of course, also evident in various other realms of popular music and culture. In the worst instances such negative judgments harbor a prevalent racism, simultaneously dismissing the music, the cultural underpinnings from which it is produced, and the black cultural workers and primary audience group that comprises its base. Rap and hip-hop are, then, inextricably entwined with race, cultural politics, ideology, and communication in contemporary America and in various moments since their inception they have, in fact, been at the center of heated debates in the nation's notorious “culture wars.”

Hip-hop culture encompasses what are routinely cited as the four core *elements*: rapping (MCing), DJing, b-boying (break dancing) and aerosol art (graffiti). These original formal practices merged under specific social conditions (in the Bronx borough of New York City) and within a circumscribed moment in time (the late 1970s through the early 1980s); their reputation as foundational elements is associated with a moment of convergence when dispersed groups and artistic practices noticeably aligned in a tangible manner.¹ In more recent years hip-hop's most ardent defenders (including KRS-1, via the “The Temple of Hip Hop” initiative) have explored other

positive and culturally sustaining elements including entrepreneurialism, linguistics, and, crucially, *knowledge* (James, 2004: 186). As a facet of ideological orientation and formal practices, hip-hop's *cultural* influences are widely evident throughout the art realm, crossing into cinema, dance, literature, painting, poetry, theater and other expressive forms as well as being importantly linked to local community-based civic organizations and youth agencies.

Within hip-hop and the rap music sector distinctions have emerged between different discursive and ideological orientations that are directed toward vastly different socio-cultural perspectives and practices. In one frame of analysis, hip-hop and rap music are positioned within the tensions of a classic art versus commerce relationship, and within the dynamic of highbrow versus lowbrow culture (Levine, 1990). The original art forms associated with hip-hop were allied with the expression of urban identity and meaning among "organic intellectuals" (Gramsci, 1971) that emerged outside of the institutional infrastructures where the arts are traditionally nurtured. Stuart Hall explains Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual:

it is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know not just pretend to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly [...] the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class. (Hall, 1996: 267)

In its earliest phase, hip-hop was undeniably affiliated with street culture and those who were most strongly identified with an urban existence (creating a linkage between the concepts of the "organic intellectual" and what might be termed "street smarts"). The emphasis on the streets as a unique and formative cultural space endures in hip-hop to this day. The streets are idealized as an authentic cultural locus, a zone of *real* human activity where aspects of love and communal affiliation collide with other more heinous factors including boredom, threat, violence, and murder. That these varied aspects are all accommodated within rap and hip-hop's expressive forms is not a matter of contradiction but an acknowledgement that such contradictory factors are ultimately intrinsic to everyday life under duress and adversity. Yet since at least 1984 hip-hop has also been notably present in ostensibly highbrow cultural loci (art galleries, dance studios, and public stages and forums of all sorts), reflecting organic intellectualism within cultural/artistic production while illustrating a dual process of cultural legitimation and broadening appreciation among artworld cognoscenti (Hoban, 1999).²

Along with this trend toward institutional art spaces and other socially validated cultural realms, hip-hop also attained widespread popular appeal and commercial success. By the mid-1980s films based on urban hip-hop themes (the 1983 films *Style Wars*, directed by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, and *Wildstyle*, directed by Charlie Ahearn; *Beat Street* directed by Stan Lathan in 1984, as well as a handful of exploitative b-movies with narratives loosely based on hip-hop) and rap recordings began to generate interest and revenue for producers and artists alike. Hip-hop was also introduced on the world stage when b-boys were prominently featured during the televised opening ceremony of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles and at Ronald Reagan's 1985 inaugural celebrations. In this mid-1980s developmental phase, concerts and other standard commercial endeavors associated with rock culture were adopted among hip-hop producers and hip-hop was more fully exposed to the appropriative apparatuses of the culture industries. After several years of ignoring hip-hop, corporate executives suddenly recognized its growing appeal and widening audience base, leading to new commercial enterprises that simultaneously boosted its profile and challenged aspects of artistic authenticity (McLeod, 1999).

In the late 1980s the diversification of hip-hop's performative sensibilities and imagery and an elaborated range of discursive patterns also produced several internal distinctions (Forman, 2002). In some instances, an emphasis on leisure, pleasure and fun emerge with a distinct emphasis on "partying" (often portrayed in music, film, or video as a verb). Such expressions of social behaviors were never benign, however, as they also introduced a series of representations that present cues about leisure versus labor, gender relations, materialistic ideals, and complex models for the negotiation and navigation of a post-industrial social landscape.

Arguably the most notorious and socially challenging development in the late 1980s involves the emergence of "gangsta rap" and the music and culture affiliated with a host of urban criminal activities (whether actual or portrayed in representational form) (Quinn, 2005). Gangsta rap as a musical subgenre is frequently the object of critical assessment and social rebuke by various cultural watchdog groups and the artists that are most active in

the subgenre are also regularly—and at times rightly—castigated for their anti-social and nihilistic views despite their defense that they are simply expressing a social perspective on reality among the urban under-classes, occupying a role as “ghetto street reporters” or constructing fictional narratives that relate to actual conditions in America’s larger cities (Forman, 2002; Quinn, 2005; Dyson, 2007; Rose, 2008). Such a defense notwithstanding, it is also essential to acknowledge the role of the culture industries and the power of the media to establish dominant artistic forms and content. In this regard, Yvonne Bynoe writes:

The record companies encourage these young people to tell their ghetto tales (real or imagined) in the crudest fashion for predominantly White rap CD buyers [...]. What the music industry has done through rap music is to frame the ‘authentic’ Black American not as a complex, educated or even creative individual, but as a ‘real nigga’ who has ducked bullets, worked a triple beam, and done at least one bid in prison. (Bynoe, 2004: 149)

On Message: Hip-Hop and Conscious Rap

In still other contexts there is a pronounced commitment to cultural themes and an overt politicized discourse that poses an analytical critique of social issues and concerns, especially those that impact the economically or racially disenfranchised citizenry and the nation’s black communities in particular. This latter frame, alternately referred to as “message rap” (following the release of the 1982 recording “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five) or, more commonly, “conscious hip-hop,” suggests reflection on and intellectual engagement with pressing social issues (most often involving themes of racial and class struggle). As Michael Eric Dyson explains, conscious rap is “rap that is socially aware and consciously connected to historic patterns of political protest and aligned with progressive forces of social critique” (Dyson, 2007: 64).

Dyson’s explicit reference to historical patterns is pertinent since the conscious rap subgenre owes a clear debt to established forms of political-artistic expression of the 1960s and 1970s (including the work of the Black Arts Movement and music by artists such as the Last Poets or Watts Prophets). Indeed, most so-called conscious rap artists are extremely aware of the legacy they uphold and of their connections to previous periods in African-American political struggle and aesthetic innovation. Yet conscious rap also functions in ways that are highly responsive to contemporary socio-political contexts and conditions, aligning it with various community interests *and* artistic strategies *now*. Thus, while the music of hip-hop serves as a powerful means of articulating complex social issues, it must also be understood as just one facet within a much wider system of cultural practices through which political ideologies are processed and proposed in immediate and urgent contexts.

Although hip-hop has always demonstrated a capacity for articulating serious social issues and amplifying critical perspectives on negative conditions that inordinately impact the African-American population, the political nature of the conscious rap subgenre is often deemed unsuitable to commercial interests despite the sales and tour successes of such unambiguously politicized hip-hop acts as Public Enemy.³ Through the 1980s and early 1990s major record labels were often resistant to signing explicitly politicized acts, suggesting that either the subject matter was too narrowly concerned with black cultural issues and risked alienating the much larger white consumer market or voicing concern that the incendiary lyrics of conscious political rap acts might draw the ire of conservative cultural watchdogs or politicians and jeopardize the label’s reputation.

In one example of the backlash against controversial political content and the aggressive stance of politicized conscious rap artists, the Oakland California MC Paris was dropped from his record label Tommy Boy Records (an independent label with a production and distribution deal with the Warner Brothers corporation) in 1992 due to the content and cover art for his album *Sleeping With the Enemy* that had dark allusions to the assassination of then President George H. Bush. President Bush and Vice President Dan Quayle also explicitly criticized hip-hop MC Ice T in 1992 for his confrontational track “Cop Killer” (a song recorded with his heavy metal band, Body Count castigating police brutality but which is significantly *not* a hip-hop track), released on the Sire/Warner Brothers label. The incident and label pressure led Ice T to remove the track from subsequent pressings of the album. These and other examples reflect the extent to which hip-hop is capable of tweaking the sensibilities of mainstream America, challenging the cultural status quo and provoking intense social debate.

In several more recent instances, acts including Dead Prez, The Coup, or Immortal Technique expound an unambiguous revolutionary program for radical social change. In their view, hip-hop is a medium of

communication that is easily accessible to young audiences and that is well suited to conveying uncompromising critiques of dire social issues.⁴ Though not formally associated with an explicitly radical political ideology, MCs including Common, Jean Grae, Medusa, Mos Def, Nas, N.Y.Oil, The Roots, or Talib Kweli are regularly cited for their “conscious” lyrics and their progressive attitudes toward gender relations, black-on-black crime, prison reform and various issues relating to race, class, and hegemonic power relations. Though these artists are rarely signed to major record labels (and consequently lack access to the extensive distribution systems and touring support that accompany such circumstances) they thrive in what is defined as the “underground,”⁵ often releasing self-produced music independently and on small black-owned record labels, acquiring airplay on campus-community radio stations or exploiting the digital distribution technologies of the Internet.

Politically engaged artists that employ a critical discourse and social critique are also often weighted with additional responsibilities within hip-hop and the wider black community. They fill a void for many youths that have grown tired or suspicious of long-time career politicians and the limitations of established black leaders. These youths seek new ideas and new leadership that are more in tune with their specific needs and that share the same attitudinal and ideological base especially in relation to pressing issues such as educational reform, enhanced employment or career opportunities, revocation of racial profiling practices and improved police relations, or prison and criminal justice reform. The resultant differences in social demands and political approaches contribute to a sharp-edged generational dissonance and, in many instances, hip-hop’s conscious MCs clearly and consistently articulate community concerns, positioning them in the vanguard of social activism. Whether they seek it or not, they are commonly cast as role models or leaders; in rare cases (such as the hip-hop duo, Dead Prez) they embrace this responsibility, accepting an important leadership role in social justice movements (Asante, 2008: 151–69).⁶

Perhaps the most galvanizing event for many hip-hop identified youth in the U.S. over the past decade was the inability of the government (under George W. Bush) to protect the citizens of New Orleans and to alleviate the death and destruction in other areas along the Gulf of Mexico coastline following Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. The government’s ineffectiveness was shocking and the nation watched in abject horror as the victims of the tragedy were largely left to fend for themselves in the storm’s immediate aftermath. New Orleans is renowned as a vital cultural center and its contributions to American music are many and varied, giving birth to jazz music and zydeco as well as other hybrid musical forms. Since the late 1990s, New Orleans also emerged as a key center of hip-hop production with powerhouse record labels No Limit and Cash Money generating massive sales revenue while drawing attention to the intricacies of existence in the city’s wards through rap lyrics and music videos that placed the city front and center.

New Orleans is also a city with a predominant African-American population; the 2000 census placed the city’s black population at just over 67%. As the devastation of Katrina became clear, the media images reinforced the fact that black families were inordinately impacted by the flooding, especially those that lived in the hard-hit Ninth Ward. The first and perhaps most incendiary hip-hop statement on the tragedy emerged quickly, during NBC-TV’s live September 2, 2005 telethon broadcast of the Concert for Hurricane Relief when hip-hop MC and producer Kanye West abruptly veered off script, uttering his now-famous line “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” Though the statement is almost surely untrue (severe ineptitude and incredibly poor delegation skills do not necessarily amount to indifference or a lack of care), it cut to the core of the issue that black citizens are routinely exposed to unfair and imbalanced treatment within the white-dominated institutional power structures. Subsequent expressions of outrage emerged from hip-hop artists;⁷ Mos Def recorded “Katrina Klap (Dollar Day),” a song based on the rhythmic structure of “Nolia Clap” (by New Orleans MC Juvenile). The track and accompanying video constitute an homage to New Orleans and articulate a sharply derisive rebuke of the government’s bungling of the tragedy, cleanup, and community revitalization. Juvenile himself also conveyed the imagery of Katrina’s aftermath to the hip-hop audience via his video for “Get Ya Hustle On” featuring a footage shot in the wreckage of the Ninth Ward.

The critical theme was taken up and circulated widely among black youth and others who are aligned with the hip-hop community as acknowledged in the text accompanying the video *Katrina Knows* (produced by Harvard University’s Hip-Hop Archive):

Katrina was a wake-up call to the hip-hop generation. And we didn’t even know we were asleep! But Katrina

Knew. We knew about injustice, racism, class elitism and regional arrogance. We knew we had a president, congress and a country that seemed to be clinging to old school notions of the American dream, where the perfect America was one without cities, diversity and hip-hop. Katrina came with a vengeance and with all the lessons from the past and lessons for the future. It's like the storm knew we were asleep at the wheel!⁸

While Katrina is described as a “wake up call” it also constitutes a catalyst, motivating hip-hop-identified youth to more directly engage in political activism and social change. After Katrina there was a notable upswing in hip-hop's political rhetoric and an uncompromising discourse of resistance against the failed policies and actions of the Bush government.

“Change We Can Believe In”: Hip-Hop and the Obama Campaign

Of the many powerful discourses that emerged in the period leading to the 2008 election, surely none were more resonant than those framed within the ideals of “Change” and “Hope.” Two terms of Republican leadership (and the accompanying policies and initiatives it enacted) clearly fatigued the nation's electorate and the reputation of President George W. Bush and his administration was in tatters in the eyes of many hip-hop-identified voters. Senator Barack Obama emerged as a viable leader despite formidable opposition within his own Democratic party and skepticism among a public with concerns about his age and relative inexperience, his lack of political pedigree, and crucially, concerns about his identity as a black man.⁹ For many youth voters, these same factors were welcomed as a crucial departure from the narrow perspectives of standard career politicians and the stultifying effects of a “business as usual” approach to policymaking.

Obama's political rise is an impressive achievement by any measure. A junior figure in the Democratic Party, his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention (prior to the defeat of the party's presidential candidate, John Kerry of Massachusetts) galvanized the party faithful and caught the attention of the nation's media as well as the rank and file electorate. His elegance, sophistication, intellectual acumen, and rhetorical skills offered a sharp distinction from other politicians in the political arena and his quintessentially American back-story (Obama, 1995; Obama, 2006) endeared him to countless Americans who share various features of his own formation. As an American of mixed race, with black and white ancestry and a foreign and domestic heritage, Obama presents a different face of American politics and a new model of 21st Century leadership, appealing across lines of racial and class difference. According to hip-hop lawyer Wendy Day, “hip-hop has impacted Obama's campaign [...] I believe white folk have been educated about the struggle and the black experience since the early 80s through rap music. I believe this education and increased awareness has reduced racism within this generation to the point of accepting a black president” (Hale, 2008: 64).

Prior to John Kerry's failed electoral bid, hip-hop artists had occasionally rallied around voter registration campaigns in the attempt to mobilize young first-time voters to participate in electoral politics. Hip-Hop impresario P. Diddy initiated Citizen Change with great fanfare in 2004 with the slogan “vote or die” and various organizers (such as the Boston Hip-Hop Summit Youth Voter Registration Event that was launched at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston) also took up the cause at the local grassroots level.¹⁰ The many hip-hop oriented initiatives were lauded yet they also lacked a solid agenda. According to hip-hop organizer Jeff Johnson, “there was very little substance underneath that movement. Vote or Die, but I'm not going to tell you how. Vote or Die, but I'm not going to help you organize” (Jones, 2008: E2). Though many of these organizations were dormant between national elections, by 2008 there was a renewed groundswell of energy and support for the Obama campaign from within the extended hip-hop community and among the nation's college students.

As Obama gained momentum during the 2008 campaign, hip-hop artists emerged in droves as consistent commentators on national politics and the social landscape, offering pithy analyses and expressing an urgent need for change. While Obama's blackness was clearly a factor in their engagement, so, too, was his age. He was generally accepted as a member of the hip-hop generation, having grown and matured in a world with hip-hop; in 1979 when the first major rap recording “Rapper's Delight” (by the Sugarhill Gang) was released, Obama was 18 years old. By the time MTV began airing rap music videos on the program *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988, he was 27 and during his campaign he openly admitted to enjoying rap music and having music by Jay-Z, Ludacris and others on his iPod¹¹ and on several occasions different rap artists and hip-hop impresario Russell Simmons

accompanied him at public appearances. Obama's musical tastes and his hip-hop endorsements impressed some members of the hip-hop generation but, as Jay-Z notes in the track "Streets is Watching," his detractors were also "Waiting for you to break, make your first mistake, can't ignore it."

Time 4 Change, by DJ Premier, 2008. Star DJ and producer Preemo releases his mixtape free on the Internet.

Obama's early career work as a community organizer also endeared him to the urban youth constituency. As he describes in detail in his first memoir, he decided in 1983 to "organize black folks. At the grass roots. For change" (Obama, 1995: 133).¹² Obama subsequently worked for two years in Chicago's South Side neighborhoods, home to a sizable African-American, Latino and immigrant population and a region renowned for its urban poverty and accompanying problems. This experience reinforced his sense of service and deeply influenced his sense of commitment to disenfranchised urban citizens, further aligning him with their sensibilities, frustrations and dreams. As his reflections indicate, he clearly comprehends many of the vital issues and conditions that influence those youth that are most deeply immersed in hip-

hop's discourses and cultural practices. There was widespread acceptance of Obama's candidacy among urban youths that have been marginalized or vilified within American social institutions—especially the education system and areas related to criminal justice and the nation's penal system and labor and employment. Phonte Coleman of the group Little Brother confirms this relationship with his comment, "I just think we're excited about the possibility of a president who really understands what it's like to be us" (Hale, 2008).

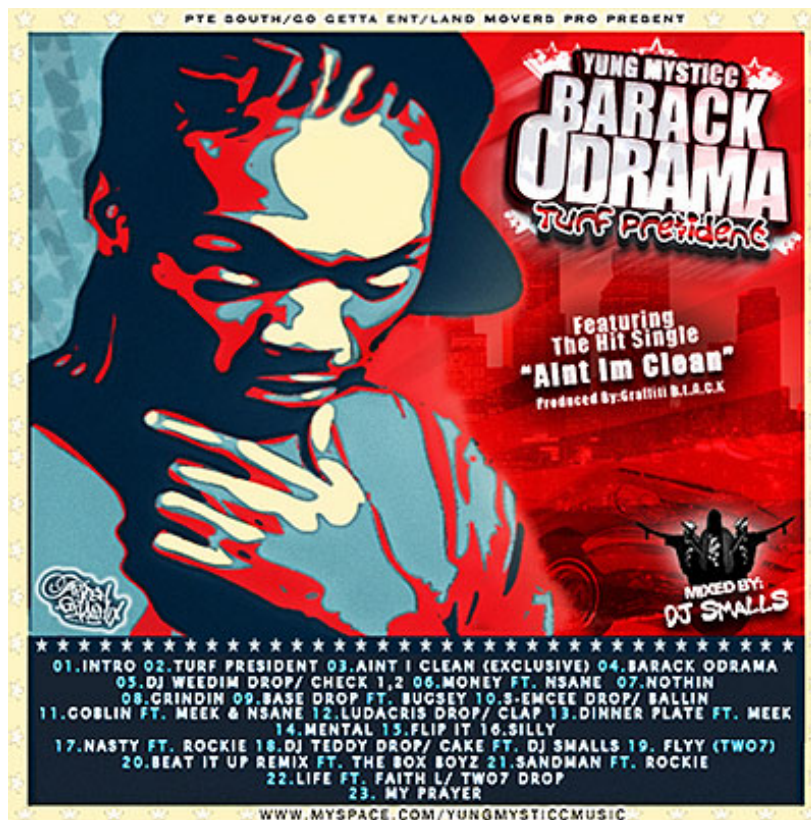
It was not only rap artists and entrepreneurs that emerged in the political arena during the 2008 campaign. New York hip-hop activist Rosa Clemente ran as the vice-presidential candidate on the national Green Party ticket and Kevin Powell, a longtime hip-hop commentator and slam-poetry artist ran for a seat in the U.S. Congress. In Newark, New Jersey mayor Cory Booker, in his 30s, navigated traditional political establishment circles as well as sites more commonly associated with the city's hip-hop oriented youth scene, effectively bridging an ideological gap that has at times caused tension between different age constituencies (Boyd, 2002; Nuruddin, 2004: 272-273). The evidence suggests that the hip-hop generation is now coming of age and as they do, they are accepting new service responsibilities, taking up the baton of political leadership that has been passed (or wrested from) old-guard political leaders.

Obama's suave and confident image, along with the campaign slogans "hope" and "change," was rapidly disseminated in and through the hip-hop apparatus. The iconic blue and red image produced by graphic artist Shepard Fairey was adopted as a national symbol of hope among Democratic supporters, eventually reaching the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery where it joined other estimable paintings of American presidents. Fairey's aesthetic pedigree is itself formed within a convergence of punk and hip-hop influences; his willful appropriation (some define it as a matter of outright plagiarism¹³) of media images reflects rap music's cut'n'mix or sampling processes and his predilection for posterizing urban spaces corresponds with hip-hop's graffiti pieces. As an indication of the reach and resonance of Fairey's Obama visage, the image was widely appropriated among hip-hop producers, emerging in numerous other hip-hop contexts including t-shirts, posters and CD covers.



Hope, Progress, by Shepard Fairey, 2008. Former art school student/street artist cum museum celebrity Fairey's iconic Obama poster is simultaneously acquired by the U.S. National Portrait Gallery and at the center of legal wrangling with the AP wire service over copyright and fair use issues. *Barack Obama Yes We Can: The Mixtape*, DJ Green Lantern and Russell Simmons, 2008. Hip-Hop impresario and Democratic Party fundraiser Simmons teams with star DJ Green Lantern to release a free mixtape featuring several hip-hop heavyweights.





Turf President, Barack Odrama with Yung Mystic and DJ Smalls, 2009. DJ Drama revises his moniker in a tribute to the forty-fourth President of the United States.

Several rap artists specifically incorporated Obama’s voice and utterances into their recordings in 2008 prior to the national election. For example, Will.i.am of the group Black Eyed Peas produced the Emmy Award-winning video “Yes We Can” which circulated widely via YouTube. The song features musicians, actors, and sports celebrities singing in unison with Obama’s spoken words, including the line, “nothing can stand in the way of the power of millions of voices calling for change,” accompanied by the graphic display of the words “change,” “hope” and “vote.” In another case, employing the hook from Tupac Shakur’s posthumous 1998 release “Changes,”¹⁴ Queens New York MC Nas builds the 2008 track “Black President” around vocal interpolations sampled from Obama’s January 3, 2008 Iowa state caucus victory (“they said this day would never come”) and his April 19, 2008 speech in Harrisburg, PA (“we will change the world”).

“Black President” is clearly intended as a tribute and an endorsement with the lines, “On a positive side/I think Obama provides hope and challenges minds/of all races and colors to erase the hate/and try to love one another, so many political snakes.” Yet while Nas celebrates the ascent of the first truly viable African-American presidential candidate and the possibility of a new form of leadership he also poses direct questions about Obama’s sustained accountability to the Black community and the nation at large and his capacity to enact the change that was the cornerstone of his campaign: “I’m thinkin’ I can trust this brother/but will he keep it real?/every innocent nigga in jail gets out on appeal/when he wins, will he really care still?”¹⁵ This suggests that despite an abiding sense of optimism—the “hope” that was so central to the campaign—voters were not simply granting Obama a free pass.

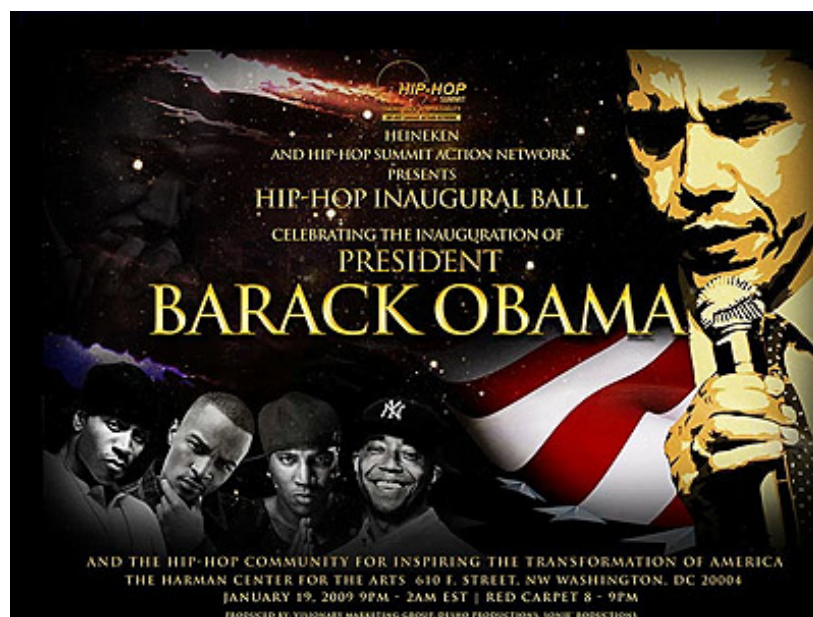
Some hip-hop critics, such as independent artists Immortal Technique or political commentator Davey D, remain skeptical of Obama’s capacity to enact real change, citing the restrictions of elected office and the tendency among so many Democratic leaders to cleave toward mainstream liberal interests in order to enact moderate change. Such skepticism serves as an important reminder that the black electorate is not a unified or homogeneous entity and that, even though there is tacit support for Obama’s presidency, there remain serious concerns about the president’s objectives and administrative strategies. Many hip-hop critics sought a more explicitly progressive and non-centrist political stance and overt resistance to the international abuses of justice and forces of global capitalist exploitation and neo-colonialism. The sentiment among many in the hip-hop community remains that Obama’s words must translate into workable policies and his declarations of “change”

must be accompanied by measurable outcomes that improve the options and well-being of low-class and struggling individuals and families not just in the United States but throughout the world wherever repression reigns.

Broad and lasting social change is not, of course, entirely Obama's to enact. His community organizing experience is founded on the capacity to encourage localities to define their needs and means of attaining resources as well as enabling political self-advocacy. As Troy Nkrumah of the National Hip-Hop Political Convention explains,

hip-hop culture has mobilized and organized young people to become more politically engaged [...]. There is no denying [Obama] has excited a lot of street cats that might not have engaged if it were not for his candidacy (Hale, 2008: 64).

The numbers bear out Nkrumah's comment: During the 2008 Democratic campaign, "an overwhelming 78 percent of black voters chose Obama over (Hillary) Clinton and (John) Edwards" (Fraser, 2009: 27); in the presidential election, there was a notable increase of participation among Hispanic and African-American voters with each increasing over 2004 figures while the overall percentage of white non-Hispanic voters dipped slightly. Polls indicate that, "young people in general and blacks in particular were the most energized by Mr. Obama's candidacy" (Roberts, 2009: A14). Obama's victory mitigates, if only partially and momentarily, the widely cited paucity of black leadership in America. His background as a street-level community organizer underscores his connection to the 'hood, to the city, and to hip-hop culture more generally.



Hip-Hop Inaugural Ball, Washington D.C., January 19, 2009.
In a swirl of inaugural balls, hip-hop represents.

The Aftermath: What Changed?

As Obama's first year in office comes to a close, it is appropriate to ask what has changed. It is amply evident in hip-hop's underground and commercial arenas alike that the monumental historical transformation is taken quite seriously. Perhaps most notable are the ways in which young people in America have taken up Obama's sense of community responsibility and his subsequent call to service. Among the nation's 2009 graduating class there was an increase of university students professing a desire to work in service positions with low pay and no glamour (Rimer, 2009). There is also a rising trend of engagement as neighborhood volunteers and community associations spring to life, strengthening social bonds through civic responsibility (Gowen, 2009).

These trends correspond with hip-hop's distinct forms of community organizing and civic engagement. Today, every U.S. city of scale can claim a number of hip-hop oriented youth agencies (something that is also increasingly true on a global scale with youth advocacy initiatives and teen agencies emerging in cities such as

London, Paris, Frankfurt, and Rio de Janeiro). Hip-hop oriented youth agencies and those who work for them are engaged in what I call “hood work,” a term that enunciates and amplifies the locale of the urban ‘hood that is also the locus of authenticity and value in hip-hop culture (Forman, 2002).

The primary mission among ‘hood workers is to educate youth about their life options and about positive, pro-social attitudes and behaviors. These include: peaceful conflict resolution and an anti-gang stance; improved relations with law enforcement officers leading to the rejection of racial profiling practices and reduced incidents of police brutality; self-advocacy pertaining to school and education reform, criminal justice reform, and employment initiatives; teaching safer sex practices and teen pregnancy education; voter registration and political awareness; and a range of other public health issues that impact the lives of young urban citizens of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and their communities. ‘Hood workers comprise an intervening force; the youth agencies directly engage urban youth, drawing them from negative and potentially deadly options including gang membership and street criminality and providing safe spaces where they can learn hip-hop skills and arts as well as developing political and community organizing abilities and community responsibilities that can positively impact themselves and others. These initiatives fall directly within the Obama model of civic responsibility and leadership.

Indeed, it is also common that ‘hood work agencies offer a pointed critique of hip-hop itself, castigating certain popular artists and the major media corporations (such as Viacom, corporate owner of both MTV and BET) that portray degrading, stereotypical or negative images of black or Latino men and women (Lee, 2007). They acknowledge that the relentless circulation of images and discourses that promote negative and nihilistic values is part of a wider problem, influencing the perceptions if not necessarily the actions of literally millions of young hip-hop fans.¹⁶ In an attempt to subvert these ubiquitous messages, ‘hood workers assist youth in producing their own counter-hegemonic and resistant messages that challenge the dominant commercial discourses of gangsta rap or the accompanying violent, sexist/misogynistic, and materialist content of music, film, and video.

The terms “empowerment,” “agency” and “responsibility” are commonly employed among ‘hood workers and there is a pronounced emphasis toward “conscious hip-hop” and the employment of politically engaged and pro-social themes and images, merging the local crises confronted by youth with larger national and global issues. With the instantaneous global reach of the Internet, localized constituencies are able to mobilize transnational critiques of corporate media and of big government, global economic and military intervention, and cultural imperialism. Globally dispersed hip-hop artists and ‘hood work agencies are also in better communication, learning from one another, exchanging aesthetic influences as well as exploring one another’s “best practices” for greater effectiveness.

This all corresponds with Obama’s own trajectory, enacting change at the local level while repairing strained global relations and employing political policies that might produce greater peace and sustained prosperity on an international scale. In this sense, just as the Obama presidency evolves and adjusts to ever-shifting conditions, so, too, does hip-hop evolve, transforming within the contexts of global/local dynamics and within a framework of indomitable spirit and hope.

Notes

1 For a comprehensive history of hip-hop’s formation and evolution, see Chang, 2005.² The notion of “legitimation” is not insignificant though it is highly problematic within a hierarchical structure of value. It implies that the urban spaces of “the street” are bestowed with distinct and powerful meanings that can be juxtaposed against official or institutional spaces. In such juxtaposition, the street and other cultural spaces associated with hip-hop are commonly deemed illegitimate and are also imbued with racial and class values that distinguish them from the more legitimate social values of a dominant white, middle and upper-class social cohort. See Forman, 2002.

3 Public Enemy’s platinum albums (awarded for sales of at least one million units) include *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, 1988; *Fear of a Black Planet*, 1990; and *Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black*,

1991. Public Enemy also reached gold album status (500,000 copies sold) with *Yo! Bum Rush the Show*, 1987 and *Muse Sick-n-Hour Mess Age*, 1994.

4 For a series of analytical essays about hip-hop and radical politics, see the special issue of *Socialism and Democracy: Hip Hop, Race, and Cultural Politics* 8:2 (2004).

5 The underground is a multivalent spatial concept, on the one hand referring to non-mainstream and non-commercial aspects of cultural production and, on the other hand, as a site of socio-political resistance to institutional power and authority. Hip-hop has traditionally had a solid allegiance to underground practices among demographic groups that are most strongly affiliated with alternative or radical ideologies.

6 There are also several prominent hip-hop organizations in the U.S. dedicated to enacting progressive political change, including the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network and the National Hip-Hop Political Convention. With an advisory board comprised of twenty-three members of the U.S. Congress and Chaired by Congresswoman Barbara Lee, the stated mission of The Hip Hop Caucus is “to organize young people in urban communities to be active in elections, policymaking, and service projects, as a means to address and end urban poverty for future generations.” There are also countless locally responsive grassroots hip-hop agencies across the nation.

7 Hip-hop tracks about Katrina proliferated after the tragedy. The Harvard Hip-Hop Archive offers a very partial list, including B. Down and Big Rags, “Katrina”; Jay Electronica, “When the Levees Broke”; Jay-Z, “Minority Report”; Lil Wayne, “Georgia Bush”; Lil Wayne with Robin Thicke, “Tie My Needs”; Papoose and Razah, “Mother Nature.”

8 See Harvard University Hip-Hop Archive, <http://www.hiphoparchive.org/prepare-yourself/katrina-knows> (accessed April 10, 2010).

9 For a detailed account of the injection of race into the 2008 campaign and election, see Fraser, 2009.

10 See Jones, 2008.

11 In a pre-election interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Obama revealed an impressively wide range of musical influences (including hip-hop, rock, folk, and classical music), citing Stevie Wonder as his “musical hero” (Wenner, 2008).

12 At the 2008 Republican National Convention, Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin ridiculed Obama’s service background, suggesting that he was *merely* engaged in localized community issues: “I guess a small-town mayor is sort of like a ‘community organizer,’ except that you have actual responsibilities.” This attitude reveals an altogether common dismissal of local political activism and, further, a disdain for the social conditions and contexts of an impoverished urban milieu that requires committed advocates such as community organizers.

13 In a protracted legal case concerning the Obama image that is reminiscent of various rap music copyright cases over the years, the Associated Press sued Fairey for copyright infringement. In October 2009, Fairey admitted in court that he had lied about the source of the photo (taken by press photographer Mannie Garcia) but he defended his right to artistically manipulate the image under the fair use principle.

14 Shakur’s “Changes” includes the lines, “and though it seems heaven sent, we ain’t ready to have a black president.”

15 Countless mainstream and underground artists released tracks referring to or explicitly endorsing Obama, many of which can be accessed on YouTube. For one of the first scholarly analyses of an Obama track—“My President” by the Atlanta MC Young Jeezy—see Nielson, 2009.

16 The President expresses his awareness and concern about hip-hop’s less savory content, noting, “I am troubled sometimes by the misogyny and materialism of a lot of rap lyrics, but I think the genius of the art form has shifted the culture and helped to desegregate music [...]. It would be nice if I could have my daughters listen to their music without me worrying that they were getting bad images of themselves” (Wenner, 2008).

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