

Nielson Remixed

The Trumpification of Hip Hop[†]

At the end of 2018, rap had become the dominant genre of popular music in the United States. For the first time ever, sales of rap music eclipsed those of rock music.¹ Furthermore, rap is becoming institutionalized in ways that historically have been reserved for rock and popular music. Rappers have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, with Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five leading the way in 2007. Run-D.M.C. (2009), the Beastie Boys (2012), Public Enemy (2013), N.W.A. (2016), and Tupac Shakur (2017) followed.² In 2017, LL Cool J was the first rapper to receive a Kennedy Center Honor. In early 2018, Kendrick Lamar won the Pulitzer Prize in music for his album *DAMN*. The hit Broadway musical *Hamilton*—one of the first to draw heavily on hip hop—debuted in 2015, was nominated for a record-setting 16 Tony nominations (it won 11), and earned the composer Lin Manuel Miranda the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and a Kennedy Center Special Honor in 2018, among other awards. The show introduced a new public to hip hop and hinted at its potential for political engagement.

In a 2009 essay in this Journal, Eric Nielson explored the impact that Barack Obama's presidency—then barely a year old—was having on rap music. The central question he posed was, “Will there be an Obamafication of rap, allowing the genre to embrace lyrics that serve the African-American community rather than exploit it?” The essays in Gosa and Nielson provide a variety of perspectives on Obama and hip hop with the benefit

[†]I have stayed fairly close to the structure of Nielson's original article. I have, in places, taken some of his arguments and even his language in an effort to demonstrate that even though a decade has passed since his article appeared, very little has changed. Some could argue that this is plagiarism: I would call it sampling and remixing.

1. It's worth considering the impact that the rise in music streaming has had on record sales figures. Amy Wang observed that music consumption rose from 2017 to 2018, but that music sales continue to drop: album sales dropped 18.2% and song sales dropped 28.8%. Rapper A Boogie Wit Da Hoodie's album *Hoodie Szn* earned the number one spot on the *Billboard* sales chart ending 10 January with sales of 823 digital copies (no hard copies of the album were produced) and 83 million streams. See Amy X. Wang, “Album Sales Dying as Fast As Streaming Services Rising,” *Rolling Stone* 3 January 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/album-sales-dying-as-fast-as-streaming-services-rising-774563/>.

2. The inductions were met with some hostility, notably from Gene Simmons of KISS, who said on Twitter that he would only acknowledge N.W.A.'s induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on “the day Led Zep[elín] gets into [the] Rap hall of fame.”

of some additional hindsight, demonstrating that while there may have been a brief turn toward more politically motivated hip hop, the community's reactions were somewhat mixed.³ While the relationship between Obama and hip hop came to national attention as he became the front-running Democratic candidate in 2008, rappers have been talking about Donald Trump well before he became the Republican presidential nominee in July 2016. The earliest reference to Trump appears to be the Beastie Boys' 1989 song "Johnny Ryall," in which Donald Trump is contrasted with his alter-ego, the homeless Donald Tramp. An analysis of rap lyrics revealed at least 266 songs that reference Trump or his brand.⁴ Trump is a popular role model for rap artists for several reasons. First, his claim to being a self-made billionaire is the quintessential American success story, and he doesn't shy away from projecting this image: he's been a near-constant media presence since the 1970s, and his image is often framed by ostentatious displays of wealth. While the Trump brand is international, Trump is most closely associated with New York City, which also happens to be the birthplace of hip hop: Trump's ascent to power runs almost parallel to the birth and development of hip hop, so it shouldn't be surprising that many aspiring rap artists saw him as a role model. As the 2016 presidential election unfolded, many in the rap community began reversing their stance on Trump and a few high-profile songs called attention to the danger that he posed as leader: "FDT [Fuck Donald Trump]" by YG featuring Nipsey Hussle, and "Campaign Speech" by Eminem are among the most notable releases.

Nielson quotes an interview with Reverend Al Sharpton in which he says, "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."⁵ It would appear that Sharpton's prediction did not hold up: much contemporary mainstream rap still features the violent and misogynistic lyrics that, in minstrel-like fashion, perpetuate harmful stereotypes of African Americans. Lyrically, Migos, Future, and Cardi B aren't exactly "advancing the narrative" in the sense that Sharpton would've liked, i.e., in the direction of respectability politics (that's not to say that their music and lyrics are not innovative in other ways). Obama himself, an avowed rap fan, told *Rolling Stone*, "I am troubled sometimes by the misogyny and materialism of a lot of rap lyrics." Misogyny and materialism are not endemic to rap music: these values are deeply woven into the fabric of our country, and Trump embodies them unashamedly. His misogyny is most apparent in the *Access Hollywood* tape that was made public just prior to the election. Following the release of the tape, Trump and his team played right into white America's criticisms of rap music. Former presidential candidate-turned-Trump adviser Ben Carson told *Business Insider* magazine said "The tape itself, [. . .] unfortunately [contains] the kind of language that we hear in rap music." Conservative radio talk-show

3. Erik Nielson, "My President's Black, My Lambo's Blue': The Obamafication of Rap?" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 21/3 (2009): 344–63; Travis L. Gosa and Eric Nielson, *The Hip Hop and Obama Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

4. Allison McCann, "Hip Hop is Turning on Donald Trump," *FiveThirtyEight*, 14 July 2016. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/clinton-trump-hip-hop-lyrics/>

5. Nielson 2009, 345.

host Stacy Washington suggested that Trump's comments "sound a lot like hip hop music today."⁶ The responses blame hip hop for cultivating this kind of behavior, thus conflating immorality with the black community. But rap music, as Tricia Rose and others argue, is not the *cause* of these problems; rather, it is a symptom of them.⁷

In this article, I reframe Nielson's research questions to ask: will Trump's presidency serve as a catalyst for the kind of change that rap's critics have been calling for? Will there be a Trumpification of rap, in essence forcing the genre to respond to Trump's racism and xenophobia by embracing lyrics that serve the political interests of the African-American community rather than those of white supremacy? Kanye West's *TMZ* interview and Young Jeezy's 2005 track "Thug Motivation" serve as examples of the trend that mainstream rap has long served the interests of white supremacy by upholding two of the principal tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT): the myth of meritocracy and whiteness as property.⁸ Trump's ascent to the presidency has exposed the myth of post-racialism that Obama's presidency appeared to usher in, and has revealed that the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (to borrow bell hooks' formulation) has continued to operate quietly behind the scenes the whole time.

A CRITICAL RACE THEORY APPROACH TO RAP MUSIC

There is no question that Obama's two terms as president have changed the way we talk about race in this country. Many have suggested that Obama's election ushered in an age of post-racialism, which Sumi Cho describes as "a twenty-first-century ideology that reflects a belief that due to the significant racial progress that has been made, the state need not engage in race-based decision-making or adopt race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action."⁹ Race-based decision-making can be harmful or helpful: consider Jim Crow laws in contrast to Affirmative Action laws—both are race-based laws, but the former was clearly intended to protect whiteness, whereas the latter was intended to assist people of color.

The selective installation of people of color to all levels of government further upholds the illusion of post-racialism by reinforcing the myth of meritocracy (in short, hard work leads to success). Zamudio et al., suggest that "Obama's presidency has become the myth's most

6. Pamela Engel, "Top Ben Carson Adviser: He Stands by Trump, Recording is 'The Kind of Language That we Hear in Rap Music,'" *Business Insider*, 8 October 2016. <https://www.businessinsider.com/ben-carson-trump-leaked-women-2005-video-2016-10>. Ashley Pickens, "Donald Trump Supporter Tries to Blame Hip-Hop For #TrumpTapes, Fails Miserably," *VIBE* 8 October 2016. <https://www.vibe.com/2016/10/donald-trump-hip-hop>.

7. Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters*, New York: Basic Civitas, 2008.

8. bell hooks makes a similar claim in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004). In response to Todd Boyd, she says that claiming rap is black music "is the stuff of pure fantasy, since not only is hip hop packaged for mainstream consumption, many of its primary themes—the embrace of capitalism, the support of patriarchal violence, the conservative approach to gender roles, the call to liberal individualism—all reflect the ruling values of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, albeit in black face" (19).

9. Sumi Cho, "Post-Racialism," *Iowa Law Review* 94–95 (July 2009): 1589–1645. Post-racialism has a lot in common with what is often called "colorblind racism": Cho distinguishes between the two, suggesting that colorblind racism is largely aspirational, while post-racial implies that some "transcendent" event—in this case, Obama's election—creates a sense of before and after (1597).

concrete manifestation”: if a black man can become president of the U.S., then why can’t all people of color achieve more?¹⁰ Robin James calls the resulting system the Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy (MRWaSP): it enables the racist projects of the WaSP to run more efficiently and covertly by masking the underlying white supremacy.¹¹ By virtue of their inclusion, people of color often become complicit in the subjugation of not only their own groups but other marginalized groups as well. The Trump Administration has leveraged a few people in this way, notably Omarosa Manigault, social media personalities Diamond and Silk, conservative pundit Candace Owens, and Kanye West.¹² This strategy echoes Sharpton’s comments above, about how “thug rappers” are distinct from—are excluded from—the political success that was Obama’s election. “Political success” means two things in this context. First, there is the obvious: Obama won the presidential election, which was a victory for Democrats and, on the surface, the black community. Second, this was a political victory for the MRWaSP: electing a black man to the highest office in the country—arguably, the world—provided the “transcendental event” that ushered in the era of post-racialism. Obama has been criticized for his middle-of-the-road political stances toward issues that affect the black community (the Black Lives Matter movement in particular) and people of color generally (a record number of people were deported during his presidency, for instance).¹³ This post-racial perspective is dangerous because it tends to make all but the most egregiously racist acts invisible. It enables the myth of meritocracy by claiming equal opportunity for all, and ultimately reinforces the value of whiteness as property.

The myth of meritocracy is foundational to the American experience: it tells us that a person’s work ethic, values, and attitude lead to success, and if they are unable to “make something of themselves”—that is, find a job, have a stable income, own a home and

10. Margaret M. Zamudio, Caskey Russell, Francisco A. Rios, and Jacquelyn L. Bridgeman, *Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology*. New York: Routledge, 2010. 9.

11. See Robin James, *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism*. Alresford, Hants, UK: Zero Books, 2015. Chapter 4 introduces the MRWaSP framework. James’ approach resonates with Derrick Bell’s theory of interest convergence, which suggests that advances in civil rights only take place when the interests of marginalized communities align with the interests of white America. See Derrick A. Bell, Jr., “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93 (1980): 518–33.

12. Omarosa Manigault’s relationship with Trump started when she was a contestant on the first season of *The Apprentice*. After he was elected, she became his assistant and director of communications for the Office of Public Liaison. Her official biography exemplifies the “myth of meritocracy”: “Born into the depths of extreme poverty, Omarosa Manigault Newman rose to become the only African American senior adviser to the 45th president of the United States, Donald J. Trump. A member of his inner circle with a relationship spanning more than 15 years, Omarosa was by Trump’s side through four television shows, a presidential campaign and her celebrated stint in ‘the most chaotic, outrageous White House in history.’” See <https://omarosa.com/about-omarosa/>. Diamond and Silk (Lynette Hardaway and Rochelle Richardson, respectively) are social media stars who have actively promoted Trump and his agenda. Activist Bree Newsome and former Clinton adviser Keith Boykin have accused the duo of playing to stereotypes of black women. Boykin said conservatives “only want to listen to the people who reaffirm their narrow, limited vision of what blackness is all about and how black people should perceive white people and specifically how they should perceive Donald Trump.” See Liam Stack, “Who Are Diamond and Silk? A Look at 2 Pro-Trump Social Media Stars,” *The New York Times*, 14 April 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/14/us/politics/diamond-silk-facebook.html>.

13. Among the critiques of Obama that emerged from hip hop culture are Lupe Fiasco’s assertion that Obama was “the world’s biggest terrorist”; Killer Mike’s disappointment that Obama did not speak out on the deaths of Trayvon Martin or Oscar Grant; and Tef Poe’s claim that the president condemned the protesters in Ferguson following the shooting death of Mike Brown. These are referenced in the Introduction to Gosa and Nielson (2015).

a car—then the blame for this failure falls squarely on them. The myth of meritocracy assumes a level playing field for all, but this is clearly not the case. The education system, often hailed as the great equalizer, depends largely on property taxes. Property taxes are collected on home ownership, which is generally higher in white suburban communities. Redlining and similar measures have historically prevented people of color from owning homes, and as a result, the schools in those communities tend to suffer. Mass incarceration disproportionately affects people of color, and convictions further prevent them from establishing credit, getting a job, and voting.¹⁴

The myth of meritocracy is foundational to hip hop as well. Jelani Cobb describes a narrative arc that is common to many rap songs, which he calls “the Malcolm X formula”: “Malcolm exists as both the ancestral hustler and the wise man who rose above the streets while never abandoning them. And thus, the trajectory of his life—birth, the dissolution of his family, the experience of poverty and beginning of his life as a hustler, his incarceration, and his eventual redemption—is played out endlessly within hip hop.”¹⁵ Beyond individual songs, rap music’s history embodies the myth to a degree. Critiquing the shift from rap’s “golden age” to the gangsta rap era, Nielson writes, “What set [gangsta rap] 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.”¹⁶ Given the subject matter of most mainstream hip hop, the genre’s current dominance of the music industry could be seen not so much as a victory for the black community, but as a successful bid by the MRWaSP to uphold white supremacy. The images of the black community that are circulated by mainstream rap reaffirm racist stereotypes: they facilitate the kinds of comparisons that Ben Carson and Stacy Washington made between Trump’s language and rap music.

The landscape of mainstream hip hop circa 2016 hasn’t changed too much from what Nielson described in 2009. I would contend that the “golden age of gangsta” has given way to a “golden age of trap,” which deals with much of the same subject matter, but grows out of the southern United States (Atlanta, in particular). While there is a handful of commercially successful conscious artists that are active today—Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Chance the Rapper, and Run the Jewels, to name a few—many of the top-selling (or top-streaming) artists—Drake, YG, Kevin Gates, Future, and Migos—seem to continue “revel[ing] in the dire social conditions and destructive behavior” and avoid the social critique.¹⁷ It is important to note, though, that these “dire conditions” are the result of racist policies like redlining, the so-called “War on Drugs,” and mass incarceration, and that the “destructive behavior” is a coping mechanism adopted by those who are forced to hustle to make ends meet.¹⁸ An issue arises, then, when

14. Lester Spence’s work on “the hustle” in black communities is illustrative here. See *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*. New York: Punctum Books, 2015.

15. William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic*, New York: New York University Press, 2007. 130.

16. Nielson 2009, 347.

17. Music aside, many other hip-hop branded media types also promote the behaviors without the benefit of social critique: I’m thinking of the website WorldStarHipHop.com, and television programs like the *Love and Hip Hop* series.

18. Kemi Adeyemi, “Straight Leanin’: Sounding Black Life at the Intersection of Hip-Hop and Big Pharma,” *Sounding Out!* 21 September 2015. <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/09/21/hip-hop-and-big-pharma/>

these cultural products are consumed uncritically by white audiences and are in turn used to justify the racist policies. As Zamudio, et al., observe, the myth of meritocracy implies that if we praise those at the top for achieving their positions, we also blame those at the bottom for their failures, and mainstream hip hop provides a convenient, highly visible scapegoat.¹⁹

Whiteness as property is the second tenet of CRT that is relevant to this essay. According to Cheryl Harris, whiteness emerged as “the characteristic, the attribute, the *property* of free human beings”: U.S. law treats the benefits white supremacy grants white people as a kind of private property right.²⁰ Whiteness has been the basis for owning land and homes, voting, employment, and a host of other legal rights. Whiteness also grants the holders of whiteness the ability to determine who gets access to this property and who does not. The U.S. Constitution (and laws that issue from it) is written in such a way that the affordance of these rights appears legitimate and natural; however, this apparent legitimacy is the result of subjugation and dehumanization of people of color.²¹ Being white thus had a significant value, and—although the laws were crafted by those who benefited most from them (the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and later, MRWaSP)—that value was made to seem legitimate and natural. In order to legitimate that value, a racialized Other was needed to oppose. Today, mainstream rap music provides this racialized Other. Ultimately, whiteness is not a unifying category, but rather one that defines itself by excluding those who are non-white: the more exclusive the membership, the higher its value.²² Trump’s “Make America Great Again” rhetoric thus represents an effort to consolidate the property value of whiteness by excluding those who do not meet certain criteria of citizenship, skin color, or religion.²³

Exclusion of this kind operates most efficiently when activities associated with certain groups of people are criminalized by those in power. American history in general, and hip-hop history in particular are full of stories like this. Trump has repeatedly taken this path, criminalizing Mexicans (“they’re drug dealers and rapists”), South American asylum seekers (they’re members of the vicious MS-13 gang), and Muslims (via the so-called “Muslim ban,” which—curiously—did not include the countries from which the 9/11 terrorists hailed). There have been plenty of egregious acts of racism in the two years since Trump took office, many of which have been a direct result of his rhetoric and policies. Trump’s own racism is well known and well documented.²⁴ It kept him in the public eye during the Obama presidency, as he repeatedly claimed that Obama was not born in the U.S. and insinuated that he was lazy and not working hard enough. These claims highlight the value that Trump and his supporters place on whiteness, and reinforce the myth of meritocracy through accusations of laziness.

19. Zamudio, et al., 26.

20. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review*, 106/8 (June 1993): 1721; emphasis added.

21. Harris, 1725–34.

22. Zamudio, et al., 33.

23. The Trump Administration’s race to exclude non-whites could in part be a response to the impending demographic shift, as America is predicted to become a “minority-majority” state by mid-century, a phenomenon that some on the far right of the political spectrum have referred to as “white genocide.”

24. For an overview, see David Leonhardt and Ian Prasad Philbrick, “Donald Trump’s Racism: The Definitive List,” *The New York Times*, 15 January 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/15/opinion/leonhardt-trump-racist.html>

THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY OR THE CURIOUS CASE OF KANYE

Trump is the embodiment of the myth of meritocracy: he is a self-proclaimed self-made billionaire whose wealth and media visibility make him a person that many aspire to be. His real estate empire is legendary, as is his casino business. His NBC reality show *The Apprentice* (itself a manifestation of the myth) aired for fifteen seasons, and brought his (highly mediated) business acumen and trademark “You’re fired!” into countless living rooms around the world. The reality is that very little of his success is the result of his own hard work. *The New York Times* has published many articles that undermine his claims of self-made riches: much of his money was the result of “gifts” from his father, Fred Trump—himself a real estate magnate, and evidently a member of the Ku Klux Klan—and much of this wealth was grown through elaborate tax evasion schemes.²⁵ Donald has been through bankruptcy proceedings many times, was sued at least three times for fraud with respect to Trump University, and at the time of this writing is the first president in recent history to refuse to release his tax returns, fueling speculation that he may have financial ties to foreign powers. Even his ascent to the presidency was not the result of his own hard work, but due to Russian involvement in the campaign and election, voter disenfranchisement, and the Electoral College.²⁶

Kanye West has a lot in common with Trump.²⁷ West is no stranger to politics: during a 2005 telethon to raise money for victims of Hurricane Katrina, he famously went off-script to detail the differences between how blacks and whites were being portrayed in the media, ending the diatribe with the now-infamous line, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” In 2015, he announced a bid for a 2020 presidential run at the MTV Video Music Awards. West met with Trump at Trump Tower in New York City on 13 December 2016, a little more than a month after the latter was elected president. On 25 April 2018, West posted a photo of himself wearing the red “Make America Great Again” hat that has become associated with the Trump campaign, a photo which sparked outrage among his friends and fans, and he wore it again during the promos and his performance on *Saturday Night Live* on 29 September, after which he went into a long pro-Trump speech backstage.

On the heels of the MAGA hat fiasco, West appeared on *TMZ Live* on 1 May 2018 and tried to justify his behavior. His talking points mirror almost exactly those of conservative pundit Candace Owens, whose “Blexit” campaign encourages black people to leave the Democratic Party (Owens would appear with West toward the end of the *TMZ* interview). The most frequently excerpted statement from the nearly 45-minute interview deals with the legacy of slavery. West claimed, “When you hear about slavery for 400 years—for 400 years? That sounds like a choice. Like, ‘You was there for 400 years, and it’s, all of y’all?’ [. . .] It’s like, we’re mentally imprisoned.” On the one hand, this rhetoric resonates with the message in his song “New Slaves.” The song begins by detailing the segregation his mother faced while growing up under Jim Crow laws, and continues by indicting capitalism and outlining what Michelle

25. David Barstow, Susanne Craig, and Russ Buettner, “Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes as He Reaped Riches From His Father,” *The New York Times*, 2 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-tax-schemes-fred-trump.html?module=inline>

26. “Donald Trump spent his trust fund money on the vote,” raps Nipsey Hussle in “FDT.”

27. Lisa Respers France, “Kanye Has a Lot in Common with Trump,” *CNN.com* 19 November 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/19/entertainment/kanye-west-donald-trump-similarities/>

Alexander refers to as “The New Jim Crow”—the disproportionate impact that mass incarceration has had on the black community.²⁸ On the other hand, to imply that slavery was a choice—that someone would choose to enter a life of subjugation, or that they had the ability to leave and become free—is the myth of meritocracy run rampant: it obscures systematic oppression by focusing narrowly on individual choice and responsibility. The idea of freedom as a choice is central to Blexit’s dogma: it upholds white supremacy by promoting anti-blackness. According to its website, the movement is “fueled by individuals who are questioning political dogma and choosing freedom over tyranny”²⁹

West continues on the topic of self-actualization: “People need to start worrying about themselves. If I go and I grab some water out of the fridge, and I’m in the studio, I’m not asking nobody if they want water—I’m not assuming. If you want water, you saw me grab the water—you go grab your own water. [. . .] We have the right to free thought.” “Free thought” is a pervasive theme in Owens’s work, and again it hints at the connection between whiteness and freedom while reinforcing the myth of meritocracy by valorizing individual freedom and choice.

Undeterred, West continues, echoing a familiar right-wing talking point about black-on-black crime: “Black people have a tendency to focus and to march when a white person kills a black person, or wears a hat, but when its 700 kids being killed in Chicago [West’s hometown], it’s ok. It’s ok for blacks to kill blacks.” Trump has repeatedly remarked on the violence in Chicago, saying, “People are being shot left and right,” calling the Chicago Police “not tough,” and threatening to send in federal agents to quell the violence.³⁰ Van Lathan, a *TMZ* reporter who was present in the room during the interview, rebuffs him:

The narrative that black people don’t care about black lives until a white person takes them is false—that is not true. But the problem is the people that are doing this work in the community every day, [. . .] they don’t get the type of reverence, [. . .] that other people do. Those people are the ones who need to be empowered. [. . .] Who’s going to talk about what doesn’t get covered on the news? For me, for a lot of years, the dude that inspired me to be more than what I was in Baton Rouge, that was you. Ask anybody in here, how many times we’ve had a Kanye West story and I’ve stood there the only person to defend Kanye West because what you meant to me, and after that you slapped me in my [censored] face by getting next to people who mean me harm, and who don’t even care about the fact that they’re being honest that they mean me harm.

28. Later in the interview, West claims that “prison is something that unites us as one race, blacks and whites being one race. We’re the human race, we’re human beings and stuff.” This claim ignores the fact that black people are incarcerated at five times the rate that white people are, even though black people comprise roughly 13% of the country’s population. Blexit relies on similar rhetoric, noting on their website that “3,446 black Republicans and 1,297 white Republicans were lynched by the KKK between 1882 and 1968.” This kind of “both sides” reasoning has become a hallmark of the current conservative movement, most notably with Trump claiming that there were good people “on both sides” during the 2017 “Unite the Right” in Charlottesville, Va.

29. Spence (2015) is illustrative in this context.

30. Mark Berman, “Trump Calls Chicago Violence ‘Very Easily Fixable’ and Blames it on Political Correctness.” *The Washington Post*, 26 January 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/01/26/trump-p-calls-chicago-violence-very-easily-fixable-and-blames-it-on-political-correctness/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0666bcf3c018

Lathan names West as an inspiration, a socially conscious rapper who called attention to issues in the black community that were not being covered in the mainstream media: as Public Enemy's Chuck D famously claimed, "Rap music is black America's CNN." Lathan also lays bare the racism that has flourished under the Trump Administration, noting how open and honest the perpetrators are about intending to do harm.

The generally held belief among rap artists is that politically controlled institutions of power have been neglectful of, or openly antagonistic toward, people of color. The result is an anti-authoritarian strain—and Trump is most certainly an authoritarian leader—which, combined with the long tradition of individualism that characterizes rap, would make any willingness to recognize the authority of a president an important shift in rap's discourse. West's embrace of Trump, despite overwhelming evidence of his antagonism toward minorities, thus marks an important shift in rap's discourse.³¹

"DONALD TRUMP IN A WHITE TEE AND WHITE ONES": WHITE (NESS) AS PROPERTY

Young Jeezy's 2005 track "Thug Motivation" encapsulates the myth of meritocracy in its opening lines: "I used to hit the kitchen lights, cockroaches everywhere/Hit the kitchen lights now, it's marble floors everywhere." In the course of the first verse, he details his path to success, although his motivations for earning money are closely linked to his situation. He's "working two pots"—cooking crack in his kitchen—to get shoes for his kid and to raise bail money. Lester Spence writes about the distinct effect that neoliberalism has had on the black community. A perfect storm comprising the prosperity gospel, rapidly disappearing employment opportunities, and the consequences of mass incarceration have created a system in which "black men are forced to work incessantly with no way out."³² It is important to note that this work may be legal or illegal (i.e., drug dealing, gambling, pimping). Jeezy starts the second verse with a recognition of this dilemma: "I'm what the streets made me, a product of my environment/Took what the streets gave me: product in my environment." Spence calls this state of constant work—Jeezy's two pots—"the hustle." The hustle is simply a refiguring of the myth of meritocracy; however, it reveals itself to be a myth because, as Spence indicates, there's no way out.

By the end of the first verse, Jeezy proclaims himself "Donald Trump in a white tee and white [Nike Air Force] Ones."³³ Here Trump functions as a symbol of wealth, power, and prestige. Jeezy's emphasis on his white attire resonates with Nielson's observations about black and white in "My President": "'black' is usually used in reference to race, and 'white' used to represent crack cocaine."³⁴ While both songs employ the black/white binary, I would argue that in "Thug Motivation," both terms refer to race—specifically,

31. Fellow Chicagoan Chance the Rapper initially voiced support for West, tweeting that "black people don't have to be Democrats," only to apologize for the remark a short time later.

32. Spence, 2.

33. Jeezy also has a song called "Trump" (feat. Birdman, from *The Real is Back 2*, 2011) that warrants a listen in this context. Nielson remarks on the importance of shoes as status symbol (2009, 352).

34. Nielson 2009, 352.

to whiteness as property—and Jeezy’s song details the ways in which black men can get access to the rights and privileges that Harris argues are typically reserved for white America. In short, the principal property of whiteness is freedom. Here again, the black/white and slave/free binaries are being recast: whiteness—or in Jeezy’s case, proximity to whiteness—affords him a degree of freedom. But despite his efforts (including trying to buy his way in with “so much paper [money] it’ll hurt your hands”), Jeezy can only approach whiteness: he remains the “other” that whiteness needs to define itself. His circumstances reveal the ways in which the myth of meritocracy is entangled with whiteness as property, how true wealth and power are only available to those who hold the property of whiteness.

It is worth mentioning that great reward is often accompanied by great risk. The association of crack cocaine with the black community led to a racially motivated sentencing disparity of 100:1 versus those who sold the powdered form; that is, a person in possession of one gram of crack would receive the same sentence as someone in possession of 100 grams of powder.³⁵ Even in the underground economy in which Jeezy plies his trade, racism stacks the deck against him, exposing him to greater risk of more severe punishment than a white person dealing powder cocaine (crack is simply a mixture of powdered cocaine, baking soda, and water). This sentencing disparity contributed to the disproportionately large number of black men incarcerated for drug-related offenses. The Fair Sentencing Act, which was passed in 2010 under the Obama Administration, reduced the ratio to 18:1. Jeezy doesn’t miss the opportunity to comment on the appropriateness of a predatory metaphor for the drug universally condemned for its role in urban violence and decay: he simply sidesteps it in favor of celebrating the freedom it brings him through proximity to whiteness.

OUTRO

*“But I take over the world when I’m on my Donald Trump shit
Look at all this money! Ain’t that some shit?”—Mac Miller, “Donald Trump”*

While he’s hardly known as a hip hop fan, Trump was fond of Mac Miller’s 2011 song “Donald Trump”: he praised Miller in a YouTube video, calling him “the new Eminem.” Once the song went platinum, Trump threatened to take the rapper to court for profiting from the use of his name. In May 2016, Miller appeared on *The Nightly Show With Larry Wilmore* to call out then-candidate Trump:

I only have one thing to say: I fucking hate you, Donald Trump. [. . .] You say you want to Make America Great Again, but we all know what that really means: ban Muslims, Mexicans are rapists, black lives don’t matter. Make America Great Again? I think you want to make America white again. I come here today as a white man with the hope that maybe you’ll listen to me. In other words, let me whitesplain this to you, you racist son of a bitch. [. . .] It says more about us as a country because we’re finally showing our true colors: not only are we letting this bullshit slide, but motherfuckers are supporting

35. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 set this penalty.

you! And if we're stupid enough to elect you, I know exactly what everyone's going to say: "I'm moving to Canada. I don't want to live in a country where Donald Trump is president. I'm getting out of here!" You know what I'm going to do if you get elected? I'm staying right the fuck here. I'm going to be here every day telling the world how much I hate you, how much of a clown you are, and how we as a nation are better than you will ever be as a racist [censored] of a human because I love America and I'm never giving it up to a troll like you.

The Trump-Miller beef encapsulates many of the themes of the preceding essay: based on the lyrics, we can argue that Miller saw Trump's wealth as proof of the myth of meritocracy. Trump appreciated the supplication, until the song got too popular. Once Trump was in the running for the presidency, Miller leveraged his white privilege to make anti-racist statements that made the Trump agenda plain to see, reviving hip hop's long history of anti-authoritarianism.

Has there been a Trumpification of hip hop? I would say yes: it started well before he became president, and it continues today. Many of the criticisms that rap has faced over the years—the rampant misogyny, and celebration of violence and drug use—are not unique to hip hop; rather, hip hop simply reflects how pervasive these behaviors are in our culture. Because the behaviors have become so closely attached to rap music, the music becomes a metonym for the black community, which in turn becomes a convenient scapegoat for the problems that our society faces as a whole. Hip hop will never succeed in raising the political consciousness of its audience unless and until the political climate shifts significantly. Such a shift would have to permit more voices of socially conscious rappers on the mainstream airwaves. The post-racial "peace" that accompanied the Obama presidency has been upended by Trump's election, revealing that our country still suffers from the sicknesses that birthed hip hop in the first place. ■

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