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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Don't Believe the Hype: Gender and Interracial Relations Between Asian Americans and
Blacks in Hip-Hop

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Ninotchka Marie McTaggart

June 2017

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Karen Pyke, Chairperson
Dr. Anthony Macias
Dr. Adalberto Aguirre

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2017

The Dissertation of Ninochka Marie McTaggart is approved:

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University of California, Riverside

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my mentor and dissertation advisor, Dr. Karen Pyke. Your guidance, motivation and patience have been invaluable. I admire your commitment to your students, excellence in teaching and upholding a high ethical standard in all that you do. I am extremely grateful for your support during this entire process.

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Anthony Macias and Dr. Adalberto Aguirre for their feedback on my work. I very much appreciate your guidance and advice that has helped to strengthen my dissertation.

I want to thank my mentor, Dr. Scott Brooks, for believing in me and helping me navigate through graduate school. I also thank Dr. Ellen Reese, Dr. Katja Guenther and Dr. Tanya Nieri for their encouragement and support during my time at UCR.

Special thanks go to Dr. Julie Albright from the University of Southern California for opening up my sociological imagination during my undergrad years. Your immense knowledge, kindness and warmth are unmatched. Thank you for believing me and being an example of a stellar scholar, professor and mentor. I would like to express my appreciation to my mentor and co-author, Dr. Eileen O'Brien. Your intelligence, creativity and guidance have made a huge difference over the past 6 years. I am so glad that you were the impetus for the research on this topic. I am proud to call you my friend and colleague. I am very excited about collaborating with you in the near future.

My friends have played a huge role in providing much needed support during the rigors of this PhD. To my best friends, Sharon Dahan, Jessica Felman, Ani Galyan,

Jenna Heffernan, Nicole Weiss-Calamar, Carie Martin, and Tania Verafield, thank you for providing me with lots of laughs, road trips and great memories during this intense process. To Liz Hughes, Whitney Mannies, Ian Breckenridge-Jackson and Caroline Heldman, I am beyond thankful to have met you through UCR. You are all great friends who I cherish every day.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for being a wonderful source of love and support. To my parents, Ricardo and Claudette, you have always supported me in all my endeavors wholeheartedly and without hesitation. You have taught me how to be hard-working, empathetic and dedicated. To my grandfather, Irving Meyer, I am forever grateful for your unwavering support. You have always taught me the importance of education and hard work and always pushed me to achieve greatness, even when I thought I was not capable. I love you so much and you have made such a great impact in my life. I would also like to thank my brother, Michael McTaggart, for being an irreplaceable source of support, my number one concert companion and twin in spirit. Love you, bahd. To Mum and Grandma, thank you for always showering me with your warmth and love. To my sisters, Althea and Claudia, you are amazing women and are wonderful examples of loving and caring mothers, who also excel in their careers. Kimani, Taryn, Kino and Chai, I love you dearly and so thankful to be your Auntie Nosh. To Kathie and Sam, I love you both and wish you only the best as you begin your PhD and MFA. We love graduate school in this family! To Murray and Laurel, thank you for always showing me lots of love and support for all of these years. You are both wonderful, kind people who I love.

The text of this dissertation, in part or in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in *Sociological Inquiry* in February 2017. The co-author listed, Eileen O'Brien, directed and supervised the research that serves as the basis for this dissertation.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother and father, Claudette “Pinky” McTaggart and Ricardo “Ricky” McTaggart for their kindness, love and support. I know that it took much courage to leave Jamaica for an unknown future in America, but your sacrifices have made this incredible process all possible. I love you both immensely.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Don't Believe the Hype: Gender and Interracial Relations Between Asian Americans and Blacks in Hip-Hop

by

Ninotchka Marie McTaggart

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, June 2017
Dr. Karen D. Pyke, Chairperson

Historically, race scholars have characterized the American racial order through a black/white duality. Due to growing numbers of Latinos, Asians, other immigrant groups and multiracial people in the United States, the American racial hierarchy is in transformation. When their place in the racial hierarchy is considered, Asian Americans are frequently placed closer to whites than blacks, due to their elevated status through educational and economic attainments compared to other minority groups. In an increasingly global culture and marketplace, examining Asian American participation in hip-hop—a genre represented as predominantly black in mainstream society—allows me to explore relationships that are not often foregrounded in the public eye, nor in the academic literature. I use an intersectional lens to examine how Asian American women and men who participate in hip-hop culture negotiate gendered and racial stereotypes and

hip-hop's hypermasculinity. This research explores the racial dynamics in hip-hop through interactions between Asian-Americans and blacks, in an arena on the margins of society where blacks seemingly hold the highest position of the hierarchy as hip-hop artists. The research contributes to understanding the racial location of Asian Americans vis a vis the black/white duality.

The study draws off 23 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) hip-hop participants. The findings reveal that respondents construct hip-hop as a liberating space where they can circumvent limiting racial and ethnic stereotypes. However, an intersectional lens reveals the constraints that hip-hop's hypermasculinity places on AAPI men as well as the ethnosexualized expectations that AAPI women must negotiate. The experience of AAPI men and women in hip-hop due to their unique position in racial and gender hierarchies interacts with stereotypical notions of AAPI people in wider society to relegate these participants to the margin rather than center of hip-hop culture. Thus, I find respondents' constructions of hip-hop less an indicator of hip-hop culture's openness than a statement of how constricting the mainstream U.S. culture is for AAPI Americans, rendering hip-hop's conditional acceptance preferable by comparison.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Historically, race scholars have characterized the American racial order through a black/white duality. Due to growing numbers of Latinos, Asians, other immigrant groups and multiracial people in the United States, the American racial hierarchy is in transformation. When their place in the racial hierarchy is considered, Asian Americans are frequently placed closer to whites than blacks, due to their elevated status through educational and economic attainments compared to other minority groups. Often, there exists a pressure for Asian Americans to claim a bond with either black or white, but their racial “otherness” may leave them rejected by both racial groups (Okihiro 1994). The participation of Asian American women and men in hip-hop culture presents a theoretically fruitful site of study, as their participation in a black cultural form seemingly places them closer to blackness, countering notions of Asian Americans as a model minority. Hip-hop social worlds are increasingly viable sites for the examination of the complicated and dynamic nature of the American racial hierarchy because of its growing multiracial fan base.

With roots in African American, Afro-Caribbean, Black and Latino artistic expressions, hip-hop is a black art form that voices the struggle of racial oppression. Although predominately black in cultural production, fans of many races compromise the hip-hop fan base. As a consequence, issues of legitimacy for hip-hop participants most often center on race, leaving those outside of the Black/white binary struggling for acknowledgment and visibility in hip hop (Bennett 1999). Still, some scholars focus on

hip-hop's engagement with fans from various racial and ethnic groups and its place as the "cultural and political voice of an entire generation" (Rose 1994; Stapleton 1998: 219).

In an increasingly global culture and marketplace, examining Asian American participation in hip-hop—a genre represented as predominantly black in mainstream society—allows me to explore relationships that are not often foregrounded in the public eye, nor in the academic literature. Because much assimilation-theory-driven research on race either uses the dominant group (whites) as its reference—comparing either blacks to whites, or Asians to whites—or else hones in solely on one particular racial-ethnic group at a time, relations between two different minority groups is underexplored in social science. In addition, I use an intersectional lens to examine how Asian American women and men who participate in hip hop culture negotiate gendered and racial stereotypes and hip-hop's hypermasculinity.

A concentration on Asian-Americans and the relationships they develop with African-Americans through hip hop culture—where whites are not often the reference group—allows for this underexplored angle to take center stage. My goal in this research is to explore the racial dynamics in hip-hop through interactions between Asian-Americans and blacks, in an arena on the margins of society where blacks seemingly hold the highest position of the hierarchy as hip hop artists. My research can contribute to understanding the racial location of Asian Americans vis a vis the black/white duality.

THE EVOLVING AMERICAN RACIAL ORDER

In America, our conception of a racial system has been entrenched in a black-white binary in part due to our country's legacy of slavery, where blacks were subordinated through enslavement and political disenfranchisement that ensured white supremacy. Since whites remain at the top of the racial hierarchy, they are presented with structural advantages that allow them to access prime neighborhoods, quality education, improved career opportunities and the economic incentives (Saenz and Morales 2005). Due to significant waves of immigration from the Caribbean, Asia, Latin America and Africa and intermarriage the past five decades, our American society is becoming more and more multiracial.

Some scholars perceive the current racial order as a binary, a division between blacks and non-blacks. The underlying assumption of this divide is that the construction of whiteness emerged with the construction of is based on the existence of blackness, and that the definition of White is whatever is not Black (Gans 2005; Guinier and Torres 2002). To define another racial group is, by opposition, to define one's group (Blumer 1958). Everything that is not Black can meld into whiteness, further accentuating the cleavage between white and black. Non-blacks can begin to assimilate into whiteness by adopting white standards, distancing themselves from blacks and therefore, reproducing anti-black ideas by "blending" more easily with whites than blacks (Warren and Twine 1997). Since Asians and Latinos have lighter skin than many blacks, this argument emphasizes the importance of phenotype in achieving whiteness. Through intermarriage with whites, the phenotypically distinct features of Asians and Latinos will disappear

more quickly than through racial mixing with darker-skinned blacks. In addition to phenotype, factors such as high educational attainment and economic standing of Asian Americans may come into play in achieving whiteness. Through analysis of census data and interviews, Lee and Bean (2007) note that racial boundaries appear to be fading faster for Latinos and Asians, implying that they are not assimilating as racialized minorities with experiences with race that are similar to blacks.

To account for the increasing multiracial nature of American society, other scholars suggest a move from a black/white binary to a tri-racial hierarchy. Bonilla-Silva proposes a tri-racial system similar those in various Caribbean and Latin American countries due to the “darkening” of America that consist of whites, honorary whites, and the collective black (Bonilla-Silva 2004). It resembles the traditional black/white binary as whites remain on the top and Blacks are seated on the bottom of the hierarchy. However, the white category is comprised of whites, assimilated white Latinos, and some multiracials. Honorary whites include Asian Indians, light-skinned Latinos, Middle Eastern Americans, most multiracials, and some Asian Americans (Japanese, Korean and Chinese Americans). The collective black is comprised of blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, African and West Indian immigrants, Filipinos, Laotians, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Native Americans. As is evident by this hierarchy, most current immigrants are situated into the collective black category. This model differs from the black/non-black divide because Bonilla-Silva argues that Latinos are often racialized in a manner similar to blacks. Most notably, white supremacy is still preserved in this racial model because

the intermediate group of honorary whites will provide a buffer for racial conflict.

(Bonilla-Silva 2004).

By placing honorary whites above the collective black but below whites, white supremacy is protected, honorary whites gain a more privileged social position (although they are not allowed to bask in the full privilege of Whiteness) and blacks stay subordinate. Whites are aware that honorary whites will not rise up against them to attempt to claim the little power that is afforded to them. Here, it is apparent that many Latinos and Asians are placed above blacks, but still fall short of being fully co-opted into whiteness. Forman et al. (2004) focus on this notion of colorism and found that Latinos fall into different areas of the tri-racial hierarchy on the basis of their national origin. Lee and Bean (2007) note that the characterization of most new immigrants and Latinos as part of the “collective black” does not accurately reflect the racialization process of these newcomers and these new immigrants should be positioned closer to whites than blacks. Overall, this tri-racial model relies too heavily on homogenizing each racial group without accounting for factors such as class, education, geography or gender that would improve the explanatory power of the model.

These preceding racial models all appear to demonstrate a rejection and distancing from blackness is foundational to the structure of the racial order in America. It also illuminates the static nature of black identity, where the one-drop rule maintains its salience, while other racial groups appear to be moving closer to whiteness due in part to a lack of a similar type of labeling (Xie & Goyette 1997). Residential patterns also speak to a reshuffling of the racial order. In a study that examined racial attitudes regarding the

composition of an ideal neighborhood, blacks were targeted as the least desired neighbors, with Latinos and blacks nearly as likely as whites to avoid listing blacks in their ideal neighborhood (Zubrinisky-Charles 2000). It is imperative to note that the placement of blacks at the bottom of the American racial hierarchy has remained fairly invariable.

BLACK, WHITE AND YELLOW: ARE ASIAN AMERICANS WHITENING OR BROWNING?

If Asian Americans are inching closer to whiteness, an integral part of the whitening process is to distance from blacks who have been historically a stigmatized group (Yancey 2003). The whitening hypothesis forecasts a black/non-black divide where Asian identity will experience a “thinning” or a decrease in significance as they gain access to white privilege. Furthermore, it could be argued that political beliefs, residential patterns and marital patterns of Asian Americans align themselves more closely to whites than blacks overall (Warren and Twine 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Another indication that Asian Americans are possibly moving towards whiteness is a belief by some members of the group that blacks are responsible for their social standing in American society. For example, the “immigrant hypothesis” is a shared ideology for immigrant Latinos and Asians where these groups are convinced that blacks do not embrace a belief in the achievement ideology (Mirguia and Forman 2003). If they take stock in the immigrant hypothesis, their perspectives mirror colorblind racism that suggests that racism does not present great obstacles, but alternatively minority groups

often bring struggles upon themselves (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Some Korean merchants showed a similar mentality as they blame blacks for their own class standing because they believe blacks lack the inclination to work hard enough to pull themselves out of poverty (Min 1996; Yoon 1997).

The classification of Asian Americans as a model minority myth has been cited to support the case for Asian Americans' assimilation into whiteness. The term "model minority" was first used to describe Asian Americans in *The New York Times* in 1966 to describe ethnic minorities who overcame their marginalization in order to find success in the United States. (Pettersen 1966). Since the creation of the model minority stereotype, Asian Americans have now surpassed white Americans as well as many other racial and ethnic groups in American society in terms of education. As of 2012, Asian Americans (as a whole) have obtained the highest educational attainment level and median household income of any racial and ethnic demographic in the country a position previously held by African Immigrants and Americans born of those immigrants (Taylor et al. 2012). Some have described the creation of the model minority theory as a partial response to the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, when African Americans fought for equal rights and the discontinuation of racial segregation in the United States. In a backlash to the movement, white America presented and used Asian Americans to argue that African Americans could raise up their communities by focusing on education and accepting and conforming to racial segregation and the institutional racism and discrimination of the time period, as Asian Americans have arguably done (Wu 2013). Many white Americans erroneously assumed that their perseverance, strong work ethic,

and general determination to succeed were extensions of their supposedly quiet natures, rather than common characteristics among most immigrants, Asian Americans came to be viewed as "model minorities" (Chou and Feagin 2008).

The concept of the model minority is indeed a myth and is actually harmful to Asian Americans although it is presented with a positive veneer in mainstream culture. Asian Americans are labeled as model minorities because they have not been as much of a "threat" to the US political establishment as blacks, due to a smaller population and less political advocacy. The label seeks to suppress potential political activism through euphemistic stereotyping (Chang 2002). For example, Asian American students are viewed as "problem-free" and academically competent students who can succeed with little support and without special services due to the model minority myth (Li 2005). Although some Asian American ethnic groups are economically successful, others, such as Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian and Khmer, are less successful than average (Chou and Feagin 2008).

Although Asian Americans fare better than blacks in reaching towards assimilation into whiteness, it is important to note that this status is conditional, comes with only some of the privilege afforded to whites, and can be revoked at any time the white majority chooses (Bonilla-Silva 2003). For Asian-Americans, doubts about citizenship status from others can cast doubt on their status as true Americans. This stereotypical perspective of Asian Americans is exemplified by the Wen Ho Lee investigation, where a naturalized citizen who worked in the Los Alamos National Laboratories was accused of being a spy for China. Lee was questioned for nine months and eventually released, after this claim

was unfounded (Wu 2002). Although he had been an American citizen for decades, the U.S. government envisioned him encompassing the popular culture image of the Yellow Peril, a sneaky, villainous and most importantly, threatening force to be dealt with (Espiritu 1997; Takaki 1993). This type of racial profiling is a testament to how America's contentious history with Asian countries such as Vietnam, Japan and Korea through combat or our strained relations with China through the Cold War has planted a deep-seated distrust for the intentions of Asian immigrants, no matter how long they reside in the country. This brings into question if it will be feasible for Asian Americans to assimilate into whiteness. A possible "browning" trend for Asian Americans would acknowledge that classic assimilation models neglect the structural hurdles that prevent assimilation and access to a smooth path to assimilation are those considered non-Black (Feagin and Feagin 1999). Additionally, some argue that browning may lead to positive outcomes, forcing a white majority to parcel out their power in a more equitable way, as minority racial groups continue to increase in numbers (Feagin and O'Brien 2003).

RACIALIZED MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES

A black hypermasculinity is often foregrounded in hip-hop culture, yet subordinated to hegemonic masculinity in mainstream American society. Hegemonic masculinity is represented as the white, heterosexual, and class privileged man (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In comparison to the mainstream notions of black men as very visible, black protest literature emphasizes lack, invisibility, deprivation, and silence (Ross 1996). As a coping strategy to their demeaned status, lower status men (e.g. men

of color) who are unable to exemplify culturally idealized models of masculinity may "compensate" for these "losses" by exaggerating other "masculine" forms of practice (Pyke, 1996). One such form of compensatory masculinity is that of the "cool pose" among black men to show the dominant culture that they are strong and proud, despite their status in American society. Most notably, this posing helps black men counter social oppression and racism through displays of control, confidence and strength, but can come at the cost of alienation from white communities and other black communities (Majors and Bilson 1992). Sexual prowess grows in importance as a marker of Black masculinity and accompanies valued traits like aggression and street smarts (Collins 2004).

Unlike representations of Black men in the media, AAPI men are nearly invisible in popular media and when visible, Asian American men are most often depicted as emasculated or nerdy, which ties in well with the model minority image. Asian American men are viewed as effeminate laundry workers and cooks, and violin playing, computer-math geniuses (Kim and Dance 2006). Asian American men are also cast as sexually unattractive, unromantic, and even gay—the ultimate strike against one in the world of hypermasculinity (Phi 2008). This is in contrast to the hypersexual, hypermasculine, and heterosexuality of black masculinity. Like the "cool pose" for black men males, Asian American men use coping strategies to deal with oppression through these stereotypes. For example, some Chinese-American men can use coping mechanisms like acting hypermasculine through participation in sports, denial of Asian American identity and glorification of white identity, or rejection of white masculinity

(Chen, 1999). In rare instances, racist images mix gender and sexuality so that Asian American men appeared to be both masculine and emasculated. Playing into the idea of simultaneously being effeminate and hypermasculine, Asian men are sometimes seen as domineering towards women yet boring sexists with small penises (Phi 2008). It is apparent that many representations of Asian American masculinity consist of all brain in contrast to all brawn that comprises black masculinity, while hegemonic masculinity emerges through a triangulation process as not black or Asian but a balance between brain (Asian) and brawn (black) (Prashad 2001). In this way, both Asian American and black masculinity are constructed as “other” in a process by which affords hegemonic masculinity its existence.

In other instances, Asian and Asian American men have been represented as sneaky and dangerous schemers and crazed martial artists in popular culture for decades, who pose danger to American society through their perceived foreignness (Espiritu 2004). I think you can delete the following detailed discussion to the end of paragraph. The Yellow Peril image, typified by Dr. Fu Manchu, a Chinese mad scientist determined to take over the Western world and to lure white women into sex slavery not a full sentence (Tchen and Yeats 2014). This image spoke to the fear of non-Western cultures that were seen as hell-bent on decimating Western culture through their immorality and cunning ways. In opposition, the law-abiding and model minority infused Charlie Chan character is depicted as non-threatening and an alternative to the evil Dr. Fu Manchu (Huang 2010). In his exploration of Bruce Lee and masculinity, Chan (2000) illustrates that Lee provides a place for a seemingly hypermasculine Asian leading man, but only serves to

replace the stereotype of a nerdy men with another stereotype of the foreign kung fu fighter in his roles. Furthermore, the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner contradicts Americanness (Wu 2002; Prashad 2001). As blacks have always been considered American, others tend to view Asian Americans as foreigners, even if they are not immigrants.

In contrast, Asian and Asian American women are often represented as either the “Lotus Blossom/China Doll” who is passive, submissive, and innocent while sexually available for the desires of white men or the seductive, dominatrix Dragon Lady (Espiritu 1997; Shimizu 2007). At the foundation of the Lotus Blossom trope is the white savior from the West who is perceived as saving the Lotus Blossom from defective Eastern culture through romantic love. This love saves her from the ills of Asian culture and confirms the moral superiority of the Western world (Prasso 2006). The Dragon Lady is aggressive and may prey on men for economic gain by utilizing their sexuality. This image also sometimes presents a woman who uses her feminine wiles to deceive and trap white men on behalf of calculating Asian men (Shimizu 2007). In this way, the Dragon Lady parallels the Yellow Peril stereotype for Asian American men as both present a danger to Western culture through the use of trickery and scheming. Although the Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom stereotypes appear to be dichotomous, both stereotypes cast Asian American women as hypersexual and identities revolve around the sexual pleasure of white men. These “controlling images” deprecate women of color (here, Asian American women) and privilege white women with racial and gender superiority (Collins 2000). By masculinizing black women and perceiving Asian women as

hyperfeminine, white forms of gender are deemed superior (Pyke and Johnson, 2003). In my research, I will explore how gendered stereotypes shape the experience of Asian American women and men in hip-hop.

RACIAL INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN HIP-HOP

Although hip-hop music and culture is a black cultural art form, many scholars debate if it will remain a source of expression for blacks solely or a site claimed by various racial and ethnic groups. Earlier research primarily focused on rap music as an urban, black, male youth culture (Rose 1994). Reaffirming its foundation in blackness, “hip-hop lives and breathes as a black thing in ways simply not open to white experience, white thought” (Allison 1994: 438). The argument that hip-hop is a black American art form can be problematic because it does not properly acknowledge the contributions of Caribbeans, whites and Latino artists in hip-hop (Perry 2004). More recent studies find that hip-hop culture is highly diverse in participation (Chang 2005; Condry 2006). Although rap prioritizes black culture, it does not necessarily deny the participation of other groups who can also enjoy it (Rose 1994). Speaking to those who criticize the mainstreaming of hip hop culture, some scholars argue that hip-hop’s commitment to cultural resistance and cross-cultural draw supports its wide-reaching appeal (Rose 1994).

As hip-hop trailblazer, DJ Cool Herc, so succinctly stated, “hip hop is the voice of this generation” (Chang 2005). By 1997, Soundscan estimated that two-thirds of those who purchased hip-hop music were White (Weingarten 1998). Its wide-reaching appeal for participants can also be attributed to its foundations in sampling, repeating, and

layering previously recorded musical texts, which requires little or no musical training for participation (Rose 1994). Some research suggests that hip-hop music and culture has revealed a “tanning” in the consciousness of society. This “tanning” reflects a societal shift that could indicate a “generationally shared mental complexion.” (Stoute and Rivas, 2011). This perspective simultaneously embraces diversity and fosters tolerance. Speaking to hip-hop as a multiracial community that reaches across socioeconomic and racial lines, it is clear that cultural tastes can no longer determined simply by demographic considerations (Stoute and Rivas, 2011). Hip-hop music can draw in both those who listen for aesthetic reasons, those who listen for political reasons, or those who listen for both reasons. However, some scholars argue that hip-hop has lost it subversiveness due to mainstreaming, losing its credibility as an authentic street culture because it used to have the ability to claim that it was an authentic reflection of black street culture (Stapleton 1998).

Due to such claims that hip-hop has lost some credibility, concerns of authenticity arise within hip-hop culture. The fundamental struggle between so-called “authentic” and “fake” determines the value of culture (Bordieu 1993). If hip-hop performers are inauthentic, this could mean that hip-hop cultures loses some credibility as an urban subculture. Hip-hop insiders may demarcate outsiders in order to maintain a sense of insider solidarity and retain control of the genre. Some scholars note that blackness is the core of hip-hop authenticity and, therefore, whiteness is viewed as inauthentic (McLeod 1999). These racial “outsiders” solve this by defining authenticity as truthfulness to one’s self, instead of focusing on racial identity (Maxwell 2003). By focusing of being

real and true to the craft performance, racial identity remains less salient in evaluation of authenticity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research is guided by the following set of main research questions:

1. How does Asian American participation in hip-hop culture illustrate the various ways in which this group moves between “whitening/browning”?
2. What does participation in hip-hop participation signal for Asian-American/black relations? How does it illuminate shared struggle? What does hip-hop participation reveal about the distinctive experiences of Asian Americans in the American racial hierarchy?
3. How do gendered stereotypes shape the experience of Asian American women and men in hip-hop?

These questions serve as a guide for my interviews and analysis of a relatively unexplored segment of the Asian American experience, one where Asian Americans occupy a space in a black cultural art form. Through semi-structured interviews with participants who occupy a range of roles in hip-hop culture, this study examines how Asian Americans from multiple ethnic backgrounds experience the American racial hierarchy. From an intersectional perspective, I examine the unique ways in which gender and race interact to shape the experiences of the respondents. Furthermore, the study illuminates the common experiences and struggles shared by blacks and Asian

Americans, hip-hop as a liberating space and the ways in which gendered and racialized stereotyping is both shattered and maintained in hip-hop culture. The participants in the study open up about issues of racial inclusion and exclusion in hip-hop and generational differences in viewing race. Overall, the study strives to analyze the space in the racial hierarchy where Asian Americans reside somewhere between blackness and whiteness.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

For this study, I chose to take a qualitative approach to provide a focused analysis of Asian Americans connection to hip-hop culture, the ways in which gender and racial hierarchies interact in their experience, and how my respondents make sense of their participation in the subculture. This study involves qualitative, in-depth interviews with respondents who are involved in hip-hop culture. I used snowball sampling in finding respondents through friends and family who were involved in performing and consuming hip-hop culture. I also recruited respondents by attending hip-hop performances and panels/lectures that discussed various facets of hip-hop culture including lectures/talks that focused on hip-hop culture. As a fan of hip-hop music and culture for decades, I had made friendships and connections with people who were either dedicated fans or performers in the hip-hop scene in Los Angeles. This became a huge asset in getting my first interviews that soon snowballed into a word-of-mouth network of possible respondents for the study. Growing up with parents who were involved in concert production for many years and a brother who is a professional musician also allowed me

to foster contacts that were willing to give suggestions and contact information for respondents for the study.

My sample of Asian and Pacific Islander American participants in hip-hop culture is part of a project examining “minority within a minority” experience, exploring Afro-Asian cultural connections, and challenging traditional notions of assimilation to a White, hegemonic “model” American identity. The 23 participants in this research study included 10 women and 13 men. The respondents range in age from 19 to 46, with an average age of 27. The ethnicities represented include Filipino, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Thai, Macanese, and Indonesian. There were eight respondents who were 1st generation, two respondents who were 1.5 generation, twelve 2nd generation respondents and one 3rd generation respondent. The class background of the interviewees included poor/working poor, working class, lower middle, and middle class, and upper middle class. There was an option for upper class on the background study, but this option was not applicable to any of the participants. To define a hip-hop participant, I include all aspects of hip-hop as a musical genre as well as a culture, including what is defined as the “four elements” --rapping, DJing, breakdancing and graffiti (Chang 2005). The sample includes a range of roles within the hip-hop community, with several respondents occupying multiple roles. The interviewees include DJs, dancers, MCs/spoken word artists, promoters, producers, radio hosts, graffiti artists, a collector, hip-hop collective organizer/founder and fans. More information about each respondent and their class status is provided in the Appendix 1. 18 interviews were conducted in West Coast metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle,

and 5 from the East Coast metropolitan areas of Washington, DC, Virginia, and New York. The audio-recorded interviews lasted from 40 minutes and 130 minutes and were conducted face-to-face, except for 7 interviews that were conducted by phone. Many respondents were able to provide referrals to other respondents. Interviews for this project were conducted between 2010 and 2013.

Interview Design

When a person agreed to participate in study, I gave them a background survey to complete before the interview. The background survey collected data on generational status, socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, and role in hip-hop participation (see Appendix 1). Undergraduate assistants transcribed the interviews over a period of 2 years. These assistants received training on transcription. Each respondent was given a pseudonym to maintain their anonymity and corresponding interview number. After receiving a transcript, I began coding for emergent themes. General themes like gender relations, black/Asian American race relations, and struggle and liberation in hip-hop were later broken down into smaller coding categories.

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview process (Berg and Lune 2012) that included twelve topical questions on issues related to race and hip-hop. Each question included a series of probes and follow-ups. I added related questions that were not included in the script in order to keep rapport going and generate new ideas. During the interviews, I relied on my own knowledge of hip-hop to interact with the respondents, and asked probing questions to gain more background information in cases where we were not familiar with the artists, songs or other items mentioned. Following in the

tradition of the “active interview” (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), I offered our respondents several different views and perspectives to react to, including those of other respondents as well as our own, in order to clarify their thoughts and experiences.

Coding of the interview transcripts for this study utilized a multi-step process, known as axial coding (Berg and Lune 2012). Because the primary impetus for this study was guided by racial/ethnic assimilation theories and theories of racial conflict, I was struck by how much gender ended up emerging in the data, and thus chose to specifically isolate that particular theme for the purposes of this study. I began by isolating any interview segments that related to gender, then subdivided those by whether they primarily referred to masculinity or femininity. Next, I examined the data to see if it supported that masculinity and femininity in hip-hop was regarded as narrow, limiting or some combination thereof for Asian Americans.

The chapters that follow analyze the data that materialized from the in-depth interviews that are at the center of this research project. Chapter 2 illuminates the distinct position of Asian Americans in the racial hierarchy with themes such as anti-black racism experienced via hip-hop involvement, racialized struggles, commonalities with Blacks, and the intersections of Blackness and Asianness. Chapter 3 examines the ways in which racialized gender norms interact with the predominantly African American cultural space of hip-hop in the context of a white supremacist society to construct experiences for AAPIs within the genre. AAPI hip-hop participants gravitate to the genre because they have imagined it as a cultural space where racial/ethnic norms are less proscriptive than the alternatives. Yet in hip-hop, they experience conditional acceptance at the expense of

fluid gender/racial expression. Chapter 4 discusses the implications of the findings concerning the place of Asian Americans in the American racial hierarchy and directions for future research.

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Chapter II

Asian American Connections in Hip-Hop: Racism, Shared Struggles and the Tension of Moving between Blackness and Whiteness

In his autobiography, Malcolm X vividly recalls a Chinese man positing a sign outside his restaurant reading “Me Colored Too” during racially motivated riots in Harlem (X and Haley 1977). This image simultaneously evokes the tension between conflict and coalition—the imminent threat of blacks targeting his establishment for destruction coexists with the shop owner’s attempt to characterize the commonality between the two minority groups. Decades later, the city of Los Angeles made headlines with the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. Spurred by the acquittal of the police officers who brutally beat Rodney King during a traffic stop, the city erupted in rioting, looting and arson that resulted in over a billion dollars in damage and 55 deaths (CNN 2016). Latino and black looters targeted Asian-owned businesses in South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown during the civil unrest. In an ironic twist, a photograph in *Newsweek* featuring the “vigilante Korean,” displayed a young Korean American man standing in front of a burning building holding a semi-automatic gun and sporting a Malcolm X t-shirt with the quote, “By any means necessary” (Palumbo-Liu 1999). However, coverage of these riots only captured a partial view of the causes for friction between blacks and Asian Americans, often ignoring the complexities of race relations that included the prejudice and discrimination experienced at the hands of whites.

At first glance the involvement of young Asian Americans in the predominantly black cultural arena of hip-hop might indicate that we have truly arrived at the supposed

“post-racial” society. In fact, upon closer inspection, the complexities that have historically characterized the relationship between these groups remain, sometimes in new ways. Asian Americans involved with hip-hop are not immune to anti-black prejudices, particularly from their family and peers. Their love for hip-hop can sometimes place them in a complicated predicament, particularly coming from cultures where respect for elders’ wishes is paramount. Anti-black racism from the wider society further complicates Asian Americans’ participation in the genre, as do the many anti-Asian microaggressions in mainstream western culture that are sometimes quite distinct from those faced by blacks.

Yet, hip-hop provides a framework within which some Asian Americans come to understand the struggles they share with Blacks and other minorities. In particular, these Asian Americans may develop a counter narrative through which to combat the racism they face, at times by emulating and learning from Blacks via shared participation in hip-hop. Hip-hop becomes a commonality bridging the two groups, even as the actual themes spoken within the language can be quite diverse, and even diverging.

Through interviews with Asian Americans who participate in hip-hop culture, I will highlight instances of Black-Asian conflict and cross-racial coalition among minorities. In particular, I will build on the work of Lee (2002) in her contesting of the notion that as middleman minorities, Asian American interactions with Blacks are inevitably characterized by conflict. By the same token, I also intend to further the development of perspectives examining cross-racial coalition building. Though coalitions are often seen as bonds formed to pursue a shared goal while temporary setting aside

differences, work by Sharma (2010) on South Asian involvement in hip-hop specifically lays the groundwork to further probe how the task of challenging white supremacy can take on quite divergent paths within the same cultural space/genre.

BLACK-ASIAN TENSIONS: MIDDLEMAN MINORITIES AND TRIANGULATION

Striving to make sense of the 1992 Los Angeles conflict, some analysts turned to the middleman minority perspective first advanced by Bonacich (1973). This theory demonstrates how the white ruling class splits the multiethnic labor market to its own advantage, and further exacerbates these conflicts by slightly elevating certain groups over others. As a type of “model minority” when it is convenient or suits the ruling class, certain Asian American groups in the modern US context can serve as a buffer between white owners of the means of production and the disempowered minority groups below them in the stratification ladder. Thus, to the extent to which frustrated African American and Latino working class see the Korean American store owners in their community as the main obstacles to their success, white property owners (from whom Korean store owners rent the property) remain the ultimate exploiters who escape being targeted. In a sense, the rioters have misplaced their aggression, rendering the “real” source of their exploitation invisible, or at least deemphasized. Minorities are left fighting against each other for the same, and ever-elusive, prize, while the oppressors are left unscathed (Bonacich 1973).

Even when no overt conflict occurs, these complicated relationships within the social structure have historically caused tension between the two groups. Although the social science literature on prejudicial attitudes has been much more concentrated on white attitudes, there is a smaller body of work examining prejudice among racial minorities, and this work reveals a certain degree of tension between Blacks and Asian Americans in terms of the negative stereotypical beliefs each group may have about the other. Some evidence reveals that Asian Americans are even more likely than whites to hold anti-black stereotypes (Bobo and Johnson 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2010). Likewise, survey data also reveal that Blacks tend to feel closer to whites and Hispanics than they do to Asian Americans (Thornton et al 2012). It is important to note that these beliefs occur in a context of white supremacy where whiteness is elevated as the ideal cultural normative standard against which others are evaluated. This becomes evident when evaluating Asian-American views on intermarriage, for example—while at times skeptical of any outmarriage to non-Asians, in rank order of preference, Asian-American parents would often prefer their children to marry whites than Blacks (O’Brien 2008).

In her study of merchant-customer interactions in major urban US centers, black-Asian conflicts tend to reflect predictably patterned “stock stories” that each group has about the other. For example, blacks who were denied refunds from Korean American merchants drew upon familiar stories about “outsiders” taking advantage of their communities, while Korean merchants relayed themes of blacks as aggressive and untrustworthy when attempting to return their merchandise (Lee 2002). Another study of an African American/Asian American housing project in California revealed a

commonly-held stereotype among blacks that Asian Americans were unfairly hoarding government resources, leaving blacks with less access to such resources for themselves. Some African American residents expressed cultural biases questioning the food, language and extended family living practices of their Asian American neighbors, while Asian Americans expressed fears of blacks (Guthrie and Hutchinson 1995). It is interesting that while some of these “stock stories” mirror white supremacist notions propagated in the wider culture, others are more unique to the specific interethnic relationship between the groups—the perception of Asian Americans hoarding government resources or exploiting communities, for example.

Much of these tensions are best understood in the larger context of white privilege and dominance in the labor market. Hoang’s (2015) analysis of the relationship between Vietnamese workers in nail salons and their black and Latino clients uses Claire Kim’s (2003) “triangulation” concept to demonstrate how Asian Americans’ perceptions of Blacks are situated specifically in their mid-point position in the stratification hierarchy. Even as African American clients in the nail salon at times made vocal complaints about services, Vietnamese workers still found them preferable to white clients whose treatment of them was clearly shrouded in a dynamic of racial superiority/inferiority. Interestingly, Vietnamese families frequently chose not to send their children to school with blacks, but for seemingly differing reasons that often undergird white rationalizations for school segregation. Rather, as an already-exploited immigrant group, they sought an educational experience that would not further stigmatize subsequent generations.

Yet despite brewing tensions, overt conflicts are actually minimal and infrequent, given the sheer amount of interactions that occur between these two groups on a daily basis. Such relatively peaceful (or at least mundane) coexistence is best characterized as civility, though, rather than affinity or coalition (Lee 2002). Indeed, the middleman minority theory would argue that these various tensions preclude any alliances forming, to the benefit of the ruling class. To the extent to which any Asian Americans participate in hip-hop culture, under this context, could be interpreted as activity that is disruptive to the status quo.

SEEING SHARED STRUGGLES: SILENT NO MORE

Although there is evidence of conflict, tension, and animosity between blacks and Asian Americans, there is also evidence of recognition of shared struggle and shared experiences between the groups. These connections seem to be drawn most often by younger, more recent generations—the same age group that comprises those most often associated with hip-hop involvement. But even well before the emergence of hip-hop, there has also been a steady stream of black-Asian American alliances and connections throughout US history—both politically and culturally based. Prashad's (2001) work takes a global perspective to outline decades of black-Asian American connections—from Ghandi's influence on Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King Jr., to the Black Panther Party's influence on National Liberation Front (Vietnam), to African American devotees of Bruce Lee films. An analysis of the post-1992 coverage of Asian-Americans in the Los Angeles black newspaper, *The Sentinel*, notes a steady increase in

coverage as well as a greater emphasis on shared struggles between the two groups (Thornton 2011). However, where these coalitions are primarily political, they have often been short-lived. It may be useful to distinguish between alliances, which are more long-term, and coalitions, which are short-term and formed to pursue a specific goal (Anderson 1992). Within this formulation, coalitions are expected to be more likely than actual alliances, since once a political goal is met, coalitions are disbanded.

Yet hopeful patterns exist especially in today's youth, in situations both political and apolitical. For example, even though there is some evidence that Asian Americans are "whitening"—that is, they are more likely to live around whites and have closer relationships to whites than Blacks (Quillian and Campbell 2003; Yancey 2003)—other evidence reveals that there are indeed areas of the country where Asian American children are more likely to come into contact with blacks than with whites at school (Mouw and Entwisle 2006). Likewise, a recent study of African American college students' racial attitudes found that these students tended to think in more positive ways about blacks, Asian Americans and Latinos than they did about whites (Nunnally 2009). This evidence from younger cohorts suggests some optimism on the horizon, standing in contrast to studies like Thornton et al (2012) where respondents' average age was mid-40s and black Americans felt least close to Asian Americans they did to any other racial group. The increasingly multiracial demographics of the US's youngest citizens suggest the possibility of more cross-racial coalitions and/or alliances to come.

Studies suggesting the "whitening" of Asian Americans notwithstanding (e.g., Yancey 2003), there are indeed segments of the AAPI community where alliance is more

probable than others. A triracial order formulation theorizes that there are Asian ethnic groups that are more likely to be positioned as “honorary whites” (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, Korean) while others may be relegated to the “collective black” in terms of social standing (e.g., Filipinos, Cambodians, Hmong) (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Each of these groups has experienced unique (and multiple) trajectories in their journeys of incorporation into American life—some more likely to come into equal-status contact with Blacks than others. For example, one insightful analysis of Filipino-Americans’ participation in hip-hop demonstrates how global militarization impacted the formative years of the current generation of hip-hop artists, having grown up alongside “similarly displaced and vulnerable communities” on American military bases (Villegas, 2016:27). Likewise, analysis of Latinos and Asian Americans contrasts the “whitened” lives of the “racial middle”, who grew up in more suburban settings, with the more racially progressive respondents who grew up alongside Blacks in diverse urban areas of New York and California (O’Brien 2008). Thus, while the overall patterns of black-Asian American interactions might not lend themselves in general to coalition or alliance, there are pockets—depending on age, generation, ethnicity and geographic location—where it is not that far-fetched.

In the realm of social activism, college campuses have been active in the Black Lives Matter movement, which includes Asian American participation. Some student activists enter the fray without much knowledge of the historical tension between the two groups and also sometimes with much fear and trepidation from their parents (Plaid 2015; Rao 2015). However, the desire to have a more powerful voice with which to speak back

to the microaggressions and marginalization they face daily as nonwhites in a white supremacist society is one force that attracts young Asian Americans to this multiracial, black-led movement.

Asian Americans face a constant struggle with white racism in the US, yet one major difference between them and Blacks is that they often lack a counter-frame within which to challenge that oppression (Chou and Feagin 2008). This lack of a strong counter frame contributes to dangerous negative mental health outcomes for Asian Americans that remain unaddressed, overshadowed by the “model minority” myth. While the stress of racial discrimination has consistently shown negative mental health outcomes for various racial minorities, those negative effects can be mediated when the targets of racism possess a strong ethnic identity (Mossakowski 2003; Cheng et al 2010). Participating in coalition with the African-American led Black Lives Matter movement thus can serve the manifest function of working toward movement goals that benefit Asian Americans and all Americans of color (e.g., greater campus diversity, more diversity and better training of police, swifter action against police brutality) as well as the latent function of building stronger racial-ethnic identity among Asian Americans, serving protective effects against the painful psychic wounds of racism.

There is evidence that this kind of empowerment can come to Asian Americans via participation in hip-hop as well. Some young South Asian Americans came to hip-hop because they were coping with discrimination in the United States that “left them with questions to which co-ethnics did not provide satisfying answers” (Sharma 2010:89). This echoes Feagin and Chou’s (2008) point about lack of a visible existing counter

frame among Asian Americans. The hip-hop generation, in particular, seems to exemplify the inter-generational tension between the first and second generation—with the first generation often having high hopes and aspirations of the United States’ promise of a better life, while the second generation is sometimes jaded by the continued racial stigma despite hard work (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). As a result, “many first and second generation South Asians thus lack a vocabulary for analyzing race within their own ethnic communities” and indeed this void can serve as “foundational to interminority alliances” (Sharma 2010: 98). Although such cross-racial connections are not without issues, it seems evident that black-led cultural and/or political movements in the United States have become attractive to other racial minorities who share concerns about finding an empowering voice in the context of continuing American racism.

BLACK/ASIAN ALLIANCES: BEYOND APPROPRIATION

If a coalition is defined as a short-term collaboration to achieve a common goal, then AAPI participation in hip-hop—which for most respondents is seen as a long-term commitment—is closer to an alliance, which is conceptualized as “long-term ongoing unity based on common interests and principles” (Anderson 1992:35). It seems to qualify that Asian American and black participation in hip-hop is most certainly a common interest. Some may wonder if non-blacks who participate in hip-hop are engaging in cultural appropriation, or mimicking a culture whose context they do not fully appreciate or comprehend, when they engage in and create hip-hop themselves (hooks 1992)?

Cultural appropriation within the context of hip-hop is regarded as particularly

problematic to the extent to which mainstream hip-hop projects images akin to minstrel shows, and those who appropriate that type of hip-hop may reproduce stereotypical, damaging tropes about blacks, erroneously believing they are authentic or representative (Ogbar 2009). For example, in one poignant scene from Byron Hurt's documentary, *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, some white teenagers are interviewed about why they like hip-hop, and they respond that they are becoming culturally diverse by learning about black people this way, "I've never had to worry about drive by shooting" (Hurt 2006). These youth clearly have presumed that black experience is somehow characterized by being part of violent crime, most likely because they have little contact with Blacks "in real life." There is concern that nonblack participation in hip-hop can amount to "playing black," particularly when it occurs as a substitute for or in the absence of real interactions (Wang 2006). For some, any alliance between Asian and African Americans that occurs via the vehicle of hip-hop may be regarded as suspect, at best.

Mainstream hip-hop can tend to be characterized by appropriation—both of black culture by non-blacks, but also African-American artists' appropriation of Asian, and South Asian styles as well (Sharma 2010). Since my respondents tend to find themselves marginalized to non-mainstream avenues of hip-hop participation, often these particular spaces are not as beholden to reproducing narrowly defined tropes. In these underground spaces, it tends to be a cultural practice to "do one's homework" with respect to the less-commodified origins of hip-hop and pay proper homage when creating one's own art in the genre. The aim of this chapter is to explore how hip-hop provides a unique cultural

setting for black and Asian-American alliances, and to challenge the notion that all black-Asian American interaction must either be about conflict/animosity, or else coalition where Black-Asian American aims are one and the same.

ASIAN AMERICANS' ANTIBLACK RACISM CONFRONTED VIA HIP-HOP

The dominant American narrative of Asian Americans as a “model minority” creates cultural expectations that AAPI participation in hip-hop would be unlikely. Narratives of black-Asian tension further complicate the prospects of AAPI hip-hop involvement. My respondents discuss facing resistance to the notion of them being involved with hip-hop from both co-ethnics and whites, but in this section, I spotlight co-ethnic experiences, while acknowledging they all occur within the context of a white-dominated social order. Sometimes respondents identify the use of code words like “hip-hop” and “ghetto” as colorblind conduits for criticizing their “step-down” into blackness. Whether stated overtly or covertly, the message is sent that the AAPI hip-hop participant is violating the expected racial order in some fundamental way, revealing the anti-black racism of wider society.

Katie, a Filipino American respondent, connects both age and generation to the reason why elders in her community use coded language to express anti-black racism, connecting it to hip-hop:

So yeah, like people who didn't grow up here...they'll be like “oh that's hip-hop” to something that was bad. “Oh that's hip-hop”. It's kind of like the older folk. I actually haven't met any young person that's like adamant about hating it...I feel it is a little unfair because they're associating a certain person or certain people with hip-hop and they're all bad, which is not necessarily true. Hip-hop turned

into almost a name you call somebody. I don't even think they were talking about the music at that point. It was kind of like oh that's so hip—he dresses so hip-hop. ... That's interesting to me how “he's so hip-hop” or “that shirt is so hip-hop” where it's like, they use it as a descriptive word now, which is real interesting.

It was common for respondents to cite interactions with immigrant elders when describing Asian-black race relations. By saying they did not “grow up here,” and also contrasting older with younger people, Katie confines her experience of anti-black racism to elderly first generation Asian Americans. She also articulates how hip-hop and blackness have become fused together in the language of colorblind racism.

Some respondents' accounts of elders' resistance to their participation in hip-hop mirror exactly the cultural racism frame of colorblind racism-- which emphasizes factors such as laziness and lack of work ethic as reasons for black inequality, minimizing the reality of systemic racial discrimination as the more likely cause (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Research suggests that not only are whites likely to hold such damaging views of blacks (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2010) but other minorities are also infected with such colorblind racism (O'Brien 2008). Indeed, some research suggests that Asian Americans may be more likely to hold anti-black stereotypes than whites (Bobo and Johnson 2000). Jeffrey, a Vietnamese American dancer, astutely describes his father's racialized resistance to his hip-hop involvement:

[My dad] wasn't racist flat-out, like blatantly racist, but he was racist based on his experiences. I guess it's kinda bad because you generalize like a whole race or whatever, but he acknowledges there are some good people, but the majority are just—lazy, or I don't know. You kind of understand? There's some kind of middle ground. It's just an observation, rather than being a racist... I think from what my dad wanted, he didn't want me to have black friends so I'd end up not successful. You know, if it had come to a decision if I could be more white or more black, he'd definitely choose more white. Yeah, I guess, does that sum it up, kind of, yeah. Even when I saw breakdancing when I was like a kid like on TV,

and I tried to do it, my dad like kinda didn't want me to do it, but back then my dad's mindset didn't develop because he'd just came here.

Interviewer: Are you saying you think he didn't want you to do it because he associated it with black people?

Yeah. But, I don't think that's the case. The more ulterior, like mindset, is that you should just focus on school, and that stuff isn't going to get you anywhere.

Like Jeffrey's father, several other respondents mentioned parents' concern that their children's involvement with hip-hop would make them "guilty by association." Not unlike the "what about the children" objection to interracial dating and marriage on the part of white parents (Bonilla-Silva 2010), some respondents had to contend with their family's critical takes on their relationships with blacks via hip-hop, undergirded by the assumption that they could better escape racism themselves without such affiliations. However, unlike whites who object to interracial intimacy, Asian Americans are encountering a society, which is already marginalizing them in many respects (Chou and Feagin 2008; Tuan 1999). As a result, it seems that rather than a downward mobilization to blackness, there is a preference in favor of upward mobility through closer association with whiteness may be at work here. An integral part of the "whitening process" is keeping a distance from blacks, who occupy the lowest position in the American racial hierarchy (Brodin 1999). So, their reactions are not as much from the position of safeguarding white privilege than simply wishing to lessen the impact of racism they already experience (O'Brien 2008).

Edward, a Filipino American hip-hop organizer and studio engineer, still experienced resistance to his involvement in hip-hop from his mother, and again in

racially coded language of the cultural racism frame, his mother linked hip-hop with laziness:

I think it's definitely a generational difference, she has that third world mentality where she's like I came here to work hard and to give you a future. And all you do is rap and... I'm just like, "Mom, you came here to give me this freedom so that I can do this stuff? It's not like I'm living at home or whatever, just like rapping all the time. No. Like I got a job, I got all this stuff. But she's more like "you got to do something with your life" and I'm like, "this is my life!" But, so yeah, it's just that age difference. It's her not growing up with the music like I did. Instead she had to go through all these harsh things so that I could be here. And I respect her for that and I love her for that, but at the same time my love for hip-hop is partially her fault because she birthed me at that time, where I could listen to all this music. And she and I'm also Asian. So, we kind of share the same struggles in terms of music. I mean, when I hear rappers I kind of relate with it. I mean a little bit with the street life, too. I'm not gonna get into that but, it's so relatable to me that I'm able to connect with it.

Edward's account is similar to Jeffrey's in that parental resistance is linked to the idea of the immigrant work-ethic—working hard to give one's children a better life—juxtaposed against hip-hop and blackness which is perceived as being the antithesis of that ethos.

The racialized undertones of cultural racism are evident here. However, triangulation is also apparent in the above accounts—that is, these elders express more of a concern about their own children's already stigmatized position in the social structure and the desire to avoid further subjugation and downward mobility through an association with blackness. Blackness presents an "other" that carves out exactly what Whiteness is not. As a result, non-Blacks have the possibility of slipping into Whiteness through replicating anti-Black attitudes and acceptance of White standards (Warren and Twine 1997). It appears that this could be a strategy to preserve their relative privilege vis blacks.

Other respondents, while acknowledging their parents' anti-Black racism, did not attempt

to analyze its objectives or to distinguish it much from the anti-Black racism that characterizes other groups. Indeed, by and large some felt that their parents' positions were somewhat excusable/forgiven due to their age and their lack of exposure/interaction with Blacks due to their immigrant status.

As Aaron, a Chinese American hip-hop fan, reflected:

I think Asian parents are more racist against Blacks...because they're immigrants and they grew up in a society that—or in countries where they never saw black people before... I think, at least they're more open about it. I don't know, maybe.

One possible explanation here is that because elders did not have much experience with blacks before they arrived in the U.S., they immediately absorbed pre-existing mainstream media and cultural images of blacks that were not positive, just as other nonblack Americans do. Additionally, the immigrant ideology of Asians (and Latinos) could transform into unfavorable views of Blacks who they feel do not welcome an achievement ideology (Murguia and Forman 2003). Immigrants attribute failures of U.S.-born minorities to deficits in character or intellectual ability instead of barriers such as institutional racism (Okazawa-Rey and Wong 1997).

At times, there was defensiveness among some respondents about singling out Asian Americans as any more racist towards blacks than other racial groups. For example, Jessamin stated:

I don't think Asians are more racist towards – I mean my parents are racist, but I think any immigrant moving into a new place would have that type of ignorance, but I think that can be applied to any of our parents. But I wouldn't say so because it could be a misunderstanding in a way that white people would probably get more crap for it. I don't see any difference of the level of racism in either culture (Asian or white culture).

While it is typical in colorblind ideologies for there to be some degree of minimization of racism among all groups, there is a striking difference here between these Asian American respondents and the predominant pattern of racial discourse among whites. Qualitative interview studies of white racial ideology often find whites try to deny the existence of racism altogether, except for the extreme cases (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2010). The preceding two excerpts display a clear acknowledgment of some anti-Black racism on the part of immigrant Asian Americans (not simply some isolated exceptions), yet also coupled with “we’re no more racist than anyone else.” Here, there is acknowledgment that racism is endemic to American culture, so it is no surprise that some of it would be present among Asian Americans.

Not all respondents, though, were content to limit the existence of anti-Black racism to explanations like older age, recentness of immigration, or lack of American experience. Others, while mentioning elders, also described similar experiences with younger co-ethnics, who were likewise critical of their involvement in hip-hop from what seemed to be anti-black perspectives. As Amy, a Macanese/Chinese American dancer notes:

I definitely think the older generation, like my parents and grandparents... they weren’t so integrated with the black community, [had] the whole white is right type of thing, you know, when they first immigrated here, the people who owned businesses were white. And so obviously, in Asian culture there’s a real, we gotta get up on the come-up attitude, and they didn’t see a lot of blacks, so putting two and two together, you don’t wanna emulate black culture or associate yourself with black culture, because that’s not gonna bring you to any success. And it’s the heavy, strict background I talk about. And with the younger generation, I think we’re just so much, I hate to say it, but a melting pot, it really doesn’t matter. It definitely-- there are a lot of people that still resonate that type of stigma against Blacks, it’s definitely a matter of exposure, for my generation. If you’re not exposed to a black person, and I’ve even—and there’s different circumstances,

I've heard an Asian person say all this stuff about a black person, but he'll listen to just Jay Z all day... So, there are people that wanna reach out to and hang out with the people who created this music. And that's a different mindset. And the people who just listen to it and still have their thinking, their ways of thinking.

Amy notes her elders' concern for their children's success, as we have already seen; however, she also attested to continuing anti-black stereotyping among her own Asian-American age peers, even those who may listen to mainstream hip-hop. By referring to someone who listens to "just Jay Z all day," Amy likely intended to describe someone with a more limited interest in hip-hop (e.g., more mainstream).

Another respondent, Paul, a Korean American, also recounted resistance from his both his family and coethnic age-peers about hip-hop. Paul states:

From my parents and their age group, and being part of the culture of something, I feel like at least from my experience with my family and the Korean church... everyone was saying they were not essentially racist. They carried over a lot of things that White America taught them. For my grandparents, on the term of what they call black people to the music and then kinda knowing I was extremely excited about this music, I definitely had some issues with that. I would say for the younger folks in the Korean community the ones that are really into Korean music and Korean pop and speaking Korean...that kinda became an issue too. They were like "what do you think you're Black?"... The older generation I think stems from especially Korean Republicans who are very active in the church. It's like being in the Reagan era of things and really tried to officially be White in many ways, at least be above the other minorities. They have to better than the Mexicans or the blacks here, they are just a little bit better, but not White yet. Those are my own thoughts... Yea, it was embarrassing for them to be doing, for being so involved in Black American culture. Especially during that time, this is after my parents and that generation was getting everything that was fed to them by the media, as well as gangsta rap with the riots and race relations going down at that time as well, I think that all of that combined. They wanted to separate themselves. They were like we aren't white, but pretty damn close to it or we're really trying to be in that racial class.

In their efforts to be "not white yet" but "pretty damn close," Paul highlights that part of the resistance to becoming involved with Blacks through hip-hop comes from wanting to

raise one's immigrant status. Aspirations of assimilation are tied to "whitening," which is juxtaposed against African American culture. Yet another source of concern is not much to do with African-Americans at all, and instead is more related to mourning the loss of one's indigenous culture once becoming "Americanized." In this case, hip-hop is cast as more of a threat not as much because it is associated with blackness but because it is not Korean.

As our respondents explore the various racialized sources of resistance to their involvement in hip-hop, many themes of the historic and enduring black/Asian conflict emerge. Still, one respondent suggested a rarer angle—perhaps underlying all this tension is in fact admiration. Stephanie stated:

From my observation, a lot of Filipinos or Asians, they come down from the Philippines...they're exposed to media, and on news you see a lot of blacks doing crime or whatever, watch videos and they're shooting and all this stuff. So, to people that have come here and this is what they see on TV, it scares them. It's just basically ignorance, of not knowing, but what's crazy to me is that my parents, they watch the Filipino channel out here... Every now and then—not watch it, but when I visit my parents or whatever, they have this on, they're like glued to it. I kid you not, the Filipinos, they do a lot of impersonations. And it's like the majority of the music they're singing is by black artists, and things like that. And also on the flip side, a lot of blacks—like Wu Tang, for example--Shao Lin...there's a really distinct correlation there. Or like you know... it's weird, but they actually really like each other, and then they hate each other at the same time... It's so weird, but if they would just see the connection in that—that, I mean, seriously, if you point out that connection, it's so weird, it's like a love hate kind of thing, and it's just like, for what? And it all stems from ignorance, it's just not knowing the connection between the two, and not admitting that, hey, I actually kind of like you [laughs] you know what I mean?

This theory of admiration underscoring condemnation in general is not new. For example, some psychological perspectives have suggested that white supremacist stereotypical exaggerations of African American sexual prowess of the Jim Crow era and beyond (e.g.,

Jezebel and Jigaboo) stemmed from a deep-seated envy resulting from Anglo-Americans' own puritanical sexual repression. Yet underlying those fears and condemnation was white power to restrict and control black sexuality. This respondent may be suggesting that just behind the stereotypes lurks a shared love of various artistic forms of expression. It is this kind of tension that can occasionally give way to a shared recognition of common experiences.

SHARED EXPERIENCES THROUGH HIP-HOP THEMES: THE STRUGGLE, THE GRIND, and OUTSIDERS

Coalitions are formed when two or more distinct groups recognize they may be able to come closer to their goals by joining forces with different but related others. Coalitions are hardly seamless fusions, and one group may stand to lose more than another through the connection. In the case of hip-hop, many might argue that this genre began and thus could probably continue to thrive with or without the involvement of Asian Americans. Yet hip-hop is characterized now by many distinct styles and variations, several of which bear Asian diasporic influences. Moreover, the global impact of hip-hop has no doubt been furthered by the participation of Asian Americans, and Asiatic peoples around the world (among others). But the clearest evidence of African and Asian American coalition in hip-hop is where Asian Americans have recognized their shared struggles with prejudice, discrimination, and exploitation with black experience voiced through hip-hop music and culture.

Social science literature may sometimes bracket Asian Americans with whites when analyzing the structural disadvantage. However, the respondents in this study felt they were better positioned to understand the struggles expressed in hip-hop than whites. The word “struggle” was commonly used in respondents’ answers when reflecting on their shared connections with Blacks. For example, Edward stated:

Well, I wouldn’t say we completely have similar histories, but we do share the history of struggle and oppression. And you know, if you look at our, just our society in general – I mean if you look at African American males and where they are on the socioeconomic status and where Asian Americans are on the socioeconomic status, we’re definitely more towards the bottom. And you know, and so all the themes that they talk about within hip-hop and rap, it’s like we can definitely relate on that end. And it’s like for, you know, Caucasian or white America, it’s a little more difficult to relate because they don’t share the type of similar experiences that Asian Americans and blacks share.

Contrary to the notion that Asian Americans are whitening, Edward seems to highlight his assumption that the “struggles” blacks and Asian Americans face (like racism and low socioeconomic status) are much more akin to each other than anything to which whites could relate. However, it is important to acknowledge that this “shared history” does not account for the reality that many Asian immigrants did not deal with racism in their homeland. Certain Asian ethnic groups like Cambodians, Hmong and Laotians have the lowest educational and socioeconomic attainment rates among Asian Americans, which would seemingly put them closer to blackness. However, Indian Americans lead all Asian Americans by a sizeable margin in their income and education levels (Le 2017).

Jeffrey, born in Vietnam but raised from a very young age in the US, advanced the argument that his family’s experience as Asian immigrants means that he expects Asian Americans would feel a connection to the themes expressed in hip-hop music:

There's a lot of common things between Asians and blacks, because they both came over here, almost without choice because, the economy back in Asia was so bad that we had to come here, because this was like the opportunity, and I mean, we all faced discrimination. There's just a lot about it, but I think in general they can relate better because you relate all the way back. Caucasians, they're from here, they were established here, and the whole slavery thing, they kind of dominate, they dominated Blacks before and everything like that... I think they both relate because they've been oppressed by the white man. And then they both came from hardships. They weren't established, they had to establish themselves. Either by—kind of forcefully. Caucasians were already here and everything was kind of laid out for them. And like if they're in a low-income area it's kind of like it's their fault or their parents' fault. But for blacks or Asians it's not necessarily their fault because there's so many issues, so many more issues, the whole racial stereotyping—whites usually get the benefit.

Jeffery identifies white privilege, in stating “whites get the benefit” and striking a contrast between “Caucasians” and whether or not their situations are “their fault.”

Although not all of the facts are necessarily correct (e.g., certainly there are white immigrant experiences of struggle as well, and most were not “already here”), in his own understanding, he felt that generally speaking, there may be more shared experiences with domination and oppression between blacks and Asian Americans than with whites. Elsewhere he pointed out that the content of hip-hop lyrics often focuses on stories of hardships that he feels both groups might be more easily able to relate to than whites.

Besides “struggle,” another repeated term respondents used to describe similarities between themselves and blacks was the “grind.” Even though the various Asian migration trajectories to the US are distinct from the forced migration via kidnapping and enslavement of African Slavery, respondents nevertheless made connections between the “rags to riches” stories of hip-hop legends like Notorious B.I.G. and their own families’ immigrant success stories. Notwithstanding the universal American Dream appeal of these narratives, David proposes that Asian- and African-Americans could relate to these

narratives in hip-hop:

I think of hip-hop and it's that American, that classic American rags to riches story all the time. Whether it's like Russell Simmons, I'm reading his book, *Super Rich*, right now. It's always that from nothing, you create something. I think that's something I love about hip-hop, I mean like watching the Biggie Smalls movie, right? Ya, Notorious. Another one of my favorites is Notorious BIG; I think those two, just their lifestyle and where they come from and where they created is something that I admire... I think maybe it is more relatable because we have that struggle commonality. Like that being accepted and being Asian and a lot of our parents emigrated from different countries, it's like they have that grind, and you know what I'm saying? It's like that same thing, the same grind for the dream that you hear a lot in hip-hop stories. When comparing to you know a lot of White people, don't have, they don't deal with the racial issues, there are still financial issues but a lot of times they are more accepted into the American culture compared to like Asians and Black people in the hip-hop culture.

Unlike Jeffrey, David briefly acknowledges here that whites may have financial struggles as well, but not necessarily the racial barriers that would make them “less accepted into the American culture.” It is these racial barriers to full acceptance into society that these Asian American hip-hop participants feel links them to Blacks, and often they are exposed to those shared stories through the content of hip-hop lyrics and biographies.

Such shared struggles are not limited to the US frame of reference. Some respondents went a step further to link their families' transnational experiences with colonialism with the African diaspora experience of enslavement and exploitation. In turn, this may be seen as another connection forged and solidified through hip-hop content. For example, Amy referenced her family's roots in Macao as relevant to her own love for hip-hop as follows:

Like my mom is an islander, and so, our family is considered not mainland, so we have a little bit of an outlaw feel going on with us, but I think that I could relate to hip-hop, because I kind of felt like I was outcasted. Not word for word like how hip-hop presented itself, but like yeah, I'm outside, and this is the grind, and this

is the hustle, and this is the life. And I think people apply hip-hop in different situations. Whites might have different situations, so... yeah, because there's no Asian music that I know that talks about coming of age in America or anything. A lot of music that is in its native language, for a lot of Asian cultures, is about love and heartbreak. And that's all you really get. There's nothing about having a dollar for a whole month, kind of thing. So, I think lyrically, hip-hop was a further extension for people in terms of like listening to music to put together hardships and for people to relate to it, as opposed to just ballads and other stuff.

To the extent that her family's music of choice seemed to be "ballads" "about love and heartbreak," in her mind it did not speak as directly to the struggles of her people as hip-hop did. This echoes Sharma's (2010) finding with South Asian hip-hop artists who found their families' Desi culture somewhat lacking when it came to capturing their experiences with discrimination in the US. Whether black or Asian, to Amy the commonality was a shared experience of being marginalized from the mainstream and having to work twice as hard to overcome the odds.

Although Jessamin's family hails from a different island, she likewise referenced an islander perspective as something that connects her and her people's struggle to the themes within hip-hop:

In my perspective, I see a lot of Filipinos. I don't know what other—I guess I could say Chinese people too but from what I relate, maybe more Pacific Islanders—like Samoans, they are more related to black culture than they are to Asian culture. That is just what I see—so I think Pacific Islanders. I would consider Pacific Islanders because there's an island. When I see a Filipino person, you're not going to... be like oh they are a part of the affluent society either. I think there was a struggle with Pacific Islanders, like Hawaiians. There was a definite struggle... So there is a sense of community involved so I guess I would associate with a sense of oppression...like a sense of building your own culture and community. It can relate to Black history as well, because there was a lot of struggle. Like from what I heard from my parents, they struggled a lot to get to where there are now. So, from what I would assume to relate them to is a lot of struggle and fight. That is what I can relate, those two at least.

Again, we see a mix of both socioeconomic and racial/ethnic oppression implicated as the thread linking Pacific Islanders specifically to Blacks. Jessamin actually asserted that Pacific Islanders might have more in common with Blacks than other “Asian” ethnicities (such as Chinese) in the sense that she perceived them to have faced greater economic hardships than more “affluent” Asian nations—a relative position they bring to the US context.

Both the “struggle” and the “grind” were the points of entry through which many AAPI hip-hop participants explain their common bond with Blacks. Although hard work and struggle for success may be a universal “American Dream,” repeatedly AAPI hip-hop participants expressed their beliefs that they do not think white Americans can relate in quite the same way. This contrast points to the distinctiveness of the “work twice as hard” mentality that is the coping strategy that many nonwhite Americans have unfortunately come to know all too well in a racist society (Coates 2015). Notably, some respondents also stressed that other forms of music (including those from their families’ native lands) were ill-equipped to give voice to such “struggle” and “grind,” lauding hip-hop as uniquely poised to express that theme. Indeed, hip-hop does seem to provide that counter frame to identify racial discrimination and exploitation that other analysts have found lacking with Asian Americans. Whether this sense of shared connection results in elevating coalition to mutual alliance, or whether it leads to cooptation of another’s culture to the disdain of one’s own, is a question to explore next.

CAN ASIAN AMERICANS DO HIP-HOP?: CULTURAL APPROPRIATION, IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONS OF BLACKNESS AND ASIANSNESS

In many instances, Asian Americans are cast as model minorities, or as like-whites, however, I have demonstrated that Asian American engagement with hip-hop is unique due to their position between Blackness and Whiteness. While critics of white involvement in hip-hop have pointed to minstrelry and thievery, calculated only to “reassert one’s position of dominance” (Sharma 2010:239), these AAPI narratives tell a different story. Far from “acting black,” some felt they were simply being themselves as opposed to attempting to mimic a white suburban culture to which they could not relate.

For Amy, it was not until she graduated high school and went onto a predominantly white private university in the South that she was made to feel that her ethnic phenotype and her interest in hip-hop culture did not go together in many people’s minds:

My sister—actually, the zoning in our neighborhood kept changing...because she went to a more Asian and white junior high school and I went to a predominantly Latino/Black school and we could only count a handful of Asians there... I mean, it was just different, we were just different because of our schools. And she went on to go to a more—to a high school in a more affluent neighborhood that had a lot of Asians and whites, and I kept in contact with everyone that I grew up with, that were more Dominican and Haitians....I went to my high school that I kept, we hung out with, we call it the minority floor. And that’s when we were swapping HOT 97 mix tapes and all that other stuff, so. It was never an issue... But once leaving for college, in dining hall it was definitely very segregated. I would always sit at the “black table”, but my thing is, there were some black females there that were just—they should have sat in the white section because of the way they were like, “oh my God” [valleygirl voice] yeah, stuff like that. So, to me it was separated by the things you talk about and what you’re interested in, and there’s ways that the minority culture can joke about stuff, and whites can’t joke about that stuff or else they’ll think that it’s racist... But I just felt like, even sitting in class, if I was sitting in a predominantly white class, which is usually how it happened, I was intimidated to raise my hand to say something, because I just felt like I wasn’t exposed to enough mainstream white culture that they would think some way about me, about the way I talk, or the way I [dress].

Far from how others perceived her, Amy did not feel she was “playing black” when she should have been “acting white.” Rather, given her high school socialization experiences, she was sitting with those with whom she felt most comfortable, due to common interests. It was the responses of others—deriving from often dichotomous and limiting constructions of race—that expected Asian Americans to be closer to suburban and white than to hip-hop (associated with urban and black). Yet, Amy was actually intimidated by the dominant white upper-class culture at the college, which felt utterly unfamiliar to her.

Another respondent, Stephanie, described a similar experience of shock and surprise when changing schools (and also changing continents, as daughter of a military family). While her father was stationed overseas, Stephanie, a Filipino American, grew a fondness for hip-hop styles, not yet understanding the racial stigma associated with them:

Somebody pointed out to me, “dang, you’re always around black people.” I was like huh? Really? I didn’t notice it. And I heard the word “Filigger” for the first time. I was like, what is that? A Filipino trying to be black. It was like, what? Even my own race was like, you don’t even hang out with us. But then I started looking around, and I was like, whoa, the majority of the people I am around are Black. I don’t know, they just befriended me so easily. I don’t know if it had to do with me being so into hip-hop with my fashion. You know, I came off the plane—I’ll never forget my outfit—I had a Detroit Pistons starter shirt, with my overalls...with the one strap down. I was representing my Kris Kross, and I had my Filas on. My black, white and red with the strap Filas on, that was just who I was. And so I came to school, brand new middle school, in Virginia Beach, and that’s just what happened!

Several respondents described themselves as transcending the racial boundaries to which most others around them adhered. In her school, whites hung around other whites, blacks around other blacks, and Filipinos with other Filipinos, so Stephanie found herself characterized as an awkward atrocity when she broke with the expected/typical pattern.

It took other Filipinos pointing it out to her that she was breaking norms before she realized it. Stephanie found herself in alliance with blacks at her school because there were no questions asked and they did not judge her. These formative experiences solidified into her adult understanding of hip-hop as a multiracial cultural space where the homogenous socialization norms are not as rigid as the surrounding environment, and she appreciates hip-hop precisely because of this.

Place is crucial when it comes to Americans' formative racial experiences. Amy's and Stephanie's accounts above were both shaped by the social geography of their towns during their upbringing—a multiracial working-class New York borough, and a military Southeastern community, respectively. Although Amy is Macanese-Chinese and Stephanie is Filipina, the combination of ethnicity and local geography (coupled with the global impact of hip-hop, in Stephanie's case) helped to enable the conditions where black-Asian alliance was made possible via hip-hop. Then, hip-hop allowed these respondents to continue those connections, despite no longer being in the same social circles or spaces. Another respondent, Edward, from across the country in Seattle reveals:

I don't know any Asian that's racist toward a black person because – well, I kinda grew up in a place where, it was, heavily dominated by people of color and we all shared the same experiences. We were all poor, we all kinda live in the new ghetto, I guess. And you know, we all kinda shared the same experiences. So, um in terms of my experience, I don't think that Asian Americans were racist towards Blacks at all. In terms of the mainstream, I hear that a lot... Um, and I also lived in northwest [west coast state] and both places are really progressive towards race. And so I have never really seen that in front of my own eyes anyway. And like it's difficult to impose my views on the entire country because I know the entire country feels a different way. But, in terms of my experience, again, it's – I feel like Asians were never really racist towards black people.

Although national survey data can trend toward Asian Americans having more

anti-Black prejudicial attitudes than whites, not much of these analyses have published separate breakdowns by region of country.

Interestingly, the term “wigger” serves a similar rhetorical function of “white trash” or “race traitor,” by castigating white people for not fulfilling their expected superior position in the social structure. So, when Jeffrey, a Vietnamese American breakdancer, was called a wigger due to his interest in hip-hop, this at once both laid out the expectation of Asian Americans “whitening” and likewise shamed them for not taking the expected path of emulating whiteness. Moreover, the term wigger can also carry with it assumptions of cultural appropriation—whites putting on hip-hop as a role, with little to no understanding of the culture from which it came (Kitwana 2005). Jeffrey took care to distinguish himself from such assumptions, as he discussed his college B-boy experience:

The [breakdancing] group was called Altered X, for altered expressions. It was a pretty fun bunch, it was very diverse. We had one Filipino guy, one Japanese guy, a lot of them were alumni too. And one um Caucasian, white guy. But um I guess, it's not that we were ghetto, or we were like “wiggers” or you know whatnot, or trying to be black, but I think we all had a very deep understanding of what hip-hop really was, I think everyone in the group did too... I'd say it was pretty diverse...Totally mixed, yeah. But I mean we throw like jokes, Asian jokes, whatever, around. White jokes, black jokes. It was a really cool bunch and I believe that you know with hip-hop you are able—the most astounding thing about it is I was able, you know, you are able to get away from all the discrimination.

Here, Jeffrey rebuffed the notion that non-blacks who participate in hip-hop are “trying to be black.” Rather, he reflected that hip-hop is a form of cultural expression with a “deep” history to which diverse peoples can relate. With his comment that he was “able to get away from all the discrimination” through his involvement, he characterized hip-hop as a

space where the racism of larger society is temporarily suspended. The use of racial joking among the group participants is interesting because it seems to serve the function of decentralizing race as a dividing line between members. The way Jeffrey discussed his mixed group of friends is striking because it is unlike the way whites typically point out their “diverse” friendships in ideological service of minimizing racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010)—indeed, he affirmed that there is a sizeable degree of racial discrimination that he and the group were temporarily escaping in the space they created for each other.

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that being part of hip-hop culture was integral to recognizing its African American origins and continued imprint. This was described in a way that went well beyond superficial styles of clothing, dress, or ways of speaking, but rather to the cultural conditions that engendered these unique artistic forms of expression. Jackie, a spoken word artist who grew up in Chicago and moved to New York, felt this career led her into relationships with and knowledge about Blacks that she would not have had without her hip-hop affiliations:

And maybe this is a little bit the old school in me, but I’m like, especially when you’re talking about spoken word, especially when you’re talking about hip-hop, like you should be connecting with people who are different from you... I think for us in the Asian American community, like, you should understand the roots of where a lot of this music comes from, and we’ve definitely made a contribution in terms of DJing and BBoying and there’s been different MCs, and things like that, but I think it’s like, you have to understand that this comes from somewhere? This comes from a history, this comes from histories of cultural expression, and the more you learn Afro-Caribbean expression, the more you learn about African rhythm, you understand how African it is in its derivation? And I think that that’s important. And I’m not of that school that it’s like oh this is a black thing and Asians can’t do it and —I feel like we’re all participating in different cultures... It has inspired me, learning more about the Black arts movement, or learning about the founders of the N’Yoricans café... your developing to an art form will teach you to learn about other people, learn about other people in the world, or I’ll at least say that that’s been my journey. For the fact of being in spoken word, I’ve

gotten to learn about a lot of different things that I never would have known about and I'm so thankful that I do.

Jackie referred here to the Afro-Caribbean and Latino ethnic origins that can be traced to the earliest South Bronx hip-hop beginnings, and she used that history to make the case for hip-hop being not just “a black thing” for which Asians are unqualified or unwelcome. Her approach also diverges notably from cultural appropriation.

Even where some respondents' hip-hop history knowledge was not as extensive, there was still an association of hip-hop with speaking out against oppression. Here, Jessamin credited hip-hop's black roots for making it an art form that many other non-Blacks (including whites) could connect with whenever they sought a voice for speaking out against “crap”:

I would say that because a lot of hip-hop comes from obviously black culture -- because of oppression and rebellion coming out of that kind of music. More like speaking up against popular culture so I think it has a lot to do with rebellion in our generation. Even Eminem because he was white he got a lot of crap for it because it was supposed to be an underground --underdog-- type of music and it spoke from your soul. So it's just rebellion and a way of speaking up.

Interestingly, though she began with the African American experience of oppression, she moved toward a more universal notion of “underdog” and “rebellion,” to which even a white artist like Eminem could relate. While certainly nonwhites can often relate more closely to themes of racial discrimination, the related component of speaking out against oppression, and fighting back against those who would silence you, is an aspect of hip-hop that becomes attractive to Asian Americans in particular because of the “silent/passive” stereotypes that stigmatize their racial/ethnic group more specifically. As Joe Feagin notes, Anglo-conformity ends up being a passive anti-discrimination

strategy for coping with racism: “If you talk, dress, and act as ‘white’ as you can, perhaps you will suffer fewer racial barriers” (Feagin 2012). This may be a tactic to combat that Asian Americans are often perceived as “forever foreigners”, regardless of times spent in the America or generational status. In fact, some respondents point directly to the active confrontation of racism by Blacks and other hip-hop artists as a factor that attracted them to the genre.

Another Vietnamese American breakdancer, Kris, referenced the issues shared by both Blacks and Asian Americans. He actually voiced “praise” to Blacks for creating hip-hop, because in doing so, they have built a space where not only Blacks can become empowered around their own ethnic identities, and then share that self-exploration and connection to their heritages. Interestingly, this was not something Kris recognized right away about hip-hop, but only as he got to know and understand it more deeply:

I think personally, for myself, I’ve listened to hip-hop for many, many years but I’ve never really acknowledged the cultural and the racial contribution that it had behind it. So, in the process of me getting to know like, wow, this is made by Black culture—this is made by Black people, and that this is something I truly love... I think that experience of me being able to enjoy hip-hop at its finest though, whether it be through my dance, that Black people have made, or music, I realize that as much as I take pride in like, who I am as a Southeast Asian Vietnamese, I can also take a lot of joy, and praise for, and give praise to, Black people for what they have created... But what they have contributed toward hip-hop is so beautiful in itself... from what I’ve seen, when we acknowledge the racial and the cultural aspects and the contributions of black people towards hip-hop, we come to a deeper understanding of what their culture is and who they are, and their values. . . and in a sense, we come to—and we have a sense of connection. And we realize we’re not really so different, because they’re singing, like, these songs of struggle, but these songs of struggle are not so foreign to us because we, too, have experienced struggles as well.

Kris’s comments here echo a prior theme we explored above as well, that Asian

American participation in hip-hop does not have to be construed as imitating blackness,

and can coexist with one's own strong ethnic identity. Kris demonstrated that although each racial/ethnic journey is unique, there are some commonalities in what each group has faced that can serve as a source of cross-racial alliance.

One of the respondents referenced MC Jin, a Chinese-American rapper who gained some mainstream recognition by winning successive "Freestyle Friday" contests on the "106 and Park" TV show on Black Entertainment Television (BET). The prize for winning the contest was a recording contract with a major record label, making Jin the first Asian American hip-hop artist to earn such an achievement. However, Jin's music did not achieve the success that many had hoped. Here, Amy offers her own explanation for the Jin's relative lack of success, and in doing so, expresses her admiration for African American solidarity, especially relative to that within her own racial/ethnic group:

The Asian community is not as unified as the Black community to back up his music. And I don't want to overarch the Black community, but I mean, that's the community that started hip-hop. And because Asians aren't the ones that started hip-hop, it's hard to stake your claim in it. But if there were more Asians saying, oh, this guy is good, or this is—you know, it's just so hard to see, even in movies and in music there's not a lot of Asian figures, so it doesn't really unite us, in a way, because there also different types of Asians –there are just the OC Twinkies, Twinkie Asians that would never support Jin and then there are the underground Asians from like you know California and New York that would, but we don't have enough of a voice as a community.

Amy's reference to "Twinkie Asians" refers to a saying that characterizes certain Asian Americans as "yellow on the outside and white on the inside." It is a sometimes playful, sometimes derogatory term for the traditional type of assimilation that conforms more to white mainstream culture. Amy suggested this is a group that "would never support Jin" because they are not known for having ethnic pride, and are seen as having little loyalty

to their own ethnic group. Interestingly, she made some geographic distinctions, arguing that she would expect Asian Americans from New York and California to possess more ethnic solidarity than other areas where Asian presence is sparser. However, overall, she expressed disappointment that Asian Americans do not “have enough of a voice as a community” and are “not as unified as the black community.” This perceived ethnic unity is admired, not just for its consumer power, but also for its political power when speaking out against discrimination, mistreatment, and inequality.

Indeed, AAPI hip-hop participants on the whole do not see themselves as trying to “play black”; rather, hip-hop has become a vehicle for self-empowerment and greater connection to one’s own racial identity as AAPI in the US. Rather than admiration from afar, without understanding, to varying degrees, it is an understanding of shared struggle that allows participants to find a stronger voice for themselves.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In discussing the reaction from co-ethnics to their participation in the black-dominated culture of hip-hop, respondents were candid about the anti-black racism that is used to judge and disparage their hip-hop involvement. Although it is most often attributed to elders, occasionally similarly aged peers are implicated as well. Middleman and triangulation theories continue to be relevant in making sense of these experiences, since often elders’ fear of additional discrimination from whites seems to fuel the resistance to AAPI hip-hop participation. Certainly there are also reasons why parents, regardless of race, discourage their children from hanging high hopes on careers in the

music and entertainment industry, and some of that generalized concern about success can be seen in the resistance. But the cultural frame of colorblind racism—about the assumed laziness of Blacks and other Americans of color—is also apparent in several of the quotes. Indeed, true to the AAPI “middle” position, there is some anti-Black racism being echoed “from above,” but also some of the fear of being further marginalized that comes from being located “underneath” whites in the power structure and subjugated accordingly. Thus, many respondents are engaging in antiracist action as they defy expectations and admonitions by continuing to align themselves with the predominantly African American genre and culture of hip-hop.

One reason why many respondents continue on this lesser-traveled path is they identify strongly with several themes in hip-hop that emanate from black experience in the U.S. In the spirit of cross-racial coalition that has occasionally characterized previous generations (e.g., Black Power and Yellow Power of the late 1960s and 1970s), the current generation of AAPI hip-hop participants likewise perceives a common “struggle” that they share with Blacks through the cultural and lyrical expressions of hip-hop. Without a strong counter frame from which to challenge the unfairness of American racism, many of these AAPI hip-hop participants gravitate toward hip-hop as a space where they learn the commonalities they share with Blacks (if they haven’t learned already), and are able to resist their “wedge” position in the triangulation of non-white exploitation by joining in common struggle with blacks. It is important not to equate their involvement with any sort of youthful attempt to rebel against their parents by listening to edgy music of one sort or another. There is indeed some aspect of rebellion here, but it is

more than merely generational and universal, as it has a decidedly racial dimension. A number of respondents characterize themselves as having a greater connection to the themes expressed in hip-hop due to their common experiences with racism and racialized “struggle” to compete in a society where they must work their way up from an unequal starting position.

Several respondents grew up in multiracial networks where shared living and schooling and working conditions with Blacks and Latinos were commonplace (in urban areas on both west and east coast US), making the “model minority” stereotype of a suburban “yuppie” Asian American one to which they could not relate. To characterize a Vietnamese American, for example, as a “wigger” when he participates in hip-hop culture, exemplifies this mainstream cultural expectation. Yet such expectations are not just popular misconceptions; they exist in social science as well. Assimilation models are still drawn upon in social science literature to measure the extent of continued racial inequality between groups in the US.

Even when they are modified into perspectives such as “segmented assimilation” or “downward assimilation,” such frameworks cannot quite characterize AAPI hip-hop involvement. Downward assimilation posits that some Asian Americans (and other immigrant groups) may assimilate “down” to poor Blacks or other groups that do not fare as well socioeconomically. Yet the respondents are not “abandoning” their culture to be part of hip-hop—for the most part, they situated their own experiences as narratives of co-ethnic struggles as opposed to black struggles per se. Likewise, the “segmented assimilation” model--that explores how Asian Americans forge paths that both assimilate

to whiteness and retain aspects of prior generations' culture (e.g., being bilingual)—seems to assume there is only one American culture. While segmented assimilation recognizes the protective effects of Asian Americans (and others) retaining cultural linkages like language, it does not deal specifically with the importance and usefulness of having a strong counter frame with which to resist racism. For our respondents, the way to challenge racism was not just to maintain cultural/ethnic ties, but additionally to nurture their ties to a black-led culture/genre that gave voice to their common experiences with “struggle.” It was not as much putting on someone else’s mask, or retaining an age-old traditional mask, but rather, mutual recognition of a common and empowering language that spoke familiar truths.

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Chapter III

Seeking Liberation, Facing Marginalization: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders' Conditional Acceptance in Hip-Hop Culture

In the United States context, the panethnic racial identity of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) has an especially interesting relationship within hip-hop. Although hip-hop was born in the projects of the South Bronx, New York City, with roots in African American, Afro-Caribbean, Black and Latino artistic expressions, it has transformed over the past 4 decades into a global movement whose “voice of the underdog” ethos has resounded with various racial, ethnic, class, and sexual orientation groups. From the early days of hip-hop, a West Coast hip-hop movement emerged that included Filipino DJs and breakdancers, and a steady involvement of AAPIs has continued ever since. Yet, scholars of Asian American involvement in hip-hop have pointed out their relative invisibility in the mainstream representation of the genre (Ogbar 2007; Phi 2008; Wang 2006).

I argue that the barriers and challenges that AAPI hip-hop participants face, as well as the empowerment that they find within the culture, cannot be understood without incorporating an intersectional lens. Crenshaw (1989) first introduced intersectionality theory in her research on Black feminism and theorized that one cannot grasp the subordination of Black women without considering the experience of being Black and a woman concurrently. As Collins (2009) notes, cultural patterns of oppression are tied together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender,

class, and ethnicity, forming an "interlocking oppression." The respondents characterize hip-hop as a liberating space where they can circumvent both gender and racial stereotypes more easily than in mainstream culture. These Asian Americans seeking to reject both racist US expectations, and their families' and communities' traditional expectations for them, describe hip-hop as a preferred cultural space, where they can more authentic and true to themselves. Yet, the hypermasculine bravado that hip-hop culture exudes presents a complex dilemma for both men and women AAPI participants.

While scholars have analyzed sexism in hip-hop culture, few have honed in on Asian Americans' and Pacific Islanders' experiences specifically. Thus, we seek to examine the ways in which racialized gender norms interact with the predominantly African American cultural space of hip-hop in the context of a white supremacist society to affect AAPI constructions of their experiences within the genre. The analysis finds that AAPI hip-hop participants gravitate to the genre because they have imagined it as a cultural space where racial/ethnic norms are less proscriptive than the alternatives. Yet in hip-hop, they experience conditional acceptance, at best--on the margins, and at the expense of fluid gender/racial expression.

HIP-HOP, MASCULINITY, AND ASIAN AMERICANS

Although systematically excluded from hegemonic masculinity, displays of Black masculinity have been extremely visible in mass media, including hip-hop culture. This cultural ideal of manhood was in large part reflective of white, heterosexual, largely middle-class men. (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The hegemonic masculine ideal,

the specific form of masculinity that is the most honored way of existing as a man, requires all other men to position themselves in relation to the standard. This hegemony operates through ideals of masculinity, as most men and boys do not live up to these standards in their everyday lives and calls for the subordination of men and dominance of men in society (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). White masculinity is an unmarked normative identity associated with a sense of superiority and entitlement (Donaldson 1998; Robinson 2000) and therefore, the masculinity of non-white men is subordinated. In response to their systematic subordination, Black men often rely on the construction of “coolness”. The cool pose is achieved through scripts, physical posturing and impression management, which exude a performance of pride, strength, and control (Majors and Bilson 1992). Many Black men utilize have become so used to guarding against racism and social oppression that they adopt a cool pose much of the time, regardless of circumstances. As Coates (2015) notes, this hardness for survival’s sake comes at great cost, as it leaves black men, especially fathers, ill-equipped to emotionally connect with other humans (especially their families) —for example, viewing harshness with their children as for their own good. Surviving a drive-by shooting or serving prison time (whether real or fabricated) can lend “street cred” to an artist’s hypermasculine self-presentation.

The concept of authenticity also plays an important role in the construction of Black masculinity. Music video images depicting Black men as gangstas, ballas, and players are problematic they serve to promote and glorify masculine behavior that exploits others to achieve material success, resorts to violence as a means of resolving

disputes, and promotes the indiscriminate pursuit of sexual relationships with women (Kitwana 2002). Ogbar (2007) points to a troubling narrowing of masculinity within hip-hop, particularly once the major labels took over and hip-hop achieved commercial success. It is within this context of narrow hypermasculinity that AAPI men must negotiate their masculinity within hip-hop culture. Collins (2005) emphasizes one of the cornerstones of a “real black man” is that he is control of Black women. In hip-hop culture, Black women are frequently dominated through lyrical content and through images in music videos (Sharpley-Whiting 2007). Although not frequently discussed, black male control targets lesbians, especially lesbians of color, a group rarely discussed in conversation that links hip hop and homophobia (Pritchard and Gibbs 2007). Heterosexual Black males in hip-hop vanquish male competitors and heterosexual women, and dominate lesbians as a “final frontier of conquest” (Sharpley-Whiting 2007).

Stereotypical notions of the emasculated Asian American man counter the hyper masculinity of hip-hop culture (Phi 2008). Some scholars have pointed to the direct contrast between the hypermasculine culture of hip-hop and the stereotypical notion of the emasculated Asian male. The “feminization” of Asian American men in the U.S. context is deeply rooted historically, for it served racist ideological functions of segregating Asian men into lower paying feminized occupations as well as curtailing female immigration (Higashida 2008). Over time, as Asian immigrants to the US became more highly skilled, this race/gender stereotype shifted to a more nerdy, bookish angle.

The fact that gendered anti-Asian racism renders Asian men asexual and weak seems to set them up in stark opposition hypermasculinity.

Asian masculinity is seen as consisting of all brain, in contrast to the all brawn that comprises Black masculinity or white hegemonic masculinity that is seen as a balance between brain and brawn (Prashad 2002). In this way, these constructed masculinities serve to co-create white masculinity. Asian American men report regularly encountering stereotypes about small penis sizes and passivity, becoming targets for bullying as a result (Chou 2012). While the stereotypical black rapper exudes confidence and masculinity, and is nonplussed as women hover around him, the Asian American male caricature strives too hard to impress women, oblivious to how miserably he is falling short. As Phi highlights, Asian men are viewed as over-bearing, boring misogynists with small penises, while Asian women are seen as exotic, sexualized prizes who will do anything to secure a non-Asian man (Phi 2008). As if to add insult to injury, the gendered racial stereotypes of AAPI men include the assumption that women are not even interested in them, preferring instead men of other ethnic backgrounds. For example, Crystal Anderson has pointed out that one reason why Korean artist PSY's "Gangnam Style" video went viral in the US (as opposed to PSY's many other songs) is because it exploits the asexual/effeminate stereotype of Asian masculinity (Pan 2012). Recent work by Lu and Wong (2013) points to the stress and negative mental health outcomes resulting from Asian American men's perceptions of themselves as falling short of certain masculine stereotypical attributes—such as toughness, assertiveness, and heterosexual conquest. Some Asian American respondents from Lu and Wong's (2013)

study expressed discomfort with what they perceived as societal pressure to engage in sexually crude conversations about women in order to prove their masculinity, while others expressed disappointment with a body type and size they deemed smaller than the normative ideal for men. Asian American men continue to face a glass ceiling in the workplace (Kim and Sakamoto 2010), due in part to enduring societal assumptions of them lacking the ability to be aggressive (Chen 1999; Chou and Feagin 2008). This reality demonstrates that racism must be seen through an intersectional lens, particularly in ways that it is gendered and sexualized (Chou et al 2015).

With the exception of Jin Au-Yeung (a Chinese American male rapper who left a BET competition undefeated and earned a major label record contract as a result), most Asian American involvement in hip-hop has remained largely unnoticed and underground (Ogbar 2007; Wang 2006). Several music and cultural critics have analyzed Jin's struggle to "make it big" in the hip-hop world, connecting those difficulties to being Asian-American, and mass media being uneasy with how to market this "unprecedented" combination of ethnicity and talent (Luu 2009; Nguyen 2011; Yi 2010). As Phi (2008) points out, the roles that Asian Americans are most often seen playing in contemporary hip-hop are typically silent/voiceless, as with the predominance of Asian American men turntablists/DJs in the Bay Area, or globally as Korean breakdancing crews dominate worldwide competitions. An Asian American MC/rapper—the most visible role in hip-hop—is much rarer, due in part to the masculine bravado attached to being an outspoken MC. Given the roles of DJ, dancer and producer are in the background and at the front

stage is the rapper, it would appear that some kind of a glass ceiling is in effect for Asian Americans in hip-hop.

In this way, then, actually conforming to a more highly regarded, yet still subordinated form of masculinity can be seen as transgressive for AAPI men, performed as a strategy for rejecting the effeminate racial/ethnic construction and defying stereotypes. The hypermasculine bravado that characterizes hip-hop is not traditionally considered within the hegemonic masculinity construct where the white, heterosexual, middle-class male reigns as the ideal. This hypermasculinity may serve as a response to their own subordination and lack of control and by locating themselves within hip-hop culture, AAPI men nevertheless can be seen as exercising a similar compensation strategy (Connell 2005). Notably, though, both African American *and* AAPI men negotiate such strategies within the context of white supremacy, where nonwhite men's performances of masculinity are more highly scrutinized, stigmatized and penalized in every social institution (Thompson and Armato 2012).

HIP-HOP, SEXISM, AND ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN

While hip-hop has frequently been taken to task for its sexism and misogyny, in truth this devaluation of women is evident in many other genres of music as well as in culture writ large (Hurt 2007; Phi 2008; Sharma 2010). Women, regardless of race or ethnicity, are largely used as eye candy and window dressing in music videos that are designed to depict a male heterosexual sexual fantasy of unrestricted access to women, where even when she says no she means yes (Pough 2004). We are more likely to see

females in the background as backup signers or dancers than as skilled, knowledgeable creators of art in their own right (Park 2005). However, for Asian American women within hip-hop, several scholars argue that the sexism that they face is not just one-size-fits-all—there is a decidedly racialized aspect to the stereotypes they faced.

Being associated with this degrading image of someone that is to be seen and not heard has resulted in various challenges for those Asian American and Pacific Islander women with hip-hop skills. Sharma's (2010) study reports several discriminatory experiences of South Asian female hip-hop artists, including not getting paid for gigs, being suddenly removed from lineups, and being slighted by event promoters. While such sexist expectations in the music/entertainment business create barriers for white women as well as women of color (not just Asian Americans specifically), there are specific ways in which Asian American women in particular have been ethnosexualized by US and Western media portrayals—often dichotomized as either a cunning “Dragon Lady” or a servile “Lotus Blossom” (Chou 2012). Much has been written on the misogyny within hip-hop (e.g., hooks 1994; Pough 2004; Rose 1994) where women are routinely described as sex objects, but several rappers have made specific reference to Asian women, characterizing them as the ideal pushovers who will never say no. The famous 2 Live Crew song “Me So Horny” from the late 1980s—featuring the phrase “me love you long time”—has been sampled and recycled in contemporary culture well beyond just hip-hop, and has been used to sexually harass Asian American women, amounting to symbolic violence against them (Chou 2012).

Connecting to the stereotype of Asian women as submissive and docile, Phi (2008) relates some interracial tensions at hip-hop clubs in his own community where Asian women will sometimes be admitted into clubs, preferred over African American women. Men in the US seeking Asian women as sexual partners often have exoticized expectations of them (Chou 2012). Male-dominated hip-hop audiences may prefer Asian women over other females, perceiving them as more willing to fulfill and serve a man's sexual fantasies. Such preferences are undoubtedly linked to the anti-black racism that fuels model minority stereotypes and other white supremacist constructions (Nopper 2014). Relatedly, Sharma's (2010) interview analysis of South Asians in hip-hop revealed that South Asian women often found less resistance to acceptance in hip-hop circles than their South Asian male counterparts, due in part to the docile, servile stereotype associated with Asian femininity.

Some black popular hip-hop artists have perpetuated stereotypes about Asian Americans in various ways in their work (Ho and Mullen 2008). Rappers occasionally use both the dragon lady and the coveted passive object imagery to fulfill sexual fantasy. For instance, while Kanye West's "Yeezus" ("eating Asian pussy, all I need was soy sauce") (Irwin 2013) reduces a woman to a sexual commodity, Jay Z's "Girls, Girls, Girls" ("Got this Chinese chick, had to leave her quick, 'cause she kept bootleggin' my shit") (Whaley 2006) draws on the crafty and cunning Dragon Lady stereotype. Although Asian-American artists in hip-hop are nearly invisible, borrowing parts of Asian culture such as martial arts themes or beats with Asian instruments are perceived as acceptable by Black artists. This may indicate that such black appropriation of Asianness in hip-hop

is not unlike white appropriation of aspects of black culture—done often without appreciation of the full humanity behind the cultural product. Additionally, a few rappers have gone so far as to deride Asians by using racial slurs like the word “chink” in their rhymes (Ho and Mullen 2008).

Little work has been done examining how AAPI women negotiate stereotypes of Asian American femininity in US subcultural settings where whiteness is not the norm. AAPI women who participate in hip-hop culture typically do not see themselves as anything close to these passive/docile stereotypes. While Asian American women in Pyke and Johnson’s (2003) study referred to their Vietnamese or Korean side which conformed to demure stereotypes, contrasting it with their American or “whitewashed” side which was more assertive and independent, AAPI participants in hip-hop may be less prone to use white suburban culture as their reference group. Hip-hop has its own culture that is most associated with its Black origins, but has expanded since its origins to inspire various urban, youthful, multicultural and global variants. While those outside the hip-hop realm might perceive AAPI participants as “acting black,” most within it can recognize the nuances of diversity within the genre. AAPI hip-hop artists typically bring their own creative flair to the craft, all the while in some way conforming to the braggadocio swagger expected of any hip-hop performer, regardless of race or gender. Thus, when, for example, South Asian female rappers refer to themselves as players, pimps, or B-boys, this kind of female empowerment is less likely to be construed as being white or even being American, but rather an attempt to position oneself as a “dope

MC” or a female who “spits mad lyrics” within hip-hop’s masculine culture (Sharma 2010).

In what follows, I present interview data with Asian American and Pacific Islander hip-hop participants of various ethnicities, exploring their perceptions of this musical genre/culture and how they see themselves fitting into it. On the one hand, many of them choose hip-hop as an alternative to the limited dichotomy of Asian Americans as either “fresh off the boat” or “whitewashed,” allowing them to construct an alternative identity (Chou 2012). However, this celebration of hip-hop as a liberating space is tempered by observations and experiences attesting to continued racial barriers to relative success in the genre that are often gender-specific. For AAPI men, they are excited about hip-hop as a field where they can assert hyper masculinity, yet they face a steeper climb than most due to the stark contrast between the exaggerated hypermasculinity of hip-hop and the asexual emasculated stereotype accorded to them by wider society. Women AAPI artists likewise seek out hip-hop as a space that is less boxed-in and regimented, yet hip-hop does reiterate ideas about Asian femininity that exist in the mainstream US lexicon. Thus, these narrow representations of Asian femininity create barriers for AAPI women trying to enter the hip-hop scene as legitimate artists with creative vision and independent ideas of their own. That our respondents stay loyal to hip-hop may be less a statement on hip-hop culture’s openness than an indication of how constricting the mainstream US culture is for AAPI Americans, rendering hip-hop’s space preferable by comparison.

CONSTRUCTING HIP HOP'S RACIAL/ETHNIC NORMS AS LIBERATION FROM MAINSTREAM EXPECTATIONS

The respondents sought out hip-hop often because they struggled to fit into both “Asian” and “white” expectations of them, so hip-hop was a youth culture that provided them with an alternative to this dichotomy at a crucial point in identity development. Repeatedly, respondents contrasted what they perceived as either/or choices for API Americans in wider society with a hip-hop community that they feel embraced them as more complex individuals than such boxes allow. Jeffrey, a Vietnamese American dancer, reflected:

With hip-hop you are able...to get away from all the discrimination, because in middle school or high school, I felt weird... If you were listening to rock or whatever I'd be like going as whitewashed, or if I was listening to rap I'd be going as a wigger or something like that. So, I was on the fence either way... but like with breakdancing, that never crossed my mind. I believe what hip-hop truly was is something that can belong to anyone, and it's not bound by race or color. And what's really good, what's really amazing, is the people who invented, or were the pioneers of hip-hop weren't scholars or heavily educated people. It was just a way of nonviolent expression...It's a way...to release testosterone, without hurting anyone. You don't hurt anyone, and as a direct alternative to gangbanging, or rollin' with gangs. And that's what was amazing about it, and that's really what empowered me to like it so much.

Many of the respondents were young adults, who in their youth often confronted cliques, and as Asian Americans, struggled to fit in. Jeffrey knew that if he listened to rock, his peers would call him “whitewashed,” while if he listened to rap, he would be called a “wigger.” The kind of anger and frustration that these societal roadblocks produce can be safely vented in the outlet of hip-hop, he said. He contrasted the limiting boxes of mainstream culture with the more accepting, universal language of hip-hop that can

belong to anyone. Interestingly, though, Jeffrey speaks of hip-hop as a place to release testosterone, reinforcing the masculinist aspect of the culture.

Likewise, Stephanie, MC-turned-promoter, reflected on the same kind of restrictive high school scene from which hip-hop allowed her to break free. Stephanie came back to the states after four years living in Germany (her father was in the military), wearing hip-hop style fashion because she liked it, but not realizing it was so tied to Blacks in the U.S. She recalled learning the word “Filigger” and being accused of being Filipino and trying to be Black— “even my own race was like, ‘you don’t hang out with us’!”

I already had such a hard time being Spanish, Filipino, white—mostly Filipino though... When I came here from Germany, people just didn’t know how to take this chick, that was kinda hip-hop, kinda whatever, they couldn’t register that in their mind... But with hip-hop, I found it as an escape to take out our frustrations on paper, or over a beat, or whatever. It’s also a way to unify different races. I have so many—if you see me on Facebook or on Twitter or on Intstagram—you’ll see, I try to document everything, the diversity of people involved with hip-hop. And I love all music, don’t get me wrong, but hip-hop basically saved my life. Hip-hop is love, it really is love, to me. Hip-hop is unity.

Again, hip-hop is characterized as a way to take out our frustrations-- frustrations of limiting expectations placed on people due to their race. To “escape” from these limiting stereotypes, she submerged herself into hip-hop culture which she feels is more about unity than the wider society. Later on in this paper, I explore Stephanie’s experience of being pushed out of an MC role because of her gender. But not unlike female-to-male transgender South Asian rapper D-Lo, profiled in Sharma’s (2010) study, the respondents surprisingly find refuge in a subcultural community often reviled for its sexism, misogyny, and anti-Asian prejudices. It is because they understand that racism, sexism, and homophobia exist everywhere, but particularly in mainstream society. So perhaps

they choose to conform to a subculture already known for its “proud outcast” bravado, rather than conform to a mainstream that feels even more limiting to them—constructing hip-hop as a space seen in some ways as beyond race but certainly not beyond gender. In this way, hip hop provides conditional acceptance that still seems preferable to them than the alternatives.

THE STEEP CLIMB FOR AAPI MEN IN HIP-HOP

Several respondents were acutely aware of a gap that had to be bridged between the “ladies’ man” image of a male hip-hop artist and the American cultural construction of Asian masculinity. Whether they were male or female, several respondents pointed out this disjuncture. For some, this gap represented yet another societal limitation on freedom of expression for minorities. As Liza, a Thai American respondent, put it:

In the hip-hop culture to be a man is . . . to have several girlfriends, be a player, to be very violent, take this masculinity ideal to another degree, but for Asian American men they can hardly develop these ideals because of their stereotypes of asexual, very feminine type. I would argue these narrow visions of masculinity is [why]. . . it’s hard for Asian American men to be accepted in hip-hop...as long as they play by the rules of what hip-hop defines as masculinity. They have to hype up everything about themselves and their masculinity. They will be accepted but they are not going to be accepted if they are seen as you know feminine, asexual in a sense.

Liza observed that an Asian man would not be legitimated within the hip-hop world without strict conformity to the hypermasculine straightjacket. In effect, she stated that the reason why we do not see as many Asian American men in hip-hop is not just because they are not black, but because they face race-specific stereotypes of feminine and asexual. Men of all backgrounds as well as women often adopt a “hard” image as

part of hip-hop cultural performance. Yet in hip-hop there is a fine line between performance and reality—artists are expected to have “street cred” and will be publicly flogged as not “legit” if their personal biography deviates too significantly from the persona they present through their artistry (Ogbar 2007). This presents a quandary for AAPI men who are constructed as asexual and effeminate in the larger culture (Lu and Wong 2013), so they may be automatically assumed to be putting on a front and less likely to be taken seriously within hip-hop culture when and if they present a hypermasculine image.

Although these factors signal that AAPI men may have a steeper climb than most to be taken seriously in the world of hip-hop players, those few who have been able to reach the apex are inspirational for some of our respondents. Their skill as an artist is not as noteworthy as the fact that they actually challenged the asexual stereotype by more closely conforming to the heteronormative masculine ideal, often posited as unattainable for AAPI men (Lu and Wong 2013). As Paul, a Korean-American respondent, reflected:

Growing up there were a lot of Asian role models growing up in hip-hop that helped pave the way for myself and many others. Like they were doing it, and I can do it as well. Our place is already there. It may not be as mainstream as how Latino hip-hop has gone....The more independent underground scene, just Asians in general on the DJ scene or even in L.A.....I don't know if you remember that dude Theo? He was on the radio and he had a really smooth voice and all the girls loved him. I think he's part Japanese and Filipino and Black, or Filipino and Black. He was definitely representing for Asian folks as well and that was cool. Girls liked him and whatever.

Being liked by girls, and being depicted as attractive to women, is noted here as a welcome departure from the norm. Interestingly, though, Theo's background confirms a pattern we noted in our literature review of AAPI men being more visible in both pop and

hip-hop when they were “mixed” with some other racial group besides Asian (Nguyen 2011). Likewise, here Paul considered the group Far East Movement (FEM), a Los Angeles based hip-hop group that includes members of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and Korean descent:

Some of the stereotypes are gone so I feel like someone like Far East Movement can sell a million singles, but they’re not trying to act like tough guys. They are making club songs and hits, so they are not threatening the status quo of what stereotypes still remain about Asian Americans. They are making hits that people want to dance to and kinda wanna party to, so it’s relatable. . . but they are not challenging anything per se. I think it’s cool now that there is such a high position that some of these guys, I don’t know what their fan base is, but I’m sure that there a lot of girls involved and hopefully they can be seen as sex symbols. They are probably not sex symbols like Usher is or like Trey Songz or LL Cool J or whatever, but hopefully by them doing what they are doing, women can be liking Asian dudes...rather than just Whites liking Asian girls. We haven’t had much of that.

Paul evaluated Far East Movement (FEM) as having successfully navigated the tightrope between being legitimate (not too hypermasculine as to be unbelievable for Asian men) and yet also still attractive to women. Chen’s (1999) notion of the hegemonic bargain with masculinity has clearly been struck for these performers, merely by being accepted into this player-dominated genre, whether or not the artists actually display every aspect of its hypermasculine ethos. Naming African American men who are often depicted bare-chested, Paul resigned to the fact that AAPI men may not ever be held up as the epitome of hip-hop manliness. However, he nonetheless clearly felt personally vindicated that “Asian dudes” can also be seen as sexually attractive. His sentiment echoes Sharma’s (2010) assessment that some Asian women may actually have an easier time than men breaking into the hip-hop scene, because of the more exoticized aspect to American

cultural constructions of Asian femininity. His final statement, “we haven’t had much of that,” is at once both celebratory and tragic—it acknowledges continuing barriers while at the same time conveying the sense of pride that comes with finally breaking such barriers.

Indeed, some have suggested that FEM’s rise to fame only came by deemphasizing their race. They often wear sunglasses in public appearances—not altogether uncommon for stars to do, but when one FEM music video featured a white artist and he was the only one not wearing sunglasses, it caused some to wonder whether Asian members of the group were deliberately concealing their phenotype with the eyewear (Nguyen 2011). Likewise, more recent YouTube success stories like Traphik (also known as Timothy delaGhetto, a Taiwanese American rapper and comic), while not seeming to conceal his ethnicity, still seemed to be straightjacketed by hypermasculine tropes and bravado in his performances, especially on Nick Cannon’s Wild ‘N Out MTV2 hip-hop comedy show (Regullano 2015). These YouTube channels where some AAPI performers have actually been able to gain some degree of financial and cultural success still are relegated largely to niche markets (Regullano 2015; Wang 2014).

Some respondents were quite astute about the drawbacks of AAPI men subscribing to the narrow definition of masculinity often linked to hip-hop culture. Matthew, a 28-year old Filipino, pointed to the complicated situation that follows those AAPI men who display facets of this type of masculinity:

I think it is a double edged sword... We have to adjust what type of masculinity is the correct masculinity. But I think it is also negative in the sense Asian

Americans are still trying to achieve high form of masculinity, so the hegemonic form of masculinity. It's kinda a lose-lose.

Embodying the masculinity associated with hip-hop culture is a step forward for many AAPI men, who feel they will only get ahead in this genre by embracing hypermasculinity. Black men have created their own unique formulation of masculinity in response to countering normative white masculinity. However, this simply creates another narrowing of masculinity that marginalizes those men who do not live up to this standard. For AAPI men, the task of measuring up to either black or white hegemonic masculinity can be untenable. In this way, AAPI men are left struggling in a position where failure is almost guaranteed and as Matthew notes, it is truly a lose-lose situation.

“YOUR BROTHER WROTE THAT”—AAPI WOMEN GRASPING FOR THE MIC

The construction of Asian women as exotic others presents a double-edged sword for AAPI women in hip-hop. On the one hand, this stereotype may be seen as facilitating AAPI women's entry into hip-hop culture—the hyperfeminine stereotype fits right into the already hypermasculine culture's portrayal of the idealized objectified female. On the other hand, this perceived advantage may only take them but so far, particularly when AAPI women desire roles within hip-hop beyond just video eye-candy or behind-the-scenes production. Thus, compared with African American women in hip-hop, AAPI women may be more preferred, or at least equally preferred for background/voiceless

roles, yet compared with all men, regardless of race/ethnicity, AAPI women face a struggle to be heard.

For AAPI women who may be ethnically mixed or not easily racially categorized, their appearance may sometimes gain them an initial foot in the door in the entertainment industry, preferred over both African American and white women for such roles. As Lisa, a Thai/African-American DJ/radio host described, sometimes her appearance rather than her skills is what helps her to stand out from the crowd in competition for jobs:

It makes me stick out. Straight up, I stick out. If I'm in a room of all these people and I'm like, "hey I'm a hip-hop radio host," they're gonna be like, "oh look at this mixed looking girl, she looks different". So luckily that has helped me in different things, even casting calls [for shows with video broadcast], as soon as I walked into the casting call, the guy's like "oh my gosh you have such a nondescript look". I was like, nondescript, what does that mean? I didn't do good on my SATs now. But he said I could pass as a "Native American in a historically enriched area." So I think that definitely my appearance, because people don't know what my race is... it makes me stand out, as far as my position in business, it makes me stand out, to get a leg up.

Ironically, although she is in somewhat of a non-visible role as a hip-hop radio personality, it is her appearance that matters, particularly as a woman. Yet it is not solely her appearance, but its interaction with her mixed-race status, that matters most in this particular anecdote. Indeed, as with Far East Movement's making their racial/ethnic identities unclear and ambiguous with sunglasses, Lisa also gets the message that the fact that her Asian-ness is not clearly marked seems preferred by the decision-makers in the industry.

When Lisa reflected on her own experiences and that of other female hip-hop artists, she underscored the importance of physical appearance and attractiveness for women:

I've always had a tomboy side to me. . . I was just the friend. I felt like when I started getting involved with hip-hop, people started looking at me like a girl. And it was a shock to me, because I was just like, what the hell? Why are you looking at me like that?... I had to wear more dresses because when I was hosting events for the radio station, I wanted to look nice . . . [In] the movie *Clueless* that girl who was a tomboy, they dressed her up and changed her.... People were like whoa, you know? I feel like I was going through that transformation too... I've noticed there's a huge population in Virginia of female rappers that are lesbian. It's either you're a lesbian or you're a Nikki Minaj type... or you're too much of a girl-boy or whatever. So, I think women in hip-hop really don't know how to—they're not really sure how to present themselves. You see Lady Luck, she was a tomboy---but now she's all... pretty... I feel like women have too many guidelines to live up to in the hip-hop community as far as they feel like what will make them sell.

Although when her gender and her race interact into an “exotic” frame, it may initially provide some opportunities, over the entire trajectory of a successful career in hip-hop, Lisa acknowledged that being a woman clearly presents its challenges. She describes two options: either the tomboy/lesbian “girl-boy” that does not meet the standard of being heterosexually attractive, or a prissy hyperfemininity, chosen primarily to counteract people's derogatory lesbian perceptions. Lisa reflects on her own transformation from tomboy to “more dresses” in order to be successful in the hip-hop business, and connects her own experience to other more well-known female hip-hop artists who seem to have felt pressured to do the same. While African American female rappers such as Lady Luck, Queen Latifah, and MC Lyte have all evolved from androgynous to more feminine self-presentations over the years to ward off lesbian rumors, Lisa's commentary raises questions as to whether an androgynous self-presentation is a less permissible option for

AAPI women because of the way the exotic stereotype sexualizes them in particular.

Notably, some recent work on females in hip-hop problematizes this respectable-versus-sex-object false dichotomy--insisting instead that artists like Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, and Nicki Minaj (Phillips et al 2005; Chepp 2015; Grigoriadis 2015) along with other female hip-hop participants (Munoz-Laboy et al 2007) can be both sexy *and* in control of their sexuality, taking orders from no man, and even calling the shots with bravado of their own.

Still, AAPI women in hip-hop who want to forefront their skills over their appearance continue to struggle to achieve this goal. Stephanie, a Filipina American, who initially identified her role as promoter, revealed later that she began as an MC, but sexist stereotypes thwarted her MC ambitions:

My eldest brother. . . actually was in a rap group, they were called Martial Law. Well one day. . . he was... telling one of his group members, "my sister raps." They were like, "really? Oh, I don't know about that." He was like, "Go get your notebook." I'm like, OK. . . Turned on the beat, and I started spittin, and he was like Oh man!... I didn't think I was that good, I was just writing poetry to a beat, so I didn't know. Anyways, so I became the first and only [female] member of that group called Martial Law... Mind you, it was kind of hard for me . . . [with people saying] you know, "you're a female, there's no way you wrote that,"[or] like I said, "oh, your brother wrote that for you." Or "you can't think that intelligently—you're young, you're Filipino, *and* you're a girl? There's no way!"

Stephanie chose to become a promoter rather than an artist because she wanted to be respected for her ideas, as opposed to being seen as just another "pretty faced female MC." Interestingly, she perceived "your [older] brother wrote that for you" as a comment not only on her gender, but also on her ethnicity and her age. Cultural expectations within one's own co-ethnic community where male siblings can be valued more highly than

females in the family contribute to this limitation as well (Chou 2012). In this example, the attribution of the talent to her Filipino brother suggests that AAPI women may have a harder time being accepted than AAPI men in the genre, particularly when an MC role is at stake. This example underscores the underside of that double-edged sword—as an AAPI female, your appearance may get you into hip-hop circles, but you may not be able to travel everywhere you want to go within that circle. Roles that showcase intelligence and the ability to be outspoken can be more difficult to access.

Such backstage pigeonholing of AAPI women into “eye candy” roles like dancer rather than MC, is also addressed by Matthew, a Filipino American respondent. Even as a male, he could not help but notice how sexism interacts with racism for AAPI women in hip-hop:

Yea I think when it comes to like rapping [Asian women] get no credit. I think dancing they get a lot of credit... It works out as a secondary thing so Asian American women can do it. But they can't do like rap. Yea, like battle.

Matthew explores the point that rap contests are head-to-head battles, as opposed to dancers who perform in a crew and have a more collectivist orientation, offering this as a possible reason why people resist seeing an Asian female in the MC role. He remarked that the entire structure of the field upon which MCs compete seems to exclude the feminine and presume the masculine, reaffirming the hypermasculine culture of hip-hop.

These culturally held stereotypes then become self-fulfilling prophecies. People assume there are no female MCs, so they don't become invited to events, and the continued invisibility of AAPI women in hip-hop is perpetuated. As Jackie, a Chinese/Taiwanese American spoken word artist observed:

I think it's pretty depressing to me, whether you're looking at the indie scene or on the commercial scene, how few females you see... You would think that the issue of having more—and I guess maybe because MCs in particular are so much the face of stuff, it's pretty depressing to really think of how little progress is being made in that way. And that's not to take away from the hard work that a lot of female MCs, DJs, and B-girls have been doing. It's just that I just wish that now in 2011 when there's a lineup or a major festival or when people are programming shows, there should be someone that's female in the lineup, and not just because people are like, I need a female, but because we make ourselves relevant to the point that people can't count us [as] completely irrelevant, no matter how much they want to.

This respondent acknowledges that both females and Asian Americans have been excluded from mainstream visibility, relegated to the margins, even though their talent exists in all roles across the hip-hop spectrum. The plight of AAPI women within hip-hop is that they are seen as unidimensional.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the sociological literature on gendered racism by honing in on a particular subculture and music/entertainment market where African American expressive cultural styles are the norm, and analyzes AAPI Americans' unique experiences within it. Whites often serve as the comparison group when social scientists analyze the lived experiences and trajectories of people of color. As AAPI Americans vie for success in a milieu where whiteness is not the norm, they inevitably face barriers that are both gender and race specific—some of them are similar to what they encounter in mainstream society, yet others are more unique. As they construct hip-hop as a space where racialized stereotypes are less pronounced, they nevertheless encounter limits to

being accepted and are relegated to the margins, where narrow gender norms still dominate.

Historically, a black/white divide has characterized the American racial order. However, this racial hierarchy does not take into account Latinos, AAPIs, other immigrant groups and multiracial people. Asian Americans are frequently stereotyped as falling closer to whites than blacks in the American racial hierarchy, due to their model minority status (Bonilla-Silva 2004). However, there exists a pressure for AAPIs to claim a bond with either black or white, which reflects their otherness and leaves them rejected by both racial groups (Okihiro 1994). Complicating matters further, racialized conceptions of gender for Asian American men emphasizes their otherness from blacks and whites. Asian American men are pegged as dorky computer nerds with no sex appeal, while Asian American women are categorized as submissive and exotic, with little creative to offer but their sexualized bodies (Esparto 1997; Ho and Mullen 2008).

These prevailing images of Asian American masculinity and femininity directly counter the representations of black men and women in popular media. In hip-hop, we see hypermasculine and powerful black men who garner “street cred” and women and the images of Black women as sexual aggressors or as angry and overbearing women who refuse to take flak from anyone. The narrow and exaggerated images of Asian American men and women in passive and obedient roles fuel the notion that Asian Americans are the antithesis of hip-hop, which often prides itself on its oppositional nature and display of hyper masculinity. Asian American men in hip-hop are dismissed and Asian American women are not taken seriously and objectified. The stereotype of the Asian

American man contradicts the accepted image of manhood in hip-hop culture (Ho and Mullen 2008). Asian American men are most visible in turntablism in hip-hop, but the media coverage on them is very minimal. DJs are more behind the scenes and are praised for their musical ability, whereas MCs are also known for their personalities and images. Because Asians MCs are almost nonexistent in the hip-hop mainstream, it becomes obvious that Asians are not seen as marketable as artists that can break into stardom in popular culture (Ho and Mullen 2008). Likewise, although there are female DJs and MCs who are as capable as their male counterparts the music market often demands sexualized roles for women as groupies, models and video dancers that only cement racialized and gendered stereotypes of women (Hobson and Bartlow 2008). Both Rose (1994) and Pough (2004) note the often overlooked history of women to the hip-hop, reinforcing their input in the genre, despite its masculinity. Yet and still, our AAPI respondents construct hip-hop as a space relatively free from limiting racial/ethnic expectations—from the margins and in gendered boxes all the while.

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Chapter IV

Conclusion

This study is an analysis of Asian American participation in hip-hop, a cultural art form firmly rooted in blackness. In particular, this research takes an intersectional approach to explore how gender and race interact to shape the experiences of the respondents. By conducting interviews with participants who occupy a range of roles in hip-hop culture, this study examines how Asian Americans from multiple ethnic backgrounds experience and gives a glimpse into a relatively unexplored facet of the Asian American experience. Furthermore, the study illuminates hip-hop as a liberating space, the common experiences and struggles shared by Blacks and Asian-Americans, and the ways in which gendered and racialized stereotyping is both shattered and maintained in hip-hop culture. By using a semi-structured interview guide, respondents could steer the conversation and provide information about their involvement in hip-hop. The data that emerge are significant as they illustrate how deeply entrenched gender and racial stereotypes are for Asian Americans are in American society.

Many participants choose hip-hop as an alternative to the constricting dichotomy of Asian Americans as either “whitewashed” or “fresh off the boat,” allowing them to establish an alternate identity (Chou 2012). This praise of hip-hop as a liberating space, however, is mitigated by observations and experiences attesting to continued racial barriers to relative success in the genre that are often gender-specific. The caricatured images of Asian American men and women in submissive and compliant roles stoke the

notion that Asian Americans are the antithesis of hip-hop, which often prides itself on its oppositional stance and displays of hyper masculinity. For some AAPI men, hip-hop is an arena where they can assert hyper masculinity that opposes the asexual, effeminate stereotype accorded to them by society at large. Accordingly, some respondents believe the reason why we do not see as many Asian American men in hip-hop is not just because they are not black, but because they face race-specific stereotypes. For some AAPI men interviewed for this project, the task of measuring up to either white hegemonic or black masculinity can be unattainable. Failure seems to be almost guaranteed, as AAPI Americans again may feel the need to fit into whiteness or blackness.

Some women AAPI hip-hop participants likewise define hip-hop as a space that is less boxed-in and regimented, yet hip-hop does reinforce ideas about Asian femininity that exist in mainstream U.S. culture. Whether cast as the seductive and cunning Dragon Lady or the Lotus Blossom, Asian American women are often represented in media as hypersexual women who capture men with their feminine wiles (Espiritu 1997; Shimizu 2007). The hyperfeminine stereotype fits right into the already hypermasculine culture's portrayal of the idealized objectified female. Thus, compared with African American women in hip-hop, AAPI women may be more preferred, or at least equally preferred for backgrounded or voiceless roles. AAPI American women who desire roles within hip-hop beyond just video eye-candy or behind-the-scenes production face resistance. Roles in the foreground such as the MC that showcase intelligence and the ability to be outspoken can be more difficult to access, as they may not be viewed as legitimate artists

capable of creative vision and independent ideas of their own (Hobson and Bartlow 2008). This may speak to the idea that the music market often demands sexualized roles for women as groupies, models and video dancers that only cement racialized and gendered stereotypes of women. This dynamic seems to be at work here for my women AAPI respondents as they go up against the challenges of being taken seriously as talented artists who can take their place front stage.

Various respondents face resistance to the notion of hip-hop participation from family members that appear to stem from colorblind racism. Sometimes, respondents identify the use of words by others like “hip-hop” and “ghetto” which appear to be colorblind, coded language for criticizing their “step-down” into blackness by others. Whether stated covertly or overtly, the message is sent that the AAPI hip-hop participant is violating the expected racial order in some fundamental way, revealing the anti-black racism of wider society. This same dynamic operates to meld hip-hop and blackness together in the language of colorblind racism. Some respondents recount resistance from their elders to their participation in hip-hop which seems to mirror a cultural racism aspect of colorblind racism. This perspective plays up a deficient work ethic and laziness for the position of blacks, while lessening the reality of institutional racism and prejudice as the more likely cause for their rank in the racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2010). This would suggest that elders believe hip-hop involvement would signal stepping closer to blackness. To keep as much distance from blacks as possible is a foundational step in the “whitening process” (Brodkin 1999).

Being critical of relations with blacks through hip-hop participation appears to be a way for these family members to attempt to shield the respondents from more discrimination, as they already encounter racism because of their racial background. Evidence of anti-black racism could also be tied to an immigrant work-ethic, where non-black immigrants express negative view of American blacks. Through anti-black attitudes, non-Blacks have the possibility of entrance into whiteness through acceptance of white standards (Warren and Twine 1997). It appears that this could be a way to preserve their relative privilege compared to blacks. The immigrant parents of my respondents note that hip-hop (and consequently its blackness) seems like the opposite of their belief of working hard to give one's children a better life in a new homeland. Interestingly, many respondents feel that their parents' positions were a result of to their age and their lack of interaction with blacks, coming from countries where the black population was almost nonexistent. In addition, they may have absorbed pre-existing mainstream media and cultural images of blacks that were not positive. Furthermore, the immigrant ideology of Asians (and Latinos) could transform into unfavorable views of Blacks who they feel do not welcome an achievement ideology (Murguia and Forman 2003). Immigrants attribute failures of U.S.-born minorities to deficits in character or intellectual ability instead of barriers such as institutional racism (Okazawa-Rey and Wong 1997). Since racism is a staple of American culture, it is no surprise that some of it would be present among Asian Americans.

The clearest evidence of black and Asian American coalition in hip-hop is where Asian Americans have recognized their shared struggles with prejudice, discrimination,

and exploitation voiced through hip-hop music and culture. The word “struggle” is commonly used in respondents’ answers when reflecting on their shared connections with blacks. These “struggles” blacks and Asian Americans face (especially racial prejudice) are much more akin to each other than anything to which whites could relate. However, it is important to acknowledge that this “shared history” does not account for the reality that many Asian immigrants did not deal with racism in their homeland that blacks do here in America. That being said, experiences of racial oppression through white supremacy in America may resonate in a similar way with Asian Americans and blacks, which is a common theme in hip-hop lyrics.

The “grind” was also a theme that appeared in the data many times to refer to hard work and the financial rewards that came with this success. Even though the various Asian migration trajectories to the US are distinct from the forced migration of African slavery, respondents nevertheless made connections between the “rags to riches” stories of hip-hop legends like Notorious B.I.G. and their own families’ immigrant success stories. Respondents acknowledge that whites most certainly have financial struggles as well, but do not face the racial hurdles that would make them “less accepted into the American culture.” It is these racial barriers to full acceptance into society that these Asian American hip-hop participants feel links them to Blacks, and often they are exposed to those shared stories through the content of hip-hop lyrics and biographies. Respondents noted that ethnic distinctions matter when evaluating such factors as economic and educational success, a key piece of information often ignored by the model minority myth. Whether Black or Asian American, a commonality was the shared

experience of being marginalized from the mainstream and feeling like one must to work twice as hard to overcome the odds.

Some participants in this project point out their involvement in hip-hop culture is seen as them “acting black” from their peers, hinting to the perception that they were appropriating black culture in some form. Far from “acting black,” some participants state they are simply being themselves as opposed to attempting to “be white” which was definitely not their identity either. For my respondents, it is not about being black or white, but simply socializing with those with common interests in hip-hop culture. Possibly due to the connotations of the model minority myth, peers expect that Asian Americans should be closer to whiteness rather than associated with the black, urban roots of hip-hop. However, in my participants' eyes hip-hop is a multiracial cultural space different from many social groups they experience that are mostly racially homogenous.

Other respondents view hip-hop culture as a space of empowerment and where one can speak out against racial oppression. The “underdog” and “rebellion” are two words that came up in my interviews as related components involved in speaking out against racial oppression and battling against the mainstream culture that often fosters and condones racial discrimination. Here, pushing back against American mainstream society that often mutes AAPI identity through rudimentary stereotypes, hip-hop becomes appealing and allows Asian Americans to find a voice of resistance against this simplistic typecasting. The idea of finding a voice combats the silent or passive stereotypes associated with Asian Americans and these respondents have an ability to

present a more multi-faceted identity to society. Weaving in the concept of struggle discussed previously, hip-hop is admired admiration for an understanding of shared struggle that allows participants to find a more powerful voice for themselves.

One theme that emerges in the interview data is an express admiration for how hip-hop encourages the idea of racial unity. Those who participate in hip-hop thrive in a location where blacks can consolidate around their racial identity and share accounts of their racial history and heritage through creative expression. There is a sentiment among some respondents is disappointment that Asian Americans do not have the same level of racial unity as blacks. This level of racial togetherness can serve as a powerful political vehicle for speaking out against discrimination, mistreatment, and inequality. This could signal a positive direction for Asian Americans in the future, as hip-hop could be utilized for a tool of self-empowerment and connection to racial identity for AAPIs.

Assimilation models like segmented assimilation or downward assimilation theories are unable to fully characterize AAPI hip-hop involvement. For instance, the segmented assimilation model investigates how Asian Americans assimilate into whiteness but still maintain cultural links to their native culture (e.g. language) for its protective qualities in sharing cultural tie to co-ethnics. On the other hand, downward assimilation posits that some Asian Americans (and other immigrant groups) may assimilate “down” to blackness, the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy. These models do not quite fit the experiences recounted in this study as segmented assimilation assumes an assimilation into mainstream white culture and does not deal specifically with the importance and usefulness of having a strong counter frame with which to resist racism.

Additionally, my participants are not abandoning their culture to engage with hip-hop. For these respondents, an alternate way to challenge racism was not to solely maintain cultural/ethnic ties, but also nurture links to this black cultural art form that voices “the struggle”, so common to all who face intersectional oppression.

Overall, the involvement of AAPI men and women in hip-hop due to their position in racial and gender hierarchies interact with stereotypical notions of AAPI people in wider society that push these participants to the peripheries of the genre rather than spotlight them. As a consequence, I believe this to be less an indicator of hip-hop culture’s openness than a testament to how binding the mainstream US culture is for AAPI Americans. As they tout hip-hop as a space where racialized stereotypes are diminished, AAPI Americans nevertheless encounter limits to being accepted and are relegated to the margins, where narrow gender norms still dominate. My respondents surprisingly find refuge in a subcultural community often condemned for its sexism, misogyny, and at times anti-Asian prejudices. It is because they understand that racism, sexism, and homophobia exist everywhere, but particularly in mainstream society. So perhaps they choose association with a subculture already known for its bravado rather than the limiting mainstream. To have conditional acceptance in hip-hop begins to appear more desirable in comparison.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One main limitation of this research project is the sample size. A larger sample would facilitate a more in-depth analysis of differences and similarities in findings among

respondents with the same ethnic background. In Bonilla-Silva's tri-racial hierarchy, the ethnic background of Asian Americans determines whether they will fall into either the honorary white or collective black category. This distinction is based on phenotype and those in the collective black will generally have darker skin. For instance, do Filipino and Hmong respondents (in the collective Black category) have different experiences with interracial relations with Blacks versus Korean, Chinese and Japanese respondents (who are considered honorary whites)? This current study includes participants from the both the East and West Coast, but interviews with more respondents would help to shine a light on regional differences. An analysis of similarities and differences based on geographic of a larger sample would be particularly salient for AAPI hip-hop participants because hip-hop has been well-documented as a regionally contextualized genre (Forman 2000; Hopkinson 2012; Sarig 2007), so that we might expect some differences between AAPI respondents who hail from regions marked by the history of slavery and those on the West Coast with its relatively more multiethnic flavor, less steeped in the black-white dichotomy. Additionally, interviews with hip-hop participants in other regions of the country like the South or Midwest could reveal interracial relations in major metropolitan areas.

I acknowledge that the examination of social class could be fruitful as hip-hop has its foundations in voicing the experiences of mostly black urban males of lower socioeconomic status. Most respondents in this research come from middle-class backgrounds, so it would be interesting to explore how this factor interplays with their connection to hip-hop. Another direction for future research would be to interview more

older respondents as currently there are only 4 respondents in their 30s and 40s. Older respondents could have a different relationship with hip-hop culture due to more time spent in the scene. Generational status would be another worthwhile variable to explore. It may be the case that first generation respondents may have a different connection to hip-hop culture than a respondent who is second or third generation. Overall, drawing from a larger sample would make the data more generalizable to a larger population. Many fruitful future avenues exist in this area of research. My primary aim is to present an empirically-grounded exploration of some of the racial experiences of AAPI Americans who go against prevailing stereotypes to participate in hip-hop culture, and the excitement as well as barriers they face within its terrain.

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APPENDIX 1

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	SES*	Role	Geog Reg	Generation
Michael	27	Male	Chinese/Indonesian	D	MC	Bay Area	2nd
Aaron	29	Male	Chinese	D	Fan	LA	2nd
Paul	28	Male	Korean	D	Fan/works with hip-hop artists	LA	1st
Derrick	28	Male	Japanese	D	DJ	LA	2nd
Kris	20	Male	Vietnamese	B	Dancer	LA	2nd
Jessamin	21	Female	Filipino	D	Dancer	LA	1st
David	29	Male	Filipino	D	DJ/fan	LA	1st
Ryan	21	Male	Filipino	C	fan	LA	2nd
Claudia	19	Female	Thai/White	D	fan	LA	1st
Adrian	29	Male	Filipino	C/D	DJ	LA	1st
Daniel	28	Male	Korean	D	Producer	LA	1st
Liza	24	Female	Thai/White	D	Fan	Orange County	2nd
Matthew	28	Male	Filipino	B	Fan	San Diego	1st
Lauren	24	Female	Filipino	D	Fan	Orange County	2nd
Desiree	24	Female	Filipino	D	Fan	Orange County	1st

Edward	25	Male	Filipino	A	Hip-hop organizer/studio engineering	Seattle	2nd
Calvin	46	Male	Filipino	D	Graffiti artist, poet, collector, MC, dancer, DJ, producer, hip collective co-founder	Seattle	3rd
Katie	26	Female	Filipino	C/D	Hip-hop collective member and organizer,	Seattle	2nd
Jeffrey	21	Male	Vietnamese	E	Dancer	DC	1.5
Amy	24	Female	Macanese/Chinese	C	Dancer/fan	DC (grew up in NYC)	2
Jackie	33	Female	Chinese/Taiwanese	D	MC/spoken word artist	NYC (Grew up in Chicago)	2
Lisa	31	Female	Thai/African American	B/C	DJ/radio host	VA/NY	2nd
Stephanie	31	Female	Filipino	C/D	Producer/promoter/MC	VA	1.5

*Key:

Poor/working poor (less than high school or high school diploma; minimum wage or “low skill” work that does not require a professional license or certification; receiving fixed income like social security disability, child support/alimony, TANF, or unemployment benefits)

B. Working class (high school diploma; technical certificate/apprenticeship or associate’s degree in a trade; “blue collar” work)

C. Lower middle class (some college; semi-professional experiences; salaried work)

D. Middle class (college degree; semi-professional or professional work; you are not the first person in your family to attend college)

E. Upper middle class (advanced graduate degree beyond undergraduate; profession with high degree of occupational prestige; some degree of wealth in addition to income)

F. Upper class (advanced graduate degree beyond undergraduate; profession with high degree of occupational prestige; more wealth than most average Americans; elite cultural experiences)

APPENDIX 2

BACKGROUND SURVEY

SECTION I: QUESTIONS ABOUT YOURSELF

1. What best describes your role in hip-hop?
☐ MC
☐ Musician
☐ DJ
☐ Promoter
☐ Manager
☐ Producer
☐ Other _____
2. How do you racially/ethnically identify? (check all that apply)
☐ White
☐ Black and/or African American
☐ Hispanic and/or Latino
☐ Asian American and/or Pacific Islander
☐ Native American and/or American Indian
☐ other (please specify): _____
3. In interactions with people who do not know you well, how are you typically perceived racially/ethnically? (check all that apply)
☐ White
☐ Black and/or African American
☐ Hispanic and/or Latino
☐ Asian American and/or Pacific Islander
☐ Native American and/or American Indian
☐ other (please specify): _____
4. If there are specific national origin/ethnic identities you identify with that you did not include in the above question, please list them here (e.g., Jamaican, Mexican, Korean, Vietnamese, Italian):

5. Please choose one (or more) to describe your gender:
☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other (please describe): _____
6. Please give the year you were born: _____
7. Which of the following best describes your educational background?
☐ Some high school
☐ High-school graduate

- ☐ Some college
- ☐ College Graduate
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ PhD or professional degree

8. Please identify your "generation":

- ☐ First (you were born *and grew up in* a country other than the U.S.)
- ☐ "1.5" generation (you were born outside the U.S. but spent most of your life in the U.S.)
- ☐ Second (1 or both of your parents were born outside the U.S. but you were born in the U.S.)
- ☐ Third (1 or both of your grandparents were born outside the U.S., but your parents and you were born in the U.S.)
- ☐ Fourth or later (your grandparents were born in the U.S., along with all subsequent generations)

9. Please place yourself in one of the social class categories below that best describes you/or those in your household ***while growing up***.

- ☐ Poor/working poor (minimum wage or "low skill" work that does not require a professional license or certification; receiving fixed income like social security disability, child support/alimony, TANF, or unemployment benefits)
- ☐ Working class (technical certificate/apprenticeship or associate's degree in a trade; "blue collar" work)
- ☐ Lower middle class (some college; semi-professional experiences; salaried work)
- ☐ Middle class (college degree; semi-professional or professional work)
- ☐ Upper middle class (profession with high degree of occupational prestige; some degree of wealth in addition to income)
- ☐ Upper class (profession with high degree of occupational prestige; more wealth than most average Americans)