HIP-HOP AND THE LIMITS OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE AGE OF OBAMA
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ABSTRACT
Hip hop has the power to be a political force. It has also been successful in mobilizing young people for political activities through organizations and big rappers. Unlike its past where the music genre had a commitment to resist and challenge mainstream politics, the United States presidential election of 2008 changed the tradition from defying politics to actively engaging in it. Obama’s blackness became the impetus to this progressive move for his candidacy was regarded as the most tangible manifestation of a black leader. The political engagement, however, is limited to the fact that music has been monopolized by few companies and that hip-hop artists often have personal interests when involving in politics.

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These political theories have become incorporated into the political culture of the United States in the central beliefs of egalitarianism and individualism. Egalitarianism—Doctrine emphasizing the natural equality of people in society—is the doctrine emphasizing the natural equality of humans, or at least the absence of a preexisting superiority of one set of humans above another. Hip-hop music began with party-oriented themes, but by 1982 it was focusing heavily on political issues. Unlike the preceding civil rights generation—a black subculture of baby boomers (people born immediately after World War II) that concentrated on achieving equal rights—the hip hop subculture does not have an overarching political agenda. Political hip hop is a subgenre of hip hop music that was developed in the 1980s as a way of turning rap music into a call for action and a form of social activism. Inspired by 1970s political preachers such as The Last Poets and musician Gil Scott-Heron, Public Enemy was the first predominately political hip-hop group. It has helped to create a new form of social expression for subordinate groups to speak about their exclusions, injustices and lack of power. Political hip-hop is the use of hip hop to invite readers to reassess how the historical narrative of Obama’s presidency continues to be shaped by the voice of hip hop and, conversely, how the voice of hip hop itself has been shaped by Obama. Drawing on a variety of methodological approaches from some of America’s most distinguished scholars, journalists, and activists, the book critically and unromantically assesses hip hop as an agent of social and political change, both now and in the future. This book offers the first systematic, scholarly analysis of the complex relationship between hip hop and politics in the era of Barack Obama.