"Our Street-Strutting Language": Asian American Rappers in a Hip-Hop Nation

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"OUR STREET-STRUTTING LANGUAGE": ASIAN AMERICAN RAPPERS IN A HIP-HOP NATION

A Master's Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Department
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
Helen Ye-Hua Wang
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Approved, April 2002

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ABSTRACT

Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Asian Americans have been caught up in the energy and passions of America’s multiracial awakening. Fueled by the rhetoric of racial and ethnic consciousness, one segment of Asian American youth are “making noise” through hip-hop style and subculture.

By embracing hip-hop in the idiom of black expressive culture, these Asian American rappers have seen in rap, a space of youthful rebellion. Moreover, Asian American rappers employ blackness, as articulated through hip-hop in order to dispel mainstream stereotypes of Asian Americans as “model minority.”

This thesis explores the ways in which one Asian American hip-hop group, the Mountain Brothers, have used rap to project themselves as rebellious, hip, and sexy Americans, utterly unlike the popularized myths of Asian Americans as passive and unemotional. At the same time, by using Asian iconography in their music video, the Mountain Brothers frustrate the boundaries of what is considered cool in hip-hop.

This paper begins by tracing the origins of the term, “Asian American” and how African American racial pride and militancy affected the activities of Asian American youth in the hip-hop scene.
“OUR STREET-STRUTTING LANGUAGE”:

ASIAN AMERICAN RAPPERS IN A HIP-HOP NATION
INTRODUCTION

"Where’s our jazz? Our blues? Where’s our aint-taking-no-shit-from-nobody street-strutting language? I want so bad to be the first bad-jazz China Man bluesman of America."1 Created from the imagination of Maxine Hong Kingston, Wittman Ah Sing speaks for generations of Asian Americans in search of a heroic voice. Part fiction, part legend, Tripmaster Monkey follows the metamorphosis of a Chinese-American hippie in the 1960s. As Wittman encounters various characters through his adventures, he retires his dark and cryptic personae for a more productive and hopeful one. What once seemed like a society of displaced people becomes, for Wittman, a stage of community. Finding connections among the most unlikely people, Wittman produces a carnivalesque theater to educate his audience about racism and exclusion in the United States.

Wittman Ah Sing, a “present-day U.S.A incarnation of the King of the Monkeys” is looking for a space to sound his monkey spirit.2 He is a rebellious soul displaced in a stereotyped “passive” Asian body. Wittman Ah Sing is the solipsistic “I” hero—Walt Whitman, singing to the “body electric,” through his monkey lips. He is also our wit man—a superhero who conquers the world’s fallacies through his stinging humor. Perhaps Ah Sing signals the White man’s presence as he wreaks

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2 Based on Journey to the West, a 16th century Chinese novel by Wu Cheng-en, the Monkey King is a “figure of rebellion against authority and the conventional order, and a hero in the struggle against
havoc on a neat whitewashed world. He could be all of these people, but who Whittman Ah Sing really wants to be is the Black man.

In crafting Wittman’s character, Maxine Hong Kingston sought to represent the anger and confusion of young Chinese Americans in the late sixties and early seventies, who worried that their culture was, as she puts is, “on the brink of disappearing.” Wandering among multiple worlds, neither Chinese nor American, Wittman finds inspiration from African American expressive culture fueled by the political energy of the Black community during the Civil Rights era.

Herein lies the dilemma of Wittman’s desire for blackness. His affinity for “street-strutting language” (as articulated by the rhetoric of black militancy) makes Whittman feel simultaneously jealous of the African American community strength and presence, as well as guilty for appropriating its cultural politics. Literary critic Yan Gao notes, “Whittman feels not only left out of the racial system, but also of the cultural system where, although African American jazz at least is incorporated into the mainstream, his people are represented only by ‘knickknacks,’ sweet and sour pork, Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu with pigtails.”

Throughout his encounters, Wittman exhibits his own internalized racism of Chinese Americans. We see it in his treatment of “plain girl from the bus,” Judy Louis, and his exoticism of “beautiful” Nanci Lee:

So uncool. You wouldn’t mislike them on sight if their pants weren’t so highwater, gym socks white and noticeable. F.O.B. fashions — highwaters or

evil” (Gao, 100). Whittman Ah Sing pronounces himself the “modern day incarnation of the King of the Monkeys” (Hong Kingston, Trippmaster Monkey: His Fake Book, 33).


puddlecuffs. Can’t get it right. Uncool. Uncool. The tunnel smelled of mothballs—F.O.B. perfume.⁵

While he would never admit it, Wittman is obsessed with achieving “coolness” in the eyes of others and the way that he knows to do this is by being black and hip—the antithesis of a Chinese F.O.B.⁶

At the same time that Wittman rejects the image of the uncool Chinese, he is also desperate to see his Chinese ancestry be validated. He says, “on the Black station, people were phoning in and arguing whether you can tell somebody’s color by his voice. Back at the jazz station, Wittman heard: ‘Louis B. Armstrong and John Cage credit Chinese opera for inspiring their rhythms.’ Yes? Yes? Was Whittman’s yearning giving him a hallucination in the ear?”⁷ When Nanci Lee says to him, “You sound black...I mean like a Black poet. Jive. Slang. Like LeRoi Jones. Like...like Black,” our monkey goes bananas.⁸ “*Monkey see, monkey do!*” he shouts. As someone who values and presents himself as wholly original, Wittman cannot make heads or tails of his affinity for black belonging. The question at the heart of his anxiety is how he can be black and still be original?

In the fictional world, Whittman Ah Sing represents a cohort of young Asian Americans whose adaptation of black culture and expressions opens an intriguing door into racial and ethnic identity politics. *Tripmaster Monkey’s* vision extends beyond the pages of Hong Kingston’s trips and tales. As Wittman is able to find and build a community he can identify with, so do the performers in my following narrative. They too, are like the Chinese legend, Monkey—reeking havoc and

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⁶ F.O.B is an acronym for Fresh Off the Boat.
tripping up expectations at every corner. Finding music in noise and solidarity where there is separation, these “trippers and askers,” “linguists and contenders”, “twisters and shouters” of Asian American hip-hop are rapping their way out of the model minority myth.9

Life imitates art in the conjoined experiences of Whittman Ah Sing and the Asian American hip-hop artists I am about to explore. Their mutual estrangement from both Asian and hegemonic white cultural communities subsequently leads to their use of black performance as a means of personal and political expression. But as with most youth in Western societies, experiencing conflicts in identity—racial or otherwise— is hardly an uncommon occurrence. What separates this story from the run-of-the-mill Dawson’s Creek episode is whom these youth turned to in their moment of confusion and seeming disempowerment.

Accused of trying to sound like LeRoi Jones, and wanting to be a “bad-jazz China Man,” Whittman embraces black performance in three distinct ways. First, he adopts it as a sign of “coolness,” meaning it is cool—sexy even—to be black. Secondly, being black signifies Whittman’s rejection of whiteness as a dominant form of expression. Finally, being black defies everything it means to be Asian. In these three modes, Whittman creates a niche that frustrates popular stereotypes of Asian Americans.10

I employ Whittman Ah Sing as a paradigmatic character for one Asian American hip-hop group, the Mountain Brothers. They, like Whittman, have turned

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9 Ibid., 32.
to black performance for inspiration, and ultimately for voice. Specifically, they embrace black hip-hop as a venue for rebellion. To varying degrees and interpretations, these artists engage hip-hop in the same three modes of blackness that Whittman occupies to create their culturally unorthodox music. First, they appropriate black hip-hop for the same reason whites and others do, in Eric Lott’s words, as “love and theft.” Secondly, they utilize rap as a subculture that contradicts and ultimately rejects white musical forms. Finally, as Asian American rappers, they attempt to defy Asian mores, translating noise to music and violence to control—making culturally deviant expressions integral to their newly constructed selfhood.

Chapter one establishes a framework for discussing Asian American culture by exploring how the term, “Asian American” is defined, appropriated and politicized by white hegemonic culture and Asian Americans themselves. By tracing its evolution from “Oriental” to “Asian American,” we will consider the constraints and necessity of its formation within contemporary American society.

Chapter two considers the ways in which “Asian American” is constructed vis a vis the idiom of “African American.” Borrowing from Eric Lott’s concept of “love and theft,” this chapter examines how the performance of blackness affords young Asian American men the image of power and sex appeal to counter negative media stereotypes of the sexless-Asian male.

Chapter three examines how and why some Asian and Anglo Americans employ hip-hop particularly because it is not white. Moving through examples in rock music, we will consider how not wanting to be white is in many ways a product

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10 These conventional stereotypes are rooted in antiquated notions of orientalism and the model minority myth. I will discuss the model minority myth in the following sections.
of youth culture. Asian Americans and white kids alike view hip-hop as an alternative space to critique and exempt themselves from white hegemonic culture’s square, unsexy personae.

Chapter four brings the politics of Asian American hip-hop into the private sphere of the family, where generational differences have led some young Asian Americans to choose hip-hop as their culture. Shedding their Asian-ness, Asian American rappers use hip-hop as their language of resistance against Asian traditions and ethos.

Grounded by the theoretical underpinnings of the previous four chapters, chapter five offers an open-ended reading of one Chinese and Taiwanese American hip-hop group, the Mountain Brothers. This chapter moves through a series of close readings of the group’s hip-hop image, as articulated in their self-promoting literature, interviews and music video. More than any other Asian American rap group, the Mountain Brothers have had to deal with the politics of racial presentation to a mainstream audience.

The final chapter concludes this analysis by considering the problems and potential of hip-hop as a unifying culture for Asian American and African American youth. I will also briefly survey two other Asian American hip-hop and spoken word groups, who, unlike the Mountain Brothers, mainly work with Asian American audiences. Freed from the constraints of having to negotiate mainstream politics, the Two Tongues and Jamez suggest how Asian American hip-hop might sound in non-marginalized spaces.
CHAPTER I

What Are You?: The "Asian American" Experiment

"People speak of 'American' as if it means 'white' and 'minority' as if it means 'black.' In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently are neither American nor minority," writes Frank Wu. 11 This "neither-nor" predicament locates Asian Americans as America's perpetual foreigners, awkwardly lodged between the margins and the mainstreams. 12 Wu's statement reminds us that the problem with Asian American identity begins with naming, and how the limitations of language distorts and ultimately helps to essentialize a nuanced and complex people.

For those of us who respond to the hail, "Asian American," the term fits like a bulky sweater—too big and awkward. As imperfect as the term is, it is nonetheless a marked improvement from its predecessor, "oriental," a term coined by Westerners to characterize Asians. 13 Edward Said argued that orientalism is used to trace the

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13 Luis Fancia writes, "Once Asian groups emigrated to the United States, wildly different as they were, they shared a common history once they shared a common land. Looked upon by a xenophobic white society as 'barbarians at the gate,' they settled here in the face of discrimination, bigotry and physical assaults. Especially after the Second World War, they faced—and continue to face—mounting pressure to assimilate and obliterate their own Asian identities and histories." ("Asian
history of how people in Europe and the United States created an idea of an “Orient” that was the opposite of everything “Occidental.” In other words, orientalism is the ideological effect of inventing and studying the ‘Orient’. Creating such imaginative geography “helps the mind to intensify its own sense of self by dramatizing the difference and distance between what is close to it and what is far away.”

Psychologically, the presence of “orientals” is integral to the self-actualization of “occidentals.” Therefore, the name “oriental” came to be rejected by Asian Americans because it had meaning only as an oppositional term. Transitioning from “Oriental” to “Asiatic” to finally, “Asian American,” these Americans were finding in this new name, a sense of agency and independence.

Across diasporic cultures, Americans of Asian descent mobilized politically under the umbrella term, “Asian American,” a term that film critic Peter Feng argues, “has meaning primarily because it was coined by Asians, as opposed to the term ‘Oriental’ which was applied to us by non-Asians.” The term, “Asian American” was coined by activists and intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s in response to growing discomfort of the use of “Oriental” as a racially descriptive term. Logistically, it also reflects the similarity in treatment of various Americans of Asian descent in the hands of state institutions. While Omi and Winant argue that “Asian
"Asian Americans are made, not born," says Frank Wu. Although I, and others alike, will readily use the term, we are constantly negotiating the many divergences of a diasporic peoples bound together. For those who criticize the use of "Asian American" as a representative grouping, they need only to look at the many incidents of hate-crime directed at the "abstract Asian Other," (who remain indistinguishable to their non-Asian attackers) to see its logic. “Asian Americans invent ourselves with the homogenizing of Asian peoples in America as the political aspirations of Asian Americans, themselves did.

19 Omi and Winant state, “The aggregation of Americans of Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and now Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai and Cambodian descent into the category 'Asian American' for example, is clearly a racially based process.”


22 I am thinking specifically about the 1992 riots in Los Angeles when several Chinese and Japanese storeowners were victimized and mistaken as Korean Americans. (See Blue Dreams, by Abelmann and Lee) But perhaps the most well-known case of “mistaken identity” is that of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American engineer attacked on June 19, 1982, in Highland Park, Michigan. Mistaken as Japanese American, Chin was bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat by two White autoworkers who shouted, “It’s because of motherfuckers like you that we’re out of work!” Chin died on June 23rd. The killers were sentenced to 3 years probation and a $3,780 fine after the trial. A subsequent conviction in a federal civil rights prosecution was overturned on appeal, thus neither killer ever served a day in
collectively and individually in the United States; our true place of origin nowhere to be found on a map. Our race, like anybody else’s, is an accident of birth. We are threatened, unlike most whites, by efforts to use our race against us,” says Wu.\(^{23}\) While most Asian Americans clearly distinguish ourselves individually as Chinese American, Indian American, Taiwanese Americans etc., we are also inextricably bound together in a collective identity as Asian Americans—colors and cultures set in relation to a white color spectrum.

One of the major threats that Asian Americans pose to hegemonic white culture is imagined in “yellow peril,” or the idea that Asian Americans will overrun and out-produce white Americans.\(^{24}\) We need only to look at popular films, like *Rising Sun*, or *Year of the Dragon*, to witness white America’s obsession with the Oriental takeover.\(^{25}\) In the same vein (and as an extension of the model minority myth) the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) becomes, “the University of Caucasians Lost Among Asians,” and the University of California Irvine is (University of Chinese Immigrants.)\(^{26}\) Without understanding “Asian American” as a political category, and rather operating under the auspices that “all Asians look

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\(^{24}\) “Yellow Peril” was coined by Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany to justify Germany’s grab for concessions in China. For a closer reading of the yellow peril ideology, see Gary Okihiro’s *Margins and Mainstreams* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994).


\(^{26}\) These acronyms, while somewhat humorous, are examples of white hegemonic culture’s impulse to ghettoize Asian Americans, whenever whiteness is in the minority. Despite the fact that California’s large Asian American constituency makes it sensible that there would, in fact be a large Asian American student population at UC Irvine and UCLA, white fears of the yellow peril draws attention to a perceived “racial imbalance,” where Asian Americans are not a minority. When thinking about these acronyms, we should ask ourselves, whether mainstream society would ever identify that, for example, The College of William and Mary is “too white” of an academic institution. Ten years ago, a cartoon was invented with translated WM to “Mighty Whitey.”
alike,” a sociological snapshot of the Asian American population in the U.S., might confirm hegemonic white culture’s fear of the yellow peril.

The 2000 census shows that there are now more than 10 million Asian Americans in the U.S., constituting between 3 and 4 percent of the nation’s population. Between 1990 and 2000, the Asian American population nationwide grew by 48%, trailing only Latinos. In New York City, Asian Americans make up one in ten residents, while in California, the Asian American population grew more than one-third to about 3.7 million, slightly ahead of Latinos. These statistics seem astronomical when the various ethnicities within the Asian American diaspora are collapsed into a homogenous whole.

Moreover, diversity within Asian America exists beyond culture; we find it in English language proficiency, income, and educational levels, among other factors. In New York City, 37% of the working age and 71% of the elderly APA (Asian Pacific American) population do not speak English well. Among some nationalities, linguistic isolation is even more severe, affecting over 50% of Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian households, 44% of Vietnamese households, 41% of Korean households, and 40% of Chinese households.

While the median APA income is higher than the national median, poverty rates are higher, and incomes for some groups are much lower than the national median. For example, Hmong are at a poverty rate of nearly 65%, Laotians at 35%

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28 The largest Asian American group in the U.S. is Chinese American (2.4 million), followed by Filipino American (1.9 million), Asian Indian American (1.7 million), Vietnamese American (1.1 million), Korean American (1.0 million), and Japanese American (800,000). Statistics from Frank Wu’s Yellow, Basic Books: New York, 20.
29 Urban Institute, Building Capacity: the challenges and opportunities of Asian Pacific American Community Development, October 2000, 3.
and Cambodians at 45%. Similarly, the per capita incomes for Filipinos, Thai, Koreans and Southeast Asians are lower than the national figures. Overshadowed by the model minority myth and fears of yellow peril, these statistics offer a more truthful reflection of the Asian American population. They also attest to the complexities of the umbrella term, "Asian American" and how it collapses a socially and economically diverse people into a single category.

A part, yet apart, Asian Americans disrupt common dualities that structure contemporary notions of race and nationality. Neither black nor white, immigrant nor native, Asian Americans are a postmodern experiment in identity, arriving at a moment in American Studies to frustrate the borders of race, ethnicity and transnationalism. Still in its adolescent stage, Asian American culture teases the protective waters of American culture by refusing to stay put. In this regard, Asian American culture is, as Lisa Lowe argues, a practice of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity. It is also a critical space where, through performance and reflection, Asian Americans may negotiate the meaning of their syncretic selfhood.

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30 Ibid., 4.
CHAPTER II

Too Sexy To Be Asian: Love and Theft in Shades of Black.

As Asian Americans, we are a diverse people whose common experiences on American soil intricately, and I believe, permanently bind us together. Whether Korean American, Taiwanese American, or Pakistani American, being Asian American is a condition of constant negotiation and displacement. Implied in this sense of displacement is how the dearth of role models, particularly in political or public positions affects Asian American selfhood.

It is not surprising that the civil rights movement of the late sixties and early seventies, witnessed young Asian Americans turning to black leaders, like Malcolm X as role models. Taking inspiration from the Black Power movement, Asian Americans latched onto the passion and militancy articulated in the mood of black

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32 Although race theorists and Asian American scholars have argued that the category, "Asian American" will become obsolete, I believe that its utility as a political apparatus, both with respect to finance and social considerations will make it an enduring concept. While the trend has been to delineate differences within the diaspora, I believe that the next step will be to move towards forging connections and intersecting experiences. We are at the borders of understanding race, not in terms of difference, but ironically, with respect to similarities.

33 Since the 1980s, Asian Americans have for various reasons (some more problematic than others) emerged in popular culture as objects of intrigue. However, it is important to notice the lack of Asian American representation in political arenas.

consciousness. As Frank Wu notes, "The student protests of the late 1960s, especially the Third World Liberation strikes on the San Francisco State College and University of California, Berkeley, campuses in the 1968 and 1969, launched the militancy of Black Power amid unrest across the country... Inspired, Asian American students started a Yellow Power counterpart to demand self-determination." Phrases such as "Black is Beautiful" and Black Power began to resonate with young Asian Americans whose struggle for self-definition led them to try on color as identity.

All of a sudden, "Asian American" took on a new inflection, fueled by the ideologies of Black Power. This new Asian American self-awareness, articulated through Yellow Power stems from a similar dissatisfaction with how hegemonic white culture has classified us. Charles Hamilton describes Black Power as:

> concerned with organizing the rage of black people and with putting new, hard questions and demands to white America... Black Power must (1) deal with the obviously growing alienation of black people and their distrust of the institutions of this society; (2) work to create new values and to build a new sense of community and of belonging; (3) work to establish legitimate new institutions that make participants, not recipients, out of a people traditionally excluded from the fundamentally racist processes of this country.

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35 In his critique of the Black Power movement, August Meier writes, "Black power first articulated a mood rather than a program—disillusionment and alienation from white America, race pride, and self-respect of “black consciousness.” (Meier, August, Black Protest in the Sixties, Quadrangle Books: Chicago, 1970, 19.)


37 The term, "Yellow Seed" was inspired by "Black is Beautiful," as was the prolific use of the word "yellow" to assert pride in racial identification. Gradually, although not completely, the term "Asian American" became the preferred naming, partly due to objections from the Filipino American community (who preferred the term, “brown.” (Feng, Peter, "The Politics of the Hyphen," Cineaste, Winter-Spring, 1995, v21 n1-2 p 35(1).

38 Martin Luther King Jr. writes, "First, it is necessary to understand that Black Power is a cry of disappointment...it was born from the wounds of despair and disappointment. It is a cry of daily hurt and persistent pain.” Martin Luther King Jr., Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?, Harper and Row: New York, 1967, 32-33.

From our abstract convergence into the category, "Asian Americans" to a deeply political feeling of solidarity with the African American community, APAs are bending the narrow boundaries once assigned to the "oriental." It is this seemingly unlikely intersection between the African American and Asian American community that I hope to explore. Yet this is a tenuous relationship that words alone cannot describe. Just as the Black Power and Yellow Power movements were fueled by a shared emotional experience of racism, so are the works of three contemporary Asian American hip-hop groups in this discussion. Julius Lester writes:

In black culture, it is the experience that counts, not what is said. The rhythm-and-blues singer and the gospel quartets know that their audiences want to feel the song. The singers are the physical embodiment of the emotions and experiences of the community. They are separate from the community only in that they have the means to make the community experience through music that no-good man who left, the pain of loneliness, the joy of love, physical and religious.\(^{40}\)

Through music—and music inspired by black hip-hop—three Asian American hip-hop groups are telling their narratives of the Asian American experience. By embracing black hip-hop as a source of inspiration, their music evokes fascinating questions about identity politics, ethnicity and race theory; all of which speaks to the contested boundaries of Asian American culture.

Regardless of the cultural implications of embracing hip-hop, these Asian American youth approached hip-hop for the same reason that whites and others do: it is sexy to be black. The performance of blackness as "cool" is certainly not a recent invention. It was most notably (and problematically) seen in the 1820s and 1830s blackface minstrelsy of the urban North.\(^{41}\) Riddled with complicated politics about

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both white and black performance, blackface minstrelsy (as performed by whites) was, among other reasons, a practice of asserting power over black culture through ownership of the black body.\textsuperscript{42} But, as Eric Lott notes, "blackface, then, reifies and at the same time it trespasses on the boundaries of ‘race.’"\textsuperscript{43} While Asian American rappers are not literally assuming blackface, they seem to adopt the fashions, gestures, and language of black hip-hop for similar reasons. As Eric Lott argues:

To wear or even enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black, to inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon or gaité de coeur that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood.\textsuperscript{44}

It makes sense that young Asian American men would mask themselves in the mores of blackness to appear tough and cool.\textsuperscript{45} The persistent nineteenth century stereotypes of the "Chinese laundryman," and its aura of respectable and economically sensible behavior still haunts Asian American masculinity.\textsuperscript{46} Without agency, some Asian American men (like Hong Kingston’s fictional character, Whittman Ah Sing) find in blackness a language and style that was sexy, and utterly

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42] Lott’s argument of blackface minstrelsy may be expanded by Robert Lee’s discussion of yellowface minstrelsy in his book Oriental. In his analysis, Lee examines how the 1850 creation of "John Chinaman" and the Siamese Twins (Chang and Eng), beginning in 1829 and lasting through 1860, was the white urban class’s way of reimagining the Asian as pollutant, rather than exotic. White men in yellowface created the image of Asians having excessive culture—as opposed to Blacks as having almost no culture. Already in the early nineteenth century, the polarity between Asian Americans and African Americans was being established. (Lee, Robert, Oriental, chapter one, Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1999.)
\item[43] Lott, Eric, "White Like Me."
\item[45] Note here, and throughout this essay the absence of Asian American women rappers. This omission falls in line with the absence, or at best, partitioning out of black women in conversations about hip-hop in general. Throughout my research, I was unable to locate examples of Asian American women-only hip-hop groups. Clearly, hip-hop is a patriarchal practice, relying heavily on the performance of masculinity. Not only are women displaced as rappers, their bodies are quite often the conduits by which discourse on masculinity is exchanged. An extension of this paper would include a discussion of what this absence means in both Black and Asian American hip-hop. For more on Black female rappers, see chapter 5 of Tricia Rose’s Black Noise, (Weselyan University Press, 1994), entitled, “Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music.”
\end{footnotes}
un-Asian. To borrow Lott’s phrase, some young Asian Americans have engaged in “love and theft” through the medium of black hip-hop.47

For young Asian American men, blackness has sex appeal, mainly because to be cloaked in blackness signifies danger or that one is a “gangsta.” As Greg Dimitriadis writes, “In large measure, the gangsta was a larger-than-life character or figure whose exploits existed at the surface of exaggerated violence and brutality.”48 Rappers like Biggie Small and Tupac Shakur “psychologized the gangsta type,” and made rapper stardom a mythology of masculinity.49

Asian American “love and theft” of black culture played out through rap poses questions about rap’s tenuous boundaries and claim to authenticity. By suggesting that rap’s blackness can be performed by non-Blacks (Asian American kids can be rappers) I am arguing that black performance may be understood as a construction, both portable and extractable. As Dimitriadis argues, the gangsta narrative is popularized in American popular culture precisely because of its transitory nature:

Artists such as Ice-T, N.W.A., Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, MC Ren, and Snoop Doggy Dogg reached platinum-plus status, prompting artists and record companies alike to attempt to replicate their formula for success. Part of the gangsta’s wide cultural currency comes from the universally extractable nature of this narrative. The violent outlaw, living his life outside of dominant cultural constraints, solving his problems through brute power and domination, is a character type with roots deep in popular American lore.50

Rap’s construction of black culture is a narrative of power, violence, and domination.

Rappers’ preoccupation with singing their own “props” is (among other reasons) a

49 Ibid.,101.
way of resisting hegemonic white culture's power hierarchy. Through music videos and lyrics, raps provides a space of fantasy, where young black men imagine a different world; a world in which black cultural performance is centered and hip-hop is, indeed, the “CNN of the Black community.” In other words, rap imagined those who perform blackness as coming out on top.

While Asian women are immortalized in American popular culture as “exotic and sexy,” it was not until quite recently that young Asian American men began to move away from the stereotype of being nerdy and passionless (utterly unsexy) to the status of “trophy boyfriend.” This sudden role reversal from meek to macho is, in many ways, attributed to their performance of blackness in popular culture. Their “love and theft” in shades of black has transformed them into the trophy boyfriends/sex symbols of the twenty first century.

52 I say black performance as opposed to blackness because of artists such as Eminem, whose performance of blackness has earned him the respect of Blacks and non-Blacks alike. Because Enimen can perform blackness, blackness becomes a construction that can be extracted and moved around.
53 The February 21, 2000 issue of Newsweek magazine featured an article entitled, “Why Asian Guys Are on a Roll.” In this article, Asian men are described as having made the transition from “dutiful sons” to “trophy boyfriends” (in much the same way that Asian women are commodified in the “Lotus Blossom” stereotype). It notes how “media images of Asian-American men are changing from meek and mild to macho.” Future research on this topic needs to consider the dynamics of Asian American femininity as it is played out in hip-hop's exotic images of the subservient “Oriental.” Particularly, note how black hip-hop's sex appeal (particularly in music videos) is garnered through the ownership of Asian female bodies.
CHAPTER III

Too Sexy (And Too Young) To Be White: Hip-Hop’s Style and Subculture

The events of September 11, 2001 have changed the face of American multiculturalism so profoundly, that as I write this, I wonder whether it is, indeed still sexy to be black, or, for that matter, any color but white? Everywhere across the nation, people of color are remaking themselves as conspicuously American: waving flags, shaving off their beards, and resurrecting the romantic notion of the American Dream: our nation’s most treasured (and advertised) mythical symbol for freedom. While months before the attacks, fashion magazines featured western interpretations of saris, bhindi dots, and chipaos, post 9/11 issues made the American flag the new fashion trend.\(^5\)<sup>4</sup> All of a sudden, oriental commodities are no longer in vogue.

Against the backdrop of rampant xenophobia, racial profiling, and conservative American idealism, will hip-hop withstand the critique of a shaken nation? It may be too soon to speculate whether the “war on terrorism” will break rap’s stride. Having survived criticism from almost every front, hip-hop has prevailed, in large part due to the politics and poetics of blackness. However, this time around, color, is indeed the issue being interrogated. Commercially, hip-hop has always been marketable because of its color. In fact, its claim to fame is precisely...
because it sought to defy white forms of music in favor of alternative black expression. Young Asian American men are both feeling too sexy to be Asian and too sexy to be white. As a matter of fact, young white suburbanites were also feeling much the same.55 Hip-hop, with its stylish protest and rage against hegemonic white cultural establishments offer an ideal platform for youthful rebellion.

Youth is a time of healthy questioning of societal conventions and norms.56 For many American youth, that line of questioning is intricately entwined with the nation's racial hierarchy: specifically the privileges of whiteness. Beginning in the 1980s, young white Americans and Asian Americans were finding their voice of rebellion through rap's seemingly un-white rhetoric and style. For them, rejecting white forms of music in favor of rap flavors made them both sexy and rebellious. It was not just that rap emerged as a music that defied well-established white forms of music (i.e.: rock, pop, and classical) but because it boasted a coded community, impenetrable to hegemonic white culture. This protective space gave hip-hop its sex appeal and consequently, its large non-black fan following.

Hip-hop challenged white hegemonic culture through style, emerging as what Hebdige describes as a subculture.57 It boasted its inner circle stylistically, through fashion, language and music: and everybody wanted a piece of it. In the late eighties

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54 In the November 2001 issue of Vogue magazine, Britney Spears appeared on the cover, against the American flag. In a bold headline reads, “American Fashion: Waves the Flag.” This issue is conspicuously absent of “orientalist” fashions.
55 At the same time, hip-hop has paradoxically crossed racial consumer lines such that white kids still have more consumer clout than black kids.
57 In Subculture, Hebdige writes, “...the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather, it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed (and, as we shall see, ‘magically resolved’) at the profoundly superficial level
and early nineties, hip-hop was popular precisely because as a style, it went against the order and stability carved out by white hegemonic culture.\(^5\)\(^8\) As Hebdige puts it:

> Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature,’ interrupting the process of ‘normalization.’ As codes, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority,’ which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus.\(^5\)\(^9\)

Devoid of politically correct rhetoric, hip-hop struck gold beyond the inner cities, where angst-ridden upper and middle class youths tried to denounce their social status as privileged non-black teens, by adopting hip-hop to express their liberal feelings of resistance.\(^6\)\(^0\) Erikson argued that, “youth searches for ‘fidelity,’ for something worth believing in and trusting.” Youth is “impelled to find faith, a point of rest and defense, a touchstone by which they can accept or reject, love or hate, act or not act.”

Lawrence Grossberg takes Erikson’s argument a step further by suggesting that, “youth involves not so much an ideological search for identity as an affective search for appropriate maps of daily life, for appropriate sites of involvement, investment and absorption.”\(^6\)\(^1\)

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\(^5\)\(^8\) In Black Noise, Rose notes how young white listeners found in jazz, rock and roll, soul and R&B, a similar image of hipness. They became, Norman Mailer’s ‘white Negroes,’ young white listeners trying to adopt the perfect model of correct white hipness, coolness, and style by adopting the latest black style and image.” (Rose, Tricia, Black Noise. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press: 1994, 5.)


\(^6\)\(^0\) One of rap’s greatest draws for young white males is its angry rhetoric. Even if they did not identify with the narrative of racism inherent in black rap, they empathize with the sentiment of anger and passion that these black rappers display. Grossberg writes, “This [youth] makes it seem to be a period of constant shuttling between extremes. Searching for something worthy of their passion, they ‘have no choice but to talk in extremes; they’re being wrenched and buffeted’ by all of the competing (and, in the contemporary world, unworthy) demands of the historical formation,” (Grossberg, Lawrence, “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” Routledge: New York, 1992, 176.) While his discussion focuses on rock, it can and should be extended to discussions of hip-hop culture, because of hip-hop’s dependence on youth culture.

\(^6\)\(^1\) Grossberg, Lawrence, We Gotta Get Out of this Place, Routledge, New York, 1992, 176.
Young Americans living within the manicured boundaries of suburbia may find in hip-hop such a map. Yet their affinity for hip-hop may be less about assuming black identity than about finding “something worth believing in and trusting.” Like their parents before, who listened to the blues and jazz, these youth trust hip-hop probably not because it centers black idioms, but because it refuses to be whitened, and is therefore, dangerous. In Black Noise, Tricia Rose writes, “Like generations of white teenagers before them, white teenage rap fans are listening in on black culture, fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion” Rap’s critique of the very establishment young suburbanites are raised in makes it an ideal platform for resistance. Unlike white forms of music, hip-hop “keeps it real” by giving the appearance that it does not conform to rules, that it is, in fact predicated upon breaking rules.

But in truth, creating raps requires more than a rebellious attitude. Successful rappers have to be skillful in rhymes, thoughtful in their samples, and then couch all of that in a sound that is fresh and intoxicating. According to Geneva Smitherman, the foundation of rap music is rooted in “Black oral tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification, playing the dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices.” At its best hip-hop is a highly skilled form of “post-literate orality” that reaches beyond entertainment and into politics and social

64 Smitherman, Geneva, Black Talk: Words and Phrases From the Hood To the Amen Corner. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1994, 3.
consciousness. Because of its highly commercialized, glamorized presentation, hip-hop attracts its share of enthusiasts who care as much about it as they do their Nike sneakers and baggy jeans. For these youth, rap has very little meaning beyond the surface of appearances.

In the eighties and nineties, young white men listened to and performed rock as an expression of impulsiveness, defiance and extremes—they were in other words, bored of the suburban safety zone. As Grossberg argues, “Rock refused to identify with an everyday life that was ordinary and boring. It celebrated instead the extraordinary moments within the youth’s everyday life. It’s power lay precisely in its ability to magically transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and the extraordinary into the ordinary through the very fact of its investments.” Today, white kids have replaced Guns ‘N’ Roses with Jay Z, making seventy-five percent of the hip-hop audience nonblack.

In 1998, the Recording Industry Association of America found that rock music accounted for 32.5 percent of the industry’s $12.3 billion in sales during 1997. This figure went down from 46.2% a decade ago. Meanwhile, rap music’s share of sales has increased 150% over the last ten years and is still rising. After twenty years, why

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65 See Walter Ong’s *Orality and Technology: The Technologizing of the Word*, London: Menthuen, 1982, 42.) We might add his discussion of how technology has influenced oral traditions, like hip-hop. (Also see Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise*, 86).


67 In the mid-80s, when hip-hop was just breaking ground, young white rappers like the Beastie Boys capitalized on rap’s party image. The Beastie Boys sampled from rock; another music that, as Grossberg describes, “rejected the boredom, surveillance, control and normalcy of the straight world as their own imagined future.” (Grossberg, Lawrence, “We Gotta Get Out of this Place,” Routledge: New York, 1992, 180). By sampling from rock, the Beastie Boys made white rap more about fraternity parties, youth, and escaping the boredom than about resistance to white hegemonic culture. They in essence, whitened rap to deal with white issues.

does hip-hop endure while rock is becoming a memory of a postwar phenomenon?"70

It is, as I have facetiously entitled this chapter, because young Americans feel that
they are “too sexy to be white.” Grossberg writes:

Consider that hip-hop is the only available model for an alternative youth culture
today; hence youth-oriented media and even rock culture itself find that they must
increasingly use its style and rhythms, although this has not always forced them to
question their racism.71

Rock’s rebellious undertones eclipsed race, thus leaving it decidedly vanilla—still too
safe and bland. On the other hand, rap has an edgy vibe that makes other forms of
music seem too conservative; which in youth terms, translates to “too old.” By
capitalizing on its difference from white forms of music, hip-hop has in essence,
made color youthful, desirable and cutting-edge.

While undoubtedly most young Asian Americans embrace rap for the same
reasons that white youths do (because it is sexy to be black), there are some Asian
American hip-hop artists who view rap as a productive subculture to explore their
own racial identity. Rap’s roots and influences in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American
traditions have inspired some Asian American rappers to fuse (and often center) their
own cultural traditions into their raps as well.72 As I will briefly discuss in the final
chapter, hip-hop artists like Jamez imitate rap’s Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American
roots in the oral tradition by patterning their raps in their own oral traditions. In

70 Hilburn, Robert, Year in Review/Pop Music; In the Shadow of Hip-Hop; Rap is Where the Actions
is, and its Popularity Still Hasn’t Peaked. Could Rock ‘N’ Roll Be Finally Dead?” The Los Angeles
72 Tricia Rose writes, “Hip-hop music and culture also relies on a variety of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-
American musical, oral, visual, and dance forms and practices in the face of a larger society that rarely
recognizes the Afrodiasporic significance of such practices,” (Rose, Black Noise, Wesleyan University
Jamez' case, he uses poongmul, a type of Korean opera as a source of inspiration and for sampling as well.

Before the marketing industry made hip-hop more about Coke ads and sneaker endorsements, it started as an expression of social protest from young African Americans living in the South Bronx in New York City. Beginning in the mid-1970s, African American, Afro-Caribbean and Latin American youth used the elements of hip-hop (breakdancing, graffiti and rap) to speak about the “pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America.” Through music videos, hip-hop took seriously the loss of black space (both literally and figuratively) as suburbs flourished, and a new architecture of class-based racial segregation ensued.

Tricia Rose argues:

Nothing is more central to rap’s music video narratives than situating the rapper in his or her milieu and among one’s crew or posse…This usually involves ample shots of favorite street corners, intersections, playgrounds, parking lots, school yards, roofs, and childhood friends.

Asian American youth imitated this struggle in their claim for territories within and beyond Chinatowns. Taking inspiration from black hip-hop, they rap about their neighborhoods, hangouts and friends. As I will discuss in the later chapters, some Asian American rappers imitate black culture’s emphasis on location by portraying their “hoods” in exotic oriental landscapes, deemed “sexy” by black culture.

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73 In the early 60s, the Cross-Bronx Expressway was erected as a source of “white flight” from the city to the suburbs of Westchester County and Connecticut. Thousands of people were displaced as large sections of the Bronx were leveled to build this fifteen-mile stretch of road. With a city in debt, the Bronx became a brutal place to live until a generation of hip-hoppers salvaged civic pride from rubbles. (Shapiro, Peter, The Rough Guide to Hip-hop, Penguin Group: New York, 2001, vii.) Also see Tricia Rose’s Black Noise, (27-34) for a closer analysis of how the Cross-Bronx Expressway affected hip-hop’s emergence in postindustrial NYC.)


75 Ibid., 10.
"It might be that to truly understand hip-hop you need a master’s degree in sociology, a stint in the joint, and an intimate understanding of African rhythm. Whenever I think I know enough, there’s another twist in the saga, another way to see this culture and the country that spawned it," says Nelson George, a long time hip-hop critic. If hip-hop is perplexing to Nelson George, it is a downright anomaly to me. As a first generation-twenty-something-Taiwanese American, who grew up in a middle-class suburb of New Jersey, I am constantly reminded of just how far removed I am from hip-hop’s origins in black culture—and even its gradual evolution into the mainstream. Still, there are other young Asian Americans like myself, who find inspiration and possibility in hip-hop.

For the many highly politicized reasons why non-Blacks should have no place in hip-hop, there is one stunning and ultimately defining reason why Asian American hip-hop deserves greater attention. Against the backdrop of the Los Angeles Riots in 1992, where yellow and black were pitted against one another, hip-hop marks a moment where Asian Americans and African Americans are testing the boundaries of race. It is, indeed a hopeful, even idealistic notion that these two historically polarized communities may meet in the nebulous space allotted to hip-hop.

But why not be optimistic? Certainly, there are many in the hip-hop circle, and in the academy who would question whether it is legitimate—or correct even to consider the crossover of Asian American culture into African American culture: it is admittedly a delicate negotiation. Still, I am left thinking: can we, as scholars—as Americans—afford not to be optimistic? At a time of rapid interracial mixing, we are

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all experiencing DuBois' double-consciousness: where race is both lived and performed. As Frank Wu writes, "It is the young, however, who will lead. Youth culture should be applauded for its gifts for overcoming the faults of earlier generations. Asian American hip-hop artists and African American martial arts black belts are only the most visible personifications of enriching trends. They embody the vitality of diverse cultures. Their dynamism can take on a life of its own."  

CHAPTER IV

Rock The Boat: Rappers Are Not F.O.Bs

"Whites love us because we’re not black," writes Frank Chin. In a sentence, Chin describes the agenda behind hegemonic white culture’s invention of the most pervasive stereotype in contemporary Asian America: the model minority myth. The phrase “model minority” is increasingly being recognized as derogatory and presumptive: asking the questions: “model of what” and “model for whom?” It is a concept that implies both otherness and disbelief that a non-white group can succeed in the United States.

Since the 1970s, Asian Americans have been hailed as our nation’s example of successful assimilation, both socially and economically. Newspapers and magazines featured headlines such as, “Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites,” “Success Story of One Minority in the U.S,” and “Why Do Asian Pupils Win Those Prizes?” Japanese, Pakistani, Hmong, and Filipino Americans were

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82 Robert Lee notes that although the model minority myth was popularized in the late sixties and early seventies, it originated in the “racial logic of the Cold war liberalism of the 1950s.” (Lee, Robert, Orientals, Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1999, 10.
84 US News and World Report, December 26, 1966, 73.
regarded as one and the same—cyborgs produced out of America’s “melting pot.”

As a hegemonic mode of racism, the model minority myth had the power to distort the reality of Asian American experiences, through omissions of intra-group differences. Moreover, as Frank Wu argues, “the myth is abused both to deny that Asian Americans experience racial discrimination and to turn Asian Americans into a racial threat.”

Created from the imagination of hegemonic white culture, the Asian American image is designed as a threat directed towards African Americans, cunningly goading: “they made it, why can’t you?” As Robert Lee notes:

the elevation of Asian Americans to the position of model minority has less to do with the actual success of Asian America than the perceived failure—or worse, refusal—of African Americans to assimilate. Asian Americans were ‘not black’ in two significant ways: They were both politically silent and ethnically assimilable.

Silent, assimilable and perfectly inhuman, Asian Americans are elevated to the status of “model,” precisely because we are perceived to be devoid of humanity. For some young Asian Americans, tired of being pigeonholed into this insincere category, hip-hop, in all its fire and fury, has become an ideal space to remake their innocuous image. By aligning themselves with African American youth (the political

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86 The problem, of course, with this stereotype is the enormous discrepancy among these Asian American groups. A 1990 Census indicates that while Japanese Americans earn a median family income of $51,550, Hmong Americans earn only $14,583 (Washington, D.C: Bureau of the Census, 1993, 9). Not only is the model minority myth problematic for its concealed racism against African Americans, it also assumes an overly simplistic —and inaccurate understanding of 10 million people.


88 Ibid.


90 Lee writes, “In a dystopic narrative of American national decline, the model minority resembles the replicants in the science fiction book and film, Blade Runner—a cyborg, perfectly efficient but inauthentically human, the perfect gook.” (Lee, Orientals, Temple: Philadelphia, 1999, 11.) Situating his argument in film and popular cultural representations, Lee’s analysis of the model minority image is an important addition to the 1960s understanding of the myth.
counterpart to the model minority myth), young Asian American hip-hop artists are letting us know that they are anything but America’s “model minority.”

Subsequently, and perhaps subconsciously, Asian American hip-hop artists are collapsing the wall that separates them from African American youths by pushing themselves away from mainstream America’s rosy whiz kid portrayal.

In the same gesture, Asian American hip-hop both defies the model minority stereotype (and the cultural mores associated with it), as well as creates a haven for young Asian Americans to rebel against the traditions of their immigrant parents.

In other words, Asian American hip hop is both a rebellion against the “white parent,” (white hegemonic authority), who imagines Asian Americans as “models,” and against their literal Asian parents, who impose Asian culture against their American influences.

Within Asian American communities, children and immigrant parents often experience the generational differences caused by their discrepant acculturation to American society. In her study of Asian American families, psychologist, Kit Ng notes:

Because children are in the formative stages of development, they may be easily influenced by peers. They invariably surpass their parents in rate of acquisition of the English language. They often adopt Western modes of

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91 In his analysis of Asian American stereotypes, Keith Osajima explains how some Asian American youth distance themselves from the “nerd” stereotype, and also look down on other Asian American groups, as a result of the model minority myth. Osajima refers to this behavior as “internalized racism, or the guilt, shame intra-ethnic intolerance that results from racial marginalization. (Osajima, Keith, “The Hidden Injuries of Race,” Bearing Dreams, Shaping Visions: Asian Pacific American Perspectives, Linda Revilla et al (eds), Pullman: Washington States University Press, 1993, 81-91.)

92 In fact, mental health practitioners who work with Asian American youth often write about how far away these adolescents are from being a model minority (see Evelyn Lee’s Working With Asian Americans: A Guide for Clinicians, Guilford Press: New York, 1997).

93 For many Asian American youth, the literal Asian parent often extends beyond their nuclear families and into a community of Asian American elders. These “parents” network together to keep an eye out for their children. Such behavior is not uncommon among immigrant families who live in close knit immigrant communities.
behavior and thinking quickly and adapt to the host cultural values and practices much sooner than their parents. Parents, on the other hand, have held their cultural norms and behaviors much longer and may be less willing to replace them with new ones that may be too foreign and threatening to their identity and security.\textsuperscript{94}

Asian American children are familiarized in school with Western ideas and ethos that their parents may not understand. Similarly, immigrant parents often express disappointment and frustration when they feel their children distancing themselves from Asian traditions. These generational tensions between parent and child (especially through adolescence) further complicates the duality of the Asian-American hyphenation.

The generational tension between Asian American parents and their sons has been noted to be particularly strong. Psychologists Wong and Mock write:

\begin{quote}
...young Asian men often face increased pressure to succeed academically and to major in those areas considered to be most respectable and financially rewarding by the family.\textsuperscript{95}
\end{quote}

Asian American parental expectations are often aligned with societal expectations as articulated in the model minority myth. With mounting familial pressures added onto youthful feelings of rebellion, it is no wonder that some Asian American men would want to “rock the boat.” These young rappers see hip-hop as a language to dispel their caricature as an Asian F.O.B. Their participation in hip hop is unique because in their embrace of this black cultural expression, Asian American rappers are beginning

\textsuperscript{94} Ng, Kit, Counseling Asian Families from a Systems Approach, American Counseling Association, Virginia, 1999, 19.

to tear at the seams of centuries of racism between African and Asian American communities.\textsuperscript{96}

By translating noise to music, and violence to activism, a generation of Asian American rappers have invested their youthful energy to defy the limitations of their racial boundaries. Refusing to be an “invisible minority—historically silenced,”\textsuperscript{97} Asian American rappers are putting on Whittman Ah Sing’s shattering final monologue.\textsuperscript{98} Utterly incomplete, Asian American hip-hop is indeed, an experiment in fantasy and confusion. It offends, distorts, and crosses delicate racial boundaries, all the while refusing to sit still, in the perfect image of America’s model minority.

But for all its offenses, Asian American hip-hop is making room for a postmodern conception of race that challenges the impenetrability of color. Perhaps Asian American hip-hop’s most fantastical performance is to suggest that racial nuance should not continue to divide, but rather bring us together in the spirit of collaboration and community. Frank Wu put it best: “Civil society either founders on factions or is founded on coalitions. We all share a stake in the healing of the body politic. We must keep the faith.”\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{96} As early as 1865, Asian Americans and African Americans have been pitted against each other by white hegemonic culture. During the construction of the transcontinental railroad, Central Pacific managers made Asian “coolie” laborers the “leaders” of black workers to encourage antagonism and to break up ethnic solidarity between the two races. (See Takaki’s \textit{Strangers From a Different Shore} for a comprehensive analysis of the divide and conquer strategies during the construction of the transcontinental railroad.)

\textsuperscript{97} Lyrics from “Not Your Fetish” (track 6) of \textit{Broken Speak} CD, by “I Was Born With Two Tongues,” 1999.

\textsuperscript{98} See “One-Man Show” (chapter nine) in Maxine Hong Kingston’s \textit{Tripmaster Monkey}.

CHAPTER V

“Not Your Average Guys”: The Politics of Presentation in Mountain Brothers’ *Galaxies.*

“*Not everyone is gonna be [accepting of] the idea of a hip-hop group of all Asians. Especially ‘cause this is black music, it’s a black art form.***”

(Chops of the Mountain Brothers)

As the legend goes, one thousand years ago, during the Tsung dynasty, a corrupt government ruled over the people of China. One hundred and eight heroes were declared to be outlaws and driven out to live in the Water Margins of Liang Shan Po to the south of the capital city. Each hero is thought to be the soul reborn of another earlier knight. Thirty-six of those heroes/criminals inhabited the Lianghsan Marsh, (present-day Chinese province of Shandong). Tales of the gang’s exploits spread across China as the people extolled their virtues of honor, loyalty, and justice, hoping that their heroes would rid the region of social injustice and government corruption. The heroes of the Water Margin engaged in a series of battles that ends in the deaths of the majority of the gang.101

Part fiction, part reality, *Tale of the Water Margin* (or *Shihui Zhuan,* in Mandarin) is considered by scholars of Chinese literature to be one of China’s four

101 http://horimono.net/suikoden.html and as heard through my family’s narratives.
greatest novels. The *Water Margin*, as it is more commonly referred to in English, was transformed from the oral tradition to a written text in the beginning of the Ming dynasty (circa late 14th century CE). Chinese scholars attribute authorship to a writer called Shih Nai-An, although even that remains a part of the legend. *Water Margin* has been revised and translated into several languages, and even interpreted through cinema in the 1971 Shaw Brothers’ film, “All Men Are Brothers.” Taking its place among a slew of imported Chinese myths and legends, *Water Margin* has emerged in the hip-hop circuit, and into the identity of three Chinese American rappers.

Taking their own interpretation of the *Water Margin*, the Mountain Brothers of Philadelphia proclaim themselves to be the new generation of Water Margin outlaws, (whom they name “Mountain Brothers”). Their reinterpretation of the *Water Margin* is the foundation for the group’s hip-hop ideology and presentation:

According to legend, deep in the heart of China there lies a vast swampland known as the Water Margin. At the center of this marsh stands a tall mountain, Leongshan. Long ago, Leongshan was home to a cavalry of 108 heroic bandits, each possessing unique supernatural powers and extraordinary capabilities. They embodied a brigade of fearless, honorable outlaws who reclaimed monies from the greedy rich, came to the aid of those less fortunate, and battled the corrupt imperial forces of the time. These were the MOUNTAIN BROTHERS.

Now in 1998, a new generation of Mountain Brothers has emerged to serve justice, maintain order throughout the hip-hop universe, and elevate hip-hop to the next level.

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102 *Shihui Zhuan* is thought to be based on real-life events. Also among the four most famous Chinese novels is *Journey to the West*, which Maxine Hong Kingston based *Tripmaster Monkey*.


104 Writer Frank Chin has also made mention of the *Water Margin* in his book, *Donald Duk*, Coffeehouse Press: Minneapolis, 1991. Evident in his writings and in his harsh public criticisms of Maxine Hong Kingston’s works, Chin has invested his career in trying to present an “authentic” Chinese heroic tradition. *Donald Duk* (his first and only novel) moves through Chinese legends and immigrant histories in an attempt to reclaim agency from white hegemonic culture, and “orientals,” who Chin claims are both “fake” and appropriative. He is one of Asian America’s most controversial scholars, precisely because of his rigid politics about “real” and “fake” Asian American writing.

105 Text on *Self: Volume 1* album and on www.mountainbrothers.com website.
By assuming mythical Chinese characters as their rapper identities, the Mountain Brothers add an interesting twist to the complexity of hip-hop's own "love and theft" of kung fu and the martial arts aesthetics. Their use of Chinese myths may be read as exploitative and orientalized, since such myths are entwined in hegemonic white culture's popular depictions of the oriental. It is impossible to say specifically who may find offense in the Mountain Brothers' use of the Water Margin legend. Just as the Asian American literary community is divided between those who favor Frank Chin's politics of authenticity and those who rally behind Maxine Hong Kingston's fluid use of myths, such is the case with this rap group's interpretation of the Water Margin. On the other hand, one should be cautious in attempting to delineate what is "real" and what is "fake" in claims of authenticity. Such was the platform for Hong Kingston and Chin's literary debate. Clearly their arguments about whether Asian American writers are marketing on their authenticity extends beyond the literary community and into the larger Asian American community.

Many scholars and journalists would criticize mainstream America for orientalizing Asian American culture through essentialized Asian commodities. Yet few have asked whether Asian Americans play a role in exoticizing themselves. The following discussion considers how one hip-hop group, the Mountain Brothers, wrestle with the politics of rapping from an Asian body. My concern here is not to engage in futile debates about authenticity (as witnessed

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between Hong Kingston and Chin), but rather, to consider how these Asian American rappers have had to negotiate their race in the highly contested political arena of hip-hop. As Asian American rappers, the Mountain Brothers have had to navigate the delicate boundaries of orientalism in order to appeal to a mainstream audience.

In the previous chapters, three modes in which Asian Americans have embraced black hip-hop were discussed: for love and theft of blackness, to reject white forms of music (and subsequently, whiteness), and finally, to defy Asian mores. This chapter applies each of these modes to the case of the Mountain Brothers, noting how their rhetoric conforms to and diverges from each of the three scenarios. By analyzing their interviews, rap lyrics and music video, I argue that in trying to reach mainstream audiences, the Mountain Brothers wrestle with the "double consciousness" of their Asian American selfhood. Ultimately, this group serves as a contemporary example of Du Bois' articulations of double consciousness, centering Asian Americans, a racialized people neither black nor white.

"This is the music that makes brothers say, 'true,' sisters say 'ooh,' white folks say 'right on,' and yellows say, 'finally,'" touts the Mountain Brothers' website. In 1991, three Chinese Americans from Philadelphia came together to challenge the racial conventions of hip-hop by becoming one of the first Asian American rappers to emerge in the hip-hop community. Steve Wei (Styles), Scott Jung (Chops), and Christopher Wang (Peril-L) came together during a time when Asian American rappers were just beginning to gain exposure at college campuses.
and in the larger hip-hop community. Styles, Chops and Peril-L were acquaintances in high school and came together as the Mountain Brothers while students at Penn State.\textsuperscript{110} Besides performing at Penn State, the Mountain Brothers also perform in the underground circuits of Philadelphia’s hip-hop scene.

No other Asian American hip-hop group has attracted as much attention from both the mainstream and Asian American hip-hop community as the Mountain Brothers. Music critic and Asian American scholar, Oliver Wang calls the MBs “Asian America’s best shot at hip-hop glory.”\textsuperscript{111} Their success began with a sixty-second rap entry to a national singing contest sponsored by Sprite.\textsuperscript{112} Rhyming about a soft drink won them precious commercial exposure on urban frequencies throughout the country.\textsuperscript{113} Soon afterwards in November 1996, the Mountain Brothers signed with Ruffhouse Records, a label known for producing success stories like the Fugees and Cypress Hill. In what seemed like a rap artist’s dream, the Mountain Brothers became the first Asian American hip-hop group to sign with a major production company.

After taking their first step towards seemingly limitless success, the Mountain Brothers finally came face to face with their worst fears: that rapping from an Asian Americans, and Styles is Taiwanese. All three members were born and raised in the United States and live in Philadelphia or the surrounding area.

\textsuperscript{110} Chops, Styles and Peril-L attended Upper Dublin High School in Philadelphia. Chops was the first of the MBs to attend Penn State. Peril-L and Styles got together at Upper Dublin High School. Next, Peril-L matriculated into Penn State, where he began rapping with Chops. Styles was the last MB to join attend Penn State. (wysiwyg://35/http://www.citypaper.net/articles/101797/music.mountain.brothers.shtml.)

\textsuperscript{111} Wang, Oliver, “Partners in Rhyme,” \textit{A. Magazine}, 1997.

\textsuperscript{112} The contest was named, “Sprite Rhymes From the Mind.” Power 99 selected the MBs as the best Philadelphia entry, and flew the group to L.A. to be guests on the Soul Train Awards.

American body would not sell. The Mountain Brothers’ relationship with Ruffhouse quickly soured when their producers insisted that the trio act out oriental stereotypes: “Apparently, they thought we were a difficult act to sell...They asked us if we [would] bang gongs onstage and incorporate kung fu moves,” says group rapper Chops, laughing. “We like kung fu movies as much as anybody. But it’s not what we do.”

Citing “artistic differences,” the Mountain Brothers dissolved their relationship with Ruffhouse, after recording an entire album. The group left with only a promotional single in hand. Still, in 1998, they released their album, *Self, Vol. 1* under their independent label, Pimpstrut Records. Since its release, *Self* has been regarded by music critics (both Asian American and not) as the golden child of Asian American hip-hop. San Francisco Weekly praised the album’s “clever wordplay, stellar organic production, and sense of humor.” In 1998 and 1999, the Mountain Brothers received the most amount of press from music magazines and journals across the nation. The group promotes their work on the Internet, helping to sell about 20,000 copies of *Self, Vol. 1*.

Their fan base is a small but loyal contingent of Asian Americans and/or Philadelphia hip-hop fans (although their act has spread to non-Asian American audiences in the Bay area). At the height of their success, the Mountain Brothers opened for hip-hop group, A Tribe Called Quest, in Chicago’s House of Blues,

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116 *Self* has been reviewed and praised by Tower Records PULSE! magazine as one of the top ten hip-hop albums of 1998. It has also received praise from Vibe, URB, Rappages, Blaze, XXL, NY Daily News, SHOUT, EUR, and Giant Robot. (www.hi-ya.com/shootstar.html.)
118 See http://www.mountainbrothers.com/index2.htm for a sample of their media coverage.
performing in front of 3,000 people.\textsuperscript{120} Currently, the group tours colleges and universities nationwide either solo, or in concert with other Asian American bands. They also plan to release a second album in the near future. Mountain Brothers maintain their local connections by performing in the underground hip-hop scene of Philadelphia. At the same time, they are working on several projects to bring their music to the international scene, while holding day jobs as well.\textsuperscript{121}

As the most commercially successful and publicized Asian American hip-hop group, the Mountain Brothers arrive at the nexus in cultural studies where Asian American racial performativity is adding nuance to the black and white binary. Their position as young, college-educated Asian American rappers, who are ambivalently Asian, offers an important critique of (Asian) American identity politics.

The Mountain Brothers are the only Asian American hip-hop group to have a music video aired on national TV. They made their video debut on June 11, 1999 on \textit{Yo! MTV Raps}, a popular hip-hop program that is no longer on the station.\textsuperscript{122} Their video, \textit{Galaxies} is a 3:57 second, color and black and white short, directed by Richard Kim and Chris Chan Lee, and produced by Michael Jung. Kim and Lee are both prominent filmmakers in the Asian American community. Richard Kim won an Emmy for his short film, “Kung Pao Chicken” and Chris Chan Lee’s short film, “Yellow” is making wide appearances in film festivals nationwide. As I will discuss,

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Self} is available in music stores in Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Chops has also worked on “Expo Expo,” the title track of popular Japanese hip-hop group, m-flo. Fusing rap with techno, “Expo Expo” has become one of the most popular hip-hop CDs in Japan.
Richard Kim’s personal politics play an important role in the content and style of *Galaxies*.\(^{123}\)

*Galaxies* takes us through a day in the life of the Mountain Brothers. Each MC is featured in different locations: Chops is filmed in his basement studio, Peril-L in various locations in Philadelphia’s Chinatown; and Styles takes a scene in Footwork, Illadelph, a local underground record store. Various Philadelphia hip-hop groups (Name, Willus Drummond, and Da Fat Cat Clique) also appear throughout the video.\(^{124}\) Stylistically, Kim and Lee stitch the video together with jump cuts and quick frames, creating the illusion of speed throughout. Although the camera does not shy away from extreme close ups (in fact, most of the shots of the Mountain Brothers are extreme close ups, shot with a deep focus lens), it never lingers on any frame for longer than a second.

The video begins with the hook, as we are led through sections of Philadelphia, (presumably, the Mountain Brothers’ hang out). Against mellow orange lighting, the camera takes an extreme close of Chop’s keyboard, while a kitschy Buddha figurine revolves beside it. Two shots later, a scrolling marquee of the word, “PHILADELPHIA” foregrounds the keyboard. Three scenes later, we see a torso shot of Peril-L foregrounded against a wall of Chinese characters from Tasty Palace’s (a Chinese restaurant’s) menu.

Next, the scene jump-cuts to the darkened streets of Philadelphia, where the Mountain Brothers rap in front of a glowing Septa station. We are then introduced to

\(^{123}\) In this essay, I work specifically with Richard Kim’s politics, since I am most familiar with his work, and he is usually the one cited in discussions about *Galaxies*.

Styles, whose head shot foregrounds graffiti at the record store, Footwork Illadelph. Seven shots later, the camera takes medium and extreme close shots of Styles cleaning a toilet. He opens the rap by talking about their adventures as “average guys” before their debut (brief as it was) in the mainstream. Alternating between medium and extreme close ups of Styles in a tooth-brushing interlude, as well as having the camera apparatus positioned inside the toilet bowl, these frames lets the audience know that this video intends to infuse humor throughout.

Next, we move to Philadelphia Chinatown, where Peril-L raps about how the trio came together in 1997. As Peril-L raps about ‘search[ing] to find my brethren,” he moves past the closed shops and restaurants and into an unpretentious looking, comfortable, Chinese restaurant named, “Tasty Palace.” He is served a large bowl of soup noodles, with bottles of hot and soy sauce on the side. As I will discuss later, Kim uses Chinese food to convey a sense of family and community in this scene.

The next shot fades into Chop’s basement recording studio, where he is surrounded by his instrumentals and recording equipment. Chops wears a jade medallion and again, we see the spinning Buddha revolving on what looks like a turntable. Of all the scenes in the video, this verse from Chops is the most complicated and provocative. He begins with, “Increasin your depth perception, the best selection, the next direction…,” thus alluding to both their presence in the hip-hop scene and the presence of Asian Americans overall. Two verses later, he says, “How could y’all disgustin bustas even touch this when it’s just a reflection.” Here, Chops points to his own face, signifying that his skin color (his race) is untouchable and elusive and therefore cannot be owned. Calling his Asian-ness a reflection,
Chops challenges the viewer to think about race relationally, rather than merely a matter of descent. Next, he hails Asian American cultural productions in the media with, "My mass is critical, raps Invisibl like Skratch Piklz and X-Men." Three lines later he names his own rap community, "Illadelphy Asiatic," and then locates his neighborhood as the "West End section."

The next verse by Peril-L jump-cuts to Philadelphia Chinatown, this time cutting from "Tasty Palace" to a Chinese grocery store. While rapping about "Making veteran connections, joinin old and new," Peril-L walks through the grocery store, picking up green onion and ginger root. He looks very much like the "model minority," with a book in hand, wearing glasses and shopping for typical Chinese ingredients. But his position as a rapper adds depth to those images, since they now become an integral part of his hip-hop persona. Adding a Chinese grocery store to the video complicates their use of oriental iconography, since it is not a cliché, like Buddha kitsch or Chinese restaurants may be construed to be. (I will return to this moment in a later discussion.) Peril-L also calls the Mountain Brothers, "the triad coined the golden crew," punning on their race (as "yellows") by elevating their racial status to "golden."

The next two verses by Peril-L and Styles talk about typical themes in hip-hop; singing their own props, dominating the world, and being popular with women. In these scenes, the camera sweeps through Footwork Illadelph with Styles surfing the collections, while Peril-L skateboards through a post-industrial looking street.

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125 Invisibl Skratch Piklz is a hip-hop group that features a Filipino turntablist, and the X Men are a popular Japanese cartoon.
Neither their raps nor the physical landscape alludes to their race, but rather sings their own props as up and coming rappers.

After the next hook, we are back at Chop’s darkly lit basement, where the Mountain Brothers engage in a game of mah jong. Chops raps, “Gots to take your chances and gamble the stakes,” associating mah jong with gambling. (Also notice the rice bowl and chopsticks set on top of his keyboard). Breaking the fourth wall, we assume the position of the faceless fourth player in the mah jong game, sutured into this scene as “our hands” move the pieces along with the Mountain Brothers. (It is not clear what our intended race would be.) As we play mah jong, the Mountain Brothers each rap about spreading their fame globally, and keeping their raps “real.”

The final scenes in the video are shot in black and white and take place in an alley. This verse, spoken by Chops is clipped from a separate rap, “Thoroughbred,” found on their remixed album entitled, “Galaxies: The Next Level 12.”126 This verse overtly alludes to “yellow peril” and “yellow fever.” Composed after Self: Vol. 1, “Thoroughbred” is an example of how the Mountain Brother’s politics has changed since their first album. The verse in the video goes as such:

jocking when they catch me in the hallways rocking  
My tracks is like Jehovah’s Witnesses, always knocking  
Just when you thought you had all forgotten  
The album is dropping, stop all of your cock blocking  
Chops and MB’s is hitting off the meters  
I lace tracks with the strings from Run-DMC’s addidas  
Cooler than water rice from Rita’s  
Your daughters fight to meet us  
My rhythm has given hella divas the yellow fevers  
You know the steez, chill like zero degrees  
Folks notice me both locally and oversees  
Go with ovaries, be standing close to me, hopefully

126 Galaxies, The Next Level 12 was released in 1999.
Enter the Dragon, essentially bag them like they were groceries.\textsuperscript{127}

In this verse, the Mountain Brothers turn white fears of yellow peril to their advantage. They evoke white hegemonic culture’s cliché constructions of the oriental by citing “rice, yellow fever, and Enter the Dragon.” Unlike their oblique Asian allusions heard previously in \textit{Galaxies}, this verse issues a threat to black and white rappers alike (“I lace tracks with the strings from Run-DMC’s Addidas.”)\textsuperscript{128}

Visually, the video takes a sharp transition here as well. We flash to black and white, with only Peril-L’s orange hat and Style’s blue jacket in color. Chops raps the verse, Peril-L satirizes hip-hop’s kung fu fetish by maneuvering his hat like a pair of nunchuks, and Styles clowns around, teasing the camera.

Sonically, \textit{Galaxies} fuses jazz sounds, using high octave keyboard refrains with synthesized funk beats and melodic lines played with guitar and synthesizer. Fast raps are layered over the slow background beats to create a textured rhythmic flow. Its bass groove (a prototype in all rap music) is mellow and deep, like that of R&B or Soul. Overall, their sound may be compared to a blend between the Roots and A Tribe Called Quest. Of the three MBs, Chops is responsible for the “sound aspect,” creating all the beats, cuts, mixing and mastering. He cites jazz and soul as his major musical influences, and such influences are quite evident throughout \textit{Self, Vol. 1}..\textsuperscript{129}

\textit{Galaxies’} jazz and soul inflections are only two examples of how the Mountain Brothers have been influenced by African American expressive art. As was discussed in Chapter II, the Mountain Brothers engage with rap in the modes of

\textsuperscript{127} Mountain Brothers, “Thoroughbred,” \textit{Galaxies: The Next Level 12.}
\textsuperscript{128} An intertextual line about Run-DMC’s rap, “My Addidas.”
love and theft. Like other Asian American rappers, they utilize hip-hop as a means of affiliating with the practices and behaviors of black culture (broadly, and popularly conceived). But what is particularly interesting about this group is their position as Chinese Americans who appropriate Chinese mythology in order to appear black, and sexy. In other words, the Mountain Brothers embrace black culture's interpretation of a Chinese tradition (kung fu) as a means of self-expression and authenticity. By adopting “Black-Chinese-ness” the Mountain Brothers participate in the exoticization of Asian culture.

While there is no authority that can (or should) determine the Mountain Brothers’ Chinese authenticity, we do know for certain that their impersonation of the Water Margin outlaws is based on a desire to appeal to hip-hop audiences rather than on a cultural awareness of Chinese mythology. Although the Mountain Brothers market themselves as the Water Margin’s Chinese-American Robin Hood, an interview revealed that in fact, none of the rappers has read the novel itself. When asked by an interviewer what superpower he would choose to have as a character in the Water Margin, Chops confessed: “Actually, I haven’t read the Water Margin yet, I couldn’t find a copy of it after looking mad places all over Philadelphia.” Moreover, in his online biography, Chops notes his predilection for kung fu flicks, which may, in fact have been how the group learned about Water Margin: through the Shaw Brothers’ 1971 film adaptation. Since the group has no real connection with the original

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130 Ibid. This also raises questions as to whether the Mountain Brothers could read Chinese. It would probably be easy to find a Mandarin version of the Water Margin in Philly’s Chinatown. If the Mountain Brothers cannot read Mandarin, it seems insincere that Chinese characters would appear in Peril-L’s verse at “Tasty Palace.”
Chinese legend, we can conclude that their interpretation was a way of appealing to hip-hop's preoccupation with kung fu.

Assuming the image of kung fu heroes, the Mountain Brothers attempt to enter hip-hop through a space of racial authenticity and in order to defy white mores. Just as some Asian American youth find it hip to assume shades of blackness, some African Americans have long been consuming elements of Asian culture for that very reason. Even before martial arts appeared in hip-hop raps and videos, black culture donned popular icons of kung fu's heroic tradition. At the centerpiece of its fascination with Asian culture is the martial arts action hero. Kung fu icons like Bruce Lee embody masculine ideals of loyalty, honor, and brotherhood, packaged as a powerful and mysterious action hero. As Nelson George writes:

> In black homes in the '70s it was typical to find a Martin Luther King portrait in the living room while in the basement, next to the component set and the velvet black light Kama Sutra horoscope, hung a poster of Lee, a truly worthy nonwhite icon.  

Little has changed since then, and at least in hip-hop, kung fu heroes like Lee continue to influence and inspire rappers' identities (although today, Bruce Lee is replaced by Jet Li).

So far in my analysis, I have focused only on how Asian Americans rappers have embraced black hip-hop in modes of love and theft. In thinking about the proliferation of kung fu in hip-hop culture, the directionality is reversed, as it is black culture that engages kung fu in modes of love and theft. "The youth culture of aggression that hip-hop has codified (and commodified) also has roots in kung fu flicks," writes George:

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Parallel to blaxploitation coming out of Hollywood was an influx of films from Hong Kong and Asia that, for a time, replaced Westerns as the grassroots morality plays of the age. While blaxploitation’s appeal is naked black aggression, kung fu provides a nonwhite, non-Western template for fighting superiority. The flying, leaping, spinning angels and devils of what *Variety* labeled ‘chop socky’ movies are yellow men who awed us with their ability.132

In the highly stylized, unyieldingly rebellious, anti-institutional rhetoric of hip-hop culture, black rappers’ commodification of kung fu as a “nonwhite, non-Western template for fighting superiority” is a telling moment in which African American and Asian American culture meet in contemporary popular culture. Kung fu appealed to rappers as an alternative space of power that was neither black nor white. Moreover fusing kung fu with one’s rap gave the appearance of mystery and “inscrutability,” due to its Asian origins. It is an orientalized practice, in which “chop socky” movies and “yellow men” are again, positioned as the other. Interestingly, black rappers’ love of the oriental high-flying spectacle finds its way into the Chinese American consciousness of the Mountain Brothers.

The Mountain Brothers adapt kung fu in similar modes to that of black rap group, Wu-Tang Clan. Both have used it to appear mysterious and exotic. Wu-Tang Clan, a nine-member black rap group from Staten Island, claims to belong to an ancient and secret sect searching for the thirty-sixth chamber of martial arts knowledge. The group’s members are notorious for assuming multiple aliases, a practice which one reviewer attributed to the schizophrenic disposition of Black double-consciousness.133 The group revived hip-hop in New York City in the 1990s with a serious focus on image and presentation. They taught the hip-hop community

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132 Ibid., 105.
that a mysterious façade could be just as powerful as skillful rhymes (which they did not have). Their 1993 debut album, “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers),” opens with a clip from another Shaw Brothers kung fu flick.\textsuperscript{134} 

While both Mountain Brothers and Wu-Tang appear equally ignorant of the martial arts aesthetics used to create their hip-hop personalities, the implication is quite different when it is a Chinese American group that participates in the appropriation.\textsuperscript{135} When Chinese performativity occurs from a recognizably Chinese American body, audiences would be less likely to question its authenticity than they would of an African American group doing the same. Mainstream America just as easily collapses “Asian” and “Asian American” as they do the various ethnicities within the Asian American Diaspora. They are none the wiser as to whether the Mountain Brothers’ use of the Water Margin myth is truth or fiction. The fact of the matter is that non-Asian Americans assume that having an Asian body automatically signifies knowledge of all things oriental. Among other reasons, generational differences and the personal dialectical tension of being Asian-Americans makes it clearly unjustified. But as the saying goes, if you can’t beat them, join them. Despite mainstream expectations that Chinese Americans are familiar with all things Chinese, the Mountain Brothers are no more responsible for appropriating Chinese mythology than Wu-Tang are. 

Translating hip-hop’s use of the gangsta figure into violent, mythical outlaws, the Mountain Brothers and Wu-Tang participate in “Asian performativity” as

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{135} While Wu-Tang and Mountain Brothers both appropriate martial arts aesthetics, I should add that the while the Water Margin is an actual legend, Wu-Tang seems to have crafted theirs without any actual basis.
interpreted by Black culture. Although they would testify otherwise, the Mountain Brothers are keenly aware of their unique position as rappers who are neither black nor white:

"The mainstream hip-hop listener these days is white, and we’re not really white or black, so people don’t know where to put us," Jung said. "We want to focus on our music and rhyming skills rather than worry too much about our presentation."\(^{136}\)

Repeatedly in interviews, the Mountain Brothers have said that they try to stay away from racial categorization. This was probably true before the group had a chance to make it in the mainstream. Despite their use of the Water Margin, Self, Vol. 1 is rather race-neutral in content. But when they were given the opportunity to sign with a major production label, as well as to air a music video on MTV, the Mountain Brothers were forced to consider how the mainstream hip-hop listener would receive an Asian American rap trio. In fact, the group was so concerned that their race would be a negative factor that they sent their entry for the Sprite contest only under their hip-hop names, rather than their Chinese names.

For the most part, Asian American presence in hip-hop has been limited to instrumentals like the turntable, where specifically, Filipino Americans have been able to crossover into the mainstream. "There’s less of an element of race when it comes to performing on turntable," writes ethnomusicologist, Deborah Wong, "there’s more of an emphasis on what you can do with your hands as opposed to words coming out of an Asian mouth."\(^{137}\) In order to make it beyond an Asian


\(^{137}\) Ibid.
audience, the Mountain Brothers had to market themselves as a shade of black, and also address their Asian American identity in a palatable way.

Because hip-hop is rooted in black culture, it is black rappers alone, who have the authority to make new cultural fusions marketable and sexy. Even white rappers like Eminem are more about defiance than sex appeal. As composer Jason Kao Hwang points out:

This group [Wu-Tang Clan] has been able to sell a certain sort of 70s nostalgia for kung fu movies, and has done pretty well doing so…but could an Asian group do the same thing and not be laughed at?138

Undoubtedly, these thoughts ran through the minds of Richard Kim and Chris Chan Lee when they directed the music video to Galaxies. The video could not take the Mountain Brothers’ racial background too seriously since it really was not “cool” to be Asian unless performed by a black rapper. At the same time, performing in a music video made it impossible to conceal their race. Thus, Kim and Chan synthesized a video that blends comedy, black performance, and orientalism as a kind of Asian American militant subculture.

Throughout the Galaxies video, the Mountain Brothers interject Chinese iconography in order to lay claim to their culture, as well as to acknowledge its appropriation by hip-hop artists. Always presented with a sense of humor and satire, Kim and Lee give cultural agency to the Mountain Brothers, rather than to the mainstream hip-hop culture that would flatten it in the first place. A Buddha figurine spinning atop a turntable, and a hat that doubles as a set of nunchuks both parody a Western appetite for the exotic. But the use of food; soup noodles at a Chinese restaurant, ginger root and green onions at a grocery store, and a rice bowl with
chopsticks on top of Chop's keyboard send a much different message. If these items seem cliché, it is because they are inextricably linked to their western interpretation, in which Asian culture is constantly distorted and commodified.

By using food items in their video, Kim and Lee open up a conversation into the politics of Chinese food within contemporary American culture. Today, lo-mein and fried rice are as much an American culinary experience as pizza and hamburgers. As a cuisine that has long endured American translations, Americanized Chinese food is in many ways, as much a product of American assimilation and "whitening" as Asian Americans, themselves. In the video, Kim and Lee take us to through the private cultural spaces of a Chinatown grocery store (where white Americans are in the minority) in order to reclaim agency and ownership of the ingredients for Chinese Americans. It is significant that of all the items in the store, Peril-L would choose two of the most well-known, "foreigner-friendly" ingredients; ginger root and scallions. By using well-known ingredients, Kim and Lee acknowledge how Asian ingredients, and subsequently foods, have permeated the American palette, or in other words, has become a commodity. At the same time, using recognizable Asian ingredients serves as an invitation, or a welcoming gesture into Chinese culture.

Knowing that the Mountain Brothers would have to deflect these stereotypes and clichés, director Richard Kim chose to present Chinese iconography with humor and openness. Kim has directed two award winning shorts that revolve around the topic of food; "Kung Pao Chicken" and "Talk to Takka." "Kung Pao Chicken" is a four-minute comedy-satire that depicts how disposable chopsticks came to be sold with instructions on the wrapper. This film was based on Kim's own experience of

138 Ibid.
not knowing how to use chopsticks. "Talk to Takka," starring Pat Moriata, is an eleven-minute comedy-love story about a sushi chef who gives bad love advice. The sushi bar takes the place of a liquor bar, and sushi becomes the food of love.

Kim's engagement with Asian cultures, popularized by western consumption, is also evident in the *Galaxies* video. He uses mah jong like a game of cards, and Buddha like kitsch. Both are witty and intelligent satires on the "Asianizing" of American culture. Kim works from the same concept by shooting at Tasty Palace and the Chinese grocery store, but with an added twist; he also uses food as a cross-cultural diplomat:

Food, especially ethnic food communicates so much to me. Food can be an effective diplomat. For example, my father had a sweeping history-based grudge against the Japanese. He lived during the Japanese occupation of Korea. He mistrusts Japanese considers them barbaric island people, etc, etc. Yet he loves Japanese food. LOVE it. So...he goes to Japanese restaurants...often enough, that he's chummy with the waiters, mangers, sushi chefs. When I go to an ethnic restaurant, its often like stepping onto foreign soil. The décor, the manner, the furniture, the wait staff, the dishes, the desserts. Food was the diplomat who welcomed me in. Ethnic restaurants are also a great locale for conflict and drama. Under one root, you've got people of different nationalities, dialects, different eating customs and tastes. All in the same restaurant, eating food from the same kitchen. There's bound to be some offense and misunderstanding. Food is a wonderful dramatic tool that provides easy access to issues surrounding identity, culture and affection.¹³⁹

Kim uses food in much the same way that he does in his shorts: as both dramatic tool and ethnic diplomat. By shooting in locations where Chinese food is accessible to all Americans, Kim bridges the distance between the Chinese American rappers and the mainstream American audience they seek to appeal to. Food has always occupied a unique position in America's understanding of Asian culture, whether it surfaces in best-selling Chinese American novels, or as a new trendy diet. In *Galaxies*, Chinese
food conveys a sense of community and family, and connects the Mountain Brothers to the larger American audience (much like Italian cuisine has done).\textsuperscript{140} Its presence in the video acknowledges how Asian culture has impressed upon American culture, and that our histories and cultures are inextricably entwined.

Undoubtedly, the use of Asian iconography in \textit{Galaxies} is exploitative and incomplete, but such is the nature of harboring a hyphenated identity—you understand yourself within your own body, and as the world would see you. In many ways, Asian Americans, like African Americans, are burdened and blessed with Du Bois' notion of double consciousness:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two sols, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.\textsuperscript{141}

In his seminal book, \textit{Thinking Orientals}, Henry Yu describes the double-consciousness of Asian Americans as a position of both “suffering and benefiting” from our exoticization in American culture.\textsuperscript{142} As Asian American rappers, the Mountain Brothers are suffused with stereotypes and expectations from black, white and Asian American communities. Expectedly, their presentation wavers between appropriation and cultural homage. Yu writes:

> From Oriental Problem to “model minority,” Asian Americans have both suffered and benefited from definitions of their exoticism. Unlike European immigrants who blended into whiteness, Asian Americans, like African

\textsuperscript{140} It is interesting to note that on the Mountain Brothers' homepage, the trio has included a link that offers their favorite recipes, many of which use Asian-inspired ingredients.
\textsuperscript{142} Yu focuses on Asian American sociologists from the Chicago School, noting how their “narratives of marginality and double consciousness” made them ideal social scientists. (167).
Americans have been both valued and denigrated for what was assumed to be different about them. Always tied to some other place far away, and marked with the desire for and abhorrence of the foreign that suffuses any use of the term ‘Oriental,’ Asian Americans still struggle to define themselves as part of the American social body.\(^{143}\)

Through fantasy and projection, rap culture offers Asian Americans a space where the dialectical tensions of being both “oriental” and “American,” (and all of its loaded connotations) are replaced by a subculture of black performance. But as the Mountain Brothers have experienced, even in the non-Asian, non-“American” (meaning white hegemonic culture) subculture of hip-hop, their race would still be centered. Before working with Ruffhouse or MTV, when the Steve Wei, Scott Jung and Chris Wang were creating beats and rhymes in Jung’s basement, the trio did not have to worry about the implications of rapping from an Asian body. As they have said in almost every interview, they wanted to make music that about their skills and love of hip-hop, rather than about politics and race. Knowing quite well that hip-hop culture is cluttered with fads and imitation, they try to keep their music “original,” whether that means keeping their tracks sample-free or avoiding the high-profile hip-hop scenes in New York or L.A.\(^{144}\)

But the moment Wei, Jung, and Wang left their basement studio as the Mountain Brothers—an Asian American rap trio trying to make it in the mainstream, their race would not only be an issue, it would be the issue to shape their careers. “I think [our race] affects other people more than it does us. We just make music and

\(^{143}\) Ibid. 10-11.

\(^{144}\) To the Mountain Brothers, one of the most important elements of their music is that it is without samples. They view sampling as imitation and appropriation. However, as Tricia Rose explains in *Black Noise*, sampling is not a “lazy man’s way,” but in fact, requires intelligence and creativity to make an old tune new again.
then people make assumptions, good and bad because we’re Asian,” Chops states.\textsuperscript{145}

But try as they may, the Mountain Brothers’ hip-hop politics cannot be divorced from their Asian American identities. They make the mistake of assuming that their appearance would not matter as long as they were skillful rappers. As Yu puts it:

Asians are still exotic, still bearers of an authentic otherness that they cannot shake. Like other nonwhites, Asian Americans remain both Americans and examples through their existence of non-America…. At times, Asian Americans have embraced their ethnic status, and at other times they have tried to deny it, but if they have tried either option, it has been a fettered choice, and one that most whites do not have to make. For Asian Americans, whether you dance an exotic dance or try to waltz like everyone else, you are still exotic.\textsuperscript{146}

Using humor as a communicative tool, and Asian iconography as a cultural bridge, the \textit{Galaxies} video tried to locate the Mountain Brothers’ peculiar position as Asian American rappers within the American body politic. \textit{Galaxies} is an articulation of Asian American double-consciousness, both incomplete and fantastic.

But since their 1999 music video debut, the Mountain Brothers have given up hope of success in the American mainstream. They now work the underground hip-hop scene and have geared much of their music to an Asian American audience. Appearing in several Asian American musical compilations, the Mountain Brothers have clearly switched their rhetoric to please their most loyal fan base; Asian Americans themselves. In December 1999, the Mountain Brothers collaborated with other APA musicians to create, “Elephant Tracks,” a seventeen-track album whose proceeds were donated to the annual Asian Pacific Islander Student Alliance (APISA) High School Motivational Conference at UC Santa Cruz. Their rap, “Community”

was one of the best received tracks by its Asian American critics. As Felix Wong writes, "'Community' by the Mountain Brothers...carries a melancholy vibe giving weight to the stories all three members weave about discrimination against Asian Americans."147

Attention to the Mountain Brothers' hip-hop saga has dwindled with the arrival of new Asian American hip-hop groups. The critical mass of Asian American hip-hop fans and artists in California has successfully nurtured new artists like the VISIONARIES and P.A.C.I.F.I.C.S, to name a few. But since the Mountain Brothers, no group has dared to venture down the same path. Today, the Mountain Brothers are comfortably positioned within the Asian American hip-hop circuit, where they are encouraged to rap about their race, not hide it. Most likely, growing Asian American self-consciousness will yield a new set of pressures, where the trio may become pigeonholed to only rap about race.

From my analysis of the Galaxies video alone, it is clear that the Mountain Brothers have been forced to contend with a complicated politics of their presentation. The group never truly made it in the mainstream. They never had the hip-hop success story, where political finesse and sex appeal launched a rapper from an unknown to an icon. Still, the group claims they have no regrets:

I'm [Chops] much happier being independent than signed to Ruffhouse. I mean it might be different being signed to a different label but just the fact that we can make creative decisions, or we can put our music wherever we want to. With Ruffhouse you have to fight through the system in order to do

what you want to do and now we’re free of those constraints so it’s really cool.\textsuperscript{148}

But as black rappers know, one of the ways (perhaps the most important way) to measure one’s success is if the music, the rapper, and their politics are embraced by the mainstream hip-hop listener, who in fact, is the white suburban teen. In 1999, when Lauren Hill won a Grammy for her album, “The Miseducation of Lauren Hill,” she exclaimed, “this is crazy, you know because it’s hip-hop music, you know what I mean?”\textsuperscript{149} If hip-hop success depends on whether or not white kids want to talk your talk and walk your walk, the Mountain Brothers lost before they made it to the start line. It seems that the only Asian men white kids want to imitate are Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

While some might argue that Asian American men have come a long way from Charlie Chan to Jackie Chan, persistent stereotypes still make it difficult for Asian American rappers to break into the machismo culture of hip-hop. Many in the Asian American community remain skeptical about the hip-hop’s openness; “Often I hear artists and music fans talk about the inclusiveness of hip-hop,” says composer Jason Kao Hwang, “But I see a lot of contradictions. I don’t see the One-World-ness that so many tout about.”\textsuperscript{150}

For people in the margins, hip-hop is an attractive subculture of extreme style and rhetoric. But it is also infamously contradictory. While hip-hop has broad-ranging influence, it only grants access to the select few. As Rose puts it, “it’s not just what


\textsuperscript{149} VH1, \textit{Hip Hop’s Greatest TV Moments}, February 16, 2002, 10:00pm.
As Asian American rappers, the Mountain Brothers have limited access to this public space. They hope to expand and revive their fan following by taking their music to the international scene. Teaming up with the Japanese R&B and hip-hop group, m-flo, the Mountain Brothers hope to benefit from Japan's extensive hip-hop fan base. In the 2000 album, "Expo Expo," Chops provides instrumentals and raps for this title track, rapping:

We globally achievin' new heights,
Innovative creative we made this
Exposition mission,
Eli-minated those seekin' to bite.

In Japan, hip-hop enthusiasts and fans of m-flo may recognize the Mountain Brothers' name from their appearance on m-flo's album. For the Mountain Brothers, success of this album may lead to future endeavors in the Japanese hip-hop scene, but of course, that remains to be seen.

I have learned throughout my research that hip-hop is, if nothing else, as undefined, schizophrenic, and adolescent as Asian American culture. Each rapper, critic, and fan has a take on the genre as contrasting as night and day. One person's music is another's "black noise." Despite its often confusing and frustrating politics, hip-hop endures because of these animated and passionate controversies. The emerging cohort of Asian American rappers adds to the debates, forcing listeners of hip-hop, and scholars of race and popular culture to reexamine its conventions.

152 m-flo, Expo Expo, Venus 2000 universal.
153 Ibid.
“People’s perceptions will definitely have to change,” says Oliver Wang, “You have people with talent and the insight to succeed. When you have a whole generation who grew up with hip-hop as their main culture, it’s inevitable that someone will rise.”

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CONCLUSION

"I see no changes, all I see is racist faces misplaced hate makes disgrace the racist...I wonder what it takes to make this one better place...take the evil out of the people (then) they'll be acting right cause both black and white are smokin crack tonight and the only time we deal is when we kill each other, it takes skill to be real, time to heal each other..." Tupac Shakur, "I Wonder If Heaven's Got a Ghetto."

Since its inception, hip-hop seems to have taken on a momentum, unsurpassed in history. Web-heads and average Joes just can't seem to shake its pervasiveness, as it continues to move from local to global. As performance artist, Danny Hoch argues, "It crosses all lines of color, race, economics, nationality, and gender. And hip-hop still has something to say."155 The difficulty, as some academics have argued, is how to talk about a culture whose constituency, parameters, and theoretical basis is fraught with contradictions and abstractions. In his review of Rose's Black Noise, Andrew Rose writes, "No more loose-headed talk about rap and hip-hop!"156 To some degree, Ross is right: discussions of hip-hop can, indeed be loose-headed.

But as an art form born from the rubbles of South Bronx, hip-hop's spirit and promise would have to exist in the space of fantasy. As Joe Schloss of the Seattle Weekly says, "Hip-hop is about social experience, about collective engagement with reality."157 Its style and subculture is a fire, fueled by the passion and dreams of a youth culture that thinks without bounds, sees only through possibilities. Couched in

projection and extreme emotion, hip-hop is necessarily loose-headed, and contradictory.

In this untidy space of weaving and turning, young Asian Americans in search of a culture of their own, have a venue of camaraderie and a space of community in hip-hop’s raps, rhymes and reasons. For Asian Americans, the door is only partially opened, as some spectators remain skeptical—angry even—that America’s "model minority" would trespass on hip-hop's political power and access. Toni Morrison's accusation that Asian immigrants have made it "on the backs of blacks" is a stinging but understandable sentiment that has closed off efforts of ethnic solidarity for far too long.\textsuperscript{158} Is it not time for all of us to follow in the footsteps of the young who dare to rebuff political correctness? As David Moon, a UCLA graduate and Asian American scholar notes, "...one reason to justify this acculturation to hip-hop was my general need to belong and to identify with a particular culture during my formative adolescent years. And hip-hop culture filled my need."\textsuperscript{159} That hip-hop, in all its "loose-headed" rhetoric could offer an Asian American teenager a sense of belonging is worth our time to explore.

In the underground scene, Asian American hip-hop and spoken word groups are beginning to explore how their histories, cultures and traditions may be used in rap, to explore and express their cultural pride. Uninfluenced by mainstream expectations, these Asian American rappers are firing off angry rhetoric and cultural pride, with fearless abandon. From California, to New York City, young Asian

\begin{footnotes}
\item[157] Schloss, Joe, "\textit{Hip-hop's Internet Problem}," Seattle Weekly, August 3-9, 2000.
\item[159] Moon, David, "I Really Do Feel Like I'm 1.5," \textit{Amerasia}, 146-147.
\end{footnotes}
American rappers have attracted substantial attention from Asian Americans listeners, making it possible for their music to continue to grow. In particular, two groups from the East Coast have raised Asian American hip-hop to higher levels cultural awareness by focusing on their ethnicity, and also by using their creativity as an educational tool.

In Queens, Korean American rapper, Jamez fuses poongmul, and pansori, two forms of traditional Korean music, in his raps about Asian American stereotypes and otherness.\(^\text{160}\) He echoes rap's mantra, "to be real," saying, "We should be proud of our culture, music and Asianness."\(^\text{161}\) Titling his own record label, “F.O.B productions” and rapping about Asian American issues, Jamez openly situates his Asian American identity at the forefront of his raps. Jamez admits to growing up “in denial of his ethnicity.”\(^\text{162}\) After a trip to Korea in 1990, Jamez began to use Korean folk music in his raps.

In 1998, Jamez released his debut album, “Z-Bonics.” In it, he fuses Korean opera and drumming with hip-hop beats. Comparable to how Ghanian drumming and other ‘folk’ traditions have been sampled in black raps, Jamez has tried to link his history, heritage, to the political rhetoric of hip-hop.\(^\text{163}\) While Jamez’s music has not attracted much attention, his politics are often mentioned in conversations about

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\(^{160}\) Poongmul is form of Korean drumming, akin to how African Americans use drumming as a narrative of resistance.


Asian American hip-hop. His attempts to find connections between African and Korean musical traditions may guide future research and conversations about hip-hop's permeable boundaries.

In Chicago, pan-Asian spoken word group, "I Was Born With Two Tongues" have been making noise in college and university circuits with their “Yellow Technocolor Tour.” Rapping from their sold out 1999 album, “Broken Speak,” and works in progress, the Two Tongues rap about diverse issues, ranging from Asian female fetishes, Mumia Abul Jamal, to their relationships with their parents. Two of the four members are Asian American women, which has given their music a wider appeal. Besides making powerful music, the Two Tongues are also political activists, who believe that “art is a revolutionary tool because it allows us to express our feelings of rage, hurt, anger, sadness, etc. in a constructive and enlightening mode.”

On May 21, 2000, the Tongues issued a virtual challenge, the "Yellow Fist Campaign," to encourage Asian Americans to use raps, poetry, and spoken word to fight the racist lyrics of an all-white rap group, Bloodhound Gang. In collaboration with various Asian American artists, Two Tongues posed a battle of wits in reaction to the sexist and racist lyrics of Bloodhound Gang’s “Yellow Fever.” What began as a little-known group with a little-known song erupted into

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164 Jamez is frequently cited as the “exception” to the rule, in discussions about Asian American hip-hop trying to remain race-neutral.
165 As a Senior at Bard College, Jamez wrote a thesis about the “possibilities of using two different cultural forms to promote racial harmony and understanding” between African-Americans and Korean Americans. He graduated in 1994 with a degree in Sociology and Multicultural Ethnic Studies.
166 The Two Tongues tour with another Chicago-based rap group, P.A.C.I.F.I.C.S for their Yellow Technocolor Tour.
167 http://2tonuges.com/yellowfist/
168 http://www.2tonuges.com/yellowfist/
an all-out slam session for aspiring artists, political activists, and any enraged American with access to the Internet.

"Express, object, educate, react!" they exclaim on their website. The Two Tongues solicited over one hundred entries from Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans alike, transforming anger to art, silence to productivity. In this cyber-rally, the Yellow Fist campaign is a portrait of a new generation of Asian Americans who reject stereotypes of passivity and silence. Refusing to turn the other cheek, the Yellow Fist Campaign demonstrates how today’s Asian American youth are empowered with deafening voices and unapologetic politics.

As Asian Americans who speak about and through Asian American ideas and forms, Jamez and the Two Tongues remain in the margins of a hip-hop nation. Unlike the Mountain Brothers, they have not had to negotiate the politics of merging into the mainstream. Still, their art gives me hope of a future in which Asian Americans: exotic, political, militant, passive, can exist in the social fabric of our nation, without question, and without judgement.

Some have said that race is America’s greatest tragedy. Yet, at a time when henna and hip-hop share cultural spaces and constituencies, could racial coalition be the antidote to a divided nation? We are the "music makers, the dreamers of dreams," looking for unity in unlikely spaces, daring to cross the "color-line" that hinders the progress and potential of the twenty-first century. As we bear the burden and blessing of double-consciousness, may we hope that our visions take us to places beyond where we have already stood. "Unlike any other subculture in American
history, hip-hop culture has transcended ethnic boundaries...Indeed, it has the potential to make it cool not to commit hate crimes, not to discriminate and not to be racist.\textsuperscript{172}

For better or worse, hip-hop has become our street-strutting language, pulling people together where they would otherwise be pushed apart. The question then remains, whether a culture saturated with hope can withstand the wear and tear of a nation, conditioned by cynicism.

And so as our Whittman Ah Sings of the hip-hop world close their performances with words that would offend and perhaps even enrage his audience, let us hope that their communities were blessing them, whether they liked it or not.\textsuperscript{173}

"Why don't you join my theater company? I'll make a part for you."\textsuperscript{174}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
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VITA

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