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Streetwise Model Minority: Hip Hop and Afro-Asian Encounters

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Asian American Studies

by

Daniel Woo

2013

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Streetwise Model Minority: Hip Hop and Afro-Asian Encounters

by

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Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Victor Bascara, Chair

This paper examines Hip Hop as a social space with mixed implications for contemporary Asian-Black relations. Through establishing common grounds based on mutual interests and shared cultural identities, Hip Hop bears the potential to facilitate meaningful cross-racial exchange. Concurrently it may exacerbate existing tensions, shaped by dominant cultural politics that have situated these groups in tandem. The growing emergence of Asian American rappers has brought accusations of cultural misappropriation—comparable to white co-optation of Black popular culture—revealing deep structures and embedded histories of mistrust. Compounding such inimical responses are the polarities between popular notions of Asian and Black subjectivities, rendering Asian American rappers racially inauthentic in a cultural world where Blackness is the normative. In exploring these divergent interracial dynamics, I ground my project in the case study of Chinese American battle rapper, Jin Auyueng. The national public primarily recognizes Jin as a contestant on the highest profile rap battle stage, *106 & Park's* Freestyle Friday, aired on

the cable television network BET. Initially received with skepticism and later lauded a brilliant performer, Jin's checkered career emblemizes the possibilities of changing Asian-Black relations via lived social interactions. More than shared cultural habits and tastes, the direct encounter in a common platform is what helped realize these interpersonal associations. By examining recordings of Jin's 2002 performances on Freestyle Friday, I trace the vicissitudes of interracial relations through this sort of engagement, accounting for existing conflicts while appreciating the possibilities of hard-won solidarity, rendered and fulfilled.

The thesis of Daniel Woo is approved.

King-Kok Cheung

Robin D.G. Kelley

Victor Bascara, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

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## Hip Hop: Common Grounds or Contested Terrain?

*It's about you and me, connecting one to one. That's why it has universal appeal. It has given young people a way to understand their world, whether they are from the suburbs or the city or wherever<sup>1</sup>—DJ Kool Herc*

On November 19, 2004, the Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) organized an event entitled, “Changing the Face of the Game: Asian Americans in Hip-Hop.” Anchored in Philadelphia’s Chinatown, this community-based art center proclaims as its mission, “[to engage] artists and everyday people to create art that explores the diverse experiences of Asian Americans.”<sup>2</sup> While hosting tuition-free youth workshops and a leadership-training program, it offers its space for Asian American artists to showcase their work. Founded in 1993, the organization was initially formed to address community concerns regarding interracial tensions in the city. It continues to hold talks about the social circumstances of Asian Americans, most notably cross-racial (dis) associations.<sup>3</sup> Given the increasing visibility of Asian Americans in Hip Hop, and the ensuing discussions of its social and political implications, the AAI co-produced “Changing the Face of the Game,” in partnership with the Arts Sanctuary, a Black community organization based in North Philadelphia. Pop culture critic Oliver Wang was invited as the opening speaker and moderator of a panel of discussants that included Chops of the Mountain Brothers, spoken word duo Yellow Rage, and DJ Phillie Blunt. The event was unique, though not

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press) xi.

<sup>2</sup> Asian Arts Initiative. "About Us." *Asian Arts Initiative*. Asian Arts Initiative, n.d. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>3</sup> According to executive director Gaya Isa, more than 20% of the youth served are African American. Moreover, in the aftermath of the violence that ensued South Philadelphia High School, the AAI coordinated workshops to ease persisting interracial tensions (<http://www.philaculture.org/grow/artgrowsphilly/asianarts>).

exceptional, in privileging a constituency that has generally been considered (or dismissed as) demographic outliers in the Hip Hop nation.

Affirming the timeliness of the gathering, Oliver Wang noted, “The year 2004 represented an unprecedented time for public awareness around Asian Americans in hip-hop.”<sup>4</sup> This seemingly anomalous presence, however, did not symbolize a recent social phenomenon. Wang opened the discussion by underscoring Hip Hop’s syncretic roots, as an aesthetic form that claims broad appeal across ethnic lines, and whose contours have been shaped by cross-cultural borrowings. To further emphasize Hip Hop’s multiracial origins, and the historical contributions of Asian Americans in particular, he narrated the tale of the first rapper of Asian descent to receive popular welcome. Wang’s “research into the annals of hip-hop history unearthed an emcee from the South Bronx,”<sup>5</sup> Joe Bataan, who self-identified as an “Afro-Filipino.”<sup>6</sup> Bataan himself claimed to have cut a record before the release of Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” universally acknowledged as the first rap hit. For most in attendance, Bataan must have seemed a mythical figure, heretofore lost in the archives of popular discourse and scholarship alike.

Some of the more well circulated and familiar Asian artists had been present that evening, discussing the significance of Hip Hop to the cultural experiences of Asian American youth. Responding to the question, “When did you fall in love with Hip Hop?” the speakers referenced particular songs that spoke to their experience. A Cambodian American rapper Jim related that he “came to hip-hop out of his isolation,”<sup>7</sup> growing up

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Wang, “These are the Breaks,” *AfroAsian Encounters*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 147.

<sup>5</sup> Kenyon Farrow, “We Real Cool?: On Hip-Hop, Asian-Americans, Black Folks, and Appropriation.” *Kenyonfarrow.com*. Kenyon Farrow, 2 June 2005. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>6</sup> hiphoponwax. “Joe Bataan-Rap-O Clap-O.” *Youtube*. Web. 16 Oct. 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Farrow.

in a predominantly white suburb—where he had presumably been racially othered as a foreign incursion. Yet one invited panelist, and perhaps the most relevant to the times, was missing in attendance. In fact, in referencing the growing “public awareness” around Asian American Hip Hop practitioners and enthusiasts, Wang also noted, “almost all of it [stems] from the debut release of Jin’s *The Rest Is History*, the first rap album by an Asian American artist released on a major, corporate label.”<sup>8</sup> Where Jin had been absent in the panel discussion (reportedly on tour with Jay-Z), he was “omnipresent in the print media.”<sup>9</sup> By the time of the event, the story of Jin Auyueng “already [rang] like well-worn street tale,” supposedly signifying “[Hip Hop’s] diversifying demographic.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Chinese Kid Who Raps**

The American public primarily recognizes Jin the MC as a contestant on BET’s Freestyle Friday, one of the highest profile rap battle stages. After claiming seven consecutive wins and being inducted in the Hall of Fame in the winter of 2002, he signed a recording contract with the Ruff Ryders, a subsidiary owned by Virgin Records.<sup>11</sup> Given his iconic status on a commercial platform, in addition to the momentous anticipation of his debut album, media pundits took notice. In between the release of his first single, “Learn Chinese,” in the spring of 2004, and the pending “drop” of *The Rest is History* in October of the same year, “a deluge of press” documented Jin’s foray into the music industry.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wang, 147.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Wang, "He's Your Chinaman." *Pop Life*. Sandbox Automatic, 22 Nov. 2004. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Y. Kim, "Repping Chinatown." *Colorlines: News for Action*. ARC, 21 Dec. 2004. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Wang, 152.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

The quantity and quality of press Jin received was unusual for a new rapper. Hip-hop publications like *XXL* published features on Jin, and so did many newspapers and even high-profile mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times Magazine*, National Public Radio, and *Newsweek*.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the *New York Times* profile piece, and an additional article published by *Colorlines Magazine*, circulated over the weekend following the AAI panel discussion.<sup>14</sup>

As one can imagine, media interest (or amusement) largely stemmed from the fact that Jin was an Asian American who had successfully navigated a predominantly Black cultural space. Recounting his interview with Jin, one journalist flatly stated, “[As] with the proverbial 800lb gorilla, we both knew that [race] couldn’t be ignored for long.” In response, Jin is noted to have said, “Ah...here we go again.”<sup>15</sup> Given stock images of Asian Americans as “nerdy-types” and model minorities, compounded by the absence of Asian figures in “[Hip Hop’s] hybrid histories,”<sup>16</sup> even the idea of an Asian American rapper (let alone a commercially viable one) drew public attention and fascination.

It appears that popular discourse has been primarily preoccupied with the social implications of Jin’s place in a traditionally Black industry. Mainstream media outlets produced profile pieces with titles such as, “Asian-American Rapper Jin Makes Hip-Hop History” and “A Whole New Rap,” speculating on the paradigmic shift his visible break from the racial norm has come to symbolize. One of the central questions that seemed to ground these narratives, though not necessarily a deliberate point of investigation, was “how did this happen?” Beyond his reception as an anomaly in a social world where

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he unexpectedly appeared on ESPN and Entertainment Tonight.

<sup>15</sup> Dorian Lynksey, “Straight Outta Chinatown.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 03 Mar. 2005. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Oliver Wang, “Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC,” *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham and London: Duke University Press) 37.

Blackness is the normative,<sup>17</sup> however, Jin’s story was a typical biographical account of a rapper. Most Hip Hop kids that have dabbled in one of the culture’s four recognized artistic expressions, whether professionally, casually, or even as a passing interest, could relate to components of his personal experience.

Born on June 4, 1982, Jin grew up in a multiracial working-class neighborhood in Miami, Florida, where Hip Hop had established itself as one of the dominant youth cultures. His Hong Kong-born parents moved to the states a few years prior to his birth, “part of a wave of immigrants with declining fortunes in an increasingly harsh, large-scale Chinatown economy, on one hand, and a racially segmented US labor market on the other.”<sup>18</sup> Like many first generation Chinese Americans, April and Joe Auyueng established a Chinese restaurant in a predominantly low-income Black neighborhood. As a family-run small business, Jin helped out at the store since the age of 5, doing everything from buying toilet paper, taking calls for orders, and delivering food. When reflecting on his coming of age years, Jin recalls, “Things were level. It was like, ‘Are we gonna pay electricity this month, or another bill?’”<sup>19</sup> One way for Jin to escape the material realities of his modest living, and his mundane but demanding routine, was Hip Hop.

Similar to other aspiring lyricists, Jin started by listening to popular rap songs, reciting them out loud in private to perfect his delivery. According to Ta-Nehisi Coates, senior editor at *The Atlantic*, “The first time Jin Auyueng heard LL Cool J’s ‘Mama Said

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<sup>17</sup> Wang, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Kim.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Knock You Out,' he fell in love."<sup>20</sup> Rather than doing his homework, he spent his teenage years transcribing his favorite rapper's lyrics and committing them to memory.

Interestingly the process of coming to his own was similar to Eminem's, an established artist he has been liberally compared to, for similarities in style and of course, as novelties (or social enigmas) in the Hip Hop community.<sup>21</sup> Eminem, the industry's "dark comedian," has also mentioned emulating LL in similar fashion when first dabbling in rap.<sup>22</sup> Shortly Jin graduated to making his own songs, recording demo-tapes of himself rhyiming over instrumentals of favored singles. At John F. Kennedy Middle School in North Miami Beach, Jin would spend lunchtimes battling other novice rappers, soon earning a reputation as "the Chinese kid who raps."<sup>23</sup> While most of his classmates were preparing to embark on their undergraduate journeys, he "hustled [Hip Hop] undergrounds," winning modest cash prizes in regional contests, including Miami's Grab tha Mic.<sup>24</sup> He skipped the college tract altogether, in hopes of pursuing a career as a recording artist, to the dismay of his parents. He recalls the in-house fighting, and in particular, having his rap sheets torn and disposed in the trash. "When I told [my parents] I'm skipping college for rap, it was *ov-uh*."<sup>25</sup> In 2002, his family relocated to New York City to join his grandparents in the wake of 9/11, where he continued to compete and win in local venues, most notably NYC's Braggin' Rites. As the well-sung tale goes, he was

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<sup>20</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Just Another Quick-Witted, Egg-Roll-Joke-Making, Insult-Hurling Chinese-American Rapper." *www.nytimes.com*. The New York Times, 21 Nov. 2004. Web. 14 Sept. 2012.

<sup>21</sup> See <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/12/arts/slim-shady-watch-it-asian-rapper-s-got-it.html?pagewanted=2&src=pm>>

<sup>22</sup> Steve Stoute, 277. Steve Stoute, *The Tanning of America: How Hip-Hop Created a Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy* (New York: Gotham) 277.

<sup>23</sup> Wang, Hansi Lo. "Jin, 'The Chinese Kid Who Raps,' Grows Up." *NPR*. NPR, 19 Jan. 2013. Web. 09 May 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/2013/01/19/167883591/jin-the-chinese-kid-who-raps-grows-up>>.

<sup>24</sup> Kim.

<sup>25</sup> Coates.

discovered by his manager Kamel Pratt while freestyling outside of the Hip Hop landmark Fat Beats, where he and other independent rappers would engage in impromptu rhyme sessions for leisure, while hustling their mixtapes. Pratt advised that Jin audition for BET's Freestyle Friday, and "the rest is history."

Jin's personal narrative illustrates how Hip Hop may serve as an important creative outlet for working-class youth of color. By engaging in rap as a form of self-expression, these young people may temporarily escape the material realities of their modest economic circumstances. Yet in order to appreciate Jin's emergence and the appeal of Hip Hop to racially marginalized youth, it is important to examine the history of Hip Hop's rise as a subculture. The following subsection offers a brief historical overview, to trace Hip Hop's emersion as a form of entertainment, counter-hegemony, empowerment, and vehicle for self-determination.

### **It Was All a Dream: The Voice of this Generation**

Jin's biographical account parallels those of other young people coming up in Hip Hop, implicating the culture's broad appeal across social identities. Recognizing the degree of its present relevance, pioneer DJ Kool Herc proclaims, "Hip Hop is the voice of this generation."<sup>26</sup> The promise of a voice is a significant part of its appeal, especially to the young as well as the marginalized who often struggle to be heard (in established institutional and structural contexts). Moreover as a culture that does not privilege whiteness, Hip Hop has become the preferred artistic outlet for many ethnic minorities—who identify with its core principles and claim rap music's narrative arc reflects the social, political, and economic circumstances of people of color. Common wisdom holds

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<sup>26</sup> Chang, xii.

this “vibrant subculture” was originally crafted by “disenfranchised black and Puerto Rican youth within the postindustrial urban ghettos of 1970s New York.”<sup>27</sup> Hip Hop thus most immediately speaks to the working-class experience, concurrently acknowledging its intersections with the praxis of race.

Scholars have already exhausted rap’s utility as a political medium, scrutinizing its expressions of civil disobedience and oppositional identities (if not criticizing its reinforcement of gender dynamics and heteronormativity). Cultural critic Douglass Kellner, recognized for coining the term media culture, observes rappers’ use of “musical idiom as a privileged form of resistance to oppression.”<sup>28</sup> His textbook-style diagnostic critique underscores the socio-economic conditions confronting Black “inner-city” residents in the 1980s, citing cut backs on welfare programs, deteriorating standards of living due to state abandon, urban violence, and the crack epidemic, as inspiring the content of rap. Hip Hop pundits, journalists, and scholars alike, have noted the living legacy of Chuck D, celebrating his aesthetic reinterpretation (or re-inscription) of Black Power politics, rallying the masses to “fight the powers that be.”<sup>29</sup>

Popular discourse, informed by the reflections of similar constituents, deplore the current trajectory of Hip Hop music for straying from its political roots: with its homophobic and misogynistic overtones, celebration of party culture, materialism, and general lack of lyrical inventiveness. Legendary rap icons have said their piece, most notably Nasir Jones, whose eighth studio album was entitled, *Hip Hop is Dead* (2006).<sup>30</sup>

For further reference, one simply needs to examine the comment sections of YouTube

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<sup>27</sup> Wang, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Douglass Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics between the Modern and Postmodern* (London: Routledge) 174.

<sup>29</sup> Public Enemy, “Fight the Power” (1989).

<sup>30</sup> For further reference, please see the PBS documentary, “Beyond Beats and Rhymes” (2006).



videos that feature underground artists, who offer social commentaries and criticize existing relations of power around the praxes of race and class.<sup>31</sup> Generally, hard-lined Hip Hop “traditionalists” either state that “this is how Hip Hop should sound,”<sup>32</sup> or celebrate the work by favorably contrasting it from those of commercially viable rappers.<sup>33</sup> In the process, they have helped create a mainstream vs. underground dichotomy. Without devaluing the need for such critiques, they are somewhat reductive and at times appear as romantically framed generalizations. Ironically, they also reinforce the notion that commercial artists dictate the direction of the movement. Hip Hop may reflect a critical social consciousness, yet also one that is subversive without necessarily being overtly counter-hegemonic. Stated simply, one need not to follow the path of Public Enemy to voice countercultural resistance. In fact, most rappers, as well as a majority of the music created, fall within this alternative space.

What is often lost in translation is that since the get-go, “[Hip Hop] has always been about having fun.”<sup>34</sup> Such is not to claim there has been a deliberate act of erasure, or that I am exceptional in underscoring this founding principle. Nevertheless given the most visible literature on Hip Hop, its socio-political alternatives, beyond the binary of hegemonic vs. counter-hegemonic, are often underappreciated. This seemingly opaque analysis will become clearer as our discussion progresses. To gesture towards the arc of my analysis, I want to reference the words of Asian American poet and community activist, Bao Phi. His simple yet astute observations read, “[Hip Hop] emerged not as an overt political statement but because it had to exist. It became a voice and culture for the

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<sup>31</sup>See, Skyzoo’s “Beautiful Decay” (2009) or Dead Prez’s “Beauty Within” (2010) for reference.

<sup>32</sup> Comment by pervertedalchemist1 ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkOEBFY04\\_Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkOEBFY04_Q))

<sup>33</sup> Lil Wayne and Drake have become favored targets.

<sup>34</sup> Chang, xiii.

disenfranchised, and a lot of the disenfranchised wanted to entertain and be entertained, to express themselves, and to party.”<sup>35</sup>

In explaining how some artists are “doing hip-hop the way it was meant to be done,” DJ Kool Herc elaborates, “They are reaching young people, showing them what the world could be—people living together and having fun.”<sup>36</sup> Historically, Hip Hop emerged from the house party scene, with fifteen-year-old Clive Campbell (better known as “Herc”) credited as “the originator.” In his 2011 publication, *The Tanning of America*, former music producer and current advertising executive, Steve Stoute, recounts the first social event that conceived Hip Hop culture:

[In August] 1973 Herc decided to join forces with his sister and become an entrepreneur. The two pooled their resources and rented the rec room of the apartment building to which they’d recently moved. The address? It was 1520 Sedgwick Avenue. With nothing more by way of advertising than handwritten invitations promoting the first party and charging a few coins to get in, there must have been the smell of history in the making, because after word got out, kids showed up in droves. The crowd was mixed, mostly African-American, some Hispanic who were mainly of Caribbean black descent, and some whose families had recently arrived to the increasingly poverty-stricken institutionally abandoned neighborhood, along with a few outliers from other backgrounds.<sup>37</sup>

Characterizing Herc as an “entrepreneur” is questionable, given his charge of admittance fees was more for subsistence. Stoute’s own professional background informs his personal assessment, as his book largely celebrates Hip Hop’s marketable qualities. He serves as a cultural broker, to inform corporate America how Hip Hop’s trappings can be profitably manipulated to appeal to the young consumer, whom he recognizes as “the

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<sup>35</sup> Thien-bao Thuc Phi, “Yellow Lines: Asian Americans and Hip Hop,” *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans*, ed. Fred Ho and Billy V. Mullen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 314.

<sup>36</sup> Chang, xii.

<sup>37</sup> Stoute, 10.

single most powerful purchasing force ever measured.”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless he offers important insights into the social and historical forces that shaped the culture’s development, as a 70s baby raised in Queens Village.

Since its inception, Hip Hop has been critically subversive, instantiating what Lisa Lowe, in writing about Asian American cultural politics, refers to as a countersite to US national culture.<sup>39</sup> With local house parties in urban New York City functioning as headquarters, in many respects, Hip Hop first arose as an underground society for disenfranchised youth of color. According to Stoute, these alternative gathering sites claimed somewhat of an exclusive membership, “accessible to younger generations in communities of color who couldn’t get into those other venues because of age or disinterest or racial barriers or inability to pay cover charges and afford the nicer clothes those venues required.” One can only imagine other implicit and explicit gate-keeping practices, ranging from uneasy looks, excessive surveillance, racial antagonism and delayed service, amongst other means of exclusion. Moreover access required these working-class youth of color to go beyond their means to compromise themselves, considering the terms of entry. Stoute’s observation of general “disinterest” is key to this discussion. As racialized and classed spaces, mainstream dance halls and clubs were not inviting, nor did the activities and environment speak to their interests. Rather than vying for inclusion, in standard Civil Rights fashion, these youth of color coordinated to craft alternative sites, by and for them.

Though Herc has been recognized for throwing the first party that cultivated Hip Hop culture, shortly after, many others followed suit, “putting their spin on what [he] had

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<sup>38</sup> Stoute, xxiv.

<sup>39</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 4.

started.”<sup>40</sup> The DJ and his<sup>41</sup> technical apparatus, including a microphone and two turntables, figured as the centerpieces of the event. Gatherings were generally held in homes, parks, and recreational centers in the basement of tenement buildings. DJs illegally “[borrowed] from the city’s supply through the lightposts,”<sup>42</sup> tapping into state guarded public resources to start the party and hold the space. In the worse case scenario, kids would bring boom boxes, dancing and socializing to “music already in the vernacular (the familiar Good Times by Chic).”<sup>43</sup> The disc jockey would set up two turn tables playing the same record, “to extend the break in the music, the most danceable section of the record.”<sup>44</sup> By adding their own twists, DJ’s established distinct individual styles, which ultimately influenced the culture as a whole, through a process of exchange. Legendary Grandmaster Flash reportedly invented the now popular scratch-and-mix technique. As the well-sung folk tale goes, during a party he had hosted, “he accidentally dropped the needle on a record and had to hustle to move it in sync to the beat.”<sup>45</sup> He was also known to be accompanied by a crew of emcees, who would move the crowd with motivational catch phrases. These vocalists engaged the crowd in a basic call and response routine, shouting a string of words such as, “Party over here!” to which party-goers were expected to respond, “Party over here!” Herc himself was known to assume the dual role of DJ and emcee, using hip expressions like, “It’s a party. Everybody grove!”<sup>46</sup> These founding pioneers thus established the emcee as a mainstay in the early

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<sup>40</sup> Chang, xi.

<sup>41</sup> The “original” DJ’s, according to the existing literature, have generally been men.

<sup>42</sup> Phi, 314.

<sup>43</sup> Stoute, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Stoute, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Stoute 8-9.

<sup>46</sup> Melle Mel, “Back on the Block,” *Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones*, ed. Quincy Jones (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 278.

Hip Hop scene. Later the press would refer to their craft as “rap.”<sup>47</sup> Starting with simple catch phrases, these rappers-in-the-making would later extend their roles, reciting rhyming poems and making songs as recording artists.

On a basic level, Hip Hop offered disenfranchised youth of color a community and place of belonging, with cultural undertones that spoke to their interests. From the above account, one can discern that there was a constant dialogue amongst the attendees, who became active participants through the rituals of call and response—with the DJ and emcee on one end, and the crowd on the other, establishing a unifying communal dynamic through collective participation. Not to romanticize the social dynamics at play or oversimplify them, but it is important to note that just being part of something was empowering to these youth participants, otherwise disenfranchised in established institutional and structural contexts. But it was not just anything. It was a cultural movement started by a group of young people with limited spacial resources and capital, established on their own terms and in settings they could conveniently (as well as comfortably) access. Though Hip Hop had yet to be recognized as a mainstream American cultural form, its legitimacy derived from the “people’s choice.”<sup>48</sup> DJ’s and their team of emcees worked to hone their crafts, endeavoring to distinguish themselves as formidable “party rockers,” earning “local calling [cards].”<sup>49</sup> Regional stature was predicated on claiming the demand of the so-called people, who served as arbitrators of Hip Hop’s unspoken (or yet to be standardized) rules of governance. By virtue of being resistant to mainstream inclusion, or dismissing it altogether as being irrelevant, Hip Hop

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<sup>47</sup> Melle Mel, 279.

<sup>48</sup> Chang, xi.

<sup>49</sup> Stoute, 7.

was implicitly critical of US national culture and thus established itself relatively as a countersite.

Before rap music expressed discernable social protests, it articulated counter cultural resistance, by humanizing neighborhoods pathologized as urban wastelands. Though rappers had yet to explicitly criticize relations of power, they re-centered the social dynamics and daily encounters in pockets of America, treated as peripheral by virtue of their mainstream invisibility. In explaining his motivation for rapping, Melle Mel states, “I did it to humanize my neighborhood, the part of America that’s in my heart, the part that the world never sees.”<sup>50</sup> His song, *The Message* (1982), strayed from the general thematic arc of rap music at the time, illuminating the “the stress of being alive in the city,”<sup>51</sup> as opposed to celebrating party culture. Though it did not necessarily expound civil disobedience or call for direct political action, it assumed the form of a self-determined community narrative that challenged impositions from without. In the third verse, Mel identifies disparities in the education system as a source of unemployment: “The bill collectors, they ring my phone and scare my wife when I’m not home/Got a bum education, double-digit inflation.”<sup>52</sup> Underscoring the socio-economic conditions that render behavior pathologized as degenerate habits, he negotiates dominant narratives patterns of blaming the so-called victim, by confronting institutional inequalities. In the process, he engages a politics of recognition, one that is established by and for the people.

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<sup>50</sup> Melle Mel, 283.

<sup>51</sup> Melle Mel, 280.

<sup>52</sup> Mel, Melle. "The Message Lyrics." *LyricsFreak.com*. MTV Network, n.d. Web. 09 May 2013. <[http://www.lyricsfreak.com/g/grandmaster flash/the message\\_20062225.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/g/grandmaster_flash/the_message_20062225.html)>.

As Charles Taylor has noted, “Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.”<sup>53</sup> Yet rather than simply internalizing a depreciatory self-image, a derivative mixture of dominant impositions and passive reception, Hip Hop artists have demanded to be recognized on their own terms. By establishing the genealogy of socio-economic conditions suffered and underscoring the resulting circumstances, rappers have resisted assumptions about their own social deficiencies (albeit the possibility of persisting identity conflicts). On a more basic level, as a vernacular aesthetic, Hip Hop allowed disenfranchised youth to simply be heard—through a familiar and resonant discourse. Accordingly young people of color were enabled to leave an indelible mark on the world, despite its containment in regional spaces. Narrative recounts of Hip Hop’s origins have thus fueled the imaginations of America’s “subaltern” groups, who have extended Hip Hop’s cultural field to encompass divergent individual experiences. Ideally, building common grounds, based on recognition of intersecting social circumstances and appreciation of diversity, would be the goal.

### **Hip Hop as the “New” Battle Ground**

Hip Hop has arguably become the dominant culture around which the youth of this generation has organized. Though recognized as a Black vernacular aesthetic, Hip Hop has broad appeal across social identities, as marginalized youth of various backgrounds have found resonance with this expressive form and consistently contributed to its development. Oliver Wang has thus noted a pattern of Asian Americans identifying

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<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 25.

this “subculture” with their own alterity.<sup>54</sup> In his book chapter “Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC,” Wang chronologically documents the careers of three cohorts of Asian American rappers, “covering a span of approximately fifteen years.”<sup>55</sup> He discusses a broad range of Asian rap artists claiming various agendas, from “raptivists” like Fists of Fury, who engaged radical politics learned in the context of Asian American Studies courses, to more “mainstream heavy cats,” such as Smilez (of Smilez and South Star) who had a top 40 single in 2003. David Fung, who co-wrote and performed the now viral “626” music video, compiled a list of the “The Top Ten Asian-American Rappers”(2010). His criteria of evaluation included “lyrical skill,” “song-making ability,” “longevity,” “cultural impact,” as well as self-determined identification as an Asian American.<sup>56</sup> The exclusive register featured Bambu, a household name in LA’s underground scene, and former battle rapper turned YouTube star, Dumbfoundead. Reflecting Jin’s seminal place in any discussion of Asian Americans and Hip Hop, Jin claims an entire sub-section in Wang’s chronology, and moreover, the number one spot on Fung’s Honor Roll.

The AAI Event, “Changing the Face of the Game,” acknowledged and celebrated Hip Hop’s multiracial membership, astutely taking advantage of the growing public awareness around Asian participation in Hip Hop, buoyed by the media hype around Jin. Responding to Wang’s opening question, “When did you fall in love with Hip Hop?” panelists indicated Hip Hop’s resonance with diverse communities and individual experiences. Despite grow up in a predominantly white suburb, it is understandable why

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<sup>54</sup> Wang, 37.

<sup>55</sup> Wang, 38.

<sup>56</sup> phantastikorean. “Top 10 Asian-American Rappers Interview with David Fung.” *Youtube*. Web. 2 May 2010.



Jim<sup>57</sup> would mention “[coming] to Hip Hop out of his isolation,”<sup>58</sup> given Hip Hop’s popular acclaim as the “voice of the disenfranchised” and an artistic outlet particularly suited for individual expression. Through self-determined community narratives, rappers such as Melle Mel sought to humanize “the part of America in [their hearts].”<sup>59</sup> Jin similarly endeavors to privilege social realities rendered marginal by lack of mainstream visibility. Much of his first album narrates the encounters of Chinese American youth, touching on themes ranging from coming of age in an ethnic enclave, interracial dating, media representations, and the Chinese diaspora, amongst others. This brief thematic overview should indicate how Asian Americans have utilized rap to affirm their self-identity. Rather than shedding ethnic cultural trappings—par traditional assimilationist models—these artists wear them as badges of honor, or at least reject them as racialized stigmas.

In the case of Jin, he also complicates common assumptions about the Asian American experience. His personal narrative and identity go against the grain of popular representations, which are bounded to a handful of typecasts associated with the model minority myth. As Jeff Chang, cultural critic and director of Stanford’s Institute for Diversity in the Arts, has noted:

What little image of Asian-Americans that is out there has been focused on West Coast, suburban, usually middle-class or upper-middle-class Asian Americans. What Jin represents is a completely different thing. He’s East Coast and working class, which speaks to what a lot of Asian-Americans see in themselves. He’s carrying a lot on his shoulders.

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<sup>57</sup> I’m referring to the panelist mentioned at the beginning of this section, and not Jin.

<sup>58</sup> Farrow.

<sup>59</sup> Mel, 283.

In a sense, Chang suggests Jin's subjectivity demands recognition of the socio-economic diversity within Asian America. Chang may also be implicitly calling for a critical intervention in Asian American Studies, suggesting we move east of Eden. As a public figure, Jin expounds an Asian American identity that many relate to, despite often being eclipsed by master narratives of upward social mobility. Moreover given current trends in mainstream Hip Hop, which celebrate consumer culture and materialism more generally, he seeks to establish an alternative Hip Hop subject. In explaining his possible contributions to the cultural field, Jin explains, "I can bring to hip-hop that...hard-working, 9-to 5 average Joe who really doesn't get represented in hip-hop...As much as I love Jay-Z...I can't ever truly relate...I'm not cracking 500 Cristal bottles. Flying to St.-Tropez? I never even knew that was a real place."<sup>60</sup> In an effort to portray the America in his own heart, Jin seeks to capture his experiences growing up in a working-class immigrant family. Generally speaking, commercially viable artists have celebrated underdog stories that underscore climatic moments of victory, symbolized by the attainment of material wealth, concurrently obscuring persisting institutional inequalities. It has become commonplace for rappers to boast "I went from ashly to classy,"<sup>61</sup> or "started from the bottom now we here,"<sup>62</sup> affirming the sanctity of the American Dream. My observations are not made to question the symbolic significance of these thematic patterns nor the integrity of these celebratory narratives. Nevertheless Jin, like many of his underground counterparts, seeks to recognize those who continue to struggle up the

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<sup>60</sup> Coates, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Notorious BIG, "Sky is the Limit" (1997)

<sup>62</sup> Drake, "Started from the Bottom" (2013)

economic ladder. By reflecting on his encounters as a Chinese American, he simultaneously endeavors to assert a space for Asian American identity in Hip Hop.

In acknowledging Jin's dual goal of complicating dominant notions of Asian American subjectivity and an authentic Hip Hop character, Kevin Y. Kim states, "More than a street grind...Jin's rise remixed his parents' conservative aspirations at the same time it rebuked the Booker T. Washington school of assimilation telling Asians to go slow, get educated and quietly meld into the mainstream."<sup>63</sup> Though in many ways his identity is grounded in an ethnic-specific experience, it may claim broad appeal, potentially speaking to racially disenfranchised youth that reject standard integrationist models of inclusion. Moreover it should come as no surprise that he himself identifies with Hip Hop, as a discourse often associated with counter cultural resistance and self-determined community reports. To varying degrees, Jin has utilized rap to demand recognition on his own terms, similar to Hip Hop's early pioneers. These interpretations, however, come with the assumptions that members of the Hip Hop nation are, more or less, inclined to overlook existing racial divides.

Through establishing common grounds based on mutual interests and shared cultural identities, Hip Hop bears the potential to facilitate meaningful cross-ethnic exchange. Not only has it proliferated in America's urban metropolitan centers, but has also found popular reception in rural and suburban zip codes.<sup>64</sup> Steve Stoute claims Hip Hop's universal allure symbolizes an "atomic reaction," characterized as "a catalytic force majeure that went beyond the musical boundaries and into the psyche of young America—blurring cultural and demographic lines so permanently that it laid the

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<sup>63</sup> Kim.

<sup>64</sup> Stoute, xviii.

foundation for a transformation I have dubbed ‘tanning’.”<sup>65</sup> Tanning thus represents “seismic shifts in consciousness”<sup>66</sup> that seem to implicate a “generationally shared mental complexion.”<sup>67</sup> This youthful attitude at once demands greater tolerance and welcomes diversity. In asserting connections across racial and socio-economic divides, Stoute observes that cultural tastes can no longer be distinguished along demographic lines—citing Hip Hop’s multiracial membership as evidence. The cover of his book features a survey question that demands the participant identify him or herself racially. All boxes are checked, including both broader racial categories as well as ethnic-specific follow-ups. Overlapping this survey item, etched in fading bronze print, is bold crimson lettering that reads, “How Hip Hop Created a Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy.” Again, Stoute’s main concern is to coach corporate America in profitably manipulating the trappings of Hip Hop to attract young consumers. Nevertheless his methods of instruction reflect Hip Hop’s resonance across social identities.

Hip Hop has and will continue to define the cultural experiences of many young people, serving as a point of contact for diverse communities. Yet given highly visible historic and contemporary Asian-Black conflicts, it may simultaneously exacerbate existing tensions, mitigating its potential as a space for multiracial inclusion. Besides Ice Cube’s *Black Korea* and other rap productions that engage the problematic trope of the Korean merchant, responses to Asian Hip Hop artists expose undercurrents of deep-seated resentments. The emergence of Asian American rappers has brought accusations

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<sup>65</sup> Stoute xvi.

<sup>66</sup> Stoute xxiii.

<sup>67</sup> Stoute, xvii.

of cultural misappropriation. During the Q/A portion of the AAI panel discussion, a young African American audience member is noted to have asked the first question:

[Since] we live in this multi-racial state which still positions Blackness socio-economically and politically at the bottom, how does the presence of Asian Americans in hip-hop this black cultural art form, look any different than that of white folks in Jazz, Blues, and Rock & Roll?<sup>68</sup>

This statement, framed as a question, equates Asian American participation in Hip Hop to white co-optation of Black popular culture. Despite the problematic layers of his inquiry, the gentleman later identified as Kenyon Farrow, does in fact address an important question worth investigation. In many respects, narrative recounts of Hip Hop's origins treat it as an all-inclusive panacea. In principle, it can serve this function, yet it hardly exists in a vacuum, isolated from broader historical and social forces. Hip Hop may establish common grounds based on mutual interests and shared values, yet without actual encounters, cross-racial affiliations become symbolic associations that do not necessarily materialize into interracial coalitions.

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<sup>68</sup> Farrow.

## Yellow Bodies in Black Masks: Cultural Misappropriation and Black Minstrelsy

*Whatever potential might exist is only realizable through human and social will and dedication, and therefore, culture's emancipatory promise is not always (or often) realized*<sup>69</sup>—Oliver Wang

Overlapping cultural contexts do not necessarily compel the sort of direct interactions that are necessary to adequately address historical enmities. In the age of electronic media, in which commodified forms of Hip Hop may be consumed in isolation, it is less pertinent to access material spaces where its aesthetic expressions are practiced and where people converge. Romantically characterizing the essence of the cultural movement, Stoute states, “It was about the positive, powerful potential of urban youth culture, which, when harnessed properly, managed to bring disparate groups of people together.”<sup>70</sup> Yet harnessing Hip Hop’s characteristic signs to appeal to multiracial consumers is different from generating sustainable interracial group formations. In this sense, Stoute seems dimly aware that cultural revolution and mainstream fascination are not one in the same. Consumer tastes may share a common “mental complexion”—especially within an imagined community of national scope—but *people* do not always identify on a personal or broader social level, in spite cultural proximities. Many presume interracial kinship through participation in Hip Hop, yet these presumptions often become disrupted in more direct engagements. Kenyon Farrow’s question symbolizes such a rupture in the matrix.

Shortly after the AAI event, Oliver Wang posted a reflection on his personal blog, providing a literature review of two profile pieces on Jin that circulated over the weekend

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<sup>69</sup> Wang, 149.

<sup>70</sup> Stoute xxvi.

following the panel discussion. While celebrating Ta Nehisi Coates's article for "[painting] Jin as just another American kid (race regardless) who's just in love with hip-hop," Wang also notes that he wished the journalist had dealt more forcefully with the "pertinent issues that Jin's career has raised, especially race."<sup>71</sup> Like other media pundits, what Wang seems most concerned about is how Asian American rappers, "come into contact and potential conflict with the dominant notions of Blackness that exist within hip-hop today."<sup>72</sup> As will be discussed in greater detail, most journalists underscored the racial antagonism Jin confronted as a battle contestant on Freestyle Friday. A majority of his opponents drew attention to Jin's racial difference, imposing stock Asian images and questioning his place in a traditionally Black space. Where Coates seems to fail in this capacity, Kevin. Y Kim is applauded for rigorously engaging the "specter of racial authenticity"<sup>73</sup> that Asian American artists are forced to negotiate. Kim sites discrepancies between popular understandings of Asian and Black masculinities (as well as racialized subjectivities more broadly), media ploys of divide and conquer, and the marginal position Asian Americans assume in Hip Hop's hybrid histories, as the sources of contention.

As further evidence, Wang mentions the question Farrow posed during the AAI event to illuminate the undercurrents of deep-seated Asian-Black resentments. His reference draws attention to a history of interracial tension and mistrust, while also illustrating how persisting suspicions emerge in the context of Hip Hop. Wang's rewording of Farrow's inquiry reads as follows:

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<sup>71</sup> Wang, Oliver. "He's Your Chinaman." *Pop Life*. Sandbox Automatic, 22 Nov. 2004. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

In talking about Asian Americans in hip-hop, don't we potentially [threaten] to deracinate hip-hop from its roots in the African American tradition? After all, if you look at the history of black music, we've seen [blues], jazz, rock, etc. coopted and exploited by others outside our community, often times to the cultural and economic detriment of the Black community. Is it possible that Asian Americans are contributing to that process with hip-hop?

In response, Wang recognizes the legitimacy of concerns raised around the de-racialization and de-historicizing of Hip Hop's roots in the African diaspora, given a long history of such exploitation and mainstream co-optation of Black popular culture. In broadening the parameters of US national culture, these forms of appropriation do not necessarily reflect a critical appreciation of the people and experiences that shaped the cultural forms.

Often times, Black vernacular traditions are processed through commercial filters, stripped of their subversive power as they transcend their subcultural boundaries and become integrated into the "core," as commodity spectacles.<sup>74</sup> This process of normalization situates illegible subcultures within "dominant frameworks of meaning," initially reviled and ridiculed as socially deviant, and eventually "rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise."<sup>75</sup> In the case of Hip Hop, its mainstream welcome has also served to signify America's progressive political orientation and celebration of multiculturalism. Not only does this help exonerate the US from a history of racial intolerance, but also obscures the persistence of racial inequalities. But the question is, can Asian Americans also appropriate Hip Hop, in such a way that asserts dominance and threatens Black cultural sovereignty?

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<sup>74</sup> Dick Hebdige, "(i) From Culture to Hegemony; (ii) Subculture: The Unnatural Break," *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Gigi Durham and Douglass Kellner (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 132-33.

<sup>75</sup> Hebdige, 132.



Wang begins to address this concern in his blog post, alluding to corporations as privileged sites that define Hip Hop, threatening to render it “the latest example of Black culture being emptied of content and turned into a deracinated commodity.”<sup>76</sup> Given the constraints of the genre of discourse he speaks through, Wang merely scratches the surface, claiming, “[the] colorline here is painted green.”<sup>77</sup> He asserts that only if major record labels like Universal decided to exclusively promote and market Asian American artists, will there be a semblance of a “yellow peril.” By illustrating how power dynamics in the music industry are institutionally structured, Wang challenges the perceived threat Asian Americans may pose to Hip Hop’s historic relationship to Blackness. Kenyon Farrow fires back with his own blog entry, expanding on his former statements to demand that Asians recognize “their reproduction of anti-Black racism,”<sup>78</sup> as beneficiaries of a capitalist economic structure that subjugates Blacks. Considering the superior socio-economic standing Asian Americans assume, and their presumed allegiance to white social interests, they appear to occupy a status position that permits them to exercise dominance over disenfranchised African Americans. Moreover Asian Hip Hop artists profit from cross-cultural borrowing, without illustrating a commitment to interracial solidarity. Rather they are seen to continue the trend of mainstream co-optation of Black vernacular aesthetics, at the “cultural and economic detriment of the Black community.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Wang, Oliver. "He's Your Chinaman." *Pop Life*. Sandbox Automatic, 22 Nov. 2004. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Farrow.

<sup>79</sup> Wang, Oliver. "He's Your Chinaman." *Pop Life*. Sandbox Automatic, 22 Nov. 2004.

Kenyon Farrow's points of contention generated a great deal of debate on listservs and blogs, resulting in a heated battle of words amongst Wang, Farrow himself, and general observers. Participants were forced to revamp their analytical frameworks, critically re-engaging with the social implications of an Asian American presence in Hip Hop and the prospects of Asian-Black relations more broadly. In the process, assumptions were challenged, hard realities confronted, and new possibilities imagined.

### **Asia in America: Cultural Sovereignty and Space-based Negotiations in the Black Imaginary**

On June 2, 2005, African American activist, writer, and former director of Queers for Economic Justice, Kenyon Farrow, posted a blog entry entitled, "We Real Cool?: On Hip-Hop, Asian-Americans, Black Folks, and Appropriation." The article was initially exchanged via email, became semi-public property on *Chicken Bones* (an online literary journal), and was eventually re-posted onto Farrow's personal website. It would not be too far fetched to surmise that Farrow derived his title from Gwendolyn Brook's well-known poem, "We Real Cool (1959)." In nine stanzas, Brooks narrates the daily activities of a group of seven wayward youth, whose acts of rebellion include skipping school to hang out in pool halls and illicitly selling watered-down gin. Rather than discerning their own "self-destruction," they defiantly proclaim, "We Real Cool." In appropriating the title of this classic poem to name his own work, Farrow seems to have a two-tiered goal. On one hand, he may be imploring readers to consider the socio-economic circumstances that render such "subversive" behavior, rather than accepting culturally essentialist explanations of Black pathology. Moreover, he seems to rebuke Asian Americans in Hip Hop, who are assumed to exoticize the African American experience through their

cultural aping, without having to confront the material realities of Black marginality. “We Real Cool,” is then both a question to challenge assumptions about Asian-Black solidarity, as well as a warning not to romanticize—and thereby trivialize—circumstantial deviance of the disenfranchised, as being “cool.”

Farrow begins his article by narrating what happened at the AAI event, providing both a general overview of affairs and a report on the discussion his question provoked. For full disclosure, he claims his motivation for writing was to address “racism of non-whites against Blacks.”<sup>80</sup> His critical analysis ultimately leads to the conclusion that the only prospects of Asian participation in Hip Hop are blackface minstrelsy, fetishism, and cultural co-optation. As noted in this personal reflection, he had already taken issue with the event before actually attending, conceiving the title as a threat of cultural seizure: “I cannot pretend I didn’t already know what I was getting myself into. The title of the event itself expresses a level of hostility to Black people—Since Black people are the current face of the game, and for whatever reason, that needs to be changed. But anyhow, I went, ready to see what was gonna go down...” At the risk of seeming defensive, it’s worthy to note that Farrow’s immediate impressions clouded his judgment, simplifying, and to a degree misinterpreting, the aim of the panel discussion. Such is not to claim that misguided cross-racial identification should not be critically engaged and addressed. Yet already conceiving the panelists and general attendees as “some hostile non-Black people,”<sup>81</sup> Farrow did not intend on a constructive dialogue to facilitate understanding. Rather, he almost deliberately seeks to reinforce preconceived notions that implicate Asian complicity in anti-Black Americanism.

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<sup>80</sup> Farrow.

<sup>81</sup> Farrow.

The sub-section titles of Farrow’s piece stages the AAI event as a wrestling match, opening with “The Main Event,” followed by “The Body Slam,” “After Math,” and concluding with the “Final Round.” The structure of the paper itself reflects his social attitudes and intentions, framing the exchange as a battle of might between two communities on opposite sides of the enemy line. As mentioned earlier, Oliver Wang opened the discussion by underscoring Hip Hop’s syncretic roots, presenting it as a polycultural form that has resonated amongst diverse communities. Moreover, to implicate the historical presence of Asian Americans in Hip Hop, Wang narrated the tale of the first rapper of Asian descent to receive popular welcome, Joe Bataan, who self-identified as an “Afro-Filipino.” Understandably Farrow notes, “I couldn’t help but wonder how this emcee identified himself and how he physically looked, and why his Blackness was now a footnote.”<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless in privileging Bataan’s Asian identity, it’s doubtful that Wang’s recount was a deliberate act of erasure, an endeavor to obscure Bataan’s Blackness to claim him for Asian America without ambiguity. Farrow, however, understands Wang’s “historical re-write,” as a ploy to “very skillfully [ignore] the reality that Rap was in fact created by Black youth (and Latinos from the Caribbean—many of whom are also of African descent and certainly ghettoized as ‘Black’ in the NYC socio-economic landscape).”<sup>83</sup> We are thus left with the alarming image of Asian Americans, craftily eclipsing Hip Hop’s historic relationship to the African diaspora, in an endeavor to insert themselves into the narrative and hold *the* seminal place.

“After squirming in [his] third-row seat for the duration of the talk,” Farrow posed the first and last question, which has already been referenced in both of its reported

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

variations. His statement (question)<sup>84</sup> was made to point out that Wang's narrative recount of Hip Hop's origins deracinated the culture from its Black roots. Moreover given Asian Americans' superior socio-economic standing, their misappropriation of Hip Hop threatened a violent uprooting, similar to white theft and co-optation of Jazz, Blues, and Rock & Roll. He thus characterizes Wang and the panelists' condemnation of corporations, as a calculated measure to ignore "Asian Americans' role in the capitalist structure" and their "complicity in anti-Black racism."<sup>85</sup> By projecting the locus of power outwards, such a maneuver seems to exonerate the proponents of racial violence. His perspectives are ultimately symptomatic of persisting tendencies in master narratives of Asian-Black conflicts, revitalizing the model minority myth—and thereby obscuring overlapping processes of racialization and the possibilities of sincere cross-racial identification.

While many of these concerns are legitimate and worth illuminating, Farrow fails to adequately link them to his contentions about the "Asian presence" in Hip Hop. On one hand, he accurately observes how the Asian American experience has been narrated as working model for other minorities, and African Americans in particular, to achieve social mobility through self-enterprise. Rather than demanding institutional reform or state intervention, Asians have "succeeded" by navigating existing social avenues. Consequently Asian uplift has been predicated on discourses of Black pathology, positioning Asianness and whatever it may signify, against Blackness. Farrow is absolutely right in that we have to consider the roles institutional and structural circumstances have had, and continue to have, in shaping social contests between

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<sup>84</sup> In *We Real Cool*, Farrow refers to his inquiry as a "statement/question."

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

different communities—even if this means recognizing certain privileges attained at the expense of other groups. We should not discount the prospects of people of color upholding what Farrow refers to as “white political interests.” Nevertheless, by overlooking the forms of national oppression and racial discrimination that Asian Americans confront in the US context, he presumes wholesale Asian integration into the mainstream. This faulty impression obscures the marginal social positions Asian Americans occupy, as well as the socio-economic diversity within Asian America.

Even when Asian Americans are legally recognized as citizen subjects, they are culturally marginalized as alien bodies. Dominant representations continue to portray Asian Americans as foreigners within, incorporated into US society as low-skill and professional labor, while maintaining a liminal space between national and cultural borders. In contrast, African Americans may be considered cultural insiders, having conceived aesthetic traditions that are universally recognized as American artistic forms. There is, however, no Asian equivalent to Black American popular culture. Consequently even if there is a notable Asian American presence in Hip Hop, it is far fetched to anticipate a threat to Black cultural sovereignty. Farrow’s arguments are alarmingly misguided, as he seems to dismiss the reality that Asian Americans, at best, are considered demographic outliers in the Hip Hop nation and limitedly appear in popular culture more broadly. It can hardly be disputed that there is a dearth of commercially viable Asian artists in the music industry, relative to any other racial group. Moreover there are few Asian American corporate executives at major record labels that define what Hip Hop is to the mass public, through their marketing and recruitment choices. Thus despite the growing emergence of Asian American rappers, most of whom thrive as

independent artists, there is little evidence that Hip Hop's point of reference will sway East in the public eye.

Regardless of my criticisms, it is important to also appreciate that Farrow does illuminate issues that challenge misinformed presumptions about the Asian presence in Hip Hop and Asia-Black relations more broadly. On a basic level, he forces us to recognize that cross-cultural borrowings do not necessarily materialize into interracial coalitions nor communicate such an incentive. Certainly his claims that Asian Americans hold a socio-economic position that allow them to threaten cultural seizure, in a manner comparable to white co-optation, is questionable and in many ways faulty. Nevertheless it is possible to conceive the modes of incorporation that Asian Americans assume, as not indicating an investment in Asian-Black solidarity, but symbolic associations (via cultural hybridity) maintained from a distance. Intentional or not, what translates is an impetus to carve out a uniquely Asian American space in Hip Hop. Fred Ho, in weighing in on this exchange between Farrow and Wang, claims that the legion of Asian American Studies "petty-bourgeoisie" (including Oliver Wang, Jeff Chang, among others) subscribes to a liberal brand of polyculturalism; "[taking] a blind-eye towards any dynamic of oppressed-oppressor relations in [US] society today and simply argues for cultural 'mixing' without a real analysis of appropriation, rip off, theft, plunder vs. creolization, mutual inspiration and third world unity."<sup>86</sup> Rather than illustrating a desire to forge interracial alliances, Ho asserts they, "want their own nationalist 'space' and 'props,' especially in areas of trendy and profitable youth culture," informed by Black

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<sup>86</sup> Fred Ho, "Fred Ho Responds to Kenyon Farrow's Piece." *Slanty*. Blogspot, 11 Jan. 2005. Web. 09 May 2013. <<http://slanty.blogspot.com/2005/01/fred-ho-responds-to-kenyon-farrows.html>>.

vernacular traditions.<sup>87</sup> He claims Wang and the panelists have appropriated Hip Hop to profit as “pundits-theorizers, “performers,” and “cultural capitalists,” which is distinguished from adoption to further collective liberation.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike Farrow, however, Ho does not denounce all forms of cultural crossing, but the modes that have been popularly assumed. Obvious examples would be the black-facing “rampant in Japan with *ganguro* subculture of Japanese teenage girls wearing cornrows”<sup>89</sup> or Taiwanese American David Chung, creating the racially offensive board game, “Ghettopoly.” In these instances, Hip Hop has been appropriated as a “commodity spectacle, a case of race without the resistance, a fashion, a posture of hipness and coolness without the substance of struggle and self-respect.”<sup>90</sup> Though not quite cultural aping, the AAI event and the choices of many Asians in Hip Hop represent cultural mixing that does not necessarily communicate a desire for actual coalition building.

In Wang’s chronology of Asian American rappers, his first sub-section is dedicated to the “raptivists” of the early 1990s, who emerged at a time that Hip Hop already enjoyed mainstream welcome. Inspired by Public Enemy and other politically charged rappers of the day, they utilized Hip Hop as radical medium for political expression. Echoing the perspectives of other raptivists, MC R.A.W (Hana Choi) explains, “I was influenced by Public Enemy and it was a perfect form of expressing anger. I wanted to stir shit up.”<sup>91</sup> Identifying rap as simply an outlet to articulate frustrations, and thereby implicate rappers as being angry, is potentially problematic,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen, “Introduction,” *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans*, ed. Fred Ho and Billy V. Mullen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) 11.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Wang, 43.



considering existing stereotypes of Hip Hop artists and black youth more generally. Many of these early raptivists sought to “convey social and political knowledge gained through university classes, especially Asian American studies courses.”<sup>92</sup> They engaged themes ranging from interracial dating, misogyny, Asian stereotypes, and white-washed “sell-outs.” Moreover they performed almost exclusively at community events sponsored by Asian American student groups. More than a beloved art form, point of contact with other communities, or simply an end unto itself, they utilized rap as a means to disseminate political messages geared towards Asian Americans. Even in the contemporary moment, Asian Americans have coordinated alternative platforms that cater specifically to Asian American musicians and fans. Kollobaration and the Asian American Hip Hop Summit are two such community groups that organize in this fashion. Also many YouTube artists that practice rap or R&B generally collaborate with other Asian artists and largely appear in Asian American showcases. Nevertheless it’s important to recognize that mainstream venues and multicultural art spaces in the US have not always been receptive to Asian performers. Thus my point is not to make a value judgment, but note that an ethnic-specific orientation does not translate as a desire to forge interracial alliances or as identification with Black people.

In criticizing “Changing the Face of the Game” and the AAI as an organization, Fred Ho suggests that many Asian Americans in Hip Hop subscribe to a mainstream brand of multiculturalism, to enjoy the benefits of crossing cultural borders, while remaining distanced from Blackness and whatever it may signify: “[I’m] sure none of the [Asian American] and the token [Black] panelist would subscribe as I do to an oppressed

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<sup>92</sup> Wang, 42.

[Black] nation or for that matter [Asian/Pacific Americans] as oppressed nationalities.”<sup>93</sup>

It is curious that there were not more Black speakers at the event, especially considering the topic of discussion and the generative possibilities of addressing persisting tensions. Also, I do not necessarily find Wang’s insertion of Asian Americans into Hip Hop’s origin narrative to be particularly effective in establishing common grounds. Though many have claimed that a notable Asian presence in Hip Hop is underappreciated because of its mainstream invisibility, I wonder why Oliver Wang and others do not then draw on underprivileged examples that also exemplify actual cross-racial engagements. Yet I would not go as far as to say the coordinators were resistant to interracial coalition building or dismissive of its socio-political value. After all, the event was produced in collaboration with the Arts Sanctuary, a Black arts space based in North Philadelphia. Amongst the panelists, there seems to be at least an honest desire for cross-racial identification, albeit the possibilities of being misguided. Furthermore there is nothing particularly wrong with Asian American artists and Hip Hop enthusiasts discussing Asian specific issues nor does it represent a rejection of interracial union. My critique has not been to question the sincerity of intentions, but underscore how particular approaches may translate, given the existing debates on Asian-Black relations and general state of affairs.

Responding to Asian Americans that assert Hip Hop speaks to their experience, Farrow asks, “Well, I am fine with you getting with it...but does that mean you get to have it? Better yet, take it, and then use it against Black people to promote the image of

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<sup>93</sup> Ho.

us as intimidating and politically and culturally selfish?”<sup>94</sup> His evidence of this anti-Black racism are panelists who criticize commercial artists for allowing capitalism to dilute the politics of Hip Hop—thereby defining their own authenticity by distinguishing it from the folly of commercially viable Black artists. Moreover he claims that the narrative used to promote Jin portrays Black people as being “hostile” and “culturally defensive,” comparable to the semi-biographical account of Eminem in 8-Mile. No disagreement here. As mentioned, and will be further elaborated upon, a majority of Jin’s opponents underscored his racial difference, by capitalizing on clichéd Asian jokes to question his integrity as a rapper. Major media outlets have been keen on documenting the racially charged Asian-Black encounters that have ensued in the battle arena, ultimately setting a stage for controversy, and potentially conflict. Kevin Y. Kim sums up the core issue:

Instead of trimming the tale’s excesses or tracing the racism constraining Jin’s every move, most observers turned to street-wise model minority myth. The protagonist was still stereotypically Asian, but this time the culture penetrated decidedly black. Asians were set against blacks (“Chinese in a black world,” one suburban headline blared).<sup>95</sup>

The basic story that circulated in the dominant media has characterized Jin as an artist of merit navigating a hostile Black world. Accordingly a subhead for the Guardian profile read, “Jin could be hip-hop’s first Asian-American star—racism doesn’t stop him.”<sup>96</sup> Responding to the narrative patterns, Kenyon Farrow laments the image of an Asian American underdog, shouldering horizontal oppression with dignified patience. He is accurate in pointing out the media’s ploy of manipulating the model minority myth to reinforce culturally essentialist explanations of Black pathology. Nevertheless he errs in

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<sup>94</sup> Farrow.

<sup>95</sup> Kevin Y. Kim, “Repping Chinatown.” *Colorlines: News for Action*. ARC, 21 Dec. 2004. Web. 09 May 2013.

<sup>96</sup> Lynksey.

assuming Asian American complicity in dominant representations, as he fails to recognize that these media pundits are overwhelmingly non-Asian. Most Asian American journalists, writing for “alternative papers” including *Colorline Magazine*, have actually criticized mainstream narratives on Jin for exacerbating existing tensions.

What must be recognized, however, is that in spite of my analysis, and other critical reflections made to facilitate better understanding, it is difficult to change immediate impressions derived from years of socialization. To disqualify Black demands for economic equity and formal political rights, the dominant media offers the antithetical image of the self-reliant and upwardly mobile Asian model minority.<sup>97</sup> The Asian American experience has been narrated as a working model for African Americans in particular, to achieve socio-economic mobility through self-enterprise. As Helen Jun observes, Asian assimilation has been predicated on discourses of anti-Black Americansim.<sup>98</sup> Conveniently overlooking relations of power, this neoliberal narrative has “pathologized poverty and welfare as black dependency,”<sup>99</sup> by thematically establishing an Asian-Black tandem. Though there is much to say in regards to the epistemology of interracial disconnections, it suffices to note that the mainstream media has positioned Asian Americans against other communities of color, presenting them as competitors for limited economic, political, and cultural resources. In this context, cross-racial identification does not appear to be a compelling drive or offer emancipatory promise. The culmination of deep-seated resentments has been well documented, including historical and sociological analyses of the Los Angeles Riots. These interracial

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<sup>97</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press) 150.

<sup>98</sup> Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) 51.

<sup>99</sup> Jun, 96.

conflicts may be reproduced in the contested terrain of Hip Hop, mitigating its potential as a space for universal inclusion.

Media interpretations of Jin's career have revitalized the model minority myth, with a street-wise twist, to implicate Black intolerance while ignoring institutionalized racism. Though it is both rational and significant to examine the visible contours of interracial enmities, what journalists have undermined is Jin's success, failing to paint a full picture by overlooking the generative possibilities of these contentious starts. Initially received with skepticism and later lauded as a brilliant performer, Jin's checkered career emblemizes the potential of changing Asian-Black relations via lived encounters in a common platform. By simply focusing on the social implications of Jin's place in Hip Hop as an Asian American, Oliver Wang and Kenyon Farrow commit the same folly—by narrowly targeting Jin's confrontation with “the specter of racial authenticity,” or the possibilities of cultural misappropriation, respectively. Imposing variations of the model minority myth are evidently flawed, as I have elaborately indicated. Nevertheless it is also a mistake to simply assume cross-racial kinship by adopting Hip Hop—a culture not promoted as being of value—as a rejection of white middle-class norms. Asian Americans may romanticize the African American experience by identifying Hip Hop with their own alterity, without illustrating a critical awareness of that experience in maintaining physical distance.

Though a seemingly basic observation, Wang and Farrow do not pay enough tribute to Jin's success. By not accounting for Jin's *changing* reception, both have failed to acknowledge how Jin successfully negotiated his racial difference, and forged materially grounded alliances. Despite contentious starts, once Jin proved himself an

exceptional performer and demonstrated his literacy in Hip Hop's oral traditions, he earned the respect of all in attendance. Even those artists who had offered the most racially charged verbal assaults recognized Jin's prowess in the pursuit of a common craft, and they congratulated him in the manner of good sportsmen. Likewise, after approximately two consecutive victories, the show's hosts and audience members' biases shifted in his favor, as he became the champion that most viewers rooted for until the end of his two-month run. More than shared cultural habits and tastes, the direct encounter in a common platform is what helped realize organic interpersonal associations.

## Holler-Front: Staging the Battle Ground

*People, this is battle rap, two MC's hit a stage...with rap schemes and displays/Now those shits might sound real, or really mean full of rage/At the end of the day, they don't mean what they say*<sup>100</sup>—Math Hoffa

Jin made his first public appearance on the national stage as a contestant on *106 & Park*'s Freestyle Friday Battles in 2002. A program that enjoys a national viewership and is featured on the cable network BET, *106 & Park* is a daily music video countdown show. Each Friday it hosts a freestyle battle competition, where two opponents improvise raps to skewer each other, the more lyrically competent and witty competitor emerging as the victor. Once a Freestyle Friday contestant claims seven consecutive wins, he or she is “retired” and inducted into the Hall of Fame. After a successful two-month run, Jin joined this exclusive fraternity and signed a recording contract with the Ruff Ryders (a subsidiary owned by Virgin Records). This favorable reception, however, is at variance with the response to Jin's debut performance as a challenger on Freestyle Friday. As Jin has observed in various interviews, the show's hosts and audience initially received him with skepticism, undermining his literacy in Hip Hop's oral traditions. To further underscore his eccentricity, Jin's opponents would draw attention to his racial character, not only by capitalizing on clichéd Asian jokes, but also by questioning his appropriation of a Black vernacular aesthetic. They would conjure stock images, thereby marking his distance from Hip Hop, by imposing more recognizable forms that insinuate a legible Asian subject.

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<sup>100</sup>theUrltv. “Smack/URL Presents MATH HOFFA vs DOSE (Full Battle).” *YouTube*. Web. 10 Mar. 2013.

Given the limited representations of Asian American men in popular culture, a visibility bound to a handful of typecasts associated with the model minority myth, Jin was a fated anomaly in the cultural terrain of Hip Hop. Despite its syncretic roots and broad appeal across social identities, Hip Hop is generally understood exclusively as a Black creative form. Moreover commercially viable recording artists have exploited essentialized notions of Black masculinity, establishing a hypermasculine prototype, which rappers are at times applauded for defying, but more often criticized for not measuring successfully against.<sup>101</sup> As Oliver Wang astutely observes, “Although the concept of authenticity girds most Western music cultures, from classical to pop, the idea finds its apotheosis within hip hop. ‘Realness’ even more than lyrical acumen or musical talent, is often praised and rewarded, whereas ‘fakeness’ can discredit an artist beyond redemption.”<sup>102</sup> The slogan of “keeping it real” has organically developed from a catch phrase to a pillar. In the context of Hip Hop, the concept of “realness” is at once a racialized and gendered notion, associated with a working-class Black male subjectivity. During the time when Jin was performing as a competitor on *106 & Park*, the paradigmatic rapper of the day was 50 Cent, arguably more recognized for his street credentials than his lyrical capabilities. Interestingly as a criterion of evaluation, it appears that “realness” can outweigh verbal inventiveness. Accordingly Asian American rappers enter this cultural terrain “with an authenticity crisis on their hands before they even open their mouths to rhyme.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> For example during his now legendary “beef” with 50 Cent, Ja Rule was reportedly robbed of his chain by 50 Cent’s entourage. Failing to adequately retaliate, Ja Rule was considered “soft” in the Hip Hop world and ultimately forfeited his hard-earned popular acclaim.

<sup>102</sup> Wang, 36.

<sup>103</sup> Wang, 41.



In many ways, Hip Hop continues to be characterized as a culture of little value, or at least its respectability has been persistently questioned. Despite this reservation, however, Hip Hop—like jazz and other Black vernacular traditions—is considered one of “the most American of art forms.”<sup>104</sup> In his book chapter “Silenced but Not Silent: Asian Americans and Jazz” (featured in the anthology *Alien Encounters*), cultural critic Kevin Fellez discusses “the central predicament Asian American jazz musicians face in the cultural market place.”<sup>105</sup> As an expressive medium through which a particular brand of Black national identity is asserted, Hip Hop shares similar criteria of authenticity as jazz. Therefore Fellez’s questions, concerning Asian American positionality in (or out of) jazz, pertains to Asian Hip Hop artists: “how are Asian Americans ‘not’ American and thus foreclosed from participation in this art form?”<sup>106</sup> Marked as perpetual foreigners, Asian Americans are disenfranchised from dominant US culture, which currently includes Hip Hop in its unofficial register. Moreover as model minorities, they assume a subject position that is in opposition to popular notions of Blackness and whatever it may signify.

The model minority myth, in its historical and contemporary variations, has effectively positioned Asian Americans against other communities of color. Through a process of quiet assimilation that claims no visible political protest, they are assumed to claim a middle-class socio-economic status, which does not lend itself to the struggles of the oppressed. Assumptions of their mainstream integration are accompanied by suspicions of their allegiance to white social and political interests. Further underscoring the “foreclosure” of Asian Americans from Jazz and other black vernacular aesthetics,

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<sup>104</sup> Kevin Fellez, “Silenced but Not Silent: Asian Americans and Jazz,” *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thur Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham: Duke UP, 2007) 69.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Fellezs notes their appointment as model minorities; “which positions Asian Americans as noncreative ‘nerdy’ types, liminally caught between black and white America, serving as a racial ‘buffer zone’ for white while viewed suspiciously by other disenfranchised communities of color due to the false belief in the upward social and economic mobility of all Asian Americans.”<sup>107</sup> The amalgamation of such typecasts, the lack of visible and materially grounded Asian-Black alliances, and the media’s sensationalized accounts of interracial tensions, has set a stage for contention.

Limiting its focus on existing and imagined conflicts, media portrayals have undermined historical and contemporary instances of interracial union and have fortified divisive barriers. Nonetheless their wide and sustained circulation simulates a reality. According to some critics, “corporate mass media has actually created a conflict when there really is none.”<sup>108</sup> It is also noteworthy that patterns in media representations indicate a “special attention given to the black-Asian conflict” though it “seems no more or no less a phenomenon than the ongoing, historical ‘black-white’ conflict or the ‘black-brown’ conflict.”<sup>109</sup> Noteworthy instances of cross-racial identification and alliances are exempted from news media narratives. And with mainstream ignorance come historical invisibility. Elaine H. Kim in her piece “Home is Where the Han Is,” lists a number of Korean-Black collaborations in the Los Angeles Area, forged to facilitate better relations in the wake of the 1992 Riots:

As far as I know, neither the commercial nor the public news media has mentioned the many Korean and African American attempts to improve relations, such as joint church services, joint musical performances and poetry readings, Korean merchant donations to African American community and

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<sup>107</sup> Fellezs, 73.

<sup>108</sup> Ho and Mullen, 9.

<sup>109</sup> Ho and Mullen, 9.

youth programs, African American volunteer teachers in classes for Korean immigrants studying for citizenship examinations, or Korean translations of African American history materials.<sup>110</sup>

In their stead were numerous accounts of communities in contention, situating these two groups on opposite sides of enemy lines.

During the height of Asian-Black tensions in the early 1990s, Korean Americans were portrayed as unscrupulous capitalists that were monopolizing limited community resources and growing rich from Black patronage, while maintaining a racist disgust towards their non-Asian counterparts. Some news reports have even suggested that Korean merchants were willing to commit violence against Blacks, in order to safeguard their own capital interests.<sup>111</sup> Coupled with former and present interpretations of Asian Americans as model minorities—understood as “honorary Whites” and competitive overachievers—these imaginings translated as reality. Accordingly, a poster distributed in Brooklyn to rally supporters for the December 12<sup>th</sup> boycott (1990) of Korean businesses read: “Black Power...Boycott Korean Stores! The Battle for Brooklyn...Korean merchants are agents of the U.S. government in their conspiracy to destabilize the economy of our community.”<sup>112</sup> These historic Asian-Black conflicts, and the ideological stances thus assumed, continue to saturate other structural contexts where these communities encounter each other. As a medium through which self-determined community narratives are generated and a working-class brand of Black nationality is

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<sup>110</sup> Elaine H. Kim, “Home is Where the Han is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals,” *A Reader: Asian American Studies*, ed. Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu and Min Song (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press) 276.

<sup>111</sup> John J. Goldman, and Karen Tumulty. "Dinkins Tries to Break Black Boycott of Korean Stores : Race: New York Mayor Shops at Market to Show Support for Owners. Tensions Remain High Eight Months after Incident with Customer." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 22 Sept. 1990. Web. 09 May 2013. <[http://articles.latimes.com/1990-09-22/news/mn-588\\_1\\_black-mayor](http://articles.latimes.com/1990-09-22/news/mn-588_1_black-mayor)>

<sup>112</sup> Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams* (Seattle: University Washington, 1994) 32.

expounded, Hip Hop has offered its own aesthetic reinterpretations of former and ongoing social contests. Much has already been said about Ice Cube's *Black Korea*. The critically acclaimed Lauryn Hill, celebrated as a socially conscious artist, has accused Korean nail salon workers of reinforcing white standards of beauty.<sup>113</sup> Moreover Tupac, whom the Hip Hop nation has memorialized as a deity, had urged residents of South Central, "Blame the Korean, blame the Jew? Nah, be a crooked nigga too!"<sup>114</sup>

Consequently Asian Americans maintain a tenuous position in Hip Hop, assuming a liminal place between national and cultural boundaries. Considered assimilated minorities that enjoy mainstream welcome as symbols of modernity and economic progress, they are not readily associated with popular notions of disenfranchised youth—a constituency that Hip Hop privileges. Accordingly Asian American social protest may be trivialized as frivolous identity politics and illegitimate grievances, comparable to white accusations of reverse racism utilized to safeguard designated privileges. As an aesthetic medium identified with civil disobedience and oppositional subjectivities, Hip Hop does not seem related to the Asian American experience. The anticipated question is, "What do you people have to complain about?"<sup>115</sup> Moreover given how Asian Americans have been racialized vis-à-vis Black people, Asian participation in Hip Hop does not seem to represent investment in multiracial solidarity—as Kenyon Farrow has claimed—but dominance over Black bodies and a threat of cultural seizure. Thus the model minority myth and the "yellow peril" surface as two sides of the same coin. At best, Asian American Hip Hop artists appear to claim their own nationalist space within

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<sup>113</sup> Lauryn Hill, "Doo Wop" (1999).

<sup>114</sup> Tupac, "Crooke Nigga" (2006).

<sup>115</sup> Phi, 297.

this social world, reaping the benefits of Black culture and politics while maintaining physical distance from the people who crafted them. Or as Fred Ho states in reiterating Kenyon Farrow's overarching argument, "[Kenyon asserts] that [Asians] haven't faced the same forms of national oppression and racism but they have been ethnic success stories riding upon the backs of [African Americans]." <sup>116</sup> Whatever the divergent interpretations may be, and in spite of academic labor to offer necessary interventions in challenging the master narrative of interracial conflict, deep-seated resentments have firmly taken root.

In this context, the stellar emergence of Jin is nothing short of miraculous, though the process is by no means smooth or easy. The early stages of his career exposed the undercurrents of long-standing tensions, yet his critical acclaim symbolizes a potential overcoming, rendering racial borders negotiable and somewhat fluid. Even in the present, he is the most recognized Hall of Famer in *106 & Park* history and his legacy continues to be relevant in battle rap vernacular. In manner that is symptomatic of persistent tendencies in discourses on Asian-Black relations, Wang and Farrow have largely underscored the social implications of Jin's place in Hip Hop. Their divergent analyses ultimately converge, in focusing on disconnections between Asianness and Blackness—possibly even suggesting distinct socio-political interests that claim little overlap. Fixated on the "side show," buoyed by sensationalized media reports of Asian-Black conflicts in Hip Hop, none have adequately engaged Jin's success or pondered its symbolic value. To be straightforward, they have not effectively made Jin a part of their theorizing. Rather

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<sup>116</sup> Ho.

they capitalize on the public awareness around Asian Americans in Hip Hop his career helped generate, without showing a critical appreciation for his labor.

In using Jin's career as a jumping off point to discuss general social patterns, Wang and Farrow's concerns do not displace persisting tendencies, but ratchet them up, revealing deep structures of mistrust. What they seem to overlook are instances of materially grounded Asian-Black associations in Hip Hop and the prospects of meaningful interracial relations, emblemized by Jin's checkered career. Yet I do not intend to romanticize the possibility of Asian-Black solidarity in privileging Jin's popular acclaim in the battle arena. By tracing the vicissitudes of interracial relationships through this sort of interaction, I account for existing conflicts while appreciating the amicable possibilities rendered and fulfilled.

### **Keeping it Real: Gendered and Racialized Notions of Authenticity**

Given the embedded histories of Asian-Black disconnections, the growing emergence of Asian American rappers has engendered accusations of cultural misappropriation. As mentioned, Kenyon Farrow equates Asian American participation in Hip Hop with white co-optation of Black popular culture, citing Blues, Jazz, and Rock & Roll for illustration. In a reflection piece published in *AfroAsia*, spoken word poet Bao Phi relates a personal conversation he had with an older "Black gentleman," who expressed resentment towards Asian youth that adopt the commodified trappings of Hip Hop—namely speech and fashion styles.<sup>117</sup> I can also imagine these same critics accusing Asian American rap fans of living vicariously through commercialized sound bites of the Black experience, while maintaining social distance from its material

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<sup>117</sup> Phi, 296.

realities. These Asian youth then, appear to be voyeurs of Black marginality, deriving a sense of thrill and pleasure from mediated encounters with the “other,” in order to add spice to their otherwise mundane lives. While I do recognize the reality of such tendencies, it is difficult to accuse all Asian Americans of these follies. Nevertheless it appears that mainstream understandings of Asian Americans as model minorities, antithetical to images of Black social deviance, have set a stage for conflict. Rather than a symbol of cross-racial identification, Asian American Hip Hop artists come to represent a potential threat to Black cultural sovereignty. Compounding such inimical responses are the polarities between gendered notions of Asian and Black subjectivities, rendering Asian Americans racially inauthentic in this Black cultural terrain.

Prevailing cultural reflections of African Americans culminate in the image of the miscreant, portraying Blacks as uncivilized elements of US society, stereotypically associated with the underclasses. Moreover essentialist notions of Black masculinity reduce African American men to the physicality of their bodies, presenting them as inherently belligerent and sexually promiscuous.<sup>118</sup> In stark contrast to notions of Black men’s physical prowess, salient reflections of Asian men have portrayed them as effeminate, passive, and sexually inept. Accounting for what may be overlooked, commercially viable Hip Hop artists have assumed hypermasculine demeanors, often boasting sexual conquests and triumphant violent encounters. As bell hooks astutely observes, “even though a product like rap articulates narratives of coming to critical political consciousness, it also exploits stereotypes and essentialist notions of

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<sup>118</sup> Patricia Hill-Collins, “Booty Call: Sex, Violence, and Images of Black Masculinity,” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 327.

blackness.”<sup>119</sup> I do not intend to homogenize the Hip Hop community or insinuate that commercially viable recording artists necessarily determine norms that are universally observed. Nevertheless, it can hardly be dismissed that an overwhelming majority of top-selling rappers assume ungraciously masculine postures, including the trope of the gangster and its multiple variations.<sup>120</sup> In the process, these iconic artists have established standards that Asian Americans measure inadequately against.

During an interview with AZN Lifestyles TV, Jin Auyueng related his experiences as a battle rapper, alluding to the racial antagonism and gate-keeping practices that Asian Americans confront while navigating a cultural world of artists, fans, and industry where blackness is the normative.<sup>121</sup>

Of course when I first started, like, I was always the underdog. You know, people will like judge you before you even say anything. Like, like they’ll say, “Next up...we got Jin verse ‘da da da’,” and I’ll come up on stage, and they see a Chinese kid and they like, “Aw man, this gon’ be funny.”<sup>122</sup>

The polarity between Asianness and Blackness contributes to the popular understandings of Asian American rappers as “gimmicks,” unable to meet the criteria of the prototypical rapper.<sup>123</sup> Their physical presentations, and the resulting impressions, influence their reception—similar to the way that sight allegedly affects taste. Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates relates his initial impressions of Jin, illuminating the core issue: “The first time I

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<sup>119</sup> bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 315.

<sup>120</sup> Collins, 325.

<sup>121</sup> Wang, 36.

<sup>122</sup> Aznlifestylestv. “Jin the Emcee Awesome Indepth Interview.” *Youtube*. Web. 29 Jun. 2007.

<sup>123</sup> Other non-Black rappers also confront this specter of racial authenticity, most notably white, and to a lesser degree Latino, rappers. Eminem, Iron Solomon, Soul Khan, and Cortez are battle rappers that have also had to negotiate racialized and gendered notions of “realness.” In fact in the mass media as well as Hip Hop periodicals, Jin has been liberally compared to Eminem, as racially other in the world of Hip Hop. Moreover Jin’s third opponent Skitzo, claims he is a “fake Eminem.”



saw Jin, I didn't really see him at all...I laughed and shrugged the whole thing off. An Asian American rapper? I smelled yet another gimmick: the model minority meets the miscreant.”<sup>124</sup>

Jin's debut on *106 & Park* as a challenger on the Freestyle Friday platform was a symbolic coup de tat, revealing racial borders to be both materially grounded and fluid. His opponent was the reigning champion Hassan, who boasted six consecutive victories, needing only an additional one to claim Hall of Famer status. In framing this battle as a momentous event, the show's host states, “Gotta introduce, the reigning champion. My man Hassan, going for his seventh win!”<sup>125</sup> Compounded by the shock value generated from Jin's presence as an Asian American rapper, the fact that this could be the champion's final feat created an exceptional hype around the contest. Hassan was visibly in high spirits and full of confidence, sporting a blue t-shirt with the number “7” painted in large print. The rules of Freestyle Friday dictated that the challenger initiate combat. Illustrating the occupational arrogance of a battle rapper, Jin brazenly assumed center stage, offering an introductory “yo” before delivering a devastating first blow. In anticipation of his opponent's race-baiting, Jin discloses, “Yeah I'm Chinese, now you understand it/I'm the reason that his little sister's eyes are slanted/If you make one joke about rice or karate/NYPD be in Chinatown searching for your body.”<sup>126</sup> Consequently he draws attention to his race and by extension his eccentricity, to minimize its cultural significance. He identifies himself as ethnically Chinese and locates himself in the geographically bounded Chinatown community. Such may be interpreted as a challenge,

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<sup>124</sup> Coates, 1.

<sup>125</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. “The Art of 16 Bars.” *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

daring his opponent to make an issue of his racial difference and devalue his ability as a skilled performer. Concurrently, this accentuation constitutes a preemptive strike—to intercept and neutralize the utility of Asian stereotypes, to which many battle rappers facing Asian American opponents have resorted.<sup>127</sup>

As Jin had anticipated, Hassan endeavors to mark his distance from Hip Hop by appointing a stock Asian image. In fact, the introductory line to Hassan’s rebuttal includes the following: “I’ll have you in BET hooking up fried wontons.”<sup>128</sup> In order to question Jin’s place in a traditionally Black social space, Hassan imposes a popular culture image that insinuates a more authentic Asian subjectivity. Furthermore this imagining establishes a sense of familiarity, as Chinese Americans limitedly appear in African American neighborhoods as Chinese restaurant proprietors and employees. Many top-selling rappers have alluded to Chinese food as a staple in the diet of working-class Blacks. For example, platinum artist Fabolous says, “In my hood, little kids are raised on 4 chicken wings and beef fried rice.”<sup>129</sup> For further illustration, in a freestyle performance on SMACK DVD, Jadakiss rapped, “I stay in the hood like Chinese wings.”<sup>130</sup> Consequently Hassan’s ploy may be read as an attempt to make Jin a more manageable subject in the Black imaginary, as he is otherwise a social enigma in the world of Hip Hop. Thus on one hand Hassan illustrates a natural inclination to appeal to the familiar, yet ultimately his intention is to slight Jin by drawing on a stagnant Orientalized image. Despite Hassan’s implicit taunt regarding Jin’s integrity as a rapper by alluding to a more “suitable” occupation, Jin overthrew the reigning champ.

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<sup>127</sup> For further reference, observe battles featuring former battle rapper turned YouTube star, Dumbfoundead.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> precise704, “FABOLOUS IN MY HOOD fan art,” *YouTube*. Web. 25 Sep. 2008.

<sup>130</sup> DTMSound, “Jadakiss Freestyle-Smack DVD,” *YouTube*. Web. 10 Jan. 2009.

During his competitions on *106 & Park*, a majority of Jin's opponents made remarks that underscored his racial difference, questioning his appropriation of a black vernacular aesthetic. Their criticisms may be read as mild protests against having to share a competitive space with a gimmick, implicitly demanding a worthier competitor. Jin's second opponent Sterling, noted for being the most vicious and liberal with his racial slurs, addresses the show's hostess by posing the following question: "Ayo I'm mad Free, you acting like I ain't the one/Why you got me battling, Bruce Lee's grandson?"<sup>131</sup> The reasons for his frustrations are incomprehensible, as Jin had already demonstrated his lyrical competence, proved himself an adept competitor, and flexed a unique ability to freestyle in the previous battle. Nevertheless Sterling resists acknowledging Jin's literacy in Hip Hop's oral traditions, referencing a popular culture image that supposedly captures a more authentic Asian character. Historically urban Black youth have gravitated towards Bruce Lee, who has been treated as a folk hero. He has become a point of identification, as an under dog and person of color, combating colonial forces in an attempt to establish social justice.<sup>132</sup> Yet in this instance, Bruce Lee is not evoked as a point of convergence and mutual identity, but as a way to demarcate Jin's outsider status as a foreigner within. In the process, Sterling establishes Hip Hop as a uniquely American form, positioning Asian Americans on the periphery of national culture. Conversely, Sterling's racial profile as a Black American arbitrarily entitles him to this expressive art, in spite of his comparative skills. He thus advises Jin, "I'm a star, you just a rookie/Leave rap alone and keep making fortune cookies."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. "The Art of 16 Bars." *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>132</sup> Ho, 296.

<sup>133</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. "The Art of 16 Bars." *Youtube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

Rather than an isolated instance, an overwhelming majority of Jin's opponents redundantly gestured towards his distinction from Hip Hop's racial norm by conjuring a stock Asian subject. Such a ploy is not particular to African Americans, but indicative of social attitudes in the general US landscape, which categorize racial minorities as predetermined types. By evoking dominant images of the Asian martial artist and ethnic service worker, Jin's opponents alluded to the primary points of contact between mainstream US culture and Asian Americans.<sup>134</sup> These micro-level interracial aggressions may be read as discursive means to negotiate the violence of Black disenfranchisement, through Orientalized indignation.<sup>135</sup> To identify Hip Hop as a distinctly American cultural form, through which a Black national identity is asserted, Hip Hop has imposed its own racialized and gendered qualifications.

Further exposing the undercurrents of deep-seated interracial resentments, Sterling casually referenced the image of the Korean merchant, evoking historic debates around the presence of Asian-owned businesses in traditionally Black communities. The existing literature on contemporary Asian-Black relations have "stressed macro political-economic shifts since the 1970s, such as deindustrialization, urban restructuring, and neoliberal state policies that devastated the black urban poor while facilitating two-tiered immigration (rich and poor) from Asian and Latin America."<sup>136</sup> The global shifts in modes of production that facilitated Asian immigration, and incorporated its working-class constituencies into traditionally Black urban spaces, compelled African American discourses of dispossession and displacement, emerging as place-based negotiations with

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<sup>134</sup> Indigo Som, "Chinese Restaurant Drive-Thru," *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham and London: Duke University Press) 150.

<sup>135</sup> Jun, 6.

<sup>136</sup> Jun, 2.

Asian immigrant merchants.<sup>137</sup> Indicative of the ways in which Asian Americans figure in the Black national imaginary, Sterling states, “[Jin’s] mom was in *Menace to Society* saying hurry up and buy!”<sup>138</sup> Underhandedly criticizing the role of Asian Americans in reinforcing notions of Black criminality, he engages a cinematic reinterpretation of Asian-Black conflicts in post-industrial urban settings. Sterling implicitly draws a parallel between the encroachment of Asian immigrants in working-class Black neighborhoods and the co-optation of commodified African American cultural “styles,” linking the perceived threat that Korean merchants posed to Black economic sovereignty with the presence of Asian Americans in Hip Hop—a presence that threatens to uproot the culture from its African diasporic foundations.

In this particular battle, Sterling also makes an especially explicit statement regarding Jin’s “chinky eyes,” a problematic reference that was aired on cable television though censored in a major Hip Hop documentary, “The Art of 16 Bars.” In his concluding line, Sterling discloses, “I know why your eyes are chinky/Cuz’ you keep staring at my pinky.”<sup>139</sup> To be straightforward, this comment can hardly be considered a clever manipulation of a culturally essentialist characterization of Chinese Americans. As a Hip Hop fan, I could at least appreciate such rhetorical craft. The fact that Sterling simply utilizes the adjective form of the racial slur “chink,” expresses a level of malice. More importantly, however, its permissibility says much about the principles that govern this space and Hip Hop more broadly.

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<sup>137</sup> Jun, 8.

<sup>138</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. “The Art of 16 Bars.” *Youtube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

The show's host and hostess act as disciplinarians and arbitrators of Freestyle Friday's social norms, distinguishing acceptable from prohibited behavior. Before each contest, either AJ or Free will announce the governing rules, relating that the use of profanity will lead to an immediate disqualification and that each contestant is restricted to 30 seconds. Along with the audience members, the host and hostess also regulate affairs and reinforce cultural parameters less formally, by applauding acts of sportsmanship, celebrating a strong performance, and denouncing poor etiquette. In regards to the latter, Jin's sixth opponent Skyzoo, was "called out" by Free for poking fun at AJ in his verse. Before having the guest-judges announce the winner, she advises Skyzoo, "Money, never disrespect the man of the house. That can get ugly, kid."<sup>140</sup> The audience, by applauding the statement, underhandedly criticizes the "transgressor," helping establish this standard of etiquette as an informally instituted mandate.

Interestingly, however, neither the show's official disciplinarians nor the audience members decried Sterling's racially charged offensives. On the contrary, the crowd articulated their validation through shouts of approval and boisterous laughter. Some spectators even reached towards the stage to shake the challenger's hand. Moreover after Sterling's performance, Free yells out, "Good run! That was a good run!"<sup>141</sup> Though common wisdom holds that nothing is sacred in the battle arena, one can imagine that if Jin retaliated in kind, reactions from the shows hosts and live audience would communicate the impermissibility of such anti-Black racism. Coates thus observes, "Battle rappers like to say that there are no rules in the ring, Jin knew that if he retaliated in kind—if he made any allusions to watermelon or friend chicken, say—it would be a

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<sup>140</sup> McEzkill, "Skyzoo vs Jin." *YouTube*. Web. 28 Mar. 2010.

<sup>141</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. "The Art of 16 Bars." *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

grave transgression.”<sup>142</sup> In response, Jin is noted to have said, “[Asian slurs] are absolutely too common for me to get mad at... That’s a shame, ain’t it?”<sup>143</sup> One can imagine Jin’s comments do not simply pertain to Hip Hop, but were also reflective of general social patterns in the terrain of national culture. In this vein, Fred Ho asserts that Black people, “through hard-fought struggles have earned a somewhat central focus in the mainstream of American ‘racial sensitivity’ quotients.”<sup>144</sup> He contrasts the taboo of “blackfacing” from the persistence of yellowfacing and “Asian bashing” as common practices in Hollywood.

The blatant forms of racial antagonism Jin confronted in the battle arena are a continuation of such dominant cultural trends. It is noteworthy that this platform in particular, permits an open dialogue, minimally managed by standards of political correctness and mainstream propriety. Similar to stand up comedians like Dave Chapelle, battle rappers boldly engage more sensitive social issues, including the recognition of race as a persisting cultural force. In comparison, however, it appears that battle rappers address tabooed subjects, not as a conduit to initiate a discussion about and deconstruct stereotypes, but exploit essentialist representations in crafting insults. By manipulating popular culture images that most Americans acknowledge, these rappers establish cultural proximity between themselves and spectators.

In considering the temptations to resort to this ploy, however, it is also important to recognize that drawing audience support is contingent on the transparency of a battle rapper’s lines. Unlike recording artists, battle rappers showcase their work through staged

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<sup>142</sup> Coates, 1.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ho, 11.

performances, and thus face the challenge of holding the immediate space. In the context of *106 & Park*, the victor is nominated on the spot, rather than being evaluated through revisits of recorded performances. In discussing the potency of Asian stereotypes in this cultural field, Jin states, “I could come out swinging, and all it takes is for him to say one Chinese joke, and that’ll pretty much discredit everything I say. No matter how dope it was.”<sup>145</sup> Yet rather than lamenting a racial bias in Hip Hop, he notes, “That’s just how it is, in like a battle, like in the heat of the moment, it’s about who can capture the crowd.”<sup>146</sup> Given that Jin is a novelty in this cultural world and Asian Americans often appear in the media for comic relief, it was convenient for his opponents to construct comedic insults by discussing his race. Yet the fact that Freestyle Friday is a nationally staged contest and such racially problematic insinuation did not prompt any notable public outcry, indicates the different standards of political correctness Asian and African Americans are expected to observe in the broader US landscape.

Thus far I have mainly focused on the racial antagonism and gate-keeping practices that Jin confronted as an Asian American rapper. However, I do not intend to limit my research to these concerns, thereby reimposing the two-dimensional Asian vs. Black narrative that has been noted to shape interracial contests.<sup>147</sup> Rather, I would like to explore the possibilities of changing cross-racial dynamics that Jin’s checkered career emblemizes. Yet in implicating possible group formations that may emerge from cultural proximities—in this case Hip Hop being the overlapping cultural context—I wanted to resist a romantic interpretation that eclipses persisting tensions as to counter

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<sup>145</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. “The Art of 16 Bars.” *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Kim, 275.



the master narrative of Asian-Black conflicts; deep-seated resentments must be boldly addressed in order to move beyond them. The “process of healing” will, according to circumstances, be messy—especially between two groups that have been played off each other to avoid acknowledging relations of power that have mitigated possibilities for national inclusion. My endeavor has been to treat Asian-Black contentions as ongoing issues that warrant special attention. Rather than projecting the locus of power outward, and by extension demanding institutional recourse, I see emancipatory promise in meaningful dialogue between the communities involved.

### **It’s a Man’s World: Performing Masculinity and Negotiating Racial Difference**

Jin’s changing reception, from an underdog to the most celebrated hall of famer in *106 & Park* history, exemplifies Hip Hop’s potential as an alternative site for interracial group formations. Even those opponents who hurled the most racially charged verbal assaults, would generally be humbled by Jin’s performance and then congratulate him in the manner of good sportsmen—after judges unanimously nominated him the victor. Audience members were not exempted from these proceedings, informally casting their votes through a ritual of call and response. The host or hostess would address in-house spectators, asking their opinion about the battle, to which they were expected to reply by shouting the name of their favored contestant. The popular vote then validates the official nomination, sealed by the host or hostess’ concluding appraisal. Accordingly Jin’s critical acclaim as a formidable battle rapper, not only signifies respect from fellow contestants, but also Hip Hop fans and pundits. Thus in spite of seemingly insurmountable national and cultural borders, Jin negotiated his racial difference and established his place in Hip

Hop—by demonstrating his literacy in its oral traditions and by embodying qualities recognized as characteristics of a rapper. The trajectory of his changing reception reveals racial barriers to be both materially grounded yet fluid, holding out possibilities for mutual appreciation. Jin’s torturous emergence, then, illustrates how Hip Hop constitutes a space where divided communities encounter each other in both distrustful and constructive ways.

Like many aspiring rap artists, Jin tapped into the battle scene, a platform that rap pundits acknowledge as a sure means to gain broader recognition.<sup>148</sup> Reminiscent of the traditions of Jamaican dance hall competitions,<sup>149</sup> a rap battle presumably serves as a reliable litmus test, not only by evaluating an artist’s lyrical competence and stage presence, but also by determining a sure victor. Evidently battle rapping is one of the more confrontational practices of Hip Hop, as contestants engage in an open and impassioned dialogue, slighting their opponents while boasting their own superior skills. Similar to a boxing match, a battle is a one-on-one face-off, yet a lyrical rather than physical test of might. In fact boxing metaphors have become commonplace in battle rap vernacular. Some contestants refer to the stage as a “ring” or allude to themselves as prizefighters, reiterating that confrontation comes with the territory. Battle rappers often threaten violence, assume belligerent tones, use antagonistic hand gestures, and stand virtually in nose-to-nose proximity to their opponents. Nevertheless after the match is over, fellow competitors generally congratulate each other in the manner of good sportsmen, appreciating their opponents’ skills in the pursuit of a common craft. As legendary battle rapper Math Hoffa explains, “People, this is battle rap, two MC’s hit a

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<sup>148</sup> VladTv. “Busta Rhymes on Canibus Battle & Battle Rapping.” *Youtube*. Web. 31 Aug. 2012.

<sup>149</sup> Djwizard2010. “Beef DVD (Full).” *Youtube*. Web. 11 Jul. 2011.

stage...with rap schemes and displays/Now those shits might sound real, or really mean full of rage/At the end of the day, they don't mean what they say.”<sup>150</sup>

The conditions of Freestyle Friday set a unique theater of assembly, one that engenders confrontation while holding out the possibilities for mutual respect in the spirit of competition. More than shared cultural habits and tastes, the direct encounter in a common platform is what helps realize these associations. The ceremonies of “touching microphones” to initiate battles, and offering of hands and congratulatory words with the battle’s conclusion, exemplify the intimate interpersonal exchanges within this space. Audience members were not exempted from these customary proceedings, as Jin could be seen reaching out to the crowd to receive high-fives and would directly address them in appreciation.

In the context of *106 & Park*, sportsmanship is an informally instituted principle. The exchange of handshakes is not required after the battle, but is a ritual that contestants tend to voluntarily engage in. Though not a formal mandate, the practice has become an unofficial cultural norm, as an applauded act of propriety and commonly observed routine. For example after his fifth feat, Jin extends his arm towards his opponent who responds with the expected hand slap. Free celebrates this moment of camaraderie, exclaiming out loud, “I love that sportsmanship thing!”<sup>151</sup> Spectators in turn validate this gesture, signaling their approval through applause. Thus Jin and his opponents recognize their respective merits and maintain mutual respect, in spite of initial confrontations that seem to signify insurmountable racial barriers. After all, their competitions may be read

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<sup>150</sup> theUrltv. “SMACK/URL PRESENT MATH HOFF vs Dose (Full Battle).” *YouTube*. Web. 10 Mar. 2013.

<sup>151</sup> Markus S. “Rap battles-best of Jin.” *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

as co-produced theatric performances, which requires a joint-effort. Moreover once Jin proved himself an exceptionally skilled battle rapper and learned showman, roughly after two consecutive victories, he earned the respect of all in attendance. In a sense, the trajectory of Jin's changing reception may serve as an index to help us appreciate the labor of establishing interracial alliances.

Indications of fluctuating interpersonal dynamics were evident during Jin's debut performance as a challenger on *106 & Park*. Showcasing the characteristics of a formidable battle rapper, a unique ability to improvise and a theatric stage presence, Jin challenged spectators' initial impressions of his capabilities as a performer. By the end of his thirty-second verbal onslaught, the resident DJ gestured as if to wipe off sweat from his brow, as the crowd cheered in approval. Visibly shaken by the challenger's unanticipated lyrical competence, Hasan took a moment to gather himself in preparation for his rebuttal. After attempting a few Asian jokes that proved ineffective, he stopped in mid-sentence, heaving a heavy sigh into the microphone before letting it drop to his side. One can only imagine the disappointment Hasan had felt at the moment, having but one more victory to secure his place in the Hall of Fame. Yet when Jin was announced the winner, Hasan graciously offered him a handshake, followed by a full on embrace. In Jin's victory speech, he paid tribute to the audience and, as a concluding thought, congratulated his opponent for his hard-earned wins. Hasan beamed in gratitude, and offered a final round of applause.

Despite the amicable possibilities fulfilled, however, it should be noted that interracial associations in this context are largely limited to homo-social male bonding. In order to earn the approval of a fraternity of fans and artists, Jin had to prove he claimed a

certain authenticity. One notable way he compromised his racial difference and established his place in Hip Hop, was by subscribing to gendered notions of realness. In the battle with Hasan, as well as others, Jin's success was partly contingent on his own hypermasculine posturing, illustrating his complicity in Hip Hop's gender norms. Critics have treated Jin's tactics as an underhanded ploy to reclaim his masculinity, by challenging the sexual disfigurement of Asian men in popular culture.<sup>152</sup>

In an attempt to assert his legitimacy in this cultural terrain, Jin negotiates his racial difference through a series of hypermasculine postures, endeavoring to position himself in Hip Hop's core. Referencing Hassan's "little sister's eyes," Jin insinuates a sexual engagement with his opponent's mother, in resonance with popular "yo mama" jokes. He simultaneously challenges the emasculation of Asian men in popular culture, while reiterating the non-value of women by presenting them as sexual objects. His complicity in Hip Hop's problematic gender dynamics, in turn, illustrates his place within its cultural parameters. Jin also makes a physical threat, claiming that his opponent's racial antagonism may lead to a violent death. As Jin builds up to the lines quoted above, he gradually works himself up into a frenzy—his facial expression becoming increasingly confrontational and the volume of his voice rising to the point of screaming. By the time he gets to his threat of murder, he wildly gestures towards his opponent with a pointed finger as he meets Hassan's gaze with a defiant glare. Meanwhile spectators witness Jin steadily approaching his opponent, with each forward step thickening the tension. Notably as Jin finishes the last few words of these lines, he emphatically jerks his face forward and puffs his chest, as if to initiate a fight. In adopting the aggressively

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<sup>152</sup> Tamara K. Nopper. "The Hype About Asian Rapper Reveals Low Standards for Asian Americans in Race Politics." *Azine*. 15 Nov. 2009.

competitive spirit characteristic of a battle rapper, Jin disassociates himself with popular representations of Asian masculinity (or lack thereof), thereby illustrating qualities recognized as characteristics of a rapper.

Considering the sexual disfigurement of Asian males in popular discourses, Jin endeavors to challenge racism's emasculating gaze by boasting imagined or real sexual conquests. While his racial profile cannot be obscured, discernably marked by his physical presentation, its signification may be compromised. What Jin endeavors to communicate is that Asian American men can also be sexually aggressive and capable, reiterating dominant interpretations of youthful masculinity. For basic illustration, during his face-off with Sterling, Jin claims, "Your girl must love alcohol, cuz she be swallowing Jin."<sup>153</sup> This sexually explicit line translated favorably amongst the audience—an unfortunate reflection of how comedic effect is often predicated on demeaning gestures towards women. In his third battle against Skitzo, Jin once again endeavors to position himself in Hip Hop's fold in similar fashion. In the opening line of his rebuttal, Jin states, "You a sucker and I mean it kid/My girl would never go with you because she don't like guys with small penises."<sup>154</sup> Though unprovoked, he engages the stereotype of Asian men as possessing modest sized male organs, an image that he conversely imposes on his opponent. In a way, he does challenge stereotypes that reduce African American men to the physicality of their bodies, but ultimately reinforces the sanctity of problematic standards of masculinity, rather than begging for a reconfiguration of such gender paradigms. Moreover it communicates a level of

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<sup>153</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. "The Art of 16 Bars." *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>154</sup> Keepin It Gangsta. "BET Freestyle Friday Jin vs. Skitzo." *Myspace*. Myspace, 24 Nov. 2006. Web. 09 May 2013. <<http://www.myspace.com/video/keepin-it-gangsta/bet-freestyle-friday-jin-vs-skitzo/403141>

insecurity, implicating the degree to which he has internalized the emasculation of Asian men through his fixation on penis size.

Not only does Jin exploit culturally essentialist representations of Black men's physical prowess, but also articulates his own masculinity by questioning the sexual orientation of his opponents. As a gendered and racialized concept, the notion of "keeping it real" not only enforces a particular racial hierarchy, but also reiterates heteronormativity. Though racially other, Jin claims a certain "authenticity" as a heterosexual male.<sup>155</sup> In this way he holds the privilege of reinscribing gendered aspects of Hip Hop's cultural parameters. During his battle against Logan, Jin states, "I'm a player in the game, you cheering in the stands/Matter of fact, during the Super Bowl (2002), he was cheering for the Rams/You don't even like football, that's a myth like unicorns/He just like seeing grown men in tight uniforms."<sup>156</sup> Jin seeks to shame his opponent by speculating on the sexual stimulation that Logan "experiences" while observing images of chiseled male bodies. Unconsciously, however, Jin destabilizes his own sexual orientation, by implicating his familiarity with queer desire. By speculating on—and by extension indicating his knowledge of—non-heterosexual lust, he seems to project a queer fantasy onto his opponent, thereby creating a safe distance between himself and the longing he acknowledges. Nevertheless I do not argue that Jin compromises his conservative bent or that he intentionally subscribes to queerness. Rather by taking into account the affective level of desire in informing an individual's sexuality, I challenge faulty presumptions about the organic qualities of heteronormativity.

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<sup>155</sup> To take it a step further, it's likely easier for the Hip Hop world to accept an Asian rapper, opposed to an openly queer rapper.

<sup>156</sup> Markus S. "Rap battles-best of Jin." *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

Far from demanding greater tolerance, Jin sought to queer his opponent, thereby relegating Logan to the periphery of Hip Hop while locating himself in its fold

Beyond simply emulating the hypermasculine prototype, Jin also earned his rite of passage by demonstrating an exceptional lyrical craft. In response to opponent's race-baiting, Jin would often flip the race card to his advantage. As Jin notes in an interview featured on *The Art of 16 Bars*, his battle against Sterling was perhaps his most hard-earned feat while performing as a Freestyle Friday contestant. Practically each of his opponent's lines was grounded in an Asian joke, drawing favorable reactions from in-house spectators. In reminiscing about the anticipation for this battle, Jin says, "People were still like, you know like, iffy. You could hear the buzz around, was like, 'Yo did you hear about that Chinese kid that won the Freestyle Friday? Took out the champion'...They probably didn't even know my name yet. But you hear, you hear, 'Ah he got lucky...He probably got lucky. Let's see what happens this week.'" <sup>157</sup> After Sterling's racially charged onslaught, Jin remembers that the crowd, the show's hosts, and the resident DJ assumed a sure victory for the challenger, confirming their initial suspicion's of Jin's inaptitude. Illustrating the occupational arrogance of a battle rapper, however, Jin cheerfully recalls thinking, "Ya'll really thinking it's up." <sup>158</sup> Again, his approach was to draw attention to his race as a ploy to minimize its cultural relevance.

In his opening line, Jin admonishes, "You wanna say I'm Chinese sonny here's a reminder, check your Timbs they probably say made in China." <sup>159</sup> Manipulating the popular impression of cheap Chinese goods, he utilized essentialized notions of

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<sup>157</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. "The Art of 16 Bars." *Youtube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*



Asianness to “flip” the race card. “Timbs” is an abbreviated reference to Timberland, a popular and expensive American boot brand. By claiming Sterling’s shoes were actually “made in China,” he insinuates they were counterfeits, not only pointing out the hypocrisy of Sterling’s racial antagonism, but also implicitly questioning the legitimacy of his claims of being a lucrative hustler. The comedic effect, compounded by the shock value generated from witnessing a skilled Chinese American rapper, helped him recruit fans. Ironically, his racial difference became somewhat of an advantage, despite (or perhaps due to) Jin’s reinforcement of culturally essentialist representations. With the conclusion of his rebuttal, spectators were in a frenzy, as many wildly gestured towards Jin with pointed fingers, informally casting their vote before the judges nominated a victor. Moreover the resident DJ, legendary Fat Man scoop, emerged from his booth to locate a microphone to scream, “He’s crazy! He is crazy!”<sup>160</sup> From this point on, Jin became the champion most rooted for until his induction into the Hall of Fame.

By the time of his third battle, Jin had already established himself in the Freestyle Friday stage, proving himself a competent lyricist and learned showman. Moreover his confidence as a rapper and crowd-drawing antics endows him with the charisma of a theatric performer. Despite the fact that opponents continued to underscore his racial difference by conjuring stock Asian subjects, these ploys were no longer effective in demarcating Jin to the periphery of Hip Hop. His third opponent, Skitzo, was also uninhibited in his racial antagonism, possibly even more malicious than Sterling. In reference to the emasculation of Asian men in mainstream discourses, Skitzo states, “You

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

belong on a Tampax tube with Free cuz you act feminine.”<sup>161</sup> Undeniable is the existing image of Asian masculinity or lack thereof, as well as the fact that such a reference could easily translate broadly amongst an American audience. To agitate Jin with a personal slight and damage his morale, Skitzo also states, “Oh by the way Jin, how’s your sister?/I should know man, I got naked pictures.”<sup>162</sup> It is evident that Skitzo has been watching previous episodes of *106 & Park* in preparation for this battle. After his first win, Jin made a victory speech, not only to congratulate his opponent but also to “shout out” his sister who had apparently been ill. Skitzo manipulates this sensitive moment to construct an especially unnerving insult. Instinctively he evokes the popular image of hypersexualized Asian women, claiming he is familiar with Jin’s sister’s progress because he admires her pornography. To bolster his claim, he reveals a picture of a naked Asian model that is supposed to be the unnamed sister. Continuing on the topic of Asian American women, but taking a different direction, Skitzo teases, “And your girl’s whack, when she rocks a thong/It looks like she got boxers on.”<sup>163</sup> Speculating on Jin’s “girl’s” androgynous bodily figure, he alludes to Black popular discourses that represent Asian females as having “flat butts,” in contrast to voluptuous African American and Latino counterparts. Emasculating Jin by masculinizing his imagined girlfriend, Skitzo positions himself as a voyeur of a queer intimacy.

Nevertheless given Jin’s two consecutive victories and brilliant lyrical display, it became less pertinent for him to negotiate his racial difference to assert a legitimate place in this platform. The audience members, who had initially received Jin with skepticism,

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<sup>161</sup> Markus S. “Rap battles-best of Jin.” *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

began to show an uninhibited bias in their endorsement of him. In noting this transition in prejudice, Jin claims that after his second feat, “the crowd was like, ‘Yo that’s it...we cheering for Jin.’”<sup>164</sup> After Jin successfully passed the litmus test, stock Asian American images, though persistently relevant as legible cultural allusions, no longer became as readily applicable to his individual character. Simply stated, the utility of Asian stereotypes lost their effectiveness in reference to Jin. Thus in spite of Skitzo’s racially charged verse, which was as mean-spirited as Sterling’s—but perhaps rhetorically more sophisticated—during the brief pause before Jin’s rebuttal, in-house spectators could be heard shouting, “Jin! It’s a wrap! Come on, holler-front!”<sup>165</sup> By claiming, “it’s a wrap,” the crowd implicates that this would be a sure victory for Jin. In contrast, after Sterling’s performance, the crowd responded favorably to the challenger’s racial antagonism and enthusiastically pointed towards him, as if they had already cast their lot. The fact that a similar ploy did not work for Skitzo, indicates that audience members transitioned from unaffiliated spectators to advocates. We may even go so far as to say he was embraced as a battle rapper, though his ethnicity did not necessarily lose its symbolic significance. Even before the judges announced a winner, Free asks the crowd, “Who do ya’ll think won?” To which most responded, “Jin!”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. “The Art of 16 Bars.” *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>165</sup> Markus S. “Rap battles-best of Jin.” *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2009.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

My goal in tracing the vicissitudes of interracial relationships through Jin's interactions with the predominantly African American community is to account for existing conflicts while appreciating the possibilities of hard-won solidarity, rendered and fulfilled. I do not intend to Romanitize cross-racial identification by claiming that such convergence reflects a counterhegemonic alternative or an awareness of larger social issues. In fact, group formations in Hip Hop often take the form of homosocial bonding that reiterates the non-value of women and heteronormativity. Though racially an anomaly in a cultural world where Blackness is the normative, Jin meets the criteria of the prototypical rapper through his hypermasculine posturing. This is arguably the way he negotiated his racial difference and established a mainstream viability. Nevertheless, while remaining vigilantly critical of male-centric group identities, it is also important to recognize Hip Hop as a culture around which diverse communities may rally.

As the most critically acclaimed and visible Asian American Hip Hop artist, Jin and his documented career present fluctuating interracial dynamics particularly accessible for analysis. My research thus far has led me to observe that overlapping cultural contexts do not necessarily compel the sort of direct interactions necessary to adequately address historical enmities. Hip Hop may establish common grounds based on mutual interests and shared cultural identities, yet without actual encounters, cross-racial affiliations become symbolic associations that do not necessarily materialize into interracial coalitions. Especially in the age of electronic media, in which commodified forms of Hip Hop may be consumed in isolation, it is less pertinent to access material spaces where its

aesthetic expressions are practiced and where people converge. As Oliver Wang observes:

Popular culture can create opportunities for meaningful contact between communities, and culture often absorbs and expresses tensions not easily resolved through other social institutions like the government or an economic system. However, this does not mean that culture is able to actually resolve these tensions. Whatever potential might exist is only realizable through human and social will and dedication and, therefore, culture's emancipatory promise is not always (or often) realized.<sup>167</sup>

Asian Americans may romanticize the African American experience by identifying Hip Hop with their own alterity, without illustrating a critical awareness of that experience through personal relationships. Moreover, many presume interracial kinship through their participation in Hip Hop's expressive forms, yet these presumptions often become disrupted in more direct engagements. The initial stages of Jin's battle career exemplify these complications, implicating the associative limits of shared cultural tastes and habits. Yet the conditions of the battle arena itself stage a unique theater of assembly, which permit interpersonal exchanges in a common platform. In the process, competitors may negotiate and challenge biased assumptions, rendering the possibility of reciprocal appreciation in the spirit of competition. Jin's favorable reception illuminates the potential of these changing interracial dynamics, as he earned the respect of opponents who recognized his superior capabilities in the pursuit of a common craft. Though this sort of dialogue at times thrives on the replication of racial and gender stereotypes, it is important to appreciate the cross-racial camaraderie organically forged.

After his seventh consecutive win, Jin announced signing a recording contract with the Ruff Ryders, inviting Free, AJ, and the *106 & Park's* live audience to join in the

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<sup>167</sup> Wang, 148.

celebration of his hard-earned feat. Having witnessed Jin's final landslide victory, AJ addresses the newly anointed Hall of Famer: "You going down, in the Hall of Fame, Freestyle Friday Battle Champion. How you feeling? And what's next?"<sup>168</sup> Emphatically nodding to each praise, Jin responds, "Yo, the next move...let's do it right here. This is *106 & Park*. I'm gonna make this a special day."<sup>169</sup> He then exposes the platinum chain tucked in his hooded sweatshirt, proudly holding the pendant inscribed with the Ruff Ryders' signature emblem between clenched teeth, as he intertwines his index and middle finger on each hand to form two R's. "Double R! The streets been waiting to see!"<sup>170</sup> Free screams, "Congratulations!" amidst the cheers of animated fans. Given this favorable response, compounded by the appraisal of Asian American Hip Hop enthusiasts who presumed affirmative prospects for Asian rappers, we witness an earnest desire for Hip Hop to fulfill its romantically framed role—as a space for multicultural inclusion.

Nevertheless as Jin became a public figure, media narratives speculated on the social implications of the Asian American presence in Hip Hop, in a manner symptomatic of existing discourses on Asian-Black relations. With the mass media's sensationalized accounts of interracial enmities, both Asian and African American pundits defensively weighed in on the debate; and so began the culture wars "that [marked] his career more than his musical talent."<sup>171</sup> Intellectuals like Oliver Wang and Kenyon Farrow have primarily focused on the "pertinent issues that Jin's career has raised [around race],"<sup>172</sup> examining the specter of racial authenticity Asian American rappers confront and the

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<sup>168</sup> RollingUpTheBlunts. "The Art of 16 Bars." *YouTube*. Web. 5 Jan. 2012.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Jeff Chang. "Look At Me: Chinese American Rapper Attacks Invisibility." *San Francisco Bay Guardian Arts and Entertainment*. SFBG Online, n.d. Web. 9 May 2013. <[http://www.sfbg.com/39/03/art\\_music\\_jin.html](http://www.sfbg.com/39/03/art_music_jin.html)>.

<sup>172</sup> Wang, Oliver. "He's Your Chinaman." *Pop Life*. Sandbox Automatic, 22 Nov. 2004.

prospects of cultural aping, respectively. Wang has been keen on underscoring the crisis of authenticity Asian American artists confront, while navigating a social world where blackness is the normative. Even though he recognizes Jin's seminal place in the *106 & Park* platform and his incorporation into the mainstream Hip Hop industry, his analysis concentrates on instances of racial antagonism and public debates on Asian Hip Hop artists that expose undercurrents of interracial enmities. Meanwhile Farrow vigilantly looks out for signs of cultural misappropriation. Conversations centered on these broader social and political issues, however, ultimately overlook the interracial camaraderie that Jin managed to forge while performing as a Freestyle Friday contestant. Evidently Jin's career rendered the conflicted interracial dynamics that inform Asian-Black relations exceptionally visible. Yet his success and popular acclaim also implicate the strong possibility of hard-won solidarity.

Through a more direct point of contact that permits face to face encounters, immediate impressions derived from media representations of minority groups and mainstream accounts of interracial tensions, may be challenged by interpersonal relations that illuminate other possibilities. On one hand, typecasts assigned raced bodies are reevaluated when confronting individuals whose character complicates racial stereotypes and what they signify. In the case of Asian American Hip Hop artists and Jin specifically, they pose necessary challenges to the model minority myth, especially in regards to Asian American subscription to "whiteness." Evidently identifying with Hip Hop symbolizes resistance to white middle-class norms, suggesting identification with African Americans as people of color. More importantly, interactions amongst a racially diverse group of Hip Hop fans and practitioners, illustrate an earnest desire to establish Hip Hop as a space

for multiracial inclusion. Certainly Jin's popular reception did not completely deconstruct embedded histories of mistrust or the viability of Asian stereotypes. In this sense, the solidarity forged may reveal problematic limits. Yet the ideal is difficult to immediately achieve, especially between two groups that have been positioned against each other. What Jin's career illuminates, however, is that Hip Hop may be an initial point of contact for diverse communities. Moreover considering its symbolic value as a radical political medium, cross-racial correspondence in this common ground may lead to identification on a broader socio-political level.

Once Jin was incorporated into the mainstream music industry, however, we witnessed the demise of what made him a transformative figure. On a basic level, his artistic integrity was compromised by the constraints of this commercial platform. Trying to figure out the best way to market their latest recruit, the Ruff Ryders recast Jin as a novelty Asian American rapper. The opening track on Jin's first full-length studio album features a skit narrating Jin's first encounter with the label head, Joaquin "Waah" Dean. As Jin expresses his enthusiasm about working on his debut project, Waah "promises a lifestyle make over"<sup>173</sup> as a necessary rite of passage into the Hip Hop industry. In order to fit Jin into the Ruff Ryders' roster of otherwise hard-lined acts, he demands that Jin learn to fight Dobermans, ride a motorcycle, and use a firearm. Not understanding the relevance of these prerequisites, Jin responds, "A gun? Why would I...I rhyme yo...I could kick a freestyle for you."<sup>174</sup> To which Waah dismissively replies, "Forget your freestyles, it's over...You gotta get past lifestyle first."<sup>175</sup> By instituting a brand of

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> FoBuLoUzRiCebOi. "Jin-The Signing (Skit)." *YouTube*. Web. 5 Apr. 2007.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.



realness that under privileges lyrical acumen and insinuating Asian American illiteracy in entertainment value, Jin confronts the rigid specter of racial authenticity. Once again he occupies a liminal space between national and cultural borders, to realize that social transformation is difficult to achieve within the constraints of the “master’s home.”

After an unsuccessful career as a mainstream recoding artist in the US, Jin independently released three albums between October 2005 and November 2006, before venturing off to Hong Kong where he established himself as a top-selling rapper and amateur actor. I conclude this paper at a moment when Jin has become a pop icon in Hong Kong and is slowly endeavoring to make a comeback into the American Hip Hop scene. Subsequent to the international release of “ABC (American Born Chinese)” in 2008, Jin became a superstar in his ancestral homeland. His favorable reception across seas, however, diminishes the symbolic significance he claimed as a contestant on Freestyle Friday. As Hong Kong based journalist Ben Sin mentions, “I think the fact that he competed in rap competitions with black people was a big selling point...[TV programs] were just showing clips of it and cut back to reactions of Hong Kong people, ‘Oh my god! He was rapping with black people!’ So it was a bit playing into the stereotype.”<sup>176</sup> More than simply playing into stereotypes, such responses implicate tendencies that detract the possibilities of meaningful Asian-Black relations, exemplified by Jin’s earlier battle career. In a sense, these Hong Kong natives derive a sense of pride in watching one of their “countrymen” best Black people at their own game. The confrontations are appreciated for entertainment value and nationalist indulgence, rather than the prospects of mutual respect in the spirit of competition.

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<sup>176</sup> Wang, Hansi Lo. "Jin, 'The Chinese Kid Who Raps,' Grows Up." *NPR*. NPR, 19 Jan. 2013. Web. 09 May 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/2013/01/19/167883591/jin-the-chinese-kid-who-raps-grows-up>>.

Thus far my endeavor has been to illuminate the possibilities of Asian-Black solidarity via lived social interactions. Nevertheless I hardly claim that Hip Hop in itself constitutes the revolution, but simply a point of contact. Hip Hop has and will continue to inform the cultural experiences of youth growing up in this generation. Narrative recounts of its radical political origins, despite being romantically framed, have persistently fueled the imaginations of disenfranchised groups, both in the US and abroad. Yet it is up to forward thinking and socially conscious activists to properly harness Hip Hop's symbolic value to coordinate spaces for interracial coalition building. In thinking about the necessary future research, I want to start by considering the limits of Hip Hop as simply a vernacular aesthetic and cultural practice, though I do not necessarily devalue it as an expressive form. Hip Hop may set a stage for interpersonal correspondences, yet I'm curious as to how this point of contact may generate alliances that consciously engage relations of power. Stated another way, how can the personal become political? In extending this research, I want to collaborate with administrators at existing community arts spaces, to determine conditions necessary to create a forum for meaningful interracial exchange. By capitalizing on Hip Hop's political legacy, we may begin to facilitate discussions that critically engage social hierarchies and conditions of marginality. Within rap archives themselves, there are multiple sources that criticize institutional racism that disenfranchise people of color. Youth participants are likely to be more encouraged to discuss these relations of power, if the point of reference is a familiar and resonant discourse. Hip Hop songs may serve as case studies to examine the broader social and historical forces that shape racial inequalities. Ideally, recognition of overlapping processes of racialization and shared political interests, will be the end result.

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