

## **Barack Obama: Our Pop Culture President ... and the End of Racism in America?**

In 2007, I taught a class at Minnesota State University Moorhead, a small capstone course in American studies that focused on violence in the United States. During one of our class conversations, one of my students—a young African American man who was passionate about politics and popular culture—told me about a politician named Barack Obama. Obama, he told me, was going to be the next President of the United States.

At that time, the idea of the first black president seemed impossible.

[slide 2]

Comedians like Dave Chappelle joked about being the first black president ...

[50 sec. video clip of Chappelle stand up]

[slide 3]

And comedians, rappers, artists, and activists used a black lens to provide a variety of creative critiques of the presidents before Obama.

For instance, Chappelle also imagined what a “Black Bush” would be like—explaining George Bush’s decisions with exaggerated comedic attitude and truth.

Such critiques are vital since black people in America have never had a reason to feel represented by the United States Government. They have been betrayed too many times. Further, they—like women and all ethnic and racial minorities—have

been underrepresented at every level of governmental service as well as in other spheres of cultural power like business, popular culture, and media, where they are stereotyped, belittled, exaggerated, undercut, and misrepresented. Each of these betrayals is not just a slight to black people, but to the whole of America.

[slide 4 of at is a hammer]

But, pop culture is complex and contested—and there is power in popular culture.

[slide 5 of merchandising images]

The support of Barack Obama in the sphere of popular culture is no surprise as the plethora of merchandising illustrates.

[slide 6 of collectables]

When Obama was campaigning, many hip hop artists rallied behind him. For instance, in anticipation of Obama's election, Rap artist Young Jeezy imagined "My President."

[slide 7 of Young Jeezy]

Info from slide

[50 sec video clip of "My President" (ad)]

Also before Obama was elected, Will.i.am produced a song and video with a somber and serious tone, "Yes We Can."

[slide 8 Will.i.am Yes We Can]

Info from slide

[50 sec video clip of Yes We can]

And then there was the historic election of the First Black President

[slide 9 of Nov. 4]

[slide 10 of Will.i.am A New Day]

And Will.i.am was back with “A New Day,” a far more upbeat song of celebration.

Info from slide.

[50 sec video clip of “A New Day” (ad)]

[slide 11]

After Obama’s two terms in office, a journalist for *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, proclaimed “My President Was Black” in a cover story for the January/February 2017 issue, and later in his book.

During this interview, Obama reflected on the likelihood of his presidency... animated here

[slide 11 with 1 min clip. Animated]

But, of course, not all white people were okay with Barack Obama.

\* [slide 12 Backlash]

When Obama was elected president, people cheered in the streets. People cried tears of joy and disbelief. Black people thought that maybe their nation was finally ready to embrace them. Liberal white people imagined that the days of racism were finally in the past. Some people thought we could move on, that we would never go back to the kind of racism that existed before the election of Barack Obama.

Again, not everyone was pleased with the election of The First Black President....

[slide 13]

Before he was elected, during his presidency and re-election campaign, and continuing through the backlash perpetuated by the Tea Party and then by Donald Trump and his followers, not only do we not see the end of racism in America, we see an insidious resurgence of blatant white supremacy that was never so visible during the previous Bush I and Bush II and Clinton administrations.

[slide 14]

We see racist caricatures drawing on old stereotypes and Jim Crow imagery.

[slide 15]

We see attacks on citizenship

[slide 16]

We even see attacks on Michelle Obama, a pop culture force, hero, and icon in her own right.

[slide 17]

We see this angry, insidious racism perpetuated largely through social media and other pop culture forums.

And, of course, we see accusations of racism from the extreme right that greatly misunderstand what racism is... The *single greatest act*, really?

\* [slide 18 Our Pop Culture President]

During his presidency, despite these attacks, we saw how adept Obama was at navigating media and pop cultural spaces. He brought blackness into a favorable light and the national stage was illuminated through Obama's celebration of the arts in America and through connections with some of his favorite pop cultural icons:

[slide 19]

Oprah, JayZ and Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe, Common...

We saw Obama's ability to use humor, to laugh at himself and the institution he represents.

He even made appearances on late-night talk shows like *The Daily Show* and a quirky show *Between Two Ferns*. He took a lot of criticism for being a "pop culture president."

[slide 20]

On *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* Obama read "mean tweets" (which seem to not really be so mean considering the images I've shown). He talked about his daily life and even denied the existence of aliens.

[50 sec. video clip (ad)]

[slide 21]

Through Obama we also saw the introduction of the pop culture smash hit, *Hamilton*, when Lin Manuel-Miranda nervously and bravely unveiled his re-interpretation of Secretary of the Treasury and Founding Father, Alexander Hamilton—a song that would become the opening number to the Broadway musical that has taken America by storm.

[1:47 video clip]

Obama's standing ovation was an invitation to artists everywhere to challenge the conventions and assumptions of the American past and to re-imagine the American future.

And the cast of Hamilton was there to say goodbye to our pop culture president at the end of his second term.

[slide 22 with video clip for later]

During this pop culture presidency we saw passion and dedication, humor and humility, hero and human being.

[slide 23 feminist slide]

We saw a man unafraid to claim that "This Is What a Feminist Looks Like."

We saw that the Presidency could be draining and restraining as well as powerful and empowering.

[slide 24 feminist quote]

For many black people, there was genuine hope for the first time in a long time. For the first time a multicultural America seemed like a real possibility instead of a leftist fantasy.

[slide 25]

But this fantasy certainly did not mean that racism in America had ended. And Obama has always known this despite his optimism.

[slide 26]

When the first black president talked about racism, instead of listening to his insightful message that racism is "not just overt discrimination," we focused on his use of "the N word."

But Obama knows that [quote from slide] “societies don’t, overnight, completely erase everything that has happened 200 to 300 years prior.”

And, again, extremists still make the claim....

[slide 27]

It was almost dead, *almost*



\* [slide 28 Looking Forward]

When Ta-Nehisi Coates, interviewed Barack Obama in 2016, neither could imagine that the election of Donald Trump could ever happen.

[slide 29]

How could Obama's America elect someone so opposite to the man who made politics relevant again to so many people who had been disenfranchised for lifetimes?

But, of course, racism never went away. The structures of white supremacy remained fully in place and those who actively supported this agenda bided their time. They moved chess pieces around the board while the king was busy doing his job. While Obama was fluffing the center, preparing the nation to move forward as a united front and connecting with the world, the fringes were restless.

[slide 30 and optional clip for later]

This article and argument created much controversy and backlash as Coates made the round of TV interviews.

But if we believe Trump...

[slide 31]

\*

Obama was not a miracle worker, he was only the President. And he continues to inspire us.

[slide 32]

[Read quote.]

Post-presidency, Obama still has work to do.

[slide 33]

And it is no surprise that popular culture is one of the realms where he will continue his work as he and Michelle have signed a contract with Netflix to produce original shows and, perhaps, engage the public in important issues that might move us forward as a nation.

There continues to be power in pop culture, but will the power of popular culture be enough?

[slide 34]

Maybe *Saturday Night Live* could convince the Obamas...

[video clip 1 to 3 min]

At the very least, we have him here with us today....