**Remixing *Obama Hope*:**

**Generating Counterpublic Rhetorics with Mobile Augmented Reality**

“The fundamental scandal of the public image is that it is not limited to communicating specific information to a specific audience about a specific event. Instead, the image has more value, wider circulation, and much more to say.”

— Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites,

*The Public Image: Photography and Civic Spectatorship*

Shepard Fairey’s iconic *Obama Hope* poster is one of the most widely circulated and remixed images in recent political history. From its use as an anti-Obama political advertisement to its function as a unifying symbol for transnational protests, *Obama Hope* has surfaced across a variety of media and genres as a platform for voicing political concerns, proving itself to be a highly adaptable visual icon for galvanizing public response. *Obama Hope* is “rhetorical” not only because of its persuasive power, as Laurie Gries suggests, but its ability to “organize and maintain collective formation”—to assemble, in other words, a diverse group of people for an even more diverse array of social, cultural, and political ends (11). If we read Gries’ claim about the galvanizing power of public images alongside Michael Warner’s theories of publics and counterpublics, we might say that the kind of circulation demonstrated through *Obama Hope* is the very rhetorical glue that holds “the public” together as a coherent socio-rhetorical phenomenon.

To organize the collective actions of a disparate group of strangers, public texts must galvanize according to a “transparent and replicable” rhetoric (Warner 423). Communicating messages of hope and progress throughout the 2008 presidential election, *Obama Hope* was able to generate a transparent and replicable message that, in turn, played a significant role in organizing and maintaining a public of voters who responded to its message of positive political change. However, as the poster’s simple political message and striking visual design combined with an emerging digital delivery network that operates according to a logic of remix and recomposition, it also galvanized public support *against* Obama, thereby demonstrating how powerful public images can be repurposed as sites of counterpublic resistance. According to Warner, counterpublics are “constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public” and therefore must “fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation” (423-24). As such, counterpublics often engage in a kind of ad hoc rhetorical strategy by remixing the textual and visual discourses of a perceived dominant public as a way of refining and distributing their own counterpublic messages.

The counterpublics that formed in response to *Obama Hope* included racist Internet trolls, conservative voters who read the image as socialist propaganda, and even progressive activists who interpreted Obama’s campaign rhetoric as pandering to neoliberal tropes of upward economic mobility[[1]](#footnote-1). Although such counterpublics sought to disseminate very different messages about *Obama Hope*, they were similar in their reliance on visual remix as one of the primary rhetorical strategies for circulating rhetorics of resistance. What we learn from *Obama Hope*, then, is that although widely circulated public images organize and maintain collective formation of an intended public, they often simultaneously, and unintentionally, galvanize others to repurpose the transparent and replicable message of the image as a foil to support the production of their own counterpublic remixes.

For the purposes of this chapter, I define counterpublic remixes as discourses that reassemble a public text (e.g. a highly televised speech, a company logo, a political slogan, etc.) in order to challenge dominant ideas presented in that text, generate counter messages, and galvanize counterpublic rhetorical action. In terms of design, counterpublic remixes expose and confront specific contradictions in dominant ideas and representations perceived to be at play within a public text. In doing so, counterpublic remixes are similar to parody, as defined by Barbara Warnick, in that they rely on the viewer’s knowledge of the design aesthetic and public rhetorical function of the source text. As such, creators of counterpublic remixes must also be able to “identify the relevant intertexts that enable a user to be able to understand what is being said” (Warner 105). For instance, many remixes of *Obama Hope* were published on The People’s Cube, a group blog that satirizes liberals and American democrats through visual and textual play generated. In 2008, lead blogger Oleg Atbashian remixed *Obama Hope* by replacing Obama with former president Bill Clinton and replacing the word “Hope” with “Grope” (see Figure 1). In referencing a former democratic president’s marital infidelity and sexual assault allegations, this remixer rejects what he perceives as a dominant idea conveyed in the original *Obama Hope* design—that the Democratic party stands for social progress and equality and therefore the election of the nation’s first black president is the inevitable culmination of such progress and equality. Simultaneously, this counterpublic remix generates the counter message that Bill Clinton is an amoral figure guilty of sexual harassment and unequal power relations, thereby discrediting not only Clinton but the democratic platform. In addition, such act of counterpublic resistance helps to sustain the blog’s counterpublic rhetorical action by galvanizing blog members to engage in their own satirical recompositions. In response to this Grope poster, for instance, another member created a remix depicting Ralph Nadar that says “No Hope,” while still another uploaded a remix of George W. Bush that said “Cope.” While obviously intended as parodic play, such counterpublic remixes take on the more serious role of keeping counterpublic discourse and assemblage at play.

[FIGURE ONE EMBED]

Figure 1: Remixed version of Fairey’s *Obama Hope* poster featuring Bill Clinton and the words “Grope.”

While methods such as iconographic tracking (see Chapter 1) are useful for tracking such counterpublic remixes, in this chapter, I want to demonstrate how emerging augmented reality technologies are useful for engaging with counterpublic remixes. Augmented reality (AR) technologies make it appear as though digital media files (images, videos, etc.) are overlaid onto one’s view of the physical world. In this chapter, I will be focusing specifically on mobile AR applications, which use the components of a standard smartphone—camera, GPS, accelerometer, etc.—to augment the user’s view of physical reality. By remixing *Obama Hope*, I specifically want to model for visual studies scholars how AR can function as a viable platform for both analyzing and producing counterpublic remixes of widely circulated public images. Through my own critical making practices, I especially hope to demonstrate how mobile AR can counter “rhetorical isotropy,” a term I use to describe the ways in which public images take on monolithic meanings and associations that could potentially elide more nuanced interpretations of their socio-rhetorical function. Moreover, by creating AR overlays for public images such as *Obama Hope*, mobile writers can potentially activate what Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites refer to as “engaged spectatorship,” or the process of “decontextualizing and recontextualizing in order to engage with different dimensions of the image, different perspectives on what it shows, and different conceptions of its audience” (29). Through AR, mobile writers can accomplish such goals by creating interactive digital overlays that tap into the network of counterpublic discourses that are generated and sustained through the circulation of public images.

My first section makes use of AR to quickly identify and analyze different practices involved in designing counterpublic remixes. Drawing heavily on Dustin W. Edwards’ typologies of remix, I create AR overlays for four remixed versions of the *Obama Hope* poster, each of which can be defined as an instance of counterpublic remix. In order to establish the rhetorical significance of counterpublic remixes, I then introduce the concept of “isotropic visual rhetorics.” Similar to Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss’s repurposing of the scientific term “velocity” to describe new media delivery practices, I borrow the term “isotropy” from the field of physics to describe the tendency of certain public images to perpetuate entrenched public narratives, which have the potential to drown out alternative counterpublic discourses. I claim that although *Obama Hope’s* message of racial and political progress helped Obama to secure his presidency, it may have also worked to perpetuate a narrative of post-racial politics that elides some of the criticisms that Obama faced from prominent African-American activists and writers throughout his presidency. My third and final section models how the remix practices first introduced by Edward and identified through AR can be enacted to produce counterpublic remixes and counter this isotropic tendency of public images as well as generate what Robert Hariman and John Lucaites call an “engaged civic spectatorship.”

Ultimately, this chapter claims that if visual studies scholars are going to “do” visual studies in an era of mobile computing, then we must begin to explore and exploit the rhetorical affordances of the various writing technologies—such as AR—that are beginning to emerge alongside mobile devices. However, we must avoid taking up mobile technologies as mere extensions of the logic of prior media forms (i.e. the personal computer). Rather, we must actively engage with the emerging rhetorics that such technologies afford us, such as the ability to remix physical images with digital media overlays. Moreover, in “making” digital counterpublic remixes through emerging mobile technologies like AR, we participate in an invention process not only for the text currently being produced, but for the medium itself. Or, as Sarah Arroyo puts it, “we learn technologies and new technological platforms simply through engaging with them.” Thus, when we create applications of mobile AR for visual studies scholarship, we are simultaneously “inventing” the visual, digital, and rhetorical possibilities of AR.

**Analyzing Counterpublic Remixes**

*Special instructions for viewing this section:*

1. *Download the Aurasma application to your Android or iOS device.*
2. *Open Aurasma and search for the channel “Obama Hope Remixes.”*
3. *Select the channel and click on “Follow.”*
4. *Start the AR camera by clicking on the small bracket icon on the bottom menu and scan any images in this section that are placed in a mobile device frame (e.g. figure one).*

In this section, I take advantage of recent advancements in mobile AR known as “vision-based” augmented reality. Vision-based AR requires a visual marker to trigger and orient digital overlays, such as a QR Code or a poster. Here, remixed versions of the *Obama Hope* poster are used as visual “triggers” for AR content. These AR overlays are accessible to anyone who scans the image, regardless of their physical location. In order to demonstrate how visual studies scholars can leverage the rhetorical affordances of emerging vision-based AR technologies, I use AR to briefly analyze four different categories of remix as first identified by Dustin Edwards—types that can be combined and repurposed, I ultimately want to show, to generate new forms of multimodal counterpublic remix.

In their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher, and xtine burrough describe how “remix” was first popularized within New York City’s disco and hip-hop cultures of the 1970s when DJ’s and musicians began to experiment with cutting and pasting audio tracks from records. Today, however, the term remix now refers more generally to “the act of using preexisting materials to create something new,” whether splicing together YouTube videos to make an original movie, rearranging the letters in a poem, or even changing a few letters on a digital image (1 Navas et. al.). In his chapter “A Rhetoric of Remix,” Scott H. Church builds from this definition to describe how writers and rhetors have always draw upon practices of remix for rhetorical invention. Church notes that one of the key rhetorical features of an effective remix is the rhetor’s ability to “[exploit and leverage] the audience’s understanding of the samples in their original contexts” (44). Although creating a remixed rhetorical object—whether a video, image, or print text—is necessarily the creation of “something new,” there are certain types of remix—such as those created in response to *Obama Hope*—that rely more directly upon a rhetorical interplay between the remix and the original. These types of remixes are most effective for galvanizing counterpublics because they not only reference a shared rhetorical encounter with the original, but they also reframe this encounter through a shared critique. In this way, counterpublic remixes acquire the potential to “build common values” through practices of participatory recomposition (Ridolfo and DeVoss).

Writing and rhetoric scholars have used the concept of “remix” to rethink a number of key assumptions within the field, from the canon of delivery (Ridolfo and DeVoss) to the formation of knowledge via writing (Rice “Digital Aurality”) to the history of composition (Palmeri). Although such applications certainly yielded generative insights, they collectively perpetuate a tendency within the field to use “remix” as a catch-all rhetorical framework for interpreting a diverse array of rhetorical practices and new media genres. In his article “Framing Remix Rhetorically: Toward a Typology of Transformative Work,” Edwards points out that one of the effects of remix being applied to such disparate genres, modalities, and cultures is that the term “remix” has transformed into “a cumbersome, if not overwhelming, concept,” thus becoming less useful as a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing and creating remixed texts (42). In response, Edwards provides a typology that students and scholars can use as an entry point for engaging in different remix practices. Edwards four-part typology of remix includes:

**Assemblage**: creating new texts out of a database of other texts

**Reappropriation**: altering already-existing texts to subvert meaning

**Redistribution**: sharing or adding to a text to enhance circulation and reception

**Genre Play**: playing with genre conventions

Although Edwards developed this typology through an analysis of a variety of media and genres, from YouTube videos to standardized tests, it is especially useful for analyzing remixes of widely circulated images in that counterpublics tend to take advantage of all four kinds of remix practices described in this typology.

Example # 1: Assemblage

Edwards writes that “assemblage is a method of composing wherein a composer builds a new text by gathering, repurposing, and deploying a combination of already-existing texts” (47). Although assemblage is perhaps most common in video and music remixes, it also appears in image-remixes, as demonstrated in Figure 2. This image was created by Shepard Fairey during the height of the Occupy movement in late 2011. According to Fairey’s described intention of the remix on his personal website, it is intended to “push the insiders [e.g. Obama] to do the right thing for the people.”

[FIGURE TWO EMBED]

Figure 2: Scan the image above using the Aurasma application you were instructed to download at the beginning of the section. Make sure you are following the “Obama Hope Remixes” channel and that the volume on your mobile device is turned up. When you scan figure one, you should see the word “Assemblage” appear above the image. If you see a different word, move the phone away from the image for a few seconds and then scan it again.

In this counterpublic remix, Fairey generates a new design by taking his original *Obama Hope* design and combining it with the already-existing Guy Fawkes mask and Occupy movement slogan “We are the 99%.” The Guy Fawkes mask is a popular image of anti-government sentiment that was appropriated by the Occupy movement to critique escalating economic disparities in the United States. The political slogan emphasized such economic disparities by playing off the 1% statistic, which refers to the top 1% wealthiest people in society receiving a disproportionate share of cultural, political, and economic capital. By assembling such signs alongside the utopic idealism conveyed by the original *Obama Hope* icon, the remix contradicts the mainstream liberalism associated with *Obama Hope* and aligns with a more active and progressive political agenda. In doing so, the remix not only challenges Obama to pursue more radical policies for addressing income disparity; it simultaneously attempts to galvanize participation in the more socially and economically progressive counterpublic that came to constitute the Occupy Movement.

Example # 2: Reappropriation

According to Edwards, reappropriative remixes create meaning by “slightly altering an existing text and/or reclaiming or ‘taking back’ already existing texts, with one of its primary rhetorical aims being the subversion of “dominant discourses” (47). As Edwards writes, reappropriative remixes are fundamentally subversive: “Reappropriation involves making tactical changes to an existing text (or set of texts) to signal resistance or offer a critique of the original text or the concept for which it stands” (47-8).

[FIGURE THREE EMBED]

Figure 3: When you scan the image above, you should see the word “Reappropriation.” If you see a different word, move the phone away from the image for a few seconds and then scan it again.

Effective reappropriative remixes create minimal visual modifications for maximum rhetorical effect. The counterpublic remix in Figure 3, for instance, emerged in 2013 in response to Obama’s defense of the National Security Agency’s mass surveillance programs. This design subverts the hopeful and honest depiction of Obama in Fairey’s original design to point out how the Obama administration is just as complicit as previous administrations in perpetuating intrusive government surveillance. Such subversion is accomplished by replacing the word “Hope” with the word “Wiretapping” and inserting a pair of thin wiretapping headphones on top of Obama’s head. Through these small “tactical changes” to *Obama Hope*, Obama’s contemplative, hopeful visage becomes much more cold and sinister. This design became especially powerful in that it participated within a wider network of counterpublic rhetorics that were circulating at the time to reject the notion that Obama’s administration constituted a significant difference in regard to bigger issues of corrupt governance (i.e. surveillance). It especially surfaced on numerous blogs and online forums such as Reddit where people gathered to vehemently critique Obama’s actions and galvanize counterpublic resistance to his administration. Interestingly, while this counterpublic remix’s circulation slowed once the NSA scandal lost mass attention, it resurfaced when Donald Trump falsely accused Obama of wiretapping his apartment in 2016, contributing to the sustained counterpublic resistance to Obama that never fully died down.

Example # 3: Redistribution

Counterpublic remixes would not be able to galvanize counterpublic rhetorical action if they did not circulate. Counterpublic remixes thus always entail redistribution, which Edwards explains refers to “sharing or adding to an already existing text for the purpose of reaching a new audience, offering an updated message, and/or spreading a text further” (49). Redistributive remixes simultaneously consume and generate rhetorical energy by circulating widely and participating within a distributed network of discourses (47). In doing so, redistributive remixes become “shared *topos* through which rhetors can express their beliefs and mobilize collective groups for action” (50).

As an example, Edwards cites the “binders full of women” phrase, first mentioned by Mitt Romney during the second presidential debate of 2012. Interestingly, during the first debate of that presidential campaign season, *Obama Hope* became enmeshed within a different counterpublic remix that was redistributed after Romney made the remark that if he were elected president, he would end subsidies to PBS. In his full statement to the debate moderator, Romney said: “I like PBS, I love Big Bird…but I’m not gonna keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for.” During and after the debate, the phrase “#SaveBigBird” began trending on Twitter and other social media platforms as digital counterpublics began to form in defense of the beloved children’s character and PBS. As this phrase trended, groups redistributed it into different media and genres as a way of galvanizing collective action against Romney’s remark.

[FIGURE FOUR EMBED]

Figure 4: When you scan the image above, you should see the word “Redistribution.” If you see a different word, move the phone away from the image for a few seconds and then scan it again.

The image in figure four became part of a shared topos that allowed digital citizens to express their support for PBS through a popular public icon (Big Bird) who came to symbolize the benefits of government subsidized television programming. By replacing the word “Hope” with Big Bird’s plea for “Help,” the remix in figure four reinforces a sense of counterpublic solidarity against Mitt Romney’s comments about PBS and the GOP’s stance on government funding more broadly. Moreover, by leveraging a familiar visual design aesthetic*,* the remix is able to borrow some of the visual rhetorical energy of the original Obama Hopedesign, thereby redistributing arguments in support of PBS funding to audiences who are sympathetic to the progressive message of Obama’s 2012 campaign*.*

Example # 4: Genre Play

Counterpublic remixes also entail what Edwards calls “genre play” in that they often blend, repurpose, and/or move in and out of genre expectations (50). Such remix practice allows viewers to “re-conceptualize [the] reified norms” of a genre as they work both “within and against socially constituted ways of doing and knowing” (50). Counterpublic remixes of *Obama Hope* especially took on this role as they played with a genre initially employed to support a political candidate and generated new designs that resulted in a total genre shift to support counterpublic resistance. This simple design change enabled *Obama Hope* to transform from a political campaign poster into a biting critique.

[FIGURE FIVE EMBED]

Figure 5: When you scan the image above, you should see the word “Genre Play.” If you see a different word, move the phone away from the image for a few seconds and then scan it again.

This counterpublic remix, which entailed changing “Hope” to “Hype,” certainly makes a critique against Obama as a hyper-commodified “brand.” However, this genre play also critiques the political campaign poster itself, a genre that many might describe as doing little more than creating “hype” for a candidate.

**Countering Rhetorical Isotropy**

In the section above, I used the image-recognition functionality of AR technology to help identify common rhetorical practices of counterpublic remixes, practices first identified and described by Edwards. As we take up digital visual studies, such use of AR can be an engaging and productive way to identify and analyze how these remix practices configure into other counterpublic rhetorics. But we can also enact these practices ourselves through AR. One of the most exciting rhetorical affordances of AR technology for digital visual studies, in fact, is providing an emerging digital-public platform through which mobile device users can create and access multimodal counterpublic remixes, remixes which can function as distributed acts of counterpublic resistance.

As Foucault writes, acts of resistance are “distributed in an irregular fashion: the points, the knots, the focuses of resistance are spread over time and space in varying densities” (96). In addition to the counterpublic remixes described above, which were highly visible in their resistance against some aspect of *Obama Hope* (e.g. changing “Hope” to “Hype” to communicate disdain for the genres of political campaign marketing), other types of counterpublic discourse against Obama that were spread over time and space in an irregular fashion were more difficult to discern. In this section, I describe how many of these more spatio-temporally dispersed counterpublic rhetorics developed in response to what I term “isotropic rhetorics,” or perceived cultural narratives that a public image or text may unintentionally come to reinforce and re-present. Such isotropic narratives can sometimes work to elide these less visible or audible counterpublic rhetorics. Counterpublicremixes generated through the multimodal affordances of AR, as I aim to ultimate show, can help counteract such “isotropic” narratives that popular public images like *Obama Hope* may intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate.

As an image indelibly associated with the election of the nation’s first black president, interpretations of *Obama Hope* from white Americans could potentially perpetuate the idea that “American racism is a thing of the past” (Darity). Of course, as the writers and activists that I draw upon in this section point out, American racism is a persistent systemic reality for many black Americans, a reality that should not be ignored in favor of the narrative that “we have overcome” historical and systemic racism through the election of Barack Obama (Cullors). Counterpublic remixes distributed through AR have potential to interrupt such isotropic phenomena by providing access points to networks of counterpublic texts that challenge the source image and/or a dominant idea reinforced through its rhetorical circulation.

“Isotropy” is a scientific concept used in the field of physics to describe substances or phenomena that maintain a uniform value regardless of their direction of travel. The term is a combination of the Greek words “iso” (meaning “equal”) and “tropos” (meaning “way”). An isotropic antenna, for instance, emits omnidirectional sound waves according to the same degree of intensity and duration.

[FIGURE SIX EMBED]

Figure 6: Isotropic radiator animation. CC0 1.0. Public Domain.

Isotropic antennas do not really exist; they are merely a theoretical reference point used to calibrate actual antennas. In reality, antennas are anisotropic, meaning they emit wave particles with uneven intensity that shift according to the direction in which they travel. “Isotropy,” in other words, is a theoretically uniform, but physically impossible, distribution of energy from a central source.

Isotropy is a useful conceptual apparatus for thinking about the rhetorical circulation of public images, which, much like the isotropic antenna, are, in *theory,* designed to induce uniform public response but, in *practice*, instigate a range of inconsistent counter-rhetorical effects. Certain public images work toward a theoretically uniform model of distribution by confining complex events in a single frame and working to attune public action to a consistent rhetorical wavelength. For instance, images of three-year old Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy whose body washed ashore in 2015 after his family tried to escape a refugee camp, prompted international outrage over the growing Syrian refugee crisis. Tragic or striking public images in particular can be powerful rhetorical objects for galvanizing public action and shaping public perceptions about particular events, issues, and communities. In her book *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Barbara Zelizer points out that public images, particularly emotionally powerful ones, operate according to a subjunctive logic by focusing on “what could be rather than what is” (14). Public images like those of Kurdi strive to, ideally, establish a consistent wavelength of rhetorical energy with the aim of galvanizing a desired public response (e.g. outrage) and channeling it toward collective action (e.g. work toward global solution to the Syrian refugee crisis). To “organize and maintain” a disparate group of strangers, the image must galvanize according to a consistent, replicable, and uniform logic that maintains semi-uniform rhetorical force regardless of the context in which it is placed. Without a doubt, the images of Kurdi crystallized a powerful moment of global tragedy, and its circulation on social media helped galvanize a public identity united through shared feelings of anger and heartbreak. Indeed, during the height of the image’s circulation, refugee charity organizations reported donation increases of 70% in some cases (Henley, et. al.). However, in the wake of his son’s death, Alan Kurdi’s father lamented the fact that despite the amount of global attention that the image of his son received, the death toll of Syrian refugees continued to climb (Dearden). In this case, the isotropic function of the image—galvanizing a public through a uniform rhetorical message—perpetuated a contradictory perception of the Syrian refugee crisis as intransigent and potentially unsolvable. “If images of a dead child cannot move the world to action,” so this collective public logic went, “then what will?”

Political images like *Obama Hope* also strive for an ideal rhetorical distribution model akin to the isotropic antenna: they seek to create uniform rhetorical effects in a diverse public audience (i.e. vote for Obama). However, as the counterpublic remixes in the previous section demonstrate, this is not always the result. Indeed, as Hariman and Lucaites point out, the idea that public images are “limited to communicating specific information to a specific audience about a specific event” is one of the main misconceptions of public images’ actual rhetorical function (29). As a way of counteracting this misconception, Hariman and Lucaites propose the idea of “engaged spectatorship,” which they describe as “practice in selecting and reframing images within settings that are both personal and public, shared and subject to debate” (30). In other words, engaged spectatorship encourages viewers to conceive of the public image less as an aesthetic object or individually authored social commentary and more as a node linking together disparate, and even conflictual, public discourses.

Although certainly not as shocking as images of death, *Obama Hope* functioned isotropically by attuning Obama’s voter base to a consistent message of political and racial progress. Similar to how images of Kurdi perpetuated public perceptions of the Syrian refugee crisis as unsolvable, political images like *Obama Hope* can also perpetuate unintended narratives about the events, people, and ideas they depict. Fairey’s original poster, for instance, depicted a “deracialized” portrait of Obama, one that could capture his campaign message of equal opportunity for all Americans, regardless of race[[2]](#footnote-2). Thus, although *Obama Hope’s* message helped Obama win the presidency, it also perpetuated a “transparent and replicable” narrative of racial unification that may have worked to elide some of the criticisms that Obama faced from African-American activists and community leaders throughout his presidency, criticisms for not doing enough to address issues of racial inequality specifically.

Writers and activists such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Kwame Rose, for instance, have cited Barack Obama’s tendency to skirt racial issues and race-specific policies throughout his presidency. Moreover, others have claimed that Obama’s election as the first black president, although an important moment in establishing both real and symbolic racial progress, may have unintentionally prompted revisionist perceptions of race relations in America. As African-American Studies professor William A. Darity recently wrote, “For many white Americans [Obama’s] election confirmed their belief that American racism is a thing of the past.” As Darity points out, there is a danger in Obama’s historic achievement being exploited to support racist, revisionist arguments that we live in a “post-racial” society. Moreover, as civil rights journalist Julia Craven claims, Obama’s election being misread as an end to political, historical, and systemic racism “leaves us with nothing but the grand symbolism of having a black president, which, while important, doesn’t amend real problems facing black Americans — like police violence or the racial wealth gap.”

In my next section, I demonstrate how AR can be used to produce counterpublic remixes with potential to intervene in isotropic narratives as well as activate an “engaged spectatorship” of public images. I do so by first reviewing how AR activists have already begun to do such rhetorical work. I then produce counterpublic remixes by drawing on the diverse array of black counter-rhetorics that began to arise throughout Obama’s presidency and into the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement. As a white male scholar, I am sensitive to appropriating such discourses, but I believe this rhetorical exercise is productive in demonstrating how counterpublic rhetorics that have been spread over time and space in varying densities can become more visible through AR. In order to help elucidate how I created the counterpublic remix, I then rhetorically analyze my own AR overlays with the hope of making this critical making practice more transparent.

**Producing Counterpublic Remixes**

*Special instructions for viewing this section:*

1. *Go to the “Obama Hope Remixes” channel and UNFOLLOW by selecting the “Following” button.*
2. *Search for and follow the channel “Obama Hope(s).”*
3. *Start the AR camera and scan the Obama Hope image in figure 6.*

Digital activists have already started to experiment with the potential of AR technologies to remix visual culture. In 2011, for instance, a group of digital artists collaborated to create a counterpublic remix of Times Square in New York City. The project, known as the *AR/AD Takeover*, was a smartphone application that allowed people to superimpose digital messages over physical advertisements (Tinnell 76). One augmentation remixed an advertisement so that it simply displayed the word “Breathe,” thereby repurposing the commodification of public space for a public service message. As the creators explain, this enactment of counterpublic remix helps us imagine how AR might be used to “transform, filter, and democratize the messaging in public space” (“AR AD Takeover”). More recently, in early 2015, a group of undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania created the “Brandkiller” AR application. Designed to be used with an optical display such as Google Glass, the application blocks any physical advertisements in the viewer’s line of sight. In doing so, this application, like the *AR/AD Takeover*, demonstrates how mobile AR can revolutionize how counterpublic discourses circulate in relation to visual culture.

In “Composition and the Circulation of Writing,” John Trimbur claims that delivery is an essential component of public discourse. Trimbur argues that we should stop thinking about delivery as a mere “technical aspect of public discourse” and more as “a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day” (190). Augmenting public images with mobile AR technologies offers a new kind of “delivery system” for circulating counternarratives to the isotropic rhetorics that images such as *Obama Hope* can perpetuate. As John Tinnell points out, mobile AR as a platform for counterpublic rhetorics is not likely to catch on as a mass medium until AR creators “become more attentive to matters of content creation” (70). In other words, mobile device users are not likely to engage with AR as a medium unless there exist compelling AR experiences to engage with in the first place. Counterpublic remixes offer a compelling experience capable of not only intervening into isotropic narratives perpetuated through the circulation of public images but potentially catalyzing the production of new genres of digital writing that galvanize counterpublic action.

Drawing on the counterpublic rhetorics that circulated in response to Obama’s approach to race relations throughout his presidency, the remix in this section overlays multimedia AR content onto the original *Obama Hope* poster. In doing so, I hope to recirculate texts created by black writers and activists that are capable of creating a more complex portrait of the influence that the Obama presidency had on public perceptions of race and American politics. In terms of design and production, this counterpublic remix deploys the remix strategies introduced in the first section with the following design phases outlined in the Visualizing Information for Advocacy Handbook (VIFA): 1) Get the Idea, 2) Get the Picture, and 3) Get the Details. Created by a team of designers and activists, VIFA is a free resource that provides design strategies for promoting advocacy initiatives. By deploying remix strategies in subsequent phases, mobile writers can leverage the multimodal affordances of AR to easily design compelling counterpublic remixes with potential to spark other participatory recombinations and galvanize counterpublic action.

The first phase in producing counterpublic remixes— “Get the Idea”—entails capturing the audience’s attention and communicating a general stance on the issue at hand—a design task that can be enhanced by making use of assemblage, reappropriation, and genre play as well as rhetorical strategies such as juxtaposition and/or contradiction. At this stage, the AR overlays should not completely block the original image but rather engage in a subtle rhetorical interplay with its visual aesthetics. In relation to my own counterpublic remix, such practices and strategies are especially important for highlighting the primary point of tension between the original image and the counterpublic message of the overlay. As Scott H. Church points out, the rhetorical practices of remix—sampling, cutting, combining, etc.—extend as far back as the Greek rhetorician Isocrates and his pedagogical practice of “imitatio.” Imitatio was the practice of “imitating” the speeches of famous orators in order to learn and adapt their rhetorical techniques to present day situations. However, Church is right to point out that, for Isocrates, imitatio was not just rote copying but rather a “productive and inventive process” that allows rhetors to develop strategies of their own “through interpretation, variation, creativity, and novelty” (44). Similarly, in designing overlays for the “Get the Idea” stage of AR counter-remixes, it important to consider how meaning is created not by merely imitating but by reappropriating and responding to the rhetoric of the target image. In my counterpublic remix, I thus try to draw the audience’s attention to the racial politics of Obama’s presidency by presenting one of the core arguments levelled by Obama’s detractors: that he did not do enough in his first term as president to promote policies designed specifically to help African-Americans. For many black critics of Obama, this issue was crystallized when Obama stated in an interview with Black Enterprise magazine that “I’m not the president of black America. I’m the president of the United States of America.” The initial phase of the augmentation begins by overlaying this quote as a speech bubble next to Obama, thereby introducing the overall “idea” that the counterpublic remix will be exploring further within the next two phases.

[FIGURE SEVEN EMBED]

Figure. 7: “Get the Idea”

The next phase, “Get the Picture,” entails providing more in-depth information by further engaging in assemblage and reappropriation. According to VIFA, this phase should present a more cohesive narrative to “help people to grasp [the] problem by understanding its context or scale, how it came about, how it compares to other issues, or how urgent it is” (74). Overall, the purpose of this phase is to provide enough background information that the audience will be enticed “to explore [the] issues further.” Building from the tension created in the first phase, this second phase transitions to a short video that provides historical context to perceptions of Obama’s approach to racial issues throughout his presidency. Moving from Obama’s 2008 election to his post-presidential legacy, the video does not aim to be exhaustive but rather seeks to provide more detailed information so that the user can become familiar with and informed about the varied sides of the debate. This video helps to contextualize the issue and the historical circumstances that led up to the quote from Obama that was introduced in the first phase.

[FIGURE EIGHT EMBED]

Fig. 8: “Get the Picture”

The final phase of the augmentation, “Get the Details,” entails offering the user an entry point into primary texts, digital resources, and/or online communities connected to the issue at hand. Unlike the previous phase, which offered a linear narrative of the events leading up to the fraught relationship between Obama and prominent black writers and activists, this phase merely assembles primary source materials for the user to navigate on their own. As VIFA describes this phase, “[t]he art in getting the details is to allow audiences to explore the evidence for themselves to find the stories that mean something to them” (96). In this phase, I overlaid *Obama Hope* with accessible resources that would nuance the user’s understanding of the effects of Obama’s presidency on racial issues and public conversations about race. In doing so, I splinter this issue into the network of public texts that through it is constituted. As Gries demonstrates in *Still Life with Rhetoric*, the circulation of the *Obama Hope* image “spread desires for progress, hope, and change” (41). However, as the writers and activists in this third phase point out, it is vital that Obama’s election not be read as a substitute for continued efforts at real and lasting “progress, hope, and change.” Thus, this final phase of the augmentation works to fragment the narrative of hope embedded in the target image into distributed contemporary conversations about race.

[FIGURE NINE EMBED]

Fig. 9: “Get the Details”

To accomplish this goal, I created four digital buttons that, when tapped, trigger different critiques of Obama’s approach to race relations that have been launched by various figures throughout Obama’s administration. With Aurasma, I could include both video and audio materials in this final section of the augmentation. The button at the top, “Sharpton-West Debate,” thus links to an Obama-era MSNBC debate between Al Sharpton and Cornel West. In the video, Cornel West argues that African-American communities’ hesitance to criticize Obama is being appropriated by “Wall Street oligarchs” who use the president as a “black mascot” to advocate for their own corporate interests. Al Sharpton responds that critiques like West’s place an unfair blame on the president for not resolving centuries-long issues of systemic racism. The debate that ensues between Sharpton and West was indicative of a burgeoning divide over perceptions of Obama’s presidency within various African-American communities.

Moving clockwise, the second button triggers an interview with Kwame Rose, a leader within the Black Livers Matter movement. In the interview, Rose outlines his frustration with the Obama administration, stating that he doesn’t believe Obama “has done enough for black people.” Rose also goes on to describe the Obama administration’s lack of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. The third button triggers an interview with Patrisse Cullors, one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter, where she describes how Obama’s election negatively impacted public discourse, saying that people no longer feel the need to “have honest conversations about race” now that “we had overcome” the racial barriers of the past by electing a black president. Together, these two interviews reveal the frustration that many Black Lives Matter activists feel towards Obama’s approach to race relations more generally and to the BLM movement specifically.

The final button, “My President Was Black,” links to an article by Ta-Nehisi Coates that reflects on Obama’s racial legacy in the wake of a Donald Trump presidency. In the article, Coates describes how Obama’s resistance to pursuing race-based policies reflected a larger ideology within liberal politics that remains wedded to the idea that we should focus less on issues of race and more on general “equality for all.” Of course, as Coates writes, the rising tide of far-right, white nationalist sentiment throughout the country is now making it all too clear that “issues of race” should not be thought of as minor elements within the pursuit of a more just and equitable society. Rather, matters of race are integral to the function of a society at a systemic level, and to ignore them in favor of “equality of all” is to perpetuate the same injustices such generic policies seek to mitigate.

[FIGURE TEN EMBED]

Figure 10: To access the counterpublic remix in full, open the Aurasma app and search for and follow the channel “Obama Hope Counterpublics.” Make sure to unfollow the “Obama Hope Remixes” channel used in the previous section. Start the AR camera in Aurasma by clicking on the small bracket icon on the bottom menu. Then, scan the *Obama Hope* image above.

This overlay sequence presented the potential of mobile AR technologies to remix physical images into a delivery platform for counterpublic remixes. By combining remix practices of assemblage, reappropriation, and genre play, AR remixes can potentially foster more engaged, informed, and participatory encounters with popular public images. To harness such potential, of course, this counterpublic remix must be shared. The final phase of creating counterpublic remixes thus entails redistribution.

Because AR is such a new medium, many mobile device users may not even be aware when an image has been augmented with a digital counterpublic remix. For instance, the work it takes to download a third-party mobile application (Aurasma), search for a specific channel, and then scan the correct target image(s) may discourage some from even engaging with AR in the first place. To redistribute a simple counterpublic remix through vision-based AR with existing mobile technologies thus requires one to either 1) create a companion website (e.g. this chapter) with downloadable target images and instructions for accessing the remix through a third-party application, or 2) creating a photo or video documentation of the AR experience, which can then be circulated and accessed on social media websites and video platforms. The counterpublic remix in this final section models a combination of these two approaches. However, as mobile AR technologies become more advanced and integrated into the essential hardware and software of mobile devices, users may be able to set automatic push-notifications alerting them to the availability of counterpublic remixes that have been created for nearby physical images, such as the *Obama Hope* poster. Through this, mobile writers can leverage the existing physical delivery network of print images as platforms for the redistribution of digital counterpublic remixes. As Michael Warner reminds us, publics are constituted through “texts and their circulation” (413). Thus, by overlaying AR multimedia content that resists the isotropic narratives of widely circulated public images, counterpublic remixes can activate more informed and engaged public audiences and potentially serve as a galvanizing rhetorical force for counterpublic action.

**Conclusion**

For Gries, “rhetorical transformation” is a “process in which things become rhetorical in divergent, unpredictable ways…as people and other things come into relations to achieve a variety of nuanced purposes” (*Still Life* 27-28). Mobile AR provides a new means for rhetorically transforming public images. Not only can writers re-mix, re-post, and re-tweet images in online spaces, but through the emerging affordances of the mobile internet and AR, they can increasingly discover and generate new avenues of visual creativity and remix as the physical and digital spaces of everyday life continue to converge.

This chapter has demonstrated the potential of mobile AR as a platform for analyzing and producing counterpublic remixes of public images. As the augmentation in my final section demonstrates, mobile AR offers a viable framework for activating more nuanced interactions between the isotropic narratives of certain public images and the counterpublics that form in response to them. However, this model is by no means exhaustive; as mobile computing begins to merge with ubiquitous and wearable technologies (e.g. optical displays, smart watches, etc.) our ability to access digital information across physical spaces and texts and intervene in public affairs will continue to proliferate in ways that this chapter cannot anticipate. As such, visual studies scholarship must continue to keep up with emergent developments and alongside them generate new methodologies for analyzing and producing digital public rhetorics such as counterpublic remixes. By engaging in critical making projects such as the one modeled in this chapter, we can more effectively produce and explore the new media genres through which public and counterpublic rhetorics will potentially circulate in an era of mobile and ubiquitous computing.

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1. Of course, there were many other counterpublics that formed against *Obama Hope*. However, a detailed analysis of all counterpublics formed in response to *Obama Hope* is beyond the purview of this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion on the deracializing undertones of the *Obama Hope* poster, see Fisher III et. al “Reflections on the Hope Poster Case,” p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)