

OpenTheo

Faith, Race, and Hip-Hop at Harvard | An Interview with Obasi Shaw

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The Veritas Forum

Obasi Shaw has recently hit the news as the first Harvard student to submit a rap album as his senior thesis. The album, entitled "Liminal Minds," represents a coming together of Obasi's interests, ranging from Chaucer, to hip-hop, to the pursuit of racial justice. But the key theme that connects all his thoughts and experiences is his passion for Jesus and for applying the gospel of the crucified God to the murky complexities of human life. In this interview, Obasi explores the album in relation to his faith.

Transcript

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[MUSIC PLAYING] Welcome to the Veritas Forum Podcast. My name is Caleb Godhart. And I'm the online and social media manager for Veritas.

In this episode, we're doing something a little different. I had the opportunity to sit down with soon-to-be Harvard graduate, Obasi Shaw. He is about to graduate from Harvard University, class of 2017.

And most notably, right now, he is the first Harvard senior to submit a rap album in his senior thesis. And so, Obasi, could you just tell us a little bit about yourself, like, club it in your background, and how you got here? Yeah, so I am-- I'm Harvard senior. I study English with a minor in computer science.

I am from Atlanta. I rap. I've been rapping for a couple of years now.

I started rapping summer of 2015. I focus my studies in English mainly on medieval things. I've always known I wanted to be a creative writer of some form, but I didn't know until recently that rap would be that form, as well as other forms of still interested in other forms of writing.

And then I'm also part of a few different Christian groups on campus, most involved with CI, which is Cruz, President's on Harvard's campus, and the Harvard Ithas, which is a Christian Journal on Harvard's campus. And I was managing editor of the Harvard Ithas last year.

[music] So, can you tell me a little bit about the story of this album? Like, how did you kind of get the concept to submit a thesis like that? What was the process like there? I've always known I wanted to do some sort of creative writing, and so I told my mom that I was thinking about it, but I had no idea what I wanted to do, and she suggested, "Why don't you write a rap album as your thesis?" And I thought they would never accept a rap album, so I was like, "No, that would never work." And so when I was accepted and I was like, now to write a rap album as a thesis, it was like a complete surprise for me.

Do you have any insight into how that was received? Harvard's English department has just been, at every step of the way, kind of far more accepting and excited about it than I thought they would be. And so it was really my thesis advisor, Josh Bell, who enabled me to write the thesis. And so he was a hip-hop fan, introduced me to some artists, and it was just a super cool guy.

How do you see, either within the content of the album, the structure of it, how do you see that as the culmination of your work at Harvard, and even before that? I had a listening party for my album a week before it was due for submission. I invited a lot of my friends, so I had something like 80 people who showed up. I was on and off kind of terrified that people wouldn't like it, but the one thing that I felt good about and felt like at peace because of was that I had honestly expressed myself.

Like I wasn't pandering to anybody, I wasn't writing to please anybody in particular. It was just all of the different ways that I developed, like my racial consciousness, my understanding of Christianity. It felt like this was the culmination, not just of my Harvard career in an academic sense, but who I have become at Harvard.

That put me at peace to know that I had truly expressed myself. What do you feel like? Right in the hospital, by your mouth it's true. Issues of race and your own understanding of what that means, how has Harvard shaped that over the last four years? Before I got to Harvard, I really didn't have very well-developed views on race, but then I just kind of was forced to start to think things through and question my own beliefs.

It was great to have been at Harvard, somewhere where I could do that intellectually. This semester I took a class on the African American literary tradition with Professor Henry Lewis-Gate and last semester a course called race and racism in American politics with Professor Larry Bobo. It's the quality of education I've been able to get as well as being around all of these other people who are experiencing race issues in different ways has been very helpful to me.

I feel like this has been a great place for me to, or Harvard's been a great place for me to develop that racial consciousness. Looking at racism as an issue within the broader context of sin or of the fallenness of humanity, the brokenness of humanity, you don't have to be a racist in order to be complicit in advancing systems of racial oppression. Even like I, as a black person, contribute to racism in my own ways just by the ways that I act or even just by the friends that we have and the way that we allocate our resources, we can be complicit in this broader kind of sinfulness of the world.

And I think that the message there is that we can't blame each other without also blaming ourselves or that we can't look at each other and say that person is the problem and let me like ostracize this person and then that will solve the issue, but really it's like all of us together are kind of in bondage together to sin and therefore in something of like a community, like there's a bond built in between all of us in racism, in sexism and in like all sin. So that like sin is social, it's about our relationships with others or with God and so I think it's just been really interesting to be able to see racism not as white people's problem, although white people certainly can contribute to racism in much more damaging ways, but it's not just white people's problem, it's a sin problem, it's everybody's problem.

[music] How do you see rap sin and even maybe this album as a vessel to communicate your own experience and understanding your racial consciousness and then do you, how also do you see it as for your listeners, like what are you hoping they take away from that? So I could have written poetry and the style of poetry that we generally write in English departments, which is a very European style of poetry, or I could have written like a short story or a novel, but writing in the in a black art form about black experiences just seemed to carry a level of authenticity or type of authenticity that I couldn't have had in any other form.

As far as like the effect I wanted to have on my listeners, that's something that I wondered a long time, even after I had finished the album, and as I was like stressed about how people would receive it and like was it good or was it not? One thing that I realized was that what I didn't want, what I wasn't worried about was if people would like it, but I was worried if people would be at all changed or challenged by it. And I realized that like I said that I wasn't pandering to any group and I felt like that was something that I was proud of and that I gave me peace, but what I was doing was I was very focused on these different groups, but I was focused on them in that I wanted to

complicity in that sinful world and that there is nobody who's free from that complicity. We can't build this Christian bubble and say we're the good people of the other people of the bad people, but that we're all sinful and cottons in. In 1 John chapter 2 verse 2 I think the message there I think is sometimes a little confused where he says walk in the light as he is in the light.

I'm pretty confident that what he's not saying there is be a good person. What he's saying is be honest, don't hide your sin, take it to the light. Those who are living in darkness are living alive because they are pretending they are not sinning.

And then he goes into the beginning of chapter 2. He says I'm writing these things to you so you do not sin, but if anyone does sin we have an advocate with a father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who gave himself for our sins and not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world. We can't restrict the benefits of Christianity to ourselves and say God died for us. We are the only ones who are important.

We're the ones who good music is written for or whatever, but that God died for all and therefore we should reach out to all and we should understand and deal with the complexities of all of our sin because nobody is righteous. When I write my raps I see myself as operating in a tradition maybe a little more similar to Chance the Rapper and Kendrick Lamar. I use profanity in my raps and I don't generally curse not very much at all in real life, but because I think that there's an experience or the things that I want to express are things that are expressed with those words.

Those are words that maybe a Christian audience would reject me for, but I'm not writing for that Christian audience necessarily. I'm writing for the people who understand those words and who understand the power of those words and what they translate and what they do and that it's not clean, but that the world isn't clean, nobody is clean. I'm not writing for anybody who thinks that we have to be clean in order to be accepted.

I love it. I've been also listening to it for the last month, still trying to process what all that means. What are your thoughts? I love the way Kendrick Lamar struggles with his faith in his albums and I just think that's something that everybody should do in the way that he does just with an honesty and openness.

In XXAC he says, "America is a reflection of me, that's what a mirror does." That seems to me to be that message of I'm a sinner, everybody's a sinner, that we're all kind of reflecting each other. I want the answer to not be, "Therefore let's be good people," because that doesn't work, it hasn't worked, we're just not going to. What I think, the answer that I read in the Bible and that I believe is the opposite that God has come in to save us because we all, rather than cursing us because we're wrong, he somehow made the decision to love us and to bring us all together, despite who we are instead of because of what we do.

Yeah, what seems like you're even talking about how Christianity itself is invested in the murkiness and the messiness of the world and that's where an redemption is born out of that in Christianity. It doesn't attempt to sanitize the world. How do you kind of see those ideas working together in this album, maybe in particular? So the goal of the album, it's called "Liminal Minds" and the idea is liminal means in between two states.

The idea came to mind because of a quote that I heard that I was talking about. It was saying that black people in America are caught between freedom and slavery. Although slavery was abolished, although not quite abolished because of the prison system, but although slavery was abolished, we still deal with the effects of slavery.

We still deal with the effects of slavery in our lives and the weight of that on our consciousness. I then saw the word liminal minds and it just kind of clicked one that there's just the liminality of black experience, but then also the contrast with criminal minds and how a lot of people see these minds as criminal minds, like those who are writing or the perspectives in my album, but that they don't see themselves that way or that that's not an appropriate way to see them instead, because we're all criminal minds. We're all sinners in that sense.

I don't think anybody's any more criminal than anybody else, but that these are liminal minds, which is they're dealing with all of these different ways that they're caught between spaces. I want to, like the deepest kind of goal of the album is to bring a little bit of empathy, not just from white listeners, but from everybody, for these people who are dealing with the world, that is with a complicated world that's oppressing them in complicated ways, and that they're not, we can't ostracize them and say these people are criminals, instead we should take the effort and the time to understand why their sin looks kind of different from ours. Or not ours, because I feel like in some ways, like these characters are expressions of me.

And no wonder for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of life, it is not surprising that if his servants also masquerades the servants of righteousness, their end will be what their actions deserve. The people that Jesus could not stand were the religious people, the people who, like, Pharisees at the time were considered the best people, like if anybody in the Jewish community wanted to look for a good person, you'd look for a Pharisee, right? And right now, I think Christians are, at least consider themselves, the best people. Jesus never liked people who took claim to that status, the people that he spent time with were the complicated people.

And I think he tells the parable about the Pharisee who goes and talks to God and says, God, thank you, that I am not a sinner, like these other people, and the tax selector who goes and says, God, Lord, have mercy on me a sinner. And I think that the people that connect to God are the people who recognize their own dirtiness and the dirtiness, the murkiness of the world they live in. I am trying to do that in this album, like, recognize

the murkiness of the world instead of pretending that there's that I'm good.

So in this album, you're also dealing with not only your own experience being black in America right now, but also the song "Pilgrims, allusions to the Native Americans' struggle in America and the history of oppression there. But you're also juxtaposing that alongside some biblical images and, like, you know, Old Testament prophecies where Israel is this nation being oppressed. Could you talk a little bit about kind of how you see in these biblical images, even of oppression and redemption, working alongside current identity in race in America? So there's this great passage where God is speaking to Israelites about how they're going to be brought into, like, the promised land that's going to be great, and they're going to really enjoy themselves.

But he says, like, when you, like, are living in houses that you did not build and, like, tilling the fields that you did not plant or whatever, to remember, like, who brought you out of, like, that I am the one who rescued you. And when God is rescuing them, he's with them, he's on their side, but then he also recognizes that as soon as they become comfortable, they're going to forget. And so I think that God is on the side of the oppressed in the sense that it is only when we are forced to acknowledge the painfulness and the sinfulness and the brokenness of our world, that we can come close to God.

And so black people now, just like Native Americans and, like, the slaves even, because there were like slaves who were on the trail of tears who, like, aren't spoken about either. And then the Israelites and any kind of oppressed group in the world is not necessarily closer to God, but practically closer to God, generally because they know the need of a savior in this world. And so I think that, like, salvation is for everybody.

God comes for everybody, but that he is especially present and visible to the oppressed. And so, you know, rap emerges in the 1970s out of that culture of oppression in the Bronx and kind of becomes a voice for the black community, voice that struggle. But in many ways, at its origin, it's an art form by the black community and for the black community.

You're, you know, part of this new kind of contemporary tradition of rap that is, you know, definitely still doing that, right? And I think that's a very important topic and chance are articulating what it's like to be black in America right now. But also, they have a larger audience, including a larger white audience. And now you're at Harvard, where that is also receiving a larger white audience.

How do you, how do you hope someone who's a thoughtful listener who wants to be aware of their sense of privilege in this country? What would you hope they take away from this album? And I think that's the audience, like, who am I writing for? Knowing that, like, I'm writing from Harvard, I'm writing, like, to a world that considers me speaking, as speaking to white people. And I think I'm speaking to anybody who wants to listen. I just want to tell stories that help people to understand and see better the plight

of a particular community.

And I don't care who the listener is as long as they are changed and helped and affected by it. And that as long as it causes them to love the world better. And so for the, like, white listener or the educated listener or, like, the thoughtful listener of any kind of background, that's what I want.

Like, the song "Beast," for example, is about a kid who's, like, involved in gain violence and gets killed. And that's what I want his life to make sense to people. Not make sense in the sense that the oppression doesn't make sense, but his response to the oppression should make sense.

That he is just a kid trying to, like, do his life. And I want anybody who's listening to, to just kind of learn to empathize with him and not say, "Oh, well, he's, like, in a gain." When people suffer, I think it's just a human thing that we try to rationalize that suffering and say that, like, it's a moral issue, that the reason this person, or at least it's a semi-moral kind of thing. Like, the reason this person is suffering is because they were in a gang and I would never be in a gang.

Or even, like, if we see somebody, like, in a car crash or, like, well, they were probably a reckless driver and, like, that would never happen to me because we want to believe that, like, the bad thing that happened to them is not something that would happen to us. And I want to challenge that. I want people more than anything to see that they are no different from the other people whom bad things happen to.

Like, even that we're no different from the criminals that go to prison and are treated horribly and, like, the criminal justice system we have, that could have been me. And the more that we can say that could have been me, the more people we can say that could have been me to, the more love we have for the world and the more we understand, I think, ourselves and the world. So that's kind of what I want, is people to, like, be able to say that could have been me to any of the, like, characters in my songs.

So you also use some middle English writing specifically, *Canterbury Tales*, as inspiration for the structure and kind of the voice of the album. How did I shape the development of this work? Just narratively, it's what came to mind very soon from when I started writing the album, although the album changed in a lot of ways, was this idea of a bunch of pilgrims kind of meeting together and talking, like in the *Canterbury Tales*. But pilgrims, in the sense that black people are on a pilgrimage of a sort, like a spiritual pilgrimage, almost like the exodus from Egypt, kind of pilgrimage.

That idea just came from, like, Chaucer, because I've done so much old English study, and I think that there's so much similarity and connections in all of these different forms of writing. It's funny to me that I study old English because I'm black, because it's a specifically European, specifically, like, English thing. We're all just telling stories, and

we're telling them in our own ways, we're telling them, like, in our own, like, times.

But Chaucer, for example, was writing these crazy stories about all these crazy adventures that people go on, and not just stories of knights and kings and whatever, but stories of like, millers and common people. What was kind of the stick of what he was doing was it's like a bunch of common people, just random people who all are interested in going to Canterbury come together and tell stories. And I think that just the idea that it's common people telling their own stories is what really appeals to me about that and where I see the connection, that anybody has a story, whether they're in 14th century, like, England, or like, 21st century America.

I really like that idea of pilgrimage, and he kind of talked about this album in many ways, represents that pilgrimage and that journey, and spiritual and issues of racial and identity, and you talk a lot about that tension between slavery and freedom. But your album ends on a very distinctively optimistic note. What kind of led you to believe, like, this is the way I want to finish this album.

It's interesting because I think there's good arguments both for and against the idea that things will get better that will approach some type of like racial equality. And I think there's good arguments on both sides, like, maybe they will, maybe they won't, like, in America. But I'm optimistic because I see things kind of on a broader scale.

I, like, was talking about the complicity of everybody, the shared kind of experience of sinfulness. And I think that that's just something that, at the end of the day, we're all human. And what that means is not that we're all, like, treated the same way or that we experience the same lives, but what it means most potently are, like, two things that we're all sinful, desperately sinful, that we all are complicit in so many ways and so many wrongs.

And there's just no way to extricate like ourselves from that. And then that we're all loved by God. And that's something that is evident to me in different ways.

But just the story of redemption that the Bible tells, the story of God coming to save all of mankind. And the narrative that Christianity tells just makes the most sense to me. And then it also provides the only solution to which is reconciliation.

One day, the Bible promises that we will all be reconciled. And that the agent of that reconciliation is Jesus Christ. And what he did was he bore our burden.

And it just makes sense to me that that's the answer, is the Christ God himself needing to bear the burdens of mankind. And if I believe that that is the answer, then I can believe that he will accomplish what he has set out to accomplish. And so whether or not there's reconciliation in America, there will be reconciliation one day.

And that's what gives me that hope. We can do like to conclude like a little speed round

of questions. So take your time, but favorite rap album of all time.

>> Do you remember "Butterfly"? >> Okay. >> What's the next step for you after graduation? >> Unsure. So, musically unsure, but like I'll be going to Google in Seattle working as a software engineer for some time.

I want to write, I will be writing, I am still writing, but I just don't know. All of this new found press is just random. I have no idea this is going to happen.

And so I haven't really been able to process anything. And then I'm also getting married in August. >> That's awesome.

>> So, life has happened. >> Life has happened. >> Yeah.

>> I have an answer. >> Yeah. >> All right.

What do you, this is going to be a speed round about the album. What do you hope Chaucer fans take away from this? >> I hope Chaucer fans start to listen to rap more. >> Okay.

Great. How about, what do you hope hip-hop fans take away? >> I hope hip-hop fans become more receptive of a message of hope. I hope that they see the beauty and the complexity in everybody's messages and recognize that their messages are maybe not no more profound or beautiful than the messages other people have.

>> That's really good. And last question, completely superficial. Favorite flavor of ice cream? >> Birthday cake.

>> Birthday cake. >> Yeah. >> Yeah.

>> Yeah. >> Yeah. >> Yeah.

>> Yeah. >> It's just, yeah. >> Yeah.

>> Oh, it's my favorite. I mean, like, if they have that at any place, that's my go-to. >> Yeah.

>> All right. Well, thank you so much, Abbasi. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

>> Thank you. >> And wish you the best as you graduate. >> Thank you.

>> Get married. >> Good to see you. >> Not coming up.

>> Yeah. >> Wish you the best. >> Yeah.

>> Thank you. >> Let's say a prayer. Every head bath, every eye clothes.

We taking arms for the weary sing a song for the soft folk. We got to take these heavy

bones and break the stones and stronghold and take these empty poems and place these songs and obstacles. >> Find more content like this on baritas.org. And be sure to follow the baritas forum on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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