“My President is Black, My Lambo’s Blue”

The Obamafication of Rap?

INTRO

At the end of 2006, when Nas released his album *Hip Hop is Dead*, he wasn’t too far off, at least as far as rap is concerned. Not only have sales been in a nosedive for the last several years, with recent declines doubling those for the recording industry overall, but there has been mounting discontent among fans, who have grown frustrated with the tired, gangsta-inspired lyrics that glorify violence, materialism, and misogyny at the expense of a more socially conscious agenda. As Michael Eric Dyson puts it, a “noble verbal art has been replaced by the mindless redundancy of themes we’re all too familiar with: women, weed, wine, cars, and jewelry” (148). With the candidacy and election of Barack Obama, however, many have expressed hope for a kind of renaissance, one in which socially conscious lyrics can once again shape the direction of rap music. In a CNN interview just after the November elections, Common (formerly Common Sense) predicted that Obama’s presidency would “change hip-hop for the better,” ushering in an important shift whereby “artists will have no choice but to talk about different things and more positive things” (quoted in McLaughlin).

One thing is certain: rappers have started talking about Obama. As early as 2007, his name started appearing in songs by socially conscious rappers like Common and Talib Kweli, but it wasn’t until the summer of 2008, when he emerged as the Democratic frontrunner, that he sparked a mini-industry of songs that made direct reference to his candidacy. Since then, well-known artists such as Nas, Jay-Z, Ludacris, Lil Wayne, Big Boi, Busta Rhymes, Jadakiss, Jin, Will.i.am, Three 6 Mafia, Ghostface Killah, Young Jeezy, and several others have appeared on tracks inspired by Obama, and there are undoubtedly more to follow. Along with these tracks, many of them performed by artists known more for nihilism than activism, has come the jubilation of fans and critics alike who have begun to posit a new direction for rap, one inspired by the first black President.

1. Jeff Chang begins *Total Chaos* with the important observation that “rap’s pop dominance has eclipsed hip hop’s true importance” and that hip hop “has become one of the most far-reaching and transformative arts movements of the past two decades” (ix). My argument here is not meant to address hip hop generally or to suggest that the movement is in any way “dead,” but to focus on specific problems within rap.

2. Scores of scholars and critics have applied this word to gangsta and gangsta-inspired rap, most of them following the lead of Cornel West who has written extensively about the threat of nihilism—which he defines as the “experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (14)—to black culture. For a discussion of the applicability of the term to gangsta rap in particular, see De Genova.
As Reverend Al Sharpton put it in a November 2008 interview, “You can’t be using the ‘b’ word, the ‘n’ word . . . when you have Barack Obama redefining overnight the image that black people want to have. Here’s the greatest political victory in the history of black America, and the thug rappers can’t come near it. They will have to change or become irrelevant” (quoted in Kot 1).

Sharpton’s prediction for a new direction in rap mirrors his public prescriptions for it over the last few years. Recently, Sharpton has become one of rap’s most vociferous critics, taking a high-profile stance against the violent and misogynistic lyrics that, in minstrel-like fashion, perpetuate harmful stereotypes of African Americans. He is clearly not alone in his call for change; in fact, even Obama himself, an avowed rap fan, told Rolling Stone, “I am troubled sometimes by the misogyny and materialism of a lot of rap lyrics.” He went on to express his hope that rappers could use their fame and talent to “help shape attitudes in a real positive way” (quoted in Wenner). And so the question that naturally arises is this: can Obama’s presidency serve as a catalyst for the kind of change that he and others like Sharpton have called for? Will there be an Obamafication of rap, allowing the genre to embrace lyrics that serve the African-American community rather than exploit it? As I hope to show, using Young Jeezy’s popular track “My President” as an exemplar, while the introduction of Obama to mainstream rap has not displaced gangsta-type themes, it has effected an intriguing dynamic in which the seemingly incompatible rhetorics of gangsta and politics actually become interdependent vehicles for one another.

GOING BACK IN TIME: THE CLASH OF GOLDEN AGES

Ironically enough, by moving forward and incorporating politically or socially conscious themes into its lyrics, rap is actually looking backward to the pre-gangsta era of the genre. In the late 1980s, when gangsta was still in its nascence, rap was undergoing a profound shift away from the apolitical, party-based themes that had generally characterized it—and toward what Greg Dimitriadis terms “a radical social consciousness” (186). As a result of this shift, rappers began to utilize their music as a communicative tool (think of Chuck D’s famous proclamation that rap is the “Black CNN”), a means through which they could speak to large segments of the African-American community and convey distinctly political, agenda-driven messages meant to address the blatant and growing racial inequities in American society. Groups like Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions led the charge and, along with other acts like X Clan, Brand Nubian, Queen Latifah, Poor Righteous Teachers, and A Tribe Called Quest, stressed black nationalist aesthetics, which helped to inspire a powerful, albeit brief, political emphasis in rap music. This emphasis

3. Numerous scholars and critics have drawn the parallel between rap and minstrelsy, but few as forcefully as Stanley Crouch, who in Artificial White Man refers to hard-core rappers as “ignorant, misogynistic knuckleheads—with their gold teeth and their updated minstrel outfits” (220).

4. I choose “My President” because not only did it become one of the the most popular of the Obama-inspired tracks, but also because its particular juxtaposition of gangsta-inspired and socially conscious themes makes it a useful exemplar for a broader discussion of Obama’s effect on rap overall.
was evident not only in song lyrics, but also in sartorial representations that included the omnipresent Malcolm X hats, African medallions, and kente-cloth designs, all of which signaled a growing interest among hip hop fans with black history and activism (Harris). This movement was prominent enough that by 1993, critics and scholars seemed justified in declaring that rap was part of “a culture of resistance” (Lusane 41) and that it was “a resurgence of a nationalism and political progressivism reminiscent of African American popular culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Allen 159). Even Tricia Rose’s seminal 1994 work *Black Noise*, though cognizant of rap’s precarious position in its larger social and political context, was similarly optimistic about rap’s “profound potential as a basis for a language of liberation” (144). The excitement among academics was palpable: rappers were beginning to blend politics and entertainment in the same way that Black Arts poets and performers had done a generation before.

Unfortunately, this optimism did not last long. A telling example of how quickly things changed can be found in an article by Ernest Allen, Jr. about the politics of “message rap.” He wrote most of it in 1993, but by the time it appeared in William Eric Perkins’ well-known edited collection of critical essays called *Droppin’ Science* just a few years later, he was forced to add a postscript acknowledging the waning relevance of his own piece as most of the political artists mentioned in his article had “disappeared from public view.” He goes on to lament that rappers “proved incapable of probing deeper into the social content of their art. Moreover, an artistic movement that gave birth to African American political consciousness in the eighties has also served as an obstacle to its further development” (Allen 185). Around this time, academics, journalists, and rap fans were following his lead by declaring “The Death of Politics in Rap Music and Popular Culture” and bemoaning the anti-social, anti-political stance mainstream rappers had adopted in such a short time (Boyd). It even became commonplace, as it still is, to refer to the socially conscious rap of the late 80s and early 90s as the “golden age,” presciently invoking Hesiod’s account of man’s descent into violence and chaos—a descent mirrored by rap’s own trajectory over the ensuing decade.

The reasons for the emergence of gangsta rap are multifarious, but with its emphasis on violence, drugs, sex, and of course the kind of materialism that made vastly oversized gold jewelry fashionable, the gangsta era was a “golden age” of a different sort—and far more enduring than the age it replaced. What separated gangsta from much of the rap before it was not so much its use of violent, materialistic, or misogynistic themes; indeed,

---

5. At the same time, the Nation of Islam and particularly the Nation of Gods and Earths (5 percenters) saw their doctrines increasingly on display in rap lyrics. For more on the distinction between the two groups, as well as their influence on rap, see Felicia Miyakawa’s *Five Percenter Rap*.

6. “Golden age” is widely used in rap scholarship, but it is a problematic term. For starters, there is no clear consensus about when it began and ended; some limit it to the 1980s, while others extend it to the early 1990s. More important is that there is no agreement about which artists and albums constitute the “golden age.” Michael Eric Dyson emphasizes the Afrocentric and black nationalist acts (64) while William Jelani Cobb adds performers like Too Short and 2 Live Crew, hardly known for their socially conscious contributions (47).

7. For a useful sociological overview of the conditions that created gangsta rap, see Eithne Quinn’s *Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang*, particularly Chapter 3. Mark Anthony Neal also notes that politically conscious groups made the mistake of placing such a premium on lyrical content that “they failed to grasp the significance of producing music that would be considered danceable by the black masses they aimed to attract” (144).
even some of the most socially conscious artists of the “golden age” peppered their work with references to guns, cars, and “bitches,” too. What set it apart is that it began to revel in the dire social conditions and destructive behavior it described, often eschewing any kind of social critique in the process. In many respects, the themes and lyrics coming from West Coast acts like Ice-T N.W.A., Snoop Dogg, and Too Short represented a complete repudiation of some of the East Coast performers, particularly those espousing black nationalist themes, that had dominated just a year or two earlier. Dr. Dre makes this rejection of politically inspired rap explicit with his lines from the 1992 track “Let Me Ride”—“No medallions, dreadlocks, or black fists—it’s just that gangsta glare, with gangsta raps.” Whether he knew it or not at the time, those lines laid out the prescription for success in the rap industry, one that many artists began to follow; even some of the more politically oriented acts quickly saw the writing on the wall and, to stave off irrelevance, began incorporating some unexpectedly thuggish lyrics into their albums to compete with the dozens of West Coast gangsta groups that had begun forming and releasing albums.

Although it often avoided the overtly political rhetoric of many East Coast acts, it is worth noting that gangsta rap, particularly in its earliest incarnations, was a political force in its own right. Rappers like N.W.A. and Ice-T were drawing attention to the abuses of the police (just think of N.W.A.’s famous track “Fuck tha Police”) and placing a noticeable emphasis on giving voice to their own neighborhoods and localities, areas long abandoned by mainstream media. In fact, one of the most profound influences of the gangsta movement was the shift in rap discourse from generic depictions of urban life to “the more localized and specific discursive construct of the ‘hood” (Forman 68). Over the last 20 years, this emphasis on the local has done more than shape discourse; it has also resulted in a variety of new sounds and styles from rappers and production crews across the country. And yet, despite this stylistic diversity, there has been thematic uniformity, with the “aesthetics of excess” (Chang, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop 318) and the glorification of an ego-driven, nihilistic worldview inherited from gangsta dominating rap music today. There are, of course, many notable exceptions: rappers like Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and the Roots, who have managed to attain some commercial success while remaining “conscious rappers.” But most have been unwilling, or unable, to break away from the standard-issue themes in rap, often citing a lack of public demand. In his 2003 track “Moment of Clarity,”

8. See, for example, Public Enemy’s first release, Yo! Bum Rush the Show, which contains tracks like “Miuzi Weighs a Ton” and “Sophisticated Bitch.” It is important to keep in mind that these distinctions between socially conscious and “gangsta” rap are by no means absolute. As Robin D.G. Kelley notes, the style of gangsta rap can be traced back to the East Coast, even to acts known for politically conscious lyrics (e.g., Boogie Down Productions). With that said, Kelley also points out that when it hit the West Coast, gangsta rap took on a style of its own, with groups like N.W.A. placing even more emphasis than their predecessors on “exaggerated descriptions of street life, militant resistance to authority, and outright sexist violence” (120).

9. Kelley notes that gangsta rappers’ antipathy toward black nationalists was fairly common because “[the gangsta rappers] contend that the nationalists’ focus—both past and present—obscures the daily battles poor black folk have to wage in contemporary America” (139). See also Davarian Baldwin, “Black Empires,” 165–66.

10. Brand Nubian, for instance, started releasing tracks called “Pass the Gat” and “Punks Jump Up to Get Beat Down” on their second album, In God We Trust.

11. As Tricia Rose notes, however, these rappers have never gone platinum, while many acts who offer albums that “satisfy larger society’s stereotypes about fantasies about black youth and ghetto life” have reached this sales milestone (Hip Hop Wars 145).
Jay Z (who has since become a high-profile Obama supporter) responded to fans who criticized him for becoming too commercial in his lyrics:

Hustlers and boosters embrace me and the music I be makin'.
I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars.
They criticized me for it, yet they all yell “HOLLA!”
If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be lyrically, Talib Kweli.
Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense,
but I did five mill’ – I ain't been rhymin' like Common since.

The argument articulated here, put forward in some form by rapper after rapper, is that going “conscious” means losing record sales because what people want are not politically or spiritually uplifting messages but the “hard core” lyrics that they have grown accustomed to. In 2007, in testimony before Congress about the content of rap lyrics, performer and music executive David Banner put it bluntly: “Hip hop is sick because America is sick.”

Faced with the dilemma of whether to help cure the sickness or simply profit from it, many rappers have attempted, unsuccessfully, to do both on their albums. Ironically, David Banner may best represent what happens to artists who try. The David Banner of The Incredible Hulk, with his split personality, is a fitting namesake for the rapper (his given name is Lavell Crump) who has been accused of his own split personality on his albums because of his attempts to combine thoughtful, introspective lyrics with shockingly violent and sexually explicit ones. The most recent example is his July 2008 album, The Greatest Story Ever Told, on which he offers religiously motivated, socially aware tracks but then, right alongside them, includes some of the most sexually explicit and violent (and sexually violent) lyrics imaginable. The effect is an incoherence that one critic couldn’t help but notice, beginning his review with “David Banner has always been driven by contradictory impulses” and ultimately lamenting the “tedious hard-core posturing” that enervates whatever lyrically original—even uplifting—message the album might be going for (du Lac Co5). This has become a common trend in rap: when artists try to amalgamate social consciousness with the commercial realities of the rap industry, they effect a discordant message in which the hard-core lyrics often undermine whatever gestures toward “message”-based rap they are trying to achieve. In short, the two rhetorics don’t always mix.

“WE READY FOR DAMN CHANGE, SO Y’ALL LET THE MAN SHINE”:
OBAMA MEETS GANGSTA

At first glance, Young Jeezy’s June 2008 track “My President” appears to suffer from a similar incompatibility.12 Not only does the chorus— “My president is black, my Lambo’s blue/and I'll be goddamned if my rims ain’t too”—place a reference to Obama alongside a “Lambo” (Lamborghini) and its rims, but it goes on to include “My money’s light green
and my Jordans light gray/and they love to see white, now how much you tryin’ to pay?”

solidifying what seems to be a clear preference for the banal images that foreground consumerism (both legal and illegal) over politics. As the song continues, so does the lyrical dichotomy. At times Jeezy lays out social problems in distinctly political terms, making statements like “Bush robbed all of us . . . And then he cheated in Florida,” and then offering distinctly political solutions: “Obama for mankind/We ready for damn change. . . .” At other times, however, he (along with Nas, who also appears on the track) swerves away from politics and back toward the kind of language that seems more comfortable reveling in social ills than changing them. For example, the emphasis on crack dealing and the expensive lifestyle it affords—a typical theme in Jeezy’s music—is evident throughout the chorus, not to mention in the first lines of the opening verse, which equate a “great night” with copious amounts of “great white” (crack cocaine). If Jeezy begins to express any hope for change, his celebration of addiction, the antithesis of change, immediately undermines it, suggesting here and elsewhere in the song that the juxtaposition of politically motivated lyrics with typical gangsta themes results in the same kind of fragmented, incoherent rhetoric we find with David Banner.

However, as I hope to show, Barack Obama’s presence in the lyrics profoundly changes the way the two modes function together. In effect, Obama serves as a kind of catalyst, causing seemingly self-contradictory themes and images to co-opt one another and generate new meaning in the process. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the song’s repeated use of the pronouns “my” or “mine,” as well as the first person “I.” The first word of the song title is “my,” and in the chorus alone, the word appears nine times, emphasizing through possession Jeezy’s mastery of his environment and therefore his elevated status within it. This, of course, is typical of rap generally, which has always been situated within a broad tradition of boasting and self-aggrandizement that has long characterized many forms of African-American cultural expression (Toop 29–46). In “My President” in particular, what should draw our attention is the emphasis on the first person in a song that makes overtures to collective action. The words “we” and “us” do appear scattered throughout, indicating an attempt to draw on a sense of communality, but they become completely engulfed by language that clearly favors “I” to “we” and “me” to “us.” The effect, therefore, of foregrounding Obama and his accomplishments in a song otherwise concerned with promoting Jeezy is a kind of struggle for lyrical dominance, one that Jeezy seems poised to win when he repeatedly places “my” before “president” and includes references to Obama alongside other possessions, including his car, his money, and his Jordans. What we see is an Obama who has been rhetorically demoted from political subject to object, suggesting little hope for a socially conscious message to emerge.

13. The appearance of Nas on a Young Jeezy track was surprising given the public “beef” the two had been engaged in. The reconciliation of two seemingly incompatible personalities makes this song a fitting exemplar for an analysis of how the song manages to reconcile two incompatible types of rhetoric as well.

14. See also Nelson George, who talks about the importance of “I” in African-American discourse. He writes, “I is a powerful word in the vocabulary of the African American male. In telling his-story, brothers are extremely subjective, and we revel in the chance to make others see things our way” (51). He goes on to talk about the importance of names—new versions of “I”—in shaping and controlling perceptions of the African-American self (52).
On the other hand, the word “my” in this context also indicates Jeezy’s acceptance of the president as an authority figure, a rarity to be sure in rap music of any variety. Many rappers instead pledge allegiance to “dead presidents,” a slang term for money that represents not only rap’s typical fixation on material wealth, but, in placing “dead” before “presidents,” clearly indicates the esteem with which most literal presidents have been held in rap lyrics generally. At the end of the song, Nas’s line “our history, black history, no president ever did shit for me” explains the generally held belief among rap artists that politically controlled institutions of power have been neglectful of, or openly antagonistic toward, minorities. The result is an anti-authoritarian strain that, combined with the long tradition of individualism that characterizes rap, would make any willingness to recognize (never mind celebrate) the authority of a president an important shift in rap’s discourse. And sure enough, it happens in “My President.” Near the end of the song, Jeezy says, “Man we congratulate you already homie. See I motivate the thugs, right? You motivate us homie—that’s what it is.” In one respect he establishes a kind of parity with Obama by referring to him as “homie” and then asserting his own authority as the man who can “motivate the thugs,” but what’s worth noting is that he simultaneously subordinates that authority to Obama’s when he counts himself among the “us” whom the black president can motivate. After the final repetition of the line “my president is black,” he goes on to joke “I’m important, too, though.” The humor in this line is achieved through the irony of the statement; Jeezy declares his own importance, but any attempt to do that has already been destabilized by the magnitude of Obama’s presence on the track. Here the “Obama effect” is a reconstruction of the rapper’s role, transforming him from possessor to possessed, from grammatical subject to political one.

The presence of Obama also reconstructs one of rap’s most ubiquitous images: the car. The most striking juxtaposition in “My President” occurs in the chorus with the line “My president is black, my Lambo’s blue, and I’ll be goddamned if my rims ain’t, too.” Just as the song touches on the historic nature of a successful black presidential candidate, it veers back to more familiar territory in its focus on the car, dedicating the majority of the rhymed couplet to the Lambo and its rims—and figuratively obscuring Obama in the process. It appears, then, that Obama takes a back seat to the car, which is perhaps rap’s most prominent representation of the materialism that has consumed rap lyrics. Interestingly, it happens again in Nas’s portion of the song when he raps, “My president is black, 15. This connection between presidents and money is what Nas is referring to with the rhyme “Mr. Black President, yo Obama for real/they gotta put your face on the five-thousand dollar bill.” At first it may seem that Nas is placing Obama in the same category as all of the other presidents whom he holds in such low esteem. However, in suggesting that Obama appear on a bill that is so large that the Treasury Department doesn’t even produce it, Nas is effectively saying that Obama is far superior to the dead presidents who do appear on currency.

16. While most Obama tracks hold out hope for change in an Obama presidency, there are exceptions. In their song “Politrikkks,” for example, dead prez are openly skeptical of Obama’s capacity to change institutions that have long been controlled by whites, arguing that “…it’s still white power./It’s the same system just changed form.” Immortal Technique echoes this sentiment in “The 3rd World,” saying that even though the US might have a black president, “he’s useless/cause he does not control the economy stupid!” Even Nas, who in “Black President” says, “I’m thinkin’ I can trust this brotha,” cannot fully shake the doubts either, asking “When he wins will he really care still?” In the end, his endorsements of Obama are unequivocal, but his own doubts represent the deep mistrust that groups like dead prez and Immortal Technique (and, by extension, many within the hip hop community) still have.
rolls golden charms/twenty-two inch rims like Hulk Hogan’s arms.” With the addition of “golden charms” to the appearance of the rims, the transformation to materialism appears to be complete, with images of cars and jewelry dominating the rhetoric in a song ostensibly dedicated to “My President.”

The particular emphasis on the car can be found in several other Obama-inspired tracks as well: a Bentley coupe appears in both Nas’s “Black President” and Ludacris’s “Politics as Usual,” a BMW M5 pops up in the remix of Jadakiss’s “Why,” a Range Rover rolls through Three 6 Mafia’s “Lolli Lolli (Pop that Body),” and in Jay Z’s own post-election remix of “My President” he substitutes the “Lambo” with an even more expensive Maybach. In all of these tracks, we can see rap’s fixation with cars generally, but within the Obama tracks, the car takes on additional significance as well. What becomes clear here is that the car is being used as a metaphor, one that takes on added significance when it is juxtaposed so blatantly with references to Obama. The automobile has been an icon in African-American culture, something that is readily observable in black music and popular culture throughout the decades leading up to hip hop (Sugrue). One of the reasons for this prominence is that it has always been a potent symbol, not only of wealth, but of mobility. This second connotation is often lost in rap lyrics because cars frequently appear in a veritable laundry list of possessions (just as they do here, with the “Lambo” appearing alongside piles of cash, sneakers, and cocaine) thereby obscuring the unique symbolic meaning of the automobile. The presence of Obama reinvigorates that meaning. After all, there is perhaps no greater example of upward mobility for African Americans than Obama himself. Given his historic rise to prominence against incredible odds, the car suddenly becomes the most apt metaphor to describe his political ascent, so it seems appropriate that the language of the car is what rappers employ to recognize the magnitude of Obama’s success. In “The People,” Common offers perhaps the cleverest example, placing the line “knight the people like Obama” in the same verse as a “Regal,” a car whose name clearly plays on Obama’s new authority. But in Jeezy we also see how the car is put to use; in this case to recognize the historic nature of Obama’s achievement. In the final portion of the song, which is spoken more than rapped (something I will return to), Jeezy first says, “Yeah, first black president” and then, in the very last line of the song, he laughs, “I was the first nigga to ride through my hood in a Lamborghini, yeah!” The parallel between these two “firsts” is actually quite striking—the exotic car making its first appearance in the ‘hood, juxtaposed with the “exotic” candidate (particularly if we consider the way he was depicted during the campaign) being the first black man to be elected president. What appears to be just another car rolling through a rap song, when placed beside Obama, instantly becomes a potent metaphor for Obama’s historic ride to the presidency.

Not only is the car emphasized repeatedly, but so is its color, along with the colors of the objects surrounding it in the chorus (green money, gray Jordans, and the ubiquitous white, an obvious reference to cocaine). The most prominent use of color occurs in the pairing of black and white, with “black” usually used in reference to race and “white” used to

17. It’s worth noting that Common’s “Regal” is a middle class car, far less expensive than the Bentleys and Maybachs found in other Obama tracks. What Common achieves here is a symbol that embodies both Obama’s middle class origins and his ascent to the “regal” heights of president.
represent crack cocaine, a typical fixation of Jeezy’s throughout his career. What is particularly noteworthy, though, is not the appearance of the two colors in isolation, but Jeezy’s frequent attempts to combine the two, sometimes into a single image. Note, for example, the light gray Jordans, an expensive pair of sneakers presumably bought with the light green money earned by a black man from the sale of white. The color gray, of course, is the combination of black and white, and within the context of the song, the shoes become a symbol of the wealth that blacks, at least in Jeezy’s ‘hood, can attain if they succumb to drug dealing. Even the addition of “light” to describe the green of the money and the gray of the shoes can, within this context, be read as an added reference to the whiteness of the cocaine that financed this lifestyle.

We can also note the black/white pairing in the line “Me, I see great white, heavy as killer whales./I cannot believe this—who knew it came in bales?” The image of the great white (sometimes used as slang for crack cocaine) oddly gives way to that of a killer whale, whose size here is being used to describe the enormous quantities (bales) of crack. Both great white sharks and killer whales are predatory animals, and both are known for their size, but when we consider the color scheme of the killer whale, it becomes obvious that, once again, Jeezy is offering us an image that combines black and white, further strengthening the lyrical connection between them. While he doesn’t provide an explicit explanation for his insistence on images that embody the union of black and white, given the way the colors are put to use elsewhere in the song, a clear attempt to connect black (people) and white (drugs) begins to emerge. We might think this would be the ideal space from which to launch socially conscious lyrics related to the destruction caused to black communities by drug addiction (it is difficult not to notice, for example, the missed opportunity to comment on the appropriateness of a predatory metaphor for the drug universally condemned for its role in urban violence and decay). But Jeezy eschews this kind of commentary, instead opting for yet another black/white pairing, one that actually seems intended to justify the sale of drugs. A few lines after his description of the “bales” of “great white,” he says, “Be all you be—now don’t that sound like some dumb shit?/When you die over crude oil as black as my nigga Boo.” The only time the color black is not used in a distinctly racial sense, it is instead used to refer to oil, another kind of addictive substance with unmistakable parallels to the white that Jeezy sells. However, rather than use this particular black/white pairing to address the broad problems of addiction plaguing the US, and his own role in perpetuating them, Jeezy seems content to leave cocaine and oil in juxtaposition without comment, suggesting that his commodity is at least no worse than oil. While we can read this as an implicit critique of the hypocrisy involved when public officials who profit from oil condemn those who profit from drugs, Jeezy seems uninterested in using

---

18. In fact, he created a line of extremely popular tee shirts with a white snowman against a black background, which cocaine dealers would wear to advertise their “snow” (until police caught on).
19. Mark Anthony Neal calls crack “the most destructive element to emerge in the contemporary Black Public Sphere” (132).
20. Celebrating crack can be seen as celebrating the political disenfranchisement of black communities. As Michael Eric Dyson notes, crack had the effect of making “poor black folk slaves to high-risk diversionary pleasure as a means of psychic survival, discouraging them from directly confronting the social dislocation, the lethargy, and the listlessness that the crack epidemic exacerbated” (84).
his social commentary to effect positive change; instead, he appears content to use it to justify his continued use of great white to prey on poor blacks.  

Lyrics that justify drug dealing may seem antithetical to those that attempt to make a political statement, but it is important to recognize the significance of the hustler to black popular culture generally. The figure of the hustler resides in the long tradition of the “bad man” who for decades, in his many permutations, has been depicted (and often revered) in black comedy, film, popular literature, and music.  

Beginning in the late 1960s, his most celebrated incarnation became that of the pimp—“an emblematic figure . . . elevated to the status of hero” (Kelley 141)—who, despite being a criminal, has been “a figure of fascination, a certain awe, and suppressed respect” because he has “always been viewed as a rare example of black male authority over his domain,” a domain largely controlled by whites (George 36–37). What’s more, he achieves this unique power through his ability to persuade others with deft verbal skills; as a matter of fact, it is precisely this “power of language” that defines him more than any other attribute (Quinn 119). Perhaps it is this sense of authority, achieved through verbal dexterity, that Jeezy draws on with his reference to deceased rapper Pimp C, saying, “You know how the Pimp be—/that nigga gon’ speak his mind” just before moving on to Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr., the two black men who, in speaking their minds, have arguably shown more authority over their domain than any others in American history. And they did so by uniting black and white—albeit in a very different way.

It is here that we can begin to appreciate the gravitational pull of Obama’s lyrical presence. While Jeezy’s combination of black and white is clearly intended to represent his own authority, gained in his community through the drug trade, his symbolic attempts to draw on the duality of black and white to illustrate power become complicated, even undermined, when placed alongside the first black man poised to occupy the White House. Indeed, given Obama’s biracial background (his mother was white, his father black), we can see how he easily overshadows the gray Jordans or the killer whale as symbols of power within the lyrics, suggesting an alternative path to power and influence from the one Jeezy underscores with his incessant talk of drug dealing. The image of the hustler or pimp is still operative, but as a kind of metaphor used to project Obama as the ultimate hustler who uses his intellect and linguistic talents to navigate far more hostile terrain (at least for a black man) and attain far greater heights than the drug dealer whose greatest accomplishment in the song is his Lamborghini.

---

21. He appears to make a similar point earlier in the song, when, after pointing out that selling crack can result in prison time, he accuses Bush of cheating in Florida and asking, “would that make him a criminal?” The implicit commentary once again is that politicians and drug dealers are not so different in what they do, a point that to some extent allows Jeezy to elevate his own status within the song. It also allows him—and later Nas—to point out that through this hypocrisy, politicians are able to maintain power by imprisoning and ultimately disenfranchising the people who might otherwise vote them out; however, there’s no real suggestion that he will change his behavior even if the politicians change theirs.

22. See R.A.T. Judy’s “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity” for a discussion of the distinction between the amoral, nihilistic “bad nigger” rappers, and morally legitimate “bad man” rappers. See also Eithne Quinn, Chapters 5 and 6, for a discussion of what distinguishes the “Nihilistic gangbanger” and “enterprising hustler.”

23. In a 1994 interview, Scarface implied a similar connection between the president and the ultimate gangsta, saying, “Gangsta. My definition, man, is somebody who has the power to take over a whole city, state, or country . . . Like Al Capone or John Gotti. That’s gangsta. Or the presidents, you know what I’m sayin’?” (quoted in Marriott 66). Note that in Scarface’s formulation, all true gangstas are white men. Fifteen years later, Obama reformulates all of that.
the political change he represents might not replace the hard-core rhetoric in the song, but they can’t help but delocalize it, compelling it to serve distinctly political ends in the process.

And yet we can’t help but note that, for all his symbolic weight, Obama is still forced to occupy the cramped universe of cars, jewelry, and drugs—something that he and what he represents are simply too big for. As a result, we are left with some of the same lyrical and thematic incompatibilities that plague any hard-core rapper trying to go political. Jeezy seems aware of this, too, and does something interesting about it. At the very end of his second (and last) verse, he finally suggests his willingness to ponder the historical significance of an Obama presidency by locating it within the broader struggle for civil rights championed by Martin Luther King, Jr.:

... Obama for mankind.

We ready for damn change, so y’all let the man shine.

Stuntin’ on Martin Luther, feelin’ just like a king—

guess this is what he meant when he said that he had a dream.

With this final couplet, though, the verse ends, and Jeezy appears to close off any chance for anything resembling a developed consideration of Obama’s place in black history. However, it turns out that he is simply setting us up for his unrhymed “outro” in which he not only provides frank insight into his own feelings about Obama with lines like “win, lose, or draw, man, we congratulate you already,” but seemingly out of nowhere he goes on to list Jackie Robinson, Booker T. Washington, and Sidney Poitier, indicating his respect for the forerunners who made Obama’s (and his) success possible. In any case, what’s relevant here is that Jeezy provides all of this commentary while talking, not rapping, intimating his recognition that lyrics with true political consciousness belong outside of the kind of rap context he has constructed. In other words, with his outro he creates a new discursive space, one that seems to reject the confines of rap’s traditional structures and themes, opening up the kind of territory where social consciousness can exist unburdened by lyrics that constantly challenge it.

Of course, we can’t ignore that this rejection of traditional rap occurs within a rap song, suggesting that it is not a rejection at all, but instead a kind of dialogic process that is part of an even broader dialogue between the rhetorics of gangsta and social consciousness occurring throughout “My President.” As we have seen, Obama is the catalyst for this dialogue, allowing for new meaning to be generated from what seem to be “juxtapositions of incompatible realities” (Lipsitz 99). In “My President,” then, we can see small but meaningful steps in the process of rap’s re-definition, a process whereby even the least political, least socially conscious themes are dragged, perhaps screaming and cursing, into a future imbued by what Al Sharpton rightly identifies as “the greatest political victory in the history of black America.”

OUTRO

With the election of the first black man to occupy the seat of power long reserved for whites, the United States was dragged (with some people also screaming and cursing)
into a similar future, one that juxtaposed political realities that even a decade earlier seemed positively incompatible. Indeed, in his song “Changes,” posthumously released in 1998, Tupac considered the presidency out of reach for an African American, saying “And although it seems heaven sent/we ain’t ready to see a black president.” From Tupac’s perspective, race relations in the United States had not reached the point where whites and blacks alike could rally around a black candidate, and for him, the future was not any more promising—the song closes with his lone voice saying, “Some things will never change.” It is fitting, then, that in his own Obama track, “Black President,” Nas repeatedly places samples of Tupac’s proclamation that “we ain’t ready to see a black president” alongside the chorus of “Yes we can . . . change the world.” Thanks to sampling, two seemingly incompatible realities—those offered by Tupac and Nas—reside within the same track, calling and responding to one another much in the same way that, with Obama’s candidacy, rap and politics appear to have struck up a new conversation as well.

The extent to which they will keep talking remains unclear, but it is worth remembering that whatever transformation Obama is helping to facilitate is nevertheless taking place in a post-gangsta environment. This means that any reformulations of mainstream rap as a political vehicle will have to contend with a recording industry that has grown increasingly accustomed to privileging “a substyle based on hustling, crime, sexual domination, and drug dealing” (Rose, *Hip Hop Wars* 13), not to mention fans who have come to associate these themes with “keeping it real.” In short, change will not come easily. If the bevy of Obama-inspired songs released before and after the election is an indication of rap’s will to effect this change, however, perhaps “My President” offers a way. With its use of Obama to reinvigorate the tired images and themes of commercial rap by infusing them with new and productive political significance, it takes a small but meaningful first step in a potentially broader process of political engagement in rap as a whole. Hence, when Jeezy declares, “We ready for damn change,” he looks to Obama to provide it from the White House, perhaps unaware of an Obamafication that has already begun in his song.

24 I am quoting the 1998 release of the song, but the lyrics “And although it seems heaven sent/we ain’t ready to see a black president” first appeared in the 1997 song “I Wonder if Heaven Got a Ghetto,” which was also released posthumously. Many of the lyrics from that first release were then reused in the new arrangement, “Changes.”

REFERENCES


