

# The Hip Hop & Obama Reader

Edited by Travis L. Gosa and Erik Nielson

*Who gives a fuck if the academics care? I mean, it's good if there are working folks in there, you know what I'm sayin'? But at the end of the day, if there's a bunch of academics saying "Oh should I listen to Power Struggle?" It's like... [makes frowning face]. It does help, but if they're sayin', "hey, I should listen to Power Struggle because he's talkin about the National Democratic Movement [in the Philippines] and this anti-Imperialist revolutionary struggle that's connected to all the other struggles" and that's at the forefront... [nods in approval].*

*Like this interview. What's it going to serve? Is it going to serve the people so that they can get enlightened and then want to get hip? Not just to listen to Power Struggle... but to learn more and want to do some studies or put in [work]?... Whose interest does it serve at the end of the day? Who does it benefit?*

—PELB, of Power Struggle

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"CHANGE THAT WOULDN'T FILL A HOMELESS MAN'S CUP UP"

Filipino American Political Hip Hop and Community Organizing in the Age of Obama

*Anthony Kwame Harrison*

"SOMETIMES RAPPIN' AIN'T ENOUGH"

In the opening verse to its 2011 song "Sunshine," Power Struggle lead vocalist Nomi enounces that "political rap is like a trap sometimes."<sup>1</sup> As an African-diasporic orature form, forged within the collusive cauldrons where the trials of postindustrial

disenfranchisement mix with the resiliencies of subaltern innovation, hip hop lyricism is inherently ambiguous *and* political. The trap that Nomi (possibly) refers to is set along the well-worn path between artistic intention and public reception. Whereas questions of multiple interpretations dominate music of any sort, and art more generally, the brilliance of the "Sunshine" lyric lies in its spotlighting how such concerns are amplified within a hip hop form that is characterized as deliberately and pointedly political.

On the November 2012 evening when I sat down with members of Power Struggle to discuss how their music supports, challenges, or is otherwise engaged with the "Obamafication" of hip hop, they had a hard time wrapping their minds around why I was interviewing them. As MC Smoke,<sup>2</sup> one of the members, explained:

I've made references in songs to Bush. And then I think I may have said something about Obama, but the point is that even in '08, probably in '04, and before that in 2000, I always knew that the presidential campaign on that level or the presidency in general . . . it didn't really matter because it was the same system in place.

Power Struggle, who are part of a rising generation of globally conscious, politicized hip hop music makers, was far more interested in discussing issues of workers' rights, human rights, U.S. imperialism, and the military pivot to the Asian Pacific. Yet, perhaps in response to my prodding, their first point was to clarify the connection between making political hip hop music and doing actual cultural work. Again, MC Smoke:

I'll be real with you because maybe I've . . . gotten kind of disillusioned with the rap game. I've put in ten or fifteen years. I've done it. I know what it's like. I know how the business side works. . . . And I'm not saying I got chewed up and spit out, but I just realized this kind of industry of hip hop—the commodification of hip hop—is like any other capitalist venture. It's gonna exploit you and it's gonna spit you out. And it's gonna put you in retirement when you're no longer useful. You know? So I guess my point is that I'm at a place now where . . . I'm not trying to use music no longer as the thing that identifies me. I try to see myself more as . . . something else. You can call it an organizer, an activist, whatever. . . .

I just feel like there's a sense of urgency. I don't know if people feel it as much as they did eight years ago, but I feel like we're still in real critical times, and if we are gonna address these issues that we feel so passionately about, then let's actually do it—versus, like, just rappin about it; you know what I mean?

There's a lot of work that needs to be done. And if I'm still able in body and mind to contribute to it, then I will. . . . I don't know if this is going to be a good example or metaphor, but, like, you know like in a corny-ass old western movie

or some shit, they'll be like, "Get all the young men. . . . There's a monster coming and all the old people and women and children"—you know, this is sexist and all that stuff—"go hide 'em?" Like, I would rather be with the fight. Where I feel like if I am just going to assume the identity of an artist, then I'm not on the front lines with the people.

This chapter looks at the resurgence of political consciousness and embrace of community organizing in underground hip hop during the age of Obama. It does this by focusing on one particular group of hip hop artists/culture workers. Since 2000, a distinctly Filipino American hip hop music movement has emerged on the U.S. West Coast. The scene was founded on a critique of the historical and contemporary implications of U.S. imperialism for people of color and the working class. This music, authored by members of a highly politicized ethno-racial minority who stand outside the traditional black/white binaries that characterize U.S. race relations and hip hop's racial politics, aspires to expose injustices in U.S. domestic and foreign policies, undermine existing structures of power and inequality, and mobilize local grassroots communities to protest and political action.

The chapter uses a contextually grounded approach to explore the significance of Filipino American hip hop songs released during Bush's second term and Obama's first term. Both the music and the interviews with the music makers reveal how the underground scene has refocused on community work, educating and organizing people around issues like workers' rights, police harassment, U.S. foreign involvement in the Philippines, and the nation's dependence on remittances as a means of coping with the violence of global capitalism. While Filipino hip hop initially served as a vector for promoting young people's political awareness, over the last few years the artists have realized that political hip hop songs are not a replacement for grassroots political activism. While none of these musicians appears ready to stop making music, today community organizing primarily defines their role in the struggle. Linking this to presidential politics, I aim to highlight how the recognition that "sometimes rappin' ain't enough"<sup>3</sup> parallels the realization that President Barack Obama, even with the best of intentions,<sup>4</sup> could go only so far in creating the change many people hoped for and expected.

#### "THIS AIN'T THE HOPE OR THE CHANGE YOU IMAGINED"

Barack Obama's tenuous standing as America's "hip hop president" may tell us more about mainstream America's strategic deployment of hip hop than it does about the president's iPod playlist.<sup>5</sup> Like James McBride (2007), who calls hip hop "the most important cultural event of [his] lifetime," Obama has repeatedly argued for the profound cultural significance of hip hop artists such as Jay Z or Kanye West, but he

has failed to acknowledge artists who operate beyond the mainstream. Although the moniker “underground” has a long history within hip hop and other music genres as an index to community-based (noncorporate) legitimacy, a discernible break between underground hip hop and commercial rap took place in the 1990s, as the hip hop music industry oligopoly became more centralized and capitalist directed (Harrison, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Through this tiering process, the industry focused on rap music’s profitability and the marketable emcee (Tyranigel, 1999), which pushed historically recognized hip hop practices like break(dance)ing, deejaying, graffiti writing, and beatboxing underground. Over the course of rap music’s “golden era” (broadly speaking, 1986–1995), these other expressive traditions endured largely through the efforts of small communities of noncommercial purists. With the rise of underground hip hop music, hip hop culture arguably became whole again. Not coincidentally, this rise and resurgence corresponded with the popularization of the Internet as a means of linking geographically disparate communities, promoting independent artists, and recruiting new followers.

At the same time that underground rap music looked to outwardly reconnect with these other hip hop traditions, rappers themselves focused inward to use “rhyme skills” and “substance” to challenge the legitimacy of commercial rap. This lyrical counterclaim was based on two related standpoints. First, those gaining the most notoriety were not the most lyrically proficient rappers (i.e., “the rhyme skills argument”). Second, as a result of increasingly centralized control by music-industry oligopolies with little connection to hip hop’s communities of origin (see Negus, 1999), commercial rap had become devoid of meaningful content, particularly as it related to the (“imagined”) origins of rap as a voice of social consciousness and community protest (i.e., “the substance argument”). Of course, not all underground hip hop songs have substantive content. However, underground emcees’ calls to be legitimately recognized alongside, or in many cases as superior to, commercial rappers, principally occurred along the axes of unique and innovative lyrical stylings or the relevance of what they were talking about.

There is another aspect of underground emceeing that cannot escape notice: the racial dimension. Simply put, with a handful of notable exceptions, the history of commercial rap is dominated by African American artists and imagery, which some argue is the continuation of an age-old American tradition of selling damaging images of blackness (Heaggans, 2009). Since the late nineties, underground artists of all races and ethnicities have appeared. While the “digital divide” and high cost of home studio equipment was initially a barrier to participation, the decreasing cost of technology has enabled multicultural members of urban underclasses to create hip hop without the support of the music industry. Underground spaces allow emcees of all backgrounds to challenge the monolithic image of the authentically black emcee and to raise questions about who has the right to claim the hip hop voice (Harrison, 2008).

### “I LOVE THAT UNDERGROUND RAP SHIT, I LOVE MY MOM’S THICK FILIPINO ACCENT”

At these crossroads of nostalgic holism, lyrical creativity and content, and racial identity, the appearance of Filipino American rap music should come as no surprise.<sup>7</sup> As an ethnographer of West Coast underground hip hop back at the turn of the century, I was fortunate to witness the early years of its emergence (Harrison, 2009). Yet looking back over more than ten years of fandom and friendship, I note that all the artists I initially recognized within this subgenre have had careers that either immediately or eventually converged on two shared attributes.<sup>8</sup> First, they have all collaborated in music, appearing with one another on songs, on albums, and in live shows—they also share a cadre of producers.<sup>9</sup> Second, each of the artists has released music through the Los Angeles–based Beatrock Music record label.<sup>10</sup> If one of the surest ways of assigning identity is through self-identification, it’s clear that this group of artists—including Power Struggle, Bambu, Kiwi, Rocky Rivera, Bwan, and Prometheus Brown (a.k.a. Geologic of Blue Scholars)—understand themselves to be collectively part of something that I will call a politically progressive, Filipino hip hop music-making community.<sup>11</sup>

While hip hop’s non-rapping elements have been diversified for well over 20 years, young West Coast Filipinos have been remarkably active in sustaining these less-glorified practices. In the 1990s, Filipino deejays such as the Invisibl Skratch Piklz (featuring Q-Bert, Apollo, Shortkut, and Mixmaster Mike), DJ Babu, and DJ Rhettmatic began gaining national and worldwide acclaim through their successes in deejay competitions (de Leon, 2004; Sue, 2002). This prominence followed from a 1980s tradition of Filipino mobile deejay crews (see Wang, 2004). Mark Katz asserts that “[a]nyone with more than a passing interest in turntablism<sup>12</sup> knows that Filipinos, especially Filipino Americans, are richly represented in the highest ranks of the art” (Katz, 2012, p. 137). During these years, young Filipinos were also gaining prominence within breaking and graffiti scenes—although the latter’s anonymity often precludes traditional identity-politics issues. The most notable Filipino graffiti writer on the West Coast was Mike “Dream” Francisco, who was tragically killed in Oakland in 2000. Following Dream’s death, longtime Bay Area hip hop aficionado Billy Jam described him as “one of hip hop’s best” (Jam, 2000)—and there have been numerous songs and events memorializing him. Similarly, Filipino American b-boys and b-girls have had a formidable presence within West Coast breaking scenes. As Geologic explained in Mark Redondo Villegas’s 2009 documentary *Hip Hop Mestizaje*, “[M]y whole life, I’ve always known like the Pinoy cats to be the illest b-boys” (Villegas, 2009).

Whereas hip hop was initially imagined as having started in—and therefore having the most social relevance to the lives of young people in—New York City’s black and Latino communities (see, for example, Rose, 1994; Perkins, 1996; Chang, 2005), as its geographic influence spread, such exclusionary perspectives subsided. In the context of California, de facto membership in the hip hop nation is extended

to young Filipinos. As just one of several examples, in the 2006 song "Police Trapp," by the Oakland African American duo The Sweeps (who are part of the Slumlordz collective), emcee Dave Doses, after describing a series of unwarranted dealings with California law enforcement, closes his verse with the explanation that this is the "usual routine, if you're Black or Mexican or Filipino" (Slumlordz, 2006). Similarly, there is no shortage of Filipino American hip hop songs that thickly describe being harassed by police as members of an urban underclass.<sup>13</sup> Although a distaste for authority figures may be found among young (rebellious) Americans from all walks of life, these feelings are intensely felt within the urban black and brown working classes, where police are often viewed as representing and enforcing the interests of the dominant white society (Anderson, 1994).

In the mid-nineties, when ethnic studies scholar Gary Okihiro provocatively asked "Is Yellow Black or White?" (1994), his aim was to claim a position for Asian Americans outside the bifurcated frames of racial reference that U.S. race relations had compelled them to choose among. The multiple subject position of those Americans who identify as Asian, as Yen Le Espiritu has perceptively explained, results from both their social position in the United States and the position of their homeland in the globalized racial order (2003, p. 6). In the case of the Philippines, U.S. imperialism—founded on pillars of military occupation, propagandic popular media, and colonialist educational curricula—has imposed a hegemonic glorification of all things American, which racially renders all things Filipino inferior, invisible, and/or relatively meaningless (San Juan, 1991; Kramer, 2006). Revising Okihiro's color continuum, Filipinos in America are often referred to as "brown Asians" (see Espiritu, 1992, p. 32)—a reference that carries both negative and positive connotations depending on the politics behind its usage.

For young Filipinos invested in hip hop culture and politicized against local, national, and global structures of inequality, their brownness signals membership in a collective working-class, people-of-color movement against U.S. and corporate global dominance. It also locates them contiguously with the historical struggles of black people in America. Filipino graphic artist David Araquel affirms this linkage when he explains: "[T]he things that [black people have] gone through, as minorities we could connect with that; we kinda feel that we could connect with what they're saying and they're kinda saying how we feel" (Villegas, 2009). This negotiation of experienced racism and the commercial images of black American coolness has an enduring history with many immigrant groups, and it has most recently been experienced through the aperture of hip hop (see Maira, 2002; Perry, 2004). As Bambu explained in a 2006 interview:

We always say hip-hop is a black art, an art started by inner-city black youth. They made this wonderful culture. We aren't making Asian hip-hop. We're not saying, "there's hip-hop, and then there's Latin hip-hop or Asian hip-hop." We're honored to be able to do this in the same tradition as Kool Herc.<sup>14</sup> At the same

time, we're Filipino, we're not black. We happen to be Filipino and that's gonna come out, it's natural. (Maharaj, 2006a)

Citing their formidable presence within Californian urban culture for much of the 20th century, Victor Hugo Viesca asserts that, at the start of the 21st century, Filipino Americans are fueling the hip hop explosion within the state (Viesca, 2003).

Since the changes to immigration laws in 1965—ending decades of strict quotas on immigration from the Philippines—Filipino Americans have steadily become one of the largest groups falling under the Asian/Pacific Island racial umbrella.<sup>15</sup> In the current century, their standing has fluctuated between the second largest (according to the 2000 U.S. census, behind only Chinese Americans) and the third largest (behind also Indian Americans in 2010). Despite these numbers, Filipinos have historically been misrecognized as, for example, Chinese or even Spanish, owing to their colonial surnames (Pisares, 2006). Much of this is a result of their relative invisibility within popular culture, which Filipino scholar-activist Oscar Campomanes (1992) explains as both a symptom and a mechanism of U.S. imperialism. The rise of a handful of celebrity figures—like Michelle Malkin,<sup>16</sup> Bruno Mars, and, most notably, Manny Pacquiao—has made inroads into increasing (self-)visibility.

For young Filipinos, these poignant self-recognitions—fueled by a charge for self-determination—issue from longstanding experiences of racial ambiguity and invisibility. Indeed, such national consciousness defines Filipino as an identity distinct from various preexisting racial poles that dominate U.S. race relations (see Maira, 2002). Though not nationally recognized on the scale of Pacquiao, in West Coast hip hop circles, the music by artists like Blue Scholars, Rocky Rivera, Bambu, and Kiwi is a galvanizing force in connecting identities that collectively revise Filipinos' self-image on their own terms. Reflecting on his early days rapping, Kiwi explained that it took time to feel comfortable rapping about "being children of immigrant parents or the experiences of working class Filipinos" (Maharaj, 2006b). Bambu's 2012 song "So Many"—which opens with the line, "California Filipinos, Yo, we down as Fuck!" and eventually gives way to the repeated refrain "I'm Filipino than a Mafuckah!" (2012)—is nothing short of a declaration that young Californian Filipinos have arrived.

Filipino youth are using hip hop culture as a resource against their social marginalization, yet their unique position within the hip hop nation is a result of multiple and multiplex factors and influences. Their understanding of these has been nourished through the rise of Filipino studies as a particular offshoot of Asian American studies within the academy. Such scholar-activist programs—which include African American studies, Asian American studies, women's and gender studies, and American Indian studies—have strong links with grassroots community organizations and frequently cultivate and shelter community allied insurgent intellectuals (Cabusao, 2007), thus making universities fertile grounds for nurturing agents of change who advance community-level political awareness.

The remainder of this chapter features sections from my post-2012 presidential election interview with Power Struggle. Some of the key themes that came up in our conversation that evening include: (1) the process of becoming politicized and how that is expressed in their music, (2) views of presidential politics and the connection between Obama and hip hop, and (3) their commitment to social justice and national self-determination in the Philippines. The interview was conducted in one of the member's kitchens, following a Thanksgiving celebration at the Filipino Community Center (FCC) in the Excelsior district of San Francisco. That evening, in addition to good food and friendship, the FCC community took part in a series of ice-breaking exercises that opened up discussions of such topics as wage discrimination among domestic healthcare workers, the Philippine economy's reliance on remittances, and the impact of job loss on one's ability to pay rent. Parts of the interview are interspersed with commentary aimed at contextualizing the activities of this one music group within the larger movement.

"IT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT I HEARD A FILIPINO BROTHER BREAK THE SHIT DOWN"

As with other emcees in this politically progressive hip hop music-making community, MC Smoke grew up surrounded by hip hop culture.<sup>17</sup> Yet relocating to the Bay Area, and being introduced to the political organizing that was in place there, is prominent in his account of the experiences that led to his politicization as an artist:

I loved hip hop. Coming from a typical b-boy, working-class experience but I never really like analyzed it. Even though I was into a lot of political hip hop, I wasn't necessarily trying to go in that direction. . . . Moving to San Francisco and hooking up with progressive Filipino organizations—specifically organizations in the Bay Area that were part of the National Democratic Movement for the Philippines—being exposed to their work and their campaigns really kind of changed my life in a major way. So I think naturally the music was to shift in that direction. . . .

I had moved out here with an old girlfriend . . . and she got into grad school here. So she had some friends out here who were progressive Filipinos. . . . So I'd go to their different events, fundraisers, you know these little shows that a lot of community people do and it was really moving for me.

Although MC Smoke did not become politicized in a college setting, the proximity of academe is notable in his experience. Oliver Wang (2007) points to the centrality of universities in many Asian American hip-hoppers' development into artists—in this regard, the experiences of Filipinos are no different. Campus life brings together young people with few restrictions on time, relatively large influxes of money, and initial test markets taking the form of college radio and student events (Harrison, 2012).

Seattle's Blue Scholars came together through the Student Hip-Hop Organization of the University of Washington (Matos, 2005). DJ Phatrick of Native Guns connected with Kiwi and Bambu through his membership in the Students for Hip Hop organization at the University of California, Berkeley (Maharaj, 2006b). Similarly, Kiwi, whose debut album, *Writes of Passage: Portraits of a Son Rising* (2003), was incorporated into the syllabus of a Filipino American literature class at San Francisco State University (see Harrison, 2012, p. 42), talks about being the only non-college member of the League of Filipino Students in Los Angeles (Tandoc, 2009).

In the tradition of classic biographies of transformation, MC Smoke's hinges on a key moment of realization that took place at a community event.

In 2004 there was this huge massacre in the Philippines—Hacienda Luisita—these were sugarcane workers that were part of . . . a peasant farmer union out there against this huge landlord called the Cojuangco Aquinos. The Cojuangco Aquinos are part of the Filipino dynasties that basically had run the Philippines for many years.<sup>18</sup> And there was this really crazy massacre that happened where . . . fourteen workers were murdered, women and children were injured. And I went to this show with this other band called Eskapo—which is a punk band from the Bay Area—and they had gotten this raw footage from the massacre. And I had just gotten back from the Philippines like a week before, on a family trip, and then I found myself at this concert at Bindlestiff Theater, which is a Filipino theater South of Market [Street]. And they played this footage and . . . it was just really life changing because I couldn't believe the blatant disrespect for human life that I was seeing. And being exposed to that and wanting to learn more and learning that this was not an isolated incident. This wasn't an isolated thing that happened in the Philippines. There's a history of these kinds of tragic events that are perpetuated by the State.<sup>19</sup> So all these doors in my mind started opening and I started learning more and that started shaping my politics.

It's notable that MC Smoke had recently returned from the Philippines:

After seeing the poverty and the economic, political, and social conditions there, and then this event happened, that heightened it even more.

Both Kiwi and Pele have recounted similar experiences of having their politics transformed through travel to the Philippines. In the last ten years a number of community organizations have started sponsoring "exposure trips" designed to educate people about the social, economic, and political conditions in the Philippines, as well as to show them the level of organization and mobilization surrounding the National Democratic Movement. Many artists have discussed these exposures as life-changing events; and, indeed, a documentary was made about Kiwi's second exposure trip in 2007 (Tandoc, 2009). "After my exposure trip," Nomi recalls, "I realized that I wanted

to commit my artistic talent to exposing the contradictions that kept the Philippines on a third world status" (triciaCA, n.d.). MC Smoke continues:

I don't know if, when you are starting to make music on a certain issue or on a certain theme, if it's completely conscious . . . but I do think that there was a period where through spending time and becoming an organizer and learning about cultural activism as a tool [I started doing it]. I always was inspired by that idea of music, hip hop or whatever, different forms, being a multi-media tool for the community and for various issues. But I think that it was many things in tandem that happened together. It wasn't just like waking up one day like "alright, I'm gonna write progressive hip hop." It was also studies that I was taking with friends. . . . It was also books that were being loaned to me about Philippines history, about American history, about world history, about economics. So there were multiple things that were happening.

This experience, this metamorphosis of artists to cultural worker, isn't this isolated experience that I've had. I've talked to many artists. . . . This change occurs when they are going through this kind of political education. Where they decide that they wanna learn more about an alternative to what they've already experienced in life, or like, what's been forced down their throat.

Still, MC Smoke was reluctant to characterize his music as overtly political:

I think the main theme [in my music] is about addressing contradictions, within myself, within society, within the community, within interpersonal relationships. I don't know what it sounds like to other people but I'm not trying to judge you based on me thinking that I have some higher moral standing. I'm trying to just be like, why do you do this thing, and I do this thing and we clash? Or why are different systems clashing? So that's like the overarching theme. But then my direct themes, like, obviously, migration and immigration are real important things to me and this community. I consider myself a proletarian, so [I talk about] working-class issues. Even more directly, issues of workers; like the nine-to-five or eight-hour, ten-hour, twelve-hour struggle with wages; and you know, their inability to really control anything; the disempowerment of workers and then empowerment of them.

AKH: "That's not what I expected to hear. What about the Philippines and what about the Filipino experience outside of the Philippines, particularly in America?"

It's also like that international perspective of trying to connect with everyone but I also automatically associate Filipino with all those things. I don't feel like I would have to justify, "I'm talking about race, class, and Filipino culture." It's like no, I'm talking about race and class and I'm Filipino. So those things are already going to be in it, you know?"

### "YOU AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A SON OF A BUSH"

On the eve of his inauguration in 2001, George W. Bush was poised to have a seminal presidency.<sup>20</sup> As the first U.S. president in the new millennium, and having won a controversial and hotly contested election,<sup>21</sup> regardless of what might occur during his tenure as the commander-in-chief, the second Bush presidency would be historically significant. At that time, while I was living in the San Francisco Bay Area conducting ethnographic fieldwork within its underground hip hop scene (Harrison 2009),<sup>22</sup> few would have predicted the events of September 11th, the subsequent rise in U.S. nationalism, and the start of a two-front "war against terror"—events that an emerging generation of young progressives would be forced to use to define their politicization.

Yet the events that followed—and persisted through a second controversial Bush election in 2004—created a national context for the emergence of a politicized Filipino voice that took aim at the excesses of American global capitalism and military reach. MC Smoke recalled the years when he first began incorporating a political Filipino perspective into his music:

It was a very critical time in our contemporary life because the war in Iraq was raging, the war in Afghanistan was raging, President Bush was in his second term. You know, things were just seemingly worse than they've been in a long time. So I think the country as a whole. . . . Many peers of mine who were political were also critical, like, things were messed up.

The collection of music released between 2003 and 2008<sup>23</sup> featured pointed critiques of U.S. domestic and foreign policies that personified administrative politics through the wickedous portrayal of George W. Bush. Songs like Kiwi's "The Takeback" (2007c) and the ineffable "When Bush Comes to Shove" (2007b) are classic commentaries on the failings of the Bush presidency to serve the interests of most Americans and its continued abuses and exploitation of working people across the globe.

With Senator Barack Obama's emergence as the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2008, the hip hop community's traditional criticism of presidential politics was unsettled. Obama's 2008 "hip hop presidency" has been attributed to his race, his relative youth,<sup>24</sup> his basketball hobby, and complicity in forging a hip-hop connection—including reporting having Jay Z on his iPod, playing Will.i.am's "Yes We Can" at his campaign rallies, and popularizing the fist bump (Jeffries, 2011; Billet, 2013; Nielson, 2013). As a former community organizer, an inspirer of hope with a promise for change, and a multiracial, multiethnic person of color with cosmopolitan ties to places like Kenya, Indonesia, and Hawaii, Obama embodied many things that globally conscious, civic-minded believers in the political potential of hip hop could identify with and take stock in. As such, many hip-hoppers embraced Obama, and even some of the more politically outspoken felt compelled to spare him from the usual scrutiny (Gosa, 2010).

From the outset, MC Smoke was ambivalent about the promises and audacities of an Obama presidency:

I was never under the illusion that if I really got on the Obama campaign in '08 that things were going to change. Because I knew that this country is an imperialist country from the get-go. It is the God of capitalism. And [I knew] that one man, woman, whoever, in the position would not dismantle everything that it's done to get to its level. And I wasn't going to disillusion myself and be like, you know what, maybe? *Maybe?*

And I'm not one of those that say "Fuck You! Don't vote." Cause I think that's stupid. I participated in local things. I participated in statewide things. Things that I felt like we could actually hold people accountable for. But at this level, the way it's set up, I just didn't really think that there was much to be changed. And I think we were pretty right in terms of a lot of the policies that were supposed to be instituted.

#### "JAY Z AND BARACK DIDN'T CHANGE MY BLOCK"

Reflecting on Obama's connection to hip hop,<sup>25</sup> MC Smoke was more concerned about what the implied partnership of presidential politics and capitalism meant for the most important cultural event of James McBride's lifetime:

Just thinking about [hip hop and Obama] . . . it's weird, like. I feel like it's definitely shifted the class dynamic of hip hop in a lot of ways. If you look at some of the artists that in their music have claimed to be like, "I was tweeting with Obama." Like Jay Z says some shit like that. [Or Young Jeezy], right after Obama won [he came out with] that song, "My president's black, My Lambo's blue." It was weird cause these are all, like, seemingly wealthy artists that project the love of money. You know what I'm sayin'? And a lot of their own perspectives are like, "I've done this all by myself." Like, "I'm Jay Z, I came up from nothing and I did this by myself. My Lambo's blue, president's black. I came up and I made this money myself." And even the narrative about President Obama as an individual that rose up. So it's like this very individualistic kind of narrative that they're pushing. And so, it's weird because coming from hip hop's original dynamic of the racial and political struggles of black and brown people in the seventies, eighties, nineties, it's a shift to *me*, know what I'm sayin'? To these people who really identify with materialist things.

The class dynamic that MC Smoke astutely points to is a narrative of American individual accomplishment that aligns with the neoconservative agenda of celebrating our nation as a meritocracy, in which each person has an equal opportunity and

where race-conscious policies and programs aimed at addressing historically rooted inequalities are targeted as "reverse discrimination." As such, the tenuous relationship between Obama and hip hop tells us more about the corporate mainstreaming of hip hop than about the forty-fourth president.

#### "CONTRADICTIONS OF A COUNTRY WHERE CORRUPTION IS KING"

Before our interview ended,<sup>26</sup> MC Smoke had a final point to make about the situation internationally:

I'm not sure if this book will have any Filipino perspectives directly about the Obama presidency. But in a nutshell, I feel like generally Filipinos vote in the trend of Democrat. There are some very conservative ones. But there's even like suborganizations, like Filipino democratic associations, Filipinos for Obama.<sup>27</sup> And I think they do good things or they're very well meaning. They want—just like everybody—they want some change and a better society or improvements in the society.

But I think that one thing just to be real about, in terms of what has changed for the Philippines under four years of this presidency, it's really *nothing*. So you know, in terms of military budgets that the Philippines military gets from the U.S. taxpayer. It's still going to death squads and militarization and military buildup and strategic naval bases. And there are a lot of things that are connected to that, like the exploitation and rape of women and prostitution and, you know, the Visiting Forces Agreement.<sup>28</sup> . . . And so there's different economic policies that remain the same. There's the inequalities of transnational corporations. You know what I'm sayin'? The targeting [of the Philippines] now that Obama really is trying to highlight China as the new major threat. And that's why I'm sayin' it's not the individual. There's a program when you get into that office that you have to follow. A protocol. And so, now that China is identified as the new growing superpower and the one that's really threatening the U.S. So now they're trying to develop all these strategic locations to, kind of, isolate China. And the Philippines would be the number one place. And that's why this is important for the readers to understand what the ramifications of imperialism are and that Obama is just another imperialist president.

At this point Pele, who had observed quietly for much of the interview, spoke up:

You could add Bush, you could add Reagan, you could add any name to the title and it's variations of the same shit. You know what I'm sayin'? And Obama doesn't make it any more special. Just 'cause he's black, or half-black. And the thing is that he represents the same imperialist agenda, the same multinational corporations. He's deported more immigrants than George Bush.<sup>29</sup> He says he

was gonna close Guantanamo; he never did. The list goes on and on. And going back to one of the main things Smoke was talking about, this push to the Asian Pacific. There's this whole military pivot to the Asian Pacific. And he's saying he's withdrawing from the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> . . . He's redirecting, and if anything he's starting anew . . . not even new, 'cause they did this in the forties. I mean, they did this in the 1900s in the Philippines and through[out] the Asian Pacific. They're doing it again. And they're continuing to do it with this thing called the Transnational Pacific Partnership agreement, the TPP, which aligns all these imperialist and multinational corporations. It's like the NAFTA of Asia.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a projected international trade and investment pact (currently) being proposed among 12 Pacific-rim countries, most notably the United States. The TPP, which has been linked to corporate behemoths like Wal-Mart, JPMorgan, Chevron, GE, and Halliburton (Citizens Trade Campaign, 2012), is said to "have the potential to become a new framework of international [trade] rules to substantially replace the WTO" (Tatsuhiko, 2014). Thus far, the negotiations surrounding this free-trade agreement have been among the most secretive in history. On March 4, 2013, an open letter to the U.S. Congress, objecting to the proposed terms and ongoing secrecy surrounding the TPP, was signed by over 400 organizations, including organizations that Filipino hip-hoppers are actively involved in (Open Letter, 2013). If passed without the informed oversight of the American public, the TPP is expected to threaten workers' rights, food sovereignty, the environment, and indigenous rights, while granting transnational corporations unprecedented freedoms from the laws and interests of national governments (Marshall, 2012). Rationalized as a measure to stimulate the consumer economy and counterbalance the growing influence of China, for community organizers concerned about U.S. foreign involvement in the Philippines, it's clearly part of a pivot toward the Asian Pacific strategy.

Noting the increasing military presence of the United States in the Pacific, and the associated social costs, including widening income disparities and political repression, both Power Struggle members closed with an appeal to radical humanism. First, MC Smoke:

My wish would be that one day the Philippines is a free nation. That it is not run by corrupt politicians and by a small, one percent of landlords. And it's not dictated by foreign powers and foreign companies. And that there's not massive exploitation and joblessness and landlessness.

At this point, my goal is to let these kids [in the U.S.] know what their country is. To have a better understanding of what their migration is all about. To reconnect to why their parents left or why they left when they were a young-ass person. And to be inspired, too, by this movement in the Philippines. By this mass movement. And to be inspired by the fact that there are rebels in the Philippines. Because we have a tendency to romanticize revolution. And I think

that's great. I romanticize it all the time. From the French Revolution to the Cuban Revolution to the Bolivian Revolution to the South African Revolution. I romanticize revolution because revolution is freedom. And I want kids in the U.S. or wherever, kids that listen to my music—'cause I'm not going to assume—to at least study that and at least understand that there is this revolution in the Philippines, and for forty years it's been fighting what they call, in the movement, the three basic problems: imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism/corruption, [and] feudalism/landlessness. . . . And this fighting spirit of their people continues. . . . They have to understand what these things are—these three basic problems.

And, Pele:

I think Smoke said it well, but some stuff to add would be, you know, whether it's here in the U.S. or in the Philippines, when folks don't have resources, like health care, relevant education, housing—you know, basic human needs, and the government is supposedly supposed to be a democracy and supposed to serve these resources and it's not doing that, then the people need to take it upon themselves to provide for themselves. And connecting back to what Smoke was saying, by any means necessary. And whether it's through these different means of teaching and music, or defending themselves and picking up arms while doing it to protect their communities. That's just what it comes down to. These basic human needs, you know? Being able to get what people deserve—you know, what all humans deserve.

#### CONCLUSION: "WE LIVING FOR THE DOLLAR BUT WE DYING FOR CHANGE"

The perspectives and experiences expressed here by members of Power Struggle are not necessarily representative of all Filipino American politically conscious hip hop artists.<sup>31</sup> Nor, for that matter, does the collection of musicians affiliated with the Beatrock Music label represent all artists/activists—Filipino or otherwise—involved in (re)investing in local, grassroots issues as an alternative to national electoral politics. Still, Power Struggle's views and understandings are illustrative of the idea that hip hop can shift from being a generative force in developing young people's consciousness to an activity that stands alongside, or even secondary to, legitimate community work.

As hip hop artists, Power Struggle and their Beatrock label mates are participating in a signifying discourse on race, nation, and global politics that aspires to reconfigure the intersection of talk and action. While these artists occasionally mention Obama, the lack of change since Bush and the first Obama administration have solidified their belief that political rhymes are no substitute for political activism. Instead of waiting for elected officials to address local and global issues, the



artists I talked to see community work as the basis for constructing shared identities around political projects that aim to revise and reform current social structures. Unlike the individual-success narratives created by commercial emcees like Jay Z and Jeezy, these Filipino artists are interested in collective uplift beyond one, individual black man.

In the places and spaces where hip hop artistry meets advanced politicization there is the potential to blaze a transformative path from artistic expression, through political awareness, and ultimately to community organizing. At the same time, what gets projected as hip hop to the wider, national mainstream often amounts to little more than sensationalized gestures, slogans, and music playlists. My hope is that this chapter will push readers to recognize that even amid such commercialized frivolity, hip hop is still being deployed by young people to (re)define their future—particularly by those who have experienced and realized how existing power structures have historically worked against them. West Coast Filipino hip hop artist-organizers understand themselves as part of a worldwide working-class citizenry that enacts their identity in resistance to these globalizing forces. Rapping may not be enough, but progressive underground hip hop offers the promise of an extracurricular, organic intellectualism that can become an avenue to action.

Despite MC Smoke's reluctance to embrace an artist-first identity, I find myself struck by the consistency between his perspectives/music and those of his Filipino Beatrock Music label mates. Somewhere in both the germ of their political views and the media through which they circulate (i.e., recorded music), hip hop matters. Yet revisiting Pele's opening quote, I remind readers that listening to Power Struggle, or any political artist for that matter, is meaningless and even offensive if it's merely a form of consumption aimed at fashioning an identity around political symbols and/or assuaging liberal guilt. These hip hop narratives, voiced with conviction and backed by local action and transnational awareness, are too powerful to mistreat this way. The music that has emerged out of these rapidly gentrifying multiracial metropolises, where everyday people are increasingly packed into the few remaining and shrinking working-class enclaves, forms the front line of a critical struggle for young people's consciousness—a space in which they get informed, get together, and collectively act.

For much of hip hop's history, the trope of a black presidency served as a potent symbol through which to gain political traction. In a 1989 N.W.A video, Dr. Dre "expressed himself" from the Oval Office of the Black House by slamming the phone on Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev; a decade later, Tupac would leverage this unlikely possibility to draw attention to American racism; and in 2007, Bay Area rapper G-Stack declared himself "George W. Kush" from the steps of the Capitol building.<sup>32</sup> Yet, at a time when rap music's presence at mass sporting events, in suburban aerobics classes, and at political rallies is remarkably unremarkable, it's a cruel irony that, for those most invested in hip hop's political potential, the actualization of a black president is a hollow shell of the once pregnant metaphor.

## NOTES

1. The chapter title quote ("Change that wouldn't fill a homeless man's cup up," is from Bambu (2011, "A Dollar").
2. A pseudonym.
3. From Power Struggle (2008, "Sometimes Rappin Ain't Enough").
4. Which within politically conscious hip hop circles continues to be a matter of debate.
5. The section title quote ("This ain't the hope or the change you imagined") is from Blue Scholars (2011, "Hussein").
6. Including selling cars, clothes, and jewelry, as well as glorifying images of black violence and sexual objectification.
7. The section title quote ("I love that underground rap shit, I love my mom's thick Filipino accent") is from Kiwi (2003, "Love, Continued").
8. Outside of ethnicity (Filipino American) and region (West Coast), of course.
9. Most notably Fatgums, Mr. Rey, and Sabzi (of the group Blue Scholars).
10. Importantly, only one of the below-mentioned six artists had their initial release on Beatrock Music. Thus, the record label should be thought of as a common destination in their career trajectories, rather than a common platform through which they were first introduced.
11. Throughout most of the remainder of this chapter, I drop the cumbersome qualifier "American" and refer to Filipino Americans simply as "Filipinos."
12. The term turntablism, which is credited to Filipino American deejay Babu, refers to the recognition of hip hop deejaying practice as its own instrumental artform (Katz, 2012).
13. Examples include Power Struggles' "Artofficialfreedom" (2010), Native Gun's "Ooolee" (2007), Blue Scholar's "Oskar Barnack-Oscar Grant" (2011), Bwan's "Pressure" (2012), and Bambu's "Always All Day" (2007), "Crooks and Rooks" (2008), and "Pepper Spray" (2012). These follow from a "golden era" tradition of songs about police harassment and abuse, including N.W.A's "Fuck tha Police" (1988), Compton's Most Wanted's "One Time Gaffled 'Em Up" (1990), and Boogie Down Productions/KRS-One's "Who Protects Us From You" (1989) and "Sound of da Police" (1993).
14. DJ Kool Herc is widely credited as the creator of hip hop or, more precisely, the deejay who threw the first party where hip hop music is recognized as having originated (see Chang, 2005, pp. 67–85).
15. Much of the initial post-1965 exodus was fueled by the repressive measures of the Marcos regime and the declaration of martial law in 1972 (Geron, de la Cruz, Saito, & Singh, 2001).
16. Arguably for all the wrong reasons—hear Prometheus Brown's 2010 release "Michelle Malkin."
17. The section title quote ("It was the first time that I heard a Filipino brother break the shit down") is Nomi speaking about his first time listening to Kiwi's album (Kiwi, 2007a, "Moment of Clarity").
18. For a comprehensive discussion of the central role of these family-based oligarchies in contributing to political corruption, the amassment of private wealth, and violence in the Philippines provinces, see McCoy (2009a).
19. In the Hacienda Luisita Massacre of November 16, 2004, army riflemen fired into a crowd of striking sugar plantation workers, killing fourteen and injuring two hundred

see Rebolusyonaryong, 2004). The Escalante Massacre (also known as "Bloody Thursday") occurred on September 20, 1985, when army special forces and local police turned automatic rifles and machine guns on a crowd of thousands of protesting sugar workers, farmers, fishermen and women, students, urban poor and professionals; 20 people lost their lives (see Ombion, 2004). In the Mendiola Massacre of January 22, 1987, riot police and marines gunned down a group of "peacefully" parading peasants, killing 17 and seriously wounding 62 (see McCoy, 2009b, p. 433). More recently, in the Maguindanao Massacre, 57 people—including 2 human rights lawyers and 30 local journalists—were brutally executed and buried in shallow graves that had "already been excavated using a government-owned backhoe"; the journalists and lawyers were accompanying Genalyn Mangudadatu (also murdered) on her way to a local election office to file a certificate of candidacy for her husband, Esmael Mangudadatu (see Asian Human Rights Commission, 2009; also hear Bambu 2012). These are just a handful of examples of the "tragic events that are perpetuated by the State" that MC Smoke alludes to.

20. The section title quote ("You ain't nothin' but a son of a Bush") is from Kiwi (2007b, "When Bush Comes to Shove").

21. The outcome would not be confirmed until a U.S. Supreme Court ruling on December 12, 2000.

22. For an elaboration on this day and evening, see the preamble of Harrison (2012).

23. Including releases like Blue Scholars' self-titled debut (2003), *The Long March* EP (2005), and *Bayani* (2007); Native Guns' *Barrel Men* (2006) and *Stray Bullet Mixtape Vol. 2* (2007); Bambu's . . . *I Scream Bars for the Children* (2007), and . . . *Exact Change* (2008); Kiwi's *The Summer Exposure Mixtape* (2007); and *Power Struggle Hearts & Minds* (2008).

24. Although his year of birth, 1961, is a few years earlier than what Bakari Kitwana refers to as the hip hop generation—black Americans born between 1965 and 1984 (Kitwana, 2002).

25. The section title quote ("Jay Z and Barack didn't change my block") is from Bambu (2008, "Like Us").

26. The section title quote ("Contradictions of a country where corruption is king") is from Power Struggle (2010, "Three Basic Problems").

27. A 2012 national survey of Asian Americans showed that more Filipinos identify as Republicans (27%) than Democrats (25%), with most (45%) identifying as Independent. This was a notable shift from prior surveys; it also revealed that among Asian American groups, Filipinos showed the strongest support for Mitt Romney (Ramakrishnan & Lee, 2012). Post-election reports indicate that 65% of Filipino Americans who voted, voted for Obama ("New Findings," 2013).

28. The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) is an agreement that sets the terms for the conduct of foreign military. Most specifically, it concerns criminal jurisdiction over foreign military personnel. Many politicized Filipinos, both in the United States and the Philippines, view the presence of a foreign—U.S.—military in the Philippines as an extension of "neo-colonial, superior-subordinate bondage" and an act of imperial aggression (Center for People Empowerment and Governance, 2010). The U.S. VFA with the Philippines—which has been described as America's second front against "terrorism, rogue regimes, and emerging powers, such as China" (Center for People Empowerment and Governance, 2010)—was controversially implicated in the case of the alleged raping of a Filipino woman by four U.S. Marines in 2005. Only one of the four was convicted, and, following U.S. embassy protests, the accused was placed in American custody, sparking calls for nullifying the VFA (see Natoreyes, 2011; also hear Bambu 2007).

29. This is based on per-month averages at the end of Obama's first term, not overall numbers compared to Bush's two terms (Khimmm, 2012).

30. In September 2014, new developments in Syria and Iraq refocused U.S. military attention on the Middle East.

31. The section title quote ("We living for the dollar but we dying for change") is from Kiwi (2007d, "The Beat Proper").

32. See N.W.A.'s "Express Yourself" video (1989); Tupac's song "Changes" (1998), which Nas sampled in his 2008 song "Black President," and G-Stack's *George W. Kush* album cover (2007).

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