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For the African-American market, bootleg s

Although Barack Obama's campaign has distributed half a million T-shirts, the official garb is rarely seen in some precincts where his support is strongest. In African-American neighborhoods this summer—particularly in the candidate's hometown of Chicago, where these shirts were bought—Obama gear was ubiquitous but almost all unauthorized. Unlike the official shirts, with their spare designs and sophisticated sans-serif fonts, the bootlegs tilt toward the gaudy, bursting with images and slogans and passion. They present the candidate as defiant, flashy, even “gangster”; this Obama in shimmering gold relief is sold beside shirts of Pablo Escobar and Al Pacino as Scarface striking essentially the same pose. In the chasm between these shirts and Obama's carefully honed image, there is a paradox: our first black presidential nominee has found himself appropriated—not just widely depicted but wholly reimagined—by black popular culture.



This bootleg gear is part of the same underground urban economy that offers pirated DVDs and knockoff designer handbags, and no doubt some vendors have sold all three. The shirts typically cost \$10, and new designs show up daily: during eight weeks of browsing, I saw at least a hundred different models, available not only on street corners and in beauty shops but in dollar stores and even the Walgreens near Obama's home. Vendors procure the shirts in bulk from a number of “import and wholesale” businesses in local storefronts, which in turn get their wares from small manufacturers. The maker of this shirt—IcedOut, a Korean-American-owned outfit based in the Chicago suburbs—specializes in hip-hop-themed shirts on which the designers “modify rappers to avoid copyright.” But Obama shirts have been IcedOut's bestsellers since spring.



This Obama—combative head-tilt, furrowed brow, piercing eyes—looks remarkably similar to the iconic photo of Malcolm X orating to a Harlem crowd in 1963. Many of the shirts depict Obama as an angry, almost threatening figure, in stark contrast to his chosen ground as the cool and cool-headed candidate, a man far removed from black rage (which he denounced in his Philadelphia speech on race as “counterproductive”). Other designers have gone so far as to darken Obama's skin, in much the same manner that popular unlicensed shirts in the late 1980s featured “blackened” versions of Mickey Mouse, Popeye, Bugs Bunny, and eventually a brown-skinned Bart Simpson, usually wearing hip hop's then-unmistakable costume of gold chains and warm-up suits. During the early primary season, it was never clear whether African Americans agreed with the media that Obama might not be “black enough.” But now the black candidate, like the cartoon characters, has received a decidedly black makeover.

Jake Austen is the author of TV-a-Go-Go: Rock on TV from American Bandstand to American Idol, and is currently writing (with Yuwal Taylor) a history of the black minstrel tradition. He lives in Chicago.

NG XXL

hirts stretch Obama's image, by *Jake Austen*



According to vendors, this Obama \$100 bill shirt, with its nods to the wearer's political and financial aspirations, is quickly becoming a hit. The idea that the first black president might wind up on currency has a long history in black culture, from when the comedian Dick Gregory handed out \$1 bills bearing his face to promote his 1968 presidential run, to when Eric B. and Rakim, on the cover of their 1987 debut LP (which includes the song "Eric B. Is President"), superimposed themselves onto money. For Obama, it has to be the hundred: excess is the rule with these shirts, whose portraits of the candidate are often rendered in glitter or rhinestones or ornate airbrushing, and which in size run, by default, to a voguishly baggy XXL—all in marked contrast to Obama's own low-key sartorial choices.



Of all the shirts, this is the one I saw most often in the city's black neighborhoods: Obama flanked by Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Nelson Mandela. (The street vendor I bought it from referred to it as "the one with everybody.") Just eight years ago, in losing a House race to incumbent Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther, Obama was denigrated as an outsider—a Harvard man with no real roots in the community. But on these shirts Obama is reborn as a race man, here placed in a pantheon of black leaders with whom he has hesitated to associate himself. (In his acceptance speech, delivered on the anniversary of King's "I Have a Dream," he did not even mention King by name.) A different "Mt. Rushmore" design surrounds him with the black cultural heroines Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and Nefertiti; yet another puts him among former presidents beloved of African Americans—Lincoln, FDR, Kennedy, and Harry Truman. (Bill Clinton's primary hijinks may have resulted in his demotion.)

After years of watching bootleggers traffic in black Bugs Bunny shirts, Warner Bros. responded with its own line of hip-hop designs, which were then picked up by the NBA and NFL and went truly mainstream. Such is the supposed post-racialism of American culture today. Obama's own campaign sells a green, Irish-themed O'BAMA shirt, with the implicit message that ethnic and racial differences are as insignificant as the blink of an apostrophe. Yet if there really were "not a black America and a white America," as Obama said in his career-making 2004 speech, then his black fans might not feel the need to remake him in their own image. This word "we," which appears frequently on these Chicago shirts, is not the pronoun of the U.S. Constitution ("We the people . . .") but rather that of Curtis Mayfield's "We People Who Are Darker Than Blue." The pronoun asserts both a complicated patriotism and a gentle rejection of the post-racial pose: Don't forget, it says; you're ours. ■