25 "Where ya at?" Hip-hop's political locations in the Obama era

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Whenever a major album is released, millions of self-appointed music reviewers flock to social media to share their thoughts. Everyday consumers, celebrities, and even politicians had plenty to say about Jay-Z's highly anticipated 2013 LP, *Magna Carta Holy Grail.* One elected official took it upon himself to release a barrage of thoughts on Twitter about the record from start to finish, most of which were positive. "ONLY #JayZ can pull off a #hiphop ode to Kurt Cobain and REM. Not just an ode . . . But lyrical references! Pretty sick," he typed.[1] The reviewer in question was not Barack or Michelle Obama. It was not Corey Booker, Harold Ford Jr., Kendrick Meek, or Kwame Kilpatrick, four Democratic Black male public figures born in the post-Civil Rights era, and once thought to be the vanguard of a new wave of hip-hop generation politicians.[2] The self-styled hip-hop journalist was Congressman Trey Radel, a thirty-seven-year-old white male Republican and former conservative media mogul, from Florida's 19th congressional district.

Imani Perry establishes hip-hop's "political location" as one defined by blackness, despite hip-hop's multiracial history.[3] This means not only that hip-hop is comprised of artistic features that grow from Black Atlantic cultural exchanges, but that when hip-hop is politicized it is heavily racialized and a form of blackness is implicated. Scholars have long argued that mainstream white America has a love/hate relationship with hip-hop.[4] There is a precarious balance in the cultural realm between the gradual commoditization and absorption of hip-hop aesthetics into the mainstream, and a constant strain of revulsion directed at lawless, disrespectful "thug" rappers and those who follow them.[5] Black vernacular virtuosity and projections of hypermasculine danger have always been popular with white consumers and the culture industry, so the most purportedly dangerous rappers are often the most saleable. This was never more clear than during the commercial explosion of hip-hop during the 1990s and early 2000s, as previously fearsome rappers like Ice Cube and Ice-T became movie stars, and hip-hop soundtracks made their way into fast food commercials and television cartoons.

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But this balance between revelry and revulsion has not historically existed in the realm of electoral politics, including during hip-hop's late twentieth-century ascent to mainstream prominence. Through the Bill Clinton (1992–2000) and George W. Bush (2000–2008) presidential years, there was no sign that hip-hop would eventually find its way into legislative halls and on to campaign trails. And for the most part, the most visible hip-hop acts expressed little interest in such inclusion. If anything, prior to the 2008 election of Barack Obama, relations between hip-hop's commercial vanguard and the political establishment were growing more contentious, as George W. Bush became a favorite target among dissenting rap stars. For example, Common inserted a jab at Bush during an unapologetically radical spoken word performance at HBO's Def Poetry Jam. Kanye West famously asserted, "George Bush doesn't care about black people," during a live telethon for Hurricane Katrina victims. Even 50 Cent, who previously (and cryptically) noted that he saw a great deal of himself in Bush, was sour on Bush by 2007, explaining "George Bush has a talent: He has less compassion than the average human. By all means, I don't aspire to be like George Bush."[6] From "conscious" rappers like Common, to gangsta anti-heroes like 50 Cent, hip-hop was overwhelmingly hostile toward the American political establishment in the early twenty-first century. Politicians either tuned rappers out or used them to score political points with conservative constituents via thinly coded racist appeals.

All of this changed dramatically as President Obama made the transition from Illinois State Senator to Democratic candidate for president in 2007. The early years of the Obama era were rife with enthusiasm among prominent hip-hop figures. But even at the height of Obama-mania, hip-hoppers' commentary and disposition toward mainstream politics was multi-faceted. Obama remains a figure frequently invoked by rappers in various contexts, but as disappointment with the Obama administration and the political process has grown since 2008, a stream of critical and politically radical commentary has emerged. These dynamic crosscurrents of Obama discourse in hip-hop force us to reconsider hip-hop's political location. Hip-hop cultures can no longer be described purely in terms of counter-hegemonic Blackness. But even as they flow into electoral politics and other elements of the mainstream, hip-hop discourses retain their brew of social critique and irreverent imagination.

Hip-hop's place in Obama era politics

After a brief flirtation with Hillary Clinton as hip-hop celebrities' candidate of choice during the early stages of the 2008 presidential election, a gaggle

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of highly visible hip-hop stars threw themselves behind upstart candidate Barack Obama. In part, rappers' embrace of Obama was driven by the Senator's trendiness and charisma. Obama was an easy lyrical reference point that rappers knew would resonate with audiences. As Obama's national election prospects grew, hip-hop acts increasingly commented on the substantive meaning of his campaign. Talib Kweli cast Obama as "someone speaking my own language amidst a sea of double talk,"[7] and Common suggested, "He represents what hip-hop is about. Hip-hop is about progress, the struggle."[8]

Rappers' early injection into Obama-related discussion is noteworthy because they forced Obama to recognize and address hip-hop as a salient cultural force. Obama did not campaign in 2008 as a hip-hop candidate, but he was keenly aware that hip-hop celebrities had the ears of young voters. Two-thirds of voters aged eighteen to twenty-nine voted for Obama in 2008, and this core demographic identified with the sleek visual and communicative aesthetics of the Obama brand, which included a massive internet presence and a street art inspired campaign poster designed by Shepard Fairey. Obama could not ignore hip-hop, so he carefully incorporated it into his public image.

The character of this incorporation constitutes one of the major arguments of this chapter – Obama's strategic engagement established a new political location for hip-hop, setting a course that subsequent politicians have followed. Rather than distancing himself from the most recognizable signs and performers of hip-hop culture, and keeping hip-hop outside the borders of mainstream politics, Obama repeatedly demonstrates hip-hop literacy and affinity for rap music. These demonstrations take multiple forms, including direct and indirect references, connections to hip-hop celebrities, and light-hearted, hip-hop music-infused public appearances. Simultaneously, President Obama leaves himself the rhetorical wiggle room to distance himself from hip-hop when necessary. The president draws upon old tropes of hip-hop-driven moral panic, maintaining his status as a moderate, and defending himself from opponents who might use Obama's hip-hop associations to cast him as an angry and dangerous Black radical. In other words, hip-hop's new political locations have not replaced the old; they exist alongside one another, and Obama operates in multiple spaces.

Obama has consistently drawn on hip-hop in public. The 2008 election season saw Obama dance to Beyoncé and Jay-Z's "Crazy in Love" on Ellen Degeneres's talk show, give a subtle acknowledgment to Jay-Z by brushing off his shoulders during a campaign event, and confirm that Ludacris's music was on his iPod.[9] In 2009, he shouted "Hallelujah, Holla Back!" during a commencement speech at Notre Dame University, a catch phrase

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that only the hip-hop literate would recognize as the signature call of John Brown, winner of VH1's "The (White) Rapper Reality Show." At the 2011 White House Correspondents dinner, the president playfully mentioned 2pac, Notorious B.I.G., Lil' Jon, and Ol' Dirty Bastard. At the 2012 dinner, he joked about singing Young Jeezy, a clear reference to the most popular Obama-rap song, Jeezy's "My President," and at the 2013 dinner, Obama strolled on to the stage with DJ Khaled's "All I Do Is Win" playing in the background. Finally, the official Obama Tumblr page invoked the image and branding of rap pioneers Run D.M.C. during an advertising blitz for the Democratic National Convention in 2012. The webpage featured a black and white depiction of Bill Clinton, Joe Biden, and Barack Obama with the words "Run DNC" beneath their faces, written in a font and style that rap fans would immediately associate with the iconic rap group.

The common thread tying these instances together is their hip, light-hearted tone. They are specifically designed to appeal to and tickle constituents who not only understand the references, but understand Obama's signifying upon them as a sign that he is not merely knowledgeable, but clever and fun. This is not about content. There is no explicitly ideological message embedded in these tactics, and there is no forthright commentary about hip-hop. But the frequency with which hip-hop images, ideas, and performers are cast in a positive light within the political mainstream would have been unimaginable a decade ago.

After 2008, Obama's peers recognized that this sort of limited affiliation with hip-hop does not necessarily endanger one's chances of winning an election. Given the voter demographics, policy, and rhetoric of both parties, we might expect Democrats to continue to utilize hip-hop as a means to brand their candidates and communicate their messages. But as evidenced by Congressman Radel's Jay-Z album review, conservative Republicans have found a place for hip-hop in their self-styling. Radel is not a nationally recognizable symbol of the party, but Florida Senator Marco Rubio is, so much so that he is one of a handful of candidates with his eye on the 2016 GOP nomination for president. In a 2012 interview with *GQ*, Rubio talked extensively about his appreciation for hip-hop, calling Public Enemy "dominant," and listing "Straight Outta Compton," by N.W.A., "Killuminati," by 2pac, and "Lose Yourself," by Eminem as his three favorite songs.[10] This is mind-blowing: a Republican presidential hopeful *praising* Public Enemy, N.W.A., and Tupac, three of the most iconic hip-hop scapegoats and symbols of Black danger and criminality.

Of course, Rubio does not follow up his commentary with a strong critique of the policies and discourse that continue to lock poor people of color behind bars and cast them as social pariahs. Then again, neither does Obama. For all the subtext and implicit incorporation of hip-hop into

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his brand and public persona, the President's explicit commentary about hip-hop is conflicted and ambivalent at best. For example, he affirms that we need to take hip-hop seriously, because it is "reflective of the culture of the inner city, with its problems, but also its potential, its energy, its challenges to the status quo."[11] But there is no causality in this statement; no indication that the problematic culture of the inner city is the direct result of institutional racism and governmental neglect, as manifest in employment and housing discrimination, the proliferation of firearms, the abandonment of public education, the War on Drugs, racial profiling, and mass incarceration. Rather than publicly make such arguments about the roots of Black American suffering, Obama has repeatedly argued for an increased sense of personal responsibility, especially as it pertains to Black fathers and child socialization.[12] Such calls may be well intentioned, but when emphasis is placed on cultural and personal choice instead of racism as a political force that restricts choice, victim blaming prevents problem solving.

On other occasions, statements by Obama and his surrogates align even more closely with conservative moral panic about hip-hop. When Ludacris released the song "Politics (Obama is Here)" during the campaign season in 2008, the Obama team was compelled to condemn its lyrics, which featured several impolite insults directed at Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush, and John McCain. But campaign spokesman Bill Burton's statement addressed more than just the song. He explained,

> rap lyrics today too often perpetuate misogyny, materialism and degrading images that [Obama] doesn't want his daughters or any children exposed to. This song is not only outrageously offensive to Senator Clinton, Senator McCain and President Bush, it is offensive to all of us who are trying to raise our children with the values we hold dear.[13]

At issue here is not merely the condemnation, but the emphasis on children's welfare, which echoes the concerns of Tipper Gore and the PMRC from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Casting rap as a threat to children, and therefore all that is innocent and pure in our society, moves beyond rejecting the song's message, stoking antagonism toward hip-hop and scoring points with moderates and conservatives.

Arguments about the damage done by hip-hop cannot be reduced to the absurd notion that the music turns Black children into deadbeats and criminals. But first lady Michelle Obama has implied that fantasies about the rap lifestyle are incompatible with more respectable and realistic notions of success. She laments, "Instead of dreaming of being a teacher or a lawyer or a business leader, [today's young Black people] fantasiz[e] about being a baller or a rapper."[14] This is just one version of the notion that there is

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something about the hip-hop "attitude" that "keeps Blacks down."[15] A slightly more sophisticated version of this belief suggests there is a clear association between hip-hop style and/or self-presentation, and Black deviance. In other words, looking like a rapper is not respectable, so you cannot expect to be treated with respect.

Many commentators stop short of the claim that this form of racial profiling according to dress is perfectly appropriate. But several politicians and commentators urge men of color to recognize the fact that they are judged by what they wear, and should, therefore, choose a politics of respectability strategy – one that includes more formal and conservative dress – to protect themselves from mistreatment.[16] In an interview with famed hip-hop DJ and MTV host Sway, Obama condemned any and all discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and sexual orientation. He also said that legislation mandating that young people pull up their pants was a waste of time. However, he defended employers' right to set standards of respectability in the workplace, implying that sagging pants were not usually up to such standards. He added that "brothers should pull up their pants" as a sign of respect for their mothers, grandmothers, and others who do not want to see their underwear.[17]

Obama's interview with Sway is not explicitly about hip-hop, but Sway is a hip-hop DJ and celebrity, and Obama is talking about sagging pants (a clothing style with clear roots in American hip-hop), and Obama directly addresses young Black men as "brothers." So there is no question about the set of messages being delivered to young Black men about the perils of hip-hop style. Hip-hop remains central to a larger discourse about respectability that overshadows the structural reasons for crime and antisocial behaviors in impoverished Black communities. Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter, who is Black, gave an impassioned speech that illustrates these connections after a string of cowardly crimes and assaults by Black teenagers in Philadelphia. Nutter plainly stated that if they wanted to avoid racial profiling by police, business owners, and everyday citizens, young people should "stop acting like fools." He continued:

> And another thing. Take those doggone hoodies down, especially in the summer. Pull your pants up and buy a belt, because no one wants to see your underwear or the crack of your butt. Nobody. Buy a belt. Buy a belt. Nobody wants to see your underwear. Comb your hair – and get some grooming skills. Comb your hair. Running round here with your hair all over the place. Learn some manners.[18]

Nutter's injection of hoodies into this discussion of young Black men and the politics of respectability calls to mind one of the most famous cases

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of racial profiling and violence against Black men in the last quarter century, the murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Hip-hop was not directly implicated or discussed as the Martin murder story took shape, but again, the image of the threatening young Black male is embedded in a discourse heavily reliant on hip-hop themes and imagery. It goes without saying that a hoodie is not universally understood as a symbol of criminality, or of anything, really. It is just as likely to be worn by someone camping in a nature preserve as it is by someone doing calisthenics at a football practice. But the hooded sweatshirt has been a staple of hip-hop style for decades; as the Notorious B.I.G. explains in his deeply moving portrayal of inner city depression, "Suicidal Thoughts" (1993), "It don't make sense, going to Heaven with the goodie-goodies/ Dressed in white – I like black Timbs and black hoodies." So the racist implicit association that stains young Black men with the mark of the criminal is interwoven with this widely recognizable garment.

Racist implicit association between hip-hop style and young Black male criminality came full circle during the Trayvon Martin controversy. Bigoted conservative groups were convinced that the innocent image of Martin most frequently used by the media was an image from far earlier in Martin's life; a wild distortion of the powerful, dangerous Black monster that George Zimmerman stalked, fought with, and shot. Such beliefs were totally false, but in place of the heavily circulated image of Martin smiling for the camera, an image of rapper the Game, a man more than thirty years of age, with a portfolio of scowling publicity photos, was circulated as the "real" Trayvon Martin.[19]

The link between these invocations of Black male hip-hop danger and President Obama is not causal. It is not the president's fault that racist stereotypes about Black male hip-hop criminality are so deeply embedded in the American imagination that to many there is no difference between Trayvon Martin and the embellished, corporately funded, gangsta rap persona of the Game. But the point is that hip-hop remains heavily politicized, and it remains tied to its old political location, as the eye of a storm of moral panic threatening wholesome mainstream America. Though Obama embraces light-hearted hip-hop imagery and signification that endears him to younger audiences, he also travels along the same discursive paths that posit fears of sagging pants and hoodies as justifications for institutional racism and violence against innocent Black men. The president's unwillingness to explicitly disrupt those patterns allows the stereotypes and racism to keep circulating with horrible material effects on people's lives. Prominent rappers have plenty to say on these and other facets of the Obama era.

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Obama's place in modern hip-hop

Just as hip-hop's location within mainstream politics cannot be painted with one broad stroke, Obama occupies multiple locations within hip-hop. Several prominent hip-hop celebrities have constructed what is best described as an ambivalent stance toward the president and the political process. Meanwhile, Jay-Z, the star with perhaps the greatest gravitational pull in the hip-hop universe, has separated himself with an unprecedented level of consistent positive engagement with Obama. And finally, there is a visible and vocal contingent of hip-hop stars who are explicitly critical of the Obama administration and mainstream politics more broadly.

Young Jeezy's aforementioned smash hit "My President" is by far the most recognizable hip-hop connection to Obama, and it is often interpreted as an endorsement. But a closer reading reveals that the song is steeped in ambivalence and trepidation, despite its celebratory tone. Nas's contribution to Jeezy's track is especially poignant, as he laments that "no President ever did shit for me," and warns Obama not to let ego and the compromise-laden culture of American politics ruin his chance to fight for justice. After Obama's first term, Nas expressed continued support for the president, but qualified it, explaining,

> I've been disappointed by politics since the day I was born. The historic part of him being elected president was got, and everyone was happy about that, and I'm glad I lived to see it. The flipside is, after we get over that, it's back to the politics, and it's something which doesn't have time for people.[20]

Hip-hop mogul and 2008 presidential inauguration attendee Sean "P Diddy" Combs expressed sentiment similar to Nas's in 2011, explaining, "I love the president like most of us. I just want the president to do better."[21] Given the disasters that have befallen American workers and people of color, such disappointment is certainly justified. But the troubles of the first four years did not lead to full-scale revolt against Obama because alternative options proved so dissatisfying. As rapper and producer Kendrick Lamar explained just prior to the 2012 election, "I think I'm going to go ahead [and vote for Barack Obama], just because I can*not* see Mitt Romney [winning]. I'll be on food stamps my whole life! I just don't feel like he's got a good heart at all."[22]

If hip-hop stars like Nas, Kendrick Lamar, and P Diddy are somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of support for Obama, Jay-Z sits at one of the extremes, with an overwhelmingly positive orientation toward the president. P Diddy's "Vote or Die" voter registration campaign in 2008 was a landmark effort, but it was, officially speaking, non-partisan. During

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the 2008 election cycle, Jay was unapologetically supportive of Obama, but cautious not to allow his involvement to damage Obama's reputation. "I didn't want the association with rappers and gangsta rappers to hinder anything that [Obama] was doing," he said. "I came when I was needed; I didn't make any comments in the press, go too far or put my picture with Obama on MySpace, Twitter, none of that."[23] But as hip-hop's location within mainstream politics shifts, Jay-Z has taken a stand and aligned himself with Obama, for better or worse. Jay has hosted upscale fundraisers for the president, produced an advertisement for the 2012 campaign, performed an anti-Romney version of his hit song "99 Problems," and attended inaugural ceremonies and parties.

Despite a momentary flap with the White House over a vacation to Cuba, the depth of Jay-Z's identification with Obama is troubling at times, especially as it pertains to the rapper's notions of political responsibility and accountability. In 2013, Jay described his mere presence as "charity," which he admitted sounds arrogant. He continued, "Just who I am, just like Obama is. Obama provides hope. Whether he does anything, that hope that he provides for a nation and outside of America is enough."[24] Musicians and actors are not contractually obligated to be political spokespeople or advance social justice. But the trouble here is the conflation between Jay-Z's role and the president's. Obama serves at the discretion of the citizenry, and by definition he is accountable to them. His chief purpose is not to embody charity or "hope," it is to keep the gears of democracy turning. This is the concern raised by hip-hop pioneer Russell Simmons in direct response to Jay-Z's dismissal of Occupy Wall Street:

> You're rich and I'm rich. But, today it's close to impossible to be you or me and get out of Marcy Projects or Hollis, Queens without changing our government to have our politicians work for the people who elect them and not the special interests and corporations that pay them. Because we know that these special interests are nothing special at all. In fact, they spend millions of dollars destroying the fabric of the black community and make billions of dollars in return.[25]

Simmons's embrace of Occupy Wall Street is one of the more public suggestions by hip-hop stars that the government and Obama no longer serve the people's interests. Other rappers echo these sentiments with far more aggressive condemnations of Obama, and more insistence that the solution to seemingly intractable social problems lies beyond mainstream politics. Self-described revolutionary hip-hop group dead prez laughed off Obama's 2009 economic stimulus plan as inconsequential, as it only stimulates corporations that profit from Black debasement, and will never improve the economic standing of working-class and poor people of color. Dead prez

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also suggested that Obama was no better than his predecessor, George W. Bush, so far as social justice was concerned.[26]

Atlanta rapper Killer Mike offers similar analysis on his critically acclaimed track "Reagan" (2012), a song that mercilessly dissects the Reagan era and describes the US government as a thin veil for oligarchy. Though the song goes into painstaking details about the plagues unleashed during the Reagan administration, especially the War on Drugs and rise of mass incarceration, there is a clear connection between Reagan and those who replaced him in the White House. The Bushes, Bill Clinton, and Obama are all "Just [sic] employee[s] of the country's real masters," the corporations that profit from the expansion of the military and prison state. In describing the song and his political orientation, Killer Mike is uneasy with the notion that he is a "political" rapper for the same reasons Nas is suspicious of politics: politics is not about people. Mike elaborates:

> A lot of people try to peg me as a political rapper and I'm not. I'm a social commentator and at times people have politicized the things I say, but I don't care too much for any political party. I care about people. Under Reagan, drugs were allowed to flood our community and wipe out two to three generations of people that could have kept my community growing, and I take exception to that.[27]

Lupe Fiasco's widely publicized Twitter dialog with comedian D. L. Hughley six weeks before the 2012 election is emblematic of this spirit. Lupe's music, especially his LPs *Food and Liquor* (2006) and *The Cool* (2007), earned him significant critical acclaim, including multiple Grammy nominations, and respect as a sharp and socially astute entertainer. Lupe announced that he did not vote in 2008 and would abstain from the 2012 election because, "Obama need swing states and white people not radical rappers kissing his ass to win this election." In response, Hughley chastised Lupe for misleading young Black men and possibly suppressing their vote. "Young black men are going to listen to him," Hughley explained. "They are the ones who have decisions made for them, [decisions] that they are not even involved in, which is silly to me. You can't go through life and not be a participant, and hope things work out for your benefit." Convincing Lupe to change his stance was out of the question, but the rapper did reply to Hughley with an alternative plan, "I vote for Grace Lee Boggs . . . put her on the ballot and i'd finance the campaign my d*mn self @realdlhughley do u even know who she is???" He continued, "Better yet @RealDLHughley you put up 50k and I'll put up 50k and let's flesh out some programs for rural & inner city youths our d*mn selves."[28] The possibility that hip-hop might turn increasingly toward "do it yourself" or alternative forms of political action is one of many worth considering as the Obama era winds down.

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Where ya at?

It is easy to forget that hip-hop is only forty years old, considering the political maturity of its artists and the political weight hip-hop cultures carry in the discursive realm. While some artists have chosen an ethic of conspicuous consumption and mass appeal rather than politicizing their careers, a remarkable number of hip-hop artists demonstrate stunning political maturity and bravery, openly challenging police and politicians to fulfill their mission to protect and serve the people. The social analysis woven through hip-hop performances of eras past has proven tragically prophetic. Rap songs from the 1980s about the abuses of corporate power, the deterioration of poor Black and Brown neighborhoods, and the growth of the surveillance state would comprise an awfully compelling soundtrack to America's contemporary social troubles.

Obama uses hip-hop performances and representations to appeal to multiple audiences, including those who are still seduced by a form of conservatism grounded in damaging race and class bigotry. It is tempting to look at the current landscape and conclude that hip-hop-fueled moral panic appeals will soon disappear, not only due to demographic shifts in the electorate, but because hip-hop styles and sensibilities suffuse across all forms of consumer culture. It is equally tempting to look at the Obama model and conservatives' attempt to copy it, and predict that hip-hop will be further incorporated into mainstream politics in the current election cycles. But such predictions are faulty, because they rely on a static, monolithic notion of hip-hop culture. The unpredictability of hip-hop's future political locations is not a sign of weakness or insignificance. It is testament to the power of hip-hop as a form of communication and cultural toolkit for examining and shaping the world.

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