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Superhybridity and the Swallowing of Subculture: Collisions of Afro-Asian Cross-Cultural Production and Consumption in Post-Internet American Popular Culture

Valentia Sundell
Macalester College, val.sundell@gmail.com

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Advisor: John Kim, Media and Cultural Studies

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Abstract

Responding to a recent resurgence in Afro-Asian imagery in the American consciousness, this paper examines the meaning and direction of the contemporary Afro-Asian relationship in post-Internet American popular culture. To investigate these questions, this paper constructs a brief history of the American Afro-Asian relationship through the performance of racial identity and cross-cultural production and consumption from the 1850s through the 2000s. An increase in American Afro-Asian imagery has not come from a place of abstraction, but rather stems from a lengthy and complex history of cross-cultural collisions, collaboration, and convergence along with a post-Internet that allows for the ready flow of cultural origin and loose identity policing. In the contemporary moment, the instability and dislocation of cybernetics meets the transnational, transcultural character of technocapitalism to paint a picture of the swallowing of subculture and cultural difference through an increasingly superhybrid Internet. This paper works through the formulations of these histories and theories to create a context for present-day cross-cultural intersections of American Blackness and East Asianness. Using the case studies of the video work of African-American rapper Kendrick Lamar and Asian-American music label 88rising, this paper argues that this contemporary moment offers room for both the continuation of hegemonic, non-resistant, racist practices and oppositional counterculture.

Honors Thesis in Media & Cultural Studies

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Table of Contents

"He's 16? This n---- is the future!" So says rapper Goldlink after watching the music video for "Dat $tick," the 2016 release by the Indonesian rapper Rich Brian, for the first time. In the video, Rich Brian raps lyrics like "you don't wanna fuck with a chigga like me when I pull up in that Maserati/ better duck 'fore ya brain splatter on the concrete/ I'ma hit you with that .45 bullet hit yo neck round the bow tie" while wearing a polo shirt and a Reebok fanny pack. A stand-in for the video itself, the word "chigga," used both in Rich Brian's previous rap name, Rich Chigga, and in the lyrics of "Dat $tick," is a portmanteau that plays upon traditional stereotypes about Asian and Black men: the Asian man as tourist, as weak, as soft, and the Black man as gangster, as dangerous, as violent. With Rich Brian rapping in classic "dadwear" with a crew of other Asian rappers rocking with guns, the music video to "Dat $tick" became an unexpected viral hit, due in equal parts to its comedy and controversy. Carefully calculating a response to the racial questions raised by the initial video, Rich Brian's label, 88rising, released the video "Rappers React to Rich Chigga," using the positive responses of popular Black rappers to legitimize Rich Brian as a serious rap artist. One rapper in the video was Ghostface Killah, a member of the famous rap group Wu-Tang Clan, an African-American hip-hop group that pulls its name and philosophy from kung-fu film. Ghostface loved Rich Brian and the video, saying, "It's different. It ain't the same shit you've seen like everybody all tryna get blinged out and all that. He's him. He's just him…I'll get on that track…let me get on that. He's blowing up out there." Before long, a new version of "Dat $tick" was out—with Ghostface Killah's verse on the remix. Of course, as a member of Wu-Tang, Ghost was used to bridging the Afro-Asian divide through hip-hop.

Over the past few years, popular American Black rappers have frequently used traditionally Asian visual signifiers in their most-watched videos, while East Asian rappers have found unprecedented success in the American market by capitalizing on traditionally Black visual signifiers. With both sides occurring simultaneously, what has led us to this convergent moment in American popular culture? How have global cultural flows in the post-Internet age created avenues for new intersections of cultural identity? Is this hybridization the reproduction and transference of past potentially harmful tropes and stereotypes, or does it represent a transformation and progressive shift towards a new cultural cosmopolitanism? If it represents a transformation, what implications arise regarding the cultural production of identity and representation in the Internet age?

In scholar bell hooks' text *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks remembers beginning to write film criticism in response to director Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It.* hooks writes that Lee's work in the film "mimics the cinematic construction of white womanhood as object, replacing her body as text on which to write male desire with the Black female body. It is transference without transformation" (hooks 126). This conception helps us characterize and compare constructions and performances of racial identity in media texts. Using transference and transformation as a framework informs our understanding of cross-cultural resistance and representation. Through this metric, we can ask whether images reinforce hegemonic tropes or whether they disrupt them, transforming our cultural consciousness through transgressive cultural production. When hegemonic practices and patterns are maintained, surface-level shifts in cultural identity and signifiers cannot mean transformation in systems of representation.

The purpose of this project is to examine the meaning and direction of the contemporary Afro-Asian relationship in post-Internet American popular culture. To adequately tackle this question, several inquiries must be made. First, regarding the notion of "meaning," this paper will outline the process of signification. Grounding this analysis, this paper will utilize the frameworks of Saussurean semiotics, building from Lacan, Laplanche, and Hall's understandings of floating and enigmatic signifiers to incorporate Hayles' conception of flickering signifiers in the digital age. Next, moving to the question of "direction," this paper will detail traditional, non-resistant tropes and stereotypes of American Blackness and East Asianness in American popular culture, noting the common forms that these historically take. From there, this paper will analyze the historical Afro-Asian relationship in American popular culture, looking to past cross-cultural production and consumption to inform us about the complex collisions and solidarities between two minority cultures from the 1850s to the present. This historical questioning creates the context for contemporary American Afro-Asian encounters. To examine the "direction" of cultural production and consumption, we must build a timeline of the American Afro-Asian relationship through representation in the past, present, and future—although it is important to recognize that no history can be truly comprehensive.

Following this history, this paper turns to setting forth a theoretical conception of post-Internet American popular culture, necessary in setting the stage upon which contemporary Afro-Asian cross-cultural production unfolds. Building upon this foundation, the third section of this paper argues that signification has changed with the invention of the Internet, creating space for transnationality, transculturality, and

superhybridity through dematerialization, destabilization, and disembodiment. This conception synthesizes ideas surrounding the instability and dislocation of cybernetics with the transnational, transcultural character of technocapitalism to paint a picture of the swallowing of culture through an increasingly superhybrid Internet. Each of these processes, histories, and theories comes together to critically construct the foundation for the contemporary moment in the American Afro-Asian relationship.

Finally, this paper will interrogate complex cultural producers and cultural objects in this post-Internet media environment through looking at the case studies of African-American rapper Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN.* album and tour along with the American East Asian rap label 88rising's viral success with their videos and media strategy. The last section of this paper will investigate the producers' use of both transferred and transformational tropes in their recent media production. Through analyzing Lamar and 88rising's use of commodity, space, and sexuality in their recent video work, this paper will examine the cultural production and digital information exchange between popular contemporary American Black and Asian rappers. I argue that in building from a mutual respect and understanding of the history and reciprocity of American Black and Asian popular resistance, Lamar and 88rising have moved strategically toward a new model of cross-cultural superhybrid cosmopolitanism, revealing potential avenues for the artistic intersection of identities opened by the Internet age. That said, although Internet flows create and maintain this new social order in which signifiers are loose and identities are superhybrid, Lamar and 88rising are far from transgressive, using traditional hegemonic tropes of patriarchy and commodity to game success in the capitalist global market.

As questions and concerns arise surrounding both the dangers and positive potential of the Internet in cultural identity formation, this paper addresses Afro-Asian popular online representation as an overlooked but significant piece of this discourse. Race relations and cultural formations in the United States often seem to lie on a black-white binary, but media and cultural scholars and researchers must critique and complicate this popular conception through critical study and interrogation. Acknowledging the vital role of media producers of all races and ethnicities in American cultural production is an act of resistance through existence. Still, resistance within a hegemonic system is not necessarily transgressive or anti-capitalist; this paper uses Jörg Heiser's term 'superhybridity' to challenge the postcolonial, largely positive use of the term 'hybridity' and speak to the hegemonic, neoliberal reality of cross-cultural, globalized identity. This conception of post-Internet superhybrid cultural identity formation expands the existing literature centering on the Afro-Asian relationship and history in American popular culture, questioning the modes and mechanisms of cross-cultural production and consumption as technology continues to evolve. Ultimately, following this trajectory, I conclude that a complex history of cross-cultural production will be overtakenf by superhybrid performances of transgressive production in the post-Internet, representing the triumph of technocapitalism over cultural resistance.

In this project, I ask the following questions: Does Afro-Asian cross-cultural production in post-Internet American popular culture represent a transference of stereotypes or a transformation of historical tropes and traditions? How have global cultural flows aided by advances in digital technology and virtual community created avenues for new intersections of cultural identity? What implications arise from this new

superhybridity regarding the meaning and direction of the contemporary Afro-Asian relationship? To answer these questions, this project assesses traditional constructions of African-Americanness and Far East Asian-Americanness, followed by a historical analysis of Afro-Asian representation in the United States. This builds a foundation for an evaluation of Afro-Asian cross-cultural production in the post-Internet, which this paper will examine through a theoretical approach to post-Internet cultural identity formation and the case studies of Kendrick Lamar and 88rising. Through this timeline, I argue that a recent resurgence in Afro-Asian imagery in the American consciousness stems from a lengthy and complex history of cross-cultural collisions with dominate white cultural production, global capital flows, politics and policy, and with each other. In the post-Internet moment, the dislocation of cybernetics and transnational technocapitalism meet, to paint a picture of the swallowing of subculture and cultural difference through an increasingly decontextualized Internet. The context of this complex history of Afro-Asian cross-cultural production and consumption is therefore swallowed by an oversaturation in origin and meaning. That said, this moment offers room for both the reinforcement of hegemonic, non-resistant, racist tropes and the disruptive power of oppositional counterculture.

2. Making Meaning

To center this analysis of representation, identity, and information flows, we must first define the sign. Saussurean semiotics tell us that the sign is comprised of the signifier and the signified, meaning that we see an image and then derive meaning from it. Signification refers to the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs; it is a means of production as the sign becomes part of the physical world through

articulating a meaning (Williams 38). Signs often represent the interests of the ruling group, presenting dominant discourses and ideologies—as is the case for constructions of American East Asianness and American Blackness (Williams 168). Beyond a traditional sign, in which a meaning is conveyed and interpreted through the consumption of the signifier, producing the signified, scholars like Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, and Stuart Hall have employed the terms 'floating signifier' and 'enigmatic signifier' to hone in on alternate productions of meaning. The floating signifier refers to the continuous production and reification of meaning. Since the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, its meaning can continually evolve. This, importantly, reveals that signification is a social construction, available for hijacking and jamming. Meanwhile, the enigmatic signifier, adopted from Lacan, has been redefined by Laplanche to mean the gestures, actions, or words of the other or what can never fully be understood. Laplanche calls "the enigmatic messages of the other" primal seduction, revealing more about our own subjectivity than the other that enigmatic signifiers purport to represent (Hinton 640). Here, Laplanche uses the term *das Andere*, the German word for the 'other,' noting that otherness is "'something that eludes phenomenal manifestation,' and yet…is the opaque core around which our descriptions circulate (Hinton 641). The enigmatic signifier retains the characteristic of "signifying to" yet does not signify any specific location or event, producing a signified that is impossible to fully grasp.

Floating signifiers illuminate the manmade process of producing meaning, as the signified derived can never be fixed. Using enigmatic signifiers, we construct our notion of both the self and the other. Hegemonic structures propagate ideology through the use

of signs, helping to produce our conception of identity through representation. New Left cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that race works like a language, noting that "signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its making meaning practices…their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation" (Hall 8). Although these constructions may be arbitrary, they alter our sociopolitical and spatial-temporal systems, affecting how humans interact with each other and their environment. The real-world impact of human systems of signification are realized powerfully through the process of othering and the construction of mental and physical boundaries. In the next sections, this paper will use the framework of signification and enigma to briefly explore the formation of American East Asianness and American Blackness, looking specifically towards representations of style, sexuality, and space.

3. Constructions of American East Asianness

Signification is the active process of constructing meaning, forming the systems and concepts of a culture. How is American East Asianness typically signified? The following section offers a brief outline of East Asian imagery in American popular culture. This project focuses on Far East Asian imagery, particularly looking at traditional representations of the Chinese and Japanese in the United States. At times, this project also references representations of the Vietnamese. I mainly narrow in on representations of the Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese in American popular culture because these are the most common cultural and political fantasies of East Asianness in the United States. This scope shifts a bit in the post-Internet era, as members of the rap label 88rising, one of my case studies, are primarily Southeast Asian. Common representations of East

Asianness in the United States are marked by a Western, Orientalist conception of Asianness as enigmatic, as futuristic, as sexually desirous. These signifiers are arbitrary and constructed by dominant cultural producers. As a result, representations of East Asianness in American popular culture reveal the spatial and sexual imaginaries of cultural producers more than they reveal any truism about East Asian identity. Common spatial imaginaries of East Asianness in American media include Asian settings and cities as enigma and mystery, along with Asian cities and objects as futuristic and impossible-to-decipher. Hegemonic, patriarchic media producers also create a vision of East Asian women and bodies as hypersexual, deviant, and submissive. These signifiers and stereotypes maintain a hegemonic white culture, reflecting Western desire and projections; in America, Asianness is dominated onscreen, which furthers white domination offscreen.

Laplanche's concept of the "primal seduction" of the enigmatic signifier applies readily to the case of East Asian filmic representation. Common tropes of East Asian representation include the spiritual magician, the barbaric Fu Manchu, the Dragon Lady, the submissive freak-slave, the kung-fu master, and so on. Signifiers of East Asianness are often enigmatic, signifying to viewers without any possible meaning to derive. These signifiers include neon signs in foreign languages, chaotic crowds, mysterious orbs and chests, and impossible-to-decipher symbols. As signifiers float, East Asia in the Western conception cannot be fixed or inert but rather must be, as Hall writes above, subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation (Hall 8). Construction is an active process on the part of Far East Orientalists and Orientalist systems, revealed through the examination of spatial and sexual imaginaries of Far East Asianness in the American

consciousness. Although there are countless stereotypes of East Asianness in American culture, in the following subsections, I focus on the creation of spatial and sexual imaginaries through images projected onto Asian settings, objects, and bodies, since these tropes prove interesting to track from traditional film to post-Internet digital media.

a. Mise-en-scène and Mystery: Spatial Imaginaries

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Orient represented "sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, and intense energy," a free-floating concept far more than an actual place (Said 67). This concept points to the Orient and the Far East as spatial imaginary, spread through Orientalist imagery in the United States. Writing about these visual tropes in his book titled *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier*, author Homay King notes,

> "Depictions of East Asia…tend to deploy a predictable set of visual tropes, including crowds of anonymous figures who move chaotically, often without regard for the rules of continuity; foreshortened, disorienting spaces that collapse foreground and background; and mise-en-scènes cluttered with hanging objects, neon signs, and layers of screens and windows that make reflections difficult to discern from their subjects…The Chinatowns, Tokyos, and Shanghais depicted in these films are dumping grounds for dead letters, overdetermined icons, and mutterings that belong to no dialect in particular…[they are] enclaves littered with signifiers that blink in the streets with neither clear sender nor obvious recipient. These filmic worlds often contain curious objects or details of ornament that seem to lie outside of rational [Western] systems of knowledge and communication" (3).

These visual tropes create the Far East for the Western consumer: a world oversaturated with signifiers that send clear messages to their audience, paradoxically, through their very distortion and lack of clarity. In this way, Orientalist images construct and maintain the enigma of the Orient and East Asia as a place impossible to understand or traverse. Regarding the construction of the Orient by the West, Edward Said writes, "Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern

political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (Said 20). Although Said primarily writes about formations of the Middle East, the Orient in the American mind includes the Far East, like China and Japan. These representations of the Far East in American popular culture reflect Western fears and desires, projected onto Asian bodies and landscapes.

Roman Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown* illustrates the spatial imaginary of the enigmatic Far East in the American consciousness. Named for Los Angeles' Chinatown, the title of the film is referenced ominously throughout the movie, yet the neighborhood only appears onscreen during the last scenes of the film. This choice serves to shroud the location in mystery; the film coyly references some sort of traumatic, sexual encounter that occurred when Jake Gittes, the protagonist, previously worked in Chinatown, although the film's audience is never let in on the secret. Instead of serving as a central location for the film's plot, Chinatown refers to a place of crime and secrecy where nobody can be trusted and nobody—certainly no LA detective—knows what is going on, making corruption run rampant and rendering police-work ineffective. Chinatown signifies the unknown, the indecipherable, and the enigmatic, intended to "signify to" viewers without ever holding further meaning. Beyond the indecipherable, Chinatown is also associated with deviance and femininity, as with the character of Evelyn Mulwray, who viewers find out is connected to the Chinese immigrant community and is visually Orientalized (King 77). Mulwray meets an untimely end at the film's conclusion. Her death duly punishes her for these mysterious connections and secrets to the Chinese community while also demonstrating the corruption and cruelty that abounds in Chinatown. As used by Polanski, the Chinatown signifier capitalizes on Western fears of

a yellow peril: the gruesome violence of Evelyn Mulwray's death and the dangerous sexual deviance perpetrated by Noah Cross, buried beneath the surface of an impossible-to-understand Chinatown. If anything, the empty signifier of 'Chinatown' invites more fear, since characters and viewers alike work to imagine the worst-case scenario. The spatial imaginary of Far East Asianness depicted here is not unique to Polanski's *Chinatown*, although this film is a particularly emblematic example.

Chinatown uses the enigmatic signifier of 'Chinatown' to construct Far East Asianness in the American popular consciousness through an empty, unknown setting, which allows audiences to build a larger-than-life image of the neighborhood. In other films, the enigma of Far East Asianness is built through a chaos of incoherent symbols and objects pictorially cluttering a film's mise-en-scène. Unlike in *Chinatown*, in these films, viewers are shown Orientalist symbols and objects visually, yet the symbols and objects nevertheless maintain their enigmatic character. These objects "taunt both detective and viewer with the question of their own significance," indicating the presence of underlying secrets (King 58). Enigmatic Asian signifiers in classic Hollywood film and film noir include objects like Asian coins, jade jewelry, Oriental rugs, Buddha figurines, silk tapestries, incense bowls, and carved wooden chests. These objects are endlessly intriguing to the films' characters and spectators, entangled in the imaginary of their place of origin. Orientalist films like *Blade Runner* offer "a visual field that borders on incoherence," strewn with rubbish-filled Chinatowns, Japanese corporate logos, neon dragons, and Thai sculptures (King 97). Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* is set in a cityscape saturated with "siren-like" signs, appearing to "defy the laws of Western perspective" through gravity-defying highways and skylines (King 163). These objects

and settings comprise a Far East Orientalist spatial imaginary. Homay King dubs these melodramatic objects "the Shanghai gesture," alluding with his language to a "double abduction," in which an Oriental aesthetic takes over the logic of the film while the film noir protagonist is "threatened with a loss of cognitive facilities when he happens upon one of these knowing Orientalist objects" (51).

b. Body and Desire: Sexual Imaginaries

The Orientalist constructs the sexual imaginary of an Asian woman and thus alters how Asian women are treated and perceived in their everyday life. From 1934 through the mid-1950s, the restrictive Hayes production code forbade "scenes of passion," requiring that the sanctity of the institution of marriage be upheld at all times. Ella Shohat writes that Hollywood exploited the Orient, Africa, and Latin America, using their locations and people as a pretext for eroticized images. The Western obsession with the Harem and eroticized Oriental dancing reveals the intersections of America's gender and colonial domination. Sexual images of Asianness gave filmmakers narrative license to expose flesh and depict rape without risking censorship (Shohat 46). The forbidden nature of these scenes made them all the more enticing for movie-going audiences.

In response to the restrictive Hayes Code, Hollywood filmmakers "[authorized] the proliferation of sexual images projected onto an otherized elsewhere" (Shohat 46)." By projecting their own desire on Asian bodies, Western filmmakers and audiences transferred any and all shame or fear of transgression and perversion onto the otherized body. Through Orientalist desire, femininity and mystery are combined to symbolize "the feminine enigma" of the East Asian Orient (King 77). For Homay King, the feminine enigma refers to "figures of opacity or otherness," presented through their

"unknowability and potential for danger" (King 77). Mystery allows for fantasy and imaginary, letting Western viewers create the sexualized Asia that they desire. In one trope—that of the sexually submissive Asian woman—the "hero allows the heroine to overcome 'her sexual repression,' but the real purpose of the narrative is to permit the male viewer to project his 'unthinkable' sexual fantasies into an exotic imaginary space 'where women are defenseless, playing off the masculine fantasy of complete control over the Western woman without any intervening code of morality'" (Studlar 102).

Asian men, on the other hand, are either codified as weak and emasculated or as predatory rapists, as was the case in yellow peril discourses. The yellow peril trope links national-cultural and personal fears through the notion of the threat of the rape of white society (Marchetti 3). Through this fantasy, the Asian man rapes the white woman, while British or American heroes must fight to save the white woman, and therefore white civilization. These tales often feature an Asian captor who forces a white woman into slavery or sexual contact. One stereotypical 'yellow peril' filmic character is that of Fu Manchu, an Asian man who is simultaneously a sexual predator and a dark, powerful occultist. The female equivalent would perhaps be the Dragon Lady trope, or an Asian woman who is cruel, evil, merciless, and calculating. Coinciding with anti-immigration rhetoric surrounding the Chinese and Japanese, the yellow peril narrative directly connects media representation of sexual aggression to sociopolitical dynamics.

4. Constructions of American Blackness

Similar to the construction of East Asianness in American popular culture, constructions of Blackness in American popular culture are also arbitrary and hegemonic. This section will briefly discuss common tropes of Blackness in American media, again

focusing on the creation of spatial and sexual imaginaries of African-Americanness through the use of setting, objects, and bodies. There are countless traditional, racist stereotypes and representations of African-Americans in American popular culture, but these sections hone in on the use of setting and sexuality. This project centers on representations of African-Americanness within American Blackness, recognizing that African-American imagery holds a unique, racist history that continues to African-American imagery today. Although the scope of these sections and this paper is limited to African-American imagery within depictions of American Blackness, this focus is by no means intended to further neglect the experiences of other American Black diasporic groups, including Afro-Caribbeanness.

As is the case for traditional signifiers of East Asianness in American media, these signifiers are constructed by dominant cultural producers, revealing more about the fears and desires of these producers than their subjects. While spatial imaginaries of East Asianness in American media center on enigma, mystery, and futurism, spatial imaginaries of Blackness in American cultural objects frequently involve characters and tropes of danger, violence, and materialism. Where East Asian women are depicted as hypersexual and deviant while East Asian men are depicted as weak and effeminate, Black women are hypersexual and/ or masculinized while Black men are conceived as dangerous and threatening. Imagery of American Blackness often centers on style and reduces Black people to their bodies. Just as this process of signification enacts dominance and violence over East Asian bodies, so too does it enact dominance and violence over Black bodies. Through condensing Blackness to a limited set of tropes,

characters, and stereotypes, signification works as a weapon, maintaining control over minority cultures and people.

a. Danger and Violence: Spatial Imaginaries

In traditional constructions of African-Americanness, Black skin comes to stand in for both white superiority and Black inferiority, seen as primitive, as backward, as evil, and as slave (Snead 2). James Snead writes that images of Blackness onscreen create the notion of an "enduring 'Black nature,'" which is eternal, unchanging, and unchangeable (3). Blackness serves as a foil to make whiteness seem even whiter. Stereotypical African-American characters in classic film include Jim Crow, Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima, Sambo, the pickaninny, the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel. These stereotypes breed further caricatures, insulated from real-life counter-examples and historical or political changes (Snead 3). Despite this insulation from historical and political change, these stereotypes can lead to real-world violence and policies enacted on Black bodies.

Much like representations of East Asianness, the signifier 'Black' condenses and generalizes any and all forms of Blackness into simplified, watered-down enigmatic signs and tropes. Stuart Hall writes that all must be condensed into this signifier in order to intervene in mainstream dominant popular culture (Hall 130). As is the case with the enigmatic signifier in East Asian representation, the signifier 'Black' acts upon all Black bodies, treating each as dangerous, violent, and sexual. Writing about representations of Blackness in film, James Snead writes that "in *all* Hollywood film portrayals of Blacks, I am arguing here, the political is never far from the sexual, for it is both as a political and as a sexual threat that the Black skin appears on screen" (Snead 30). Racist films like D.W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* codify Black masculinity as both primitive

and sexually threatening to the purity of white womanhood. The production of meaning through the act of signification is hegemonic, producing dominant ideology. These signifiers of Blackness, whether hypersexual, violent, threatening, et cetera, act upon the Black body, further subjugating Blackness in film, on the Internet, and in person.

Spatial imaginaries of African-Americanness in film delineate Blackness, and specifically Black masculinity, as dangerous and violent. Rape fantasies on film in which Black men raped or sexually harassed white women often led to lynching scenes onscreen and in real life. Similar to the yellow peril trope, Black masculinity onscreen and off was perceived as a threat to the purity of white womanhood. Connections between onscreen images of dangerous Blackness and real-world sociopolitical impacts are a frequent theme in representations of African-Americanness in cultural production and consumption. Critical reactions to Spike Lee's 1989 *Do the Right Thing,* for example, initially centered on white fears that Black audiences would be incited to riot after viewing the film (Rocchio 153). Mirroring this reception, critics of John Singleton's 1991 *Boyz N the Hood* claimed that Black audiences would be provoked into acts of "copycat violence" among its "volatile youth audience," demonstrating the tether between onscreen representation and real-life racism (Gormley 183). Paul Gormley writes that "[the] inability to distinguish between two types of Black violence—images and real—is connected to the way that the white cultural imagination fabricates images of Black bodies as immanently violent" (185). Gormley goes on to quote Judith Butler, who writes that "the Black body is circumscribed as dangerous, prior to any gesture, any raising of the hand" (Butler, quoted in Gormley 186).

Paula Massood details the mise-en-scène of hood films in creating the spatial setting of dangerous, urban Black masculinity. Such films project images of urban rebellions, poverty, and an onscreen imagining of "absent Black fathers and single welfare mothers" into the national consciousness (Massood 203). The hood film builds a neo-realist image of inner-city, "ghetto" neighborhoods. Hood films often use a neo-realist or documentary style in creating their settings, telling spectators that *this is what the hood is really like.* Most of these films focus on young Black men, who are frequently drug dealers, rappers, and gang members, as in *Boyz N the Hood*. Interestingly, most of these hood films were created by African-American directors, pointing to a complicated relationship with images of Black masculinity and sexuality as dominating, or dangerous, or violent. In hood films and gangsta rap music videos, these "ghetto" settings, once-termed "black 'holes' of urban blight…become concentrated masses of a new [hip-hop] style" (Baker 200).

b. Body, Style, and Status: Sexual Imaginaries

In classic Hollywood films, African-American men were denied their sexual maturity, and, in turn, denied any form of maturity, often referred to as "boy" no matter how old they were (Bausch 263). Black characters in these films were generally asexual and childlike, unless they were seen as violent threats or rapists. One such character is Play-It-Again Sam in the classic Hollywood film *Casablanca*. During this period of time, sexuality and maturity, linked together for most onscreen depictions of masculinity, were withheld from Black male characters. This characterization only began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of the Black Power movement and Blaxploitation film as a financially viable genre. Through the confidence and aggressive masculinity of

Black Power groups, the Black man "finally [came] of age in the American imagination," which subsequently translated into the powerful Black heroes of Blaxploitation films (Bausch 263). In these films, African-American characters found freedom through sexuality and violence. Prominent Black Power activists like Eldridge Cleaver argued that a Black man's social and political freedom was bound to his sexual freedom. During this period, images of Black bodies onscreen shifted, although body as signifier of race, sexuality, and masculinity and femininity has always dominated American popular culture representations of Blackness.

Black bodies onscreen are therefore inextricably linked to dynamics of domination and subordination. bell hooks explains that commercial culture in the United States exploits culture's desire to inscribe Blackness as "primitive," as wild, and suggest that Black people have special, secret access to intense and enigmatic pleasure—especially regarding pleasures of the body. She writes that the young Black male body is "seen as epitomizing this promise of wildness, of unlimited physical prowess and unbridled eroticism;" the Black male body was most desired for labor during slavery and is now most represented in present-day popular culture as "the body to be watched, imitated, desired, possessed" (hooks 376). The young Black male body is shown as a body in gratuitous pain, a body to be consumed by hungry onlookers. Images of Blackness onscreen revolve around signifiers of body and skin. Once asexual characters, onscreen Black characters have increasingly been depicted as hypersexual, aggressive, and sexually mature, whether on film, in music videos, or on television. Since Blackness in motion is often perceived as a threat on screen, Black movement in film is usually

"restricted to highly bracketed and containable activities, such as sports or entertainment" (Snead 8).

Writing about body and embodiment in material informatics, scholar Katherine Hayles notes, "the body produces culture at the same time that culture produces the body" (Hayles 1993). The body learns, remembers, understands culture from its environment, and then lets culture flow back into the environment from the body. In an essay published in Valerie Smith's book titled "Representing Blackness," Stuart Hall notes that "within the Black repertoire, style has become itself the subject of what is going on," with the Black diaspora finding form through the criticism and deconstruction of writing, as with hip-hop journalism, and the use of body, "as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had" (Hall 128). Nowhere is the Black body as cultural capital more apparent than in the American hip-hop industry. 1990s and 2000s American hip-hop videos create visual codes of space, body, and sexuality, from the cars that rappers drive and the graffiti to the break-dancing and the ever-present video vixens. Objects that signify Blackness in hood films, for example, include expensive-looking chain necklaces, loose, branded clothing, carefully-chosen sneakers, and flashy cars. These cars are further metaphorized as havens of security, with private cars in gangsta films and music videos embodying economic success and social status (Davies 225). Streetwear and style is vital to hip-hop culture, demarcating a subculture in opposition to dominant, white culture. Before long, though, hip-hop became part of that dominant culture, and soon, groups worldwide began mimicking Black hip-hop style in all its signifiers of sex, violence, and swagger.

5. Historical Analysis of Afro-Asian Representation

These common themes, tropes, and characterizations of American Blackness and East Asianness are arbitrary, built up through the active process of hegemonic signification. Despite the arbitrariness of these signs, this process of signification is far from abstract. Rather, it is an intentional process with real-world impacts, encoding hundreds of years of American performance and media with racial and cultural significance. Years of cross-cultural racial coding reveal a give-and-take between American Blackness, American East Asianness, dominant white cultural production and consumption, and commercial capitalism. Collisions between these cultural forces from the 1850s through the 2000s build a foundation for the contemporary moment. What has led us to this convergent moment of Blackness and East Asianness in contemporary American popular culture? Is it a transference or transformation of past traditions and what does this mean for future cross-cultural media production? To analyze this, we need to trace a history of American Black and East Asian cross-cultural media production. In the following subsections, this paper primarily engages with African-American and East Asian-American cultural producers rather than white-produced images of African-Americanness and East Asian-Americanness.

This section will first outline the intersections of Blackness and Asianness in theater performance in the 1800s through mid-twentieth century, revealing two minority cultures pitted against each other in an attempt to seem more American. Next, this paper turns to the 1950s and 1960s to examine cross-cultural resistant production and performance during the civil rights era, using the oft-overlooked Japanese-American Black Panthers Yuri Kochiyama and Richard Aoki along with Yellow Power groups' performance of Blackness to complicate the Black-white conception of this era in the

United States. From there, this paper will move to new avenues for cultural identity formation in the 1970s and 1980s in the post-civil rights era, honing in on the interplay between kung-fu and Blaxploitation film. Finally, this paper will introduce the early stages of hip-hop during the beginnings of the Internet era from the 1990s to the start of the 2000s, using the examples of rappers Wu-Tang Clan and Jin. The American Afro-Asian history of representation has always been influenced by flows of commerce and capital, but by the 1990s and 2000s, these cultural texts moved firmly from subculture to dominant culture, finding advantages and disadvantages to this new commercial success.

Following this brief history of Black and Asian cultural production in the United States, this paper will take a more in-depth look at the contemporary cultural moment in the post-Internet era, focusing in on the past three years (2015-2018). This history builds the foundation for the contemporary moment, which extends from the politics, economics, and social impacts of these complex cross-cultural meetings from the 1850s through the 2000s. These historical sections reveal that Afro-Asian cross-cultural production and consumption in the United States over the past 170 years are influenced by push-pull collisions with dominant white culture, capital flows, political events, and with each other, resulting in both the reinforcement of hegemonic, non-resistant tropes and the potential for cross-cultural solidarity to oppose and disrupt these tropes.

a. "Americanness" in 1850s-1950s Stage Performance

Early intersections between American Blackness and East Asianness in American popular culture center on the performance of racial identity. How did this early stage of American Black and East Asian cultural production set the scene for later media and entertainment? Whether onstage or onscreen, American politics influence cultural

production and consumption, just as cultural production and consumption influence American politics. From the 1850s through the 1950s, the interplay between American politics and popular culture altered the way that American Blacks and Asians were perceived and treated in the United States. Just as Black and Asian performance bumped up against more dominant white cultural production, so too did Black and Asian performance collide with the other. Blackface and yellowface, typically worn by white performers to simulate Blackness and Asianness, were popular onstage and in early film. At times, African-American performers used yellowface, positioning Asians—particularly the Chinese, who were viewed as a foreign threat—as an alien Other. Through yellowface performance, African-American performance and songs were affirmed as American while Asiannness was construed as foreign. While far from a comprehensive history of the emergence of American Black and East Asian media subjects, this section introduces early popular constructions of American Blackness and East Asianness along with ways that the two minority cultures collided with and influenced the other. One popular actress and singer during the first half of the twentieth century was Juanita Hall, a Black woman who donned yellowface in her two most famous roles. For Hall, these roles entailed the swallowing of racial identity in the name of national identity. This serves as a greater example for American constructions of racial performance during the early 1900s: being considered American above all else was the ultimate success.

In *The Making of American Audiences,* Richard Butsch details a "remarkable growth" in urban stage entertainment in the 1850s. These types of entertainment—museum theater, minstrelsy, and variety—each competed with traditional theater, with minstrelsy

proving the most influential on nineteenth-century American popular culture (Butsch 81). Butsch writes that one could go nowhere in the United States without hearing "Negro melodies," as the music of minstrelsy permeated daily life (81). Stereotyped Black characters performed by white actors were also overwhelmingly popular, which speaks to the whiteness of actors onstage. White performers frequently used blackface including dark face makeup and drawn-on large, red lips to simulate Blackness. In the North, where many had never seen a Black person, audience members even mistook white performers in blackface for Black people. Despite the popularity of these songs, Black people were a quite rare presence both onstage and in audiences. Still, they constituted enough of audiences for many theaters to have segregated seating sections. Early minstrel shows were affordable, with working men making up a large portion of audiences (Butsch 91). Most reports of minstrel show attendance referred solely to men and boys, with some newspapers expressing that the shows would be "inappropriate" for women to attend (89).

Meanwhile, as Chinese immigration to the United States increased in the mid-1800s, Chinese immigrants began to emerge as musical subjects. Initially, performances about Asian people or with Asian characters started in California in the 1850s and reached the national consciousness by 1870 (Moon 8). Songs from this period borrowed extensively from blackface minstrelsy—often, instead of creating new works, yellowface performers would adapt lyrics from popular blackface minstrelsy songs to fit their new needs (Moon 31). In the 1850s and 1860s, a character known as "John Chinaman," akin to blackface minstrelsy's "Jim Crow" or "Zip Coon," became popular, featured in songs that focused on the differences between American and Chinese men. One such song was

titled “John Chinaman’s Appeal,” based on a blackface minstrelsy song called “A Negro’s Appeal.” After the 1870s, however, yellowface performance reached national audiences and began to take on a life of its own, stretching further away from blackface minstrel traditions. One yellowface character was created by author Sax Rohmer, who popularized “…the unkillable Dr. Fu Manchu, mad scientist, master of the occult, and sexual predator. No African equivalent existed for Fu Manchu: a black man might have one or two of the attributes but never all three in combination” (Fuller 37). Fu Manchu became one of the most well-known early onscreen characterizations of Asianness, representing deviance and fear of the unknown. Asian women were often presented as either submissive sex freak slaves, easily conquerable and sexually open, or as dragon ladies, evil and torturously cruel.

American views on China were influenced by the Chinese Exclusion Act and justifications for American expansionism. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 relied on racial arguments about the Chinese’s supposed lack of character, threat to American labor, and immoral ways of living, like opium use. It was renewed every decade until its indefinite extension in 1904. Well-meaning missionaries or “sentimental imperialists” brought back stories from China, shaping Americans’ views of the country as one where Chinese women needed protection from their archaic culture. Author Pearl S. Buck, the daughter of two American missionaries who grew up in Zhenjiang, China, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for her novel *The Good Earth*, the plot of which centers on family life in a Chinese village in the early 1900s (Leong 10). Buck’s sympathetic descriptions helped Americans view the Chinese more positively, important as the two countries became allies ahead of the Second World War.

Yellowface performers borrowed stage and musical devices from blackface minstrelsy, antagonizing Chinese immigrants through song. As early as 1847, a blackface minstrel troupe called Buckley's Serenaders put on a production of Aladdin, using makeup to yellow their faces and slant their eyes instead of blackening their faces. Krystal Moon writes that negative songs about Chinese immigrants from the 1850s through 1880s reinforced the anti-Chinese attitudes that led to the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which limited the number of Chinese immigrants who could legally enter the United States (Moon 8). In response to the threat of Chinese immigration, Irish performers appealed to African-American performers and audience members, aiming to push Chinese immigrants into the role of the foreign or the Other. Increasing segregation of Chinese communities in California along with a rise in anti-Chinese attitudes led to the opening of more Chinese theaters in the 1860s and on. In some ways, Chinese music served as a foil for determining the "Americanness" of music—Native American, Appalachian, and African-American music were all considered truly American in comparison to the foreignness of Chinese music (Moon 87).

Despite their differences, African-American and Chinese music could also be lumped together, both signifying a racial Other. Their music included syncopated rhythms, unfamiliar instrumentation, chromaticisms, and atonal or "bent" notes, unlike white American music. Some African-American composers incorporated Orientalist devices into their music, combining ragtime and Chinese melodies (Moon 107). After 1880, portrayals of Chinese people onstage moved towards comparing Chinese and African-American people. From the 1880s through 1920s, African-American performers began to portray the Chinese in performances. By "positioning…the Chinese as alien,"

the association of African-American musical traditions with American identity was reaffirmed, "[elevating] African-Americans' social position in much the same way that that of the Irish before them had been elevated" (Moon 114). Karla Rae Fuller writes that African-American performers' intentions in portraying Chinese people was somewhat different from their white or Chinese counterparts, as through Chinese impersonations, "African-Americans were able to ally themselves with whites by marking the Chinese as different from the white norm, as they themselves had been marked. These characterizations, however, focused on both racial inferiority and the foreignness and inability of the Chinese to assimilate" (Fuller 9). Black performers were able to capitalize on these racial arcs and tensions by positioning the Chinese as Other. Like blackface, yellowface "marked the Chinese body as inferior and foreign" (Moon 6). Blackface minstrelsy and African-American music was considered distinctly American while Chinese music was seen as foreign.

During the early 1900s, the positionality and subjecthood of African-American and Chinese performance blended at times, as performers of both skin colors put on the guise of the other. Miscegenation became a theme in performances, as with the tune "The Wedding of the Chinee and the Coon," in which the African-American Ephraim Brown falls in love with the Chinese Ching-a-Ling. When Ching-a-Ling's father does not approve of Ephraim due to his race, Ephraim grows a long, Chinese-style beard and changes his name to Ding-a-Ling to win his approval. The pair end up together, with Ching-a-Ling's father happily referring to Ephraim as "a blackface Chinee" (Moon 132). On film, however, miscegenation between Asians or Blacks and whites was

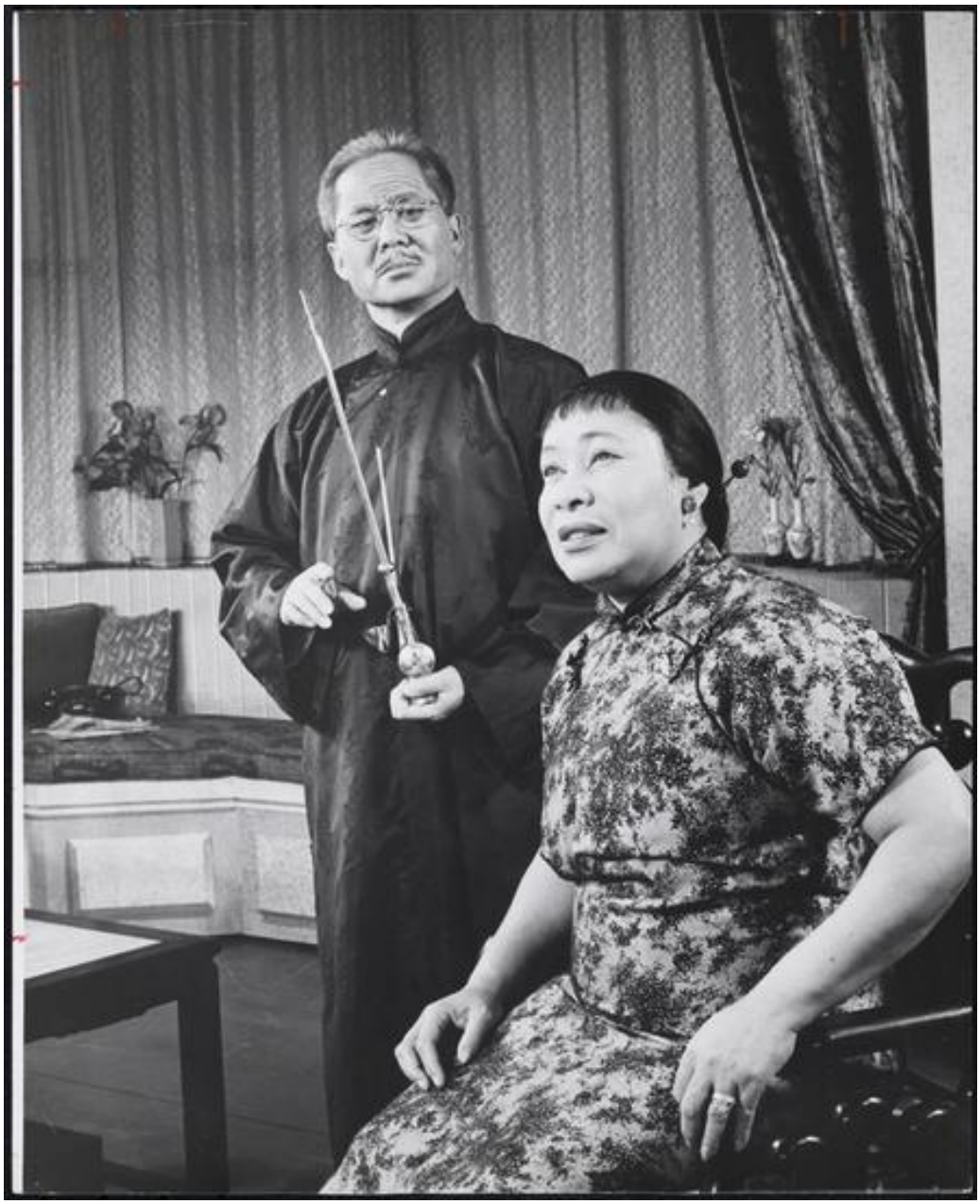
unacceptable. Famed Asian film star Anna May Wong explained of her role as the Asian wife of an Englishman in the 1934 *Java Head*,

> "I know I will never play it. The captain, you see, *marries* the woman…But no film lovers can ever marry me. If they got an American actress to slant her eyes and eyebrows and wear a stiff black wig and dress in Chinese culture, it would be alright. But me? I am really Chinese. So I must always die in the movies, so that the white girl with the yellow hair may get the man" (Leong 71).

These racist double standards persisted in early American film and performance, limiting the roles that Black and Asian performers could take. The restrictive Hayes Code banned miscegenation in film, just as it banned scenes of passion unless that eroticism was projected onto Black and Asian bodies. These limitations hindered the careers of even the most well-known non-white performers, including that of Anna May Wong.

Born at the start of the twentieth century, African-American singer and actress Juanita Long Hall's most famous roles are worth detailing in the context of the blending of African-American and Asian-American subjecthood in popular performance. Juanita Hall was the first African-American woman to win a Tony Award, winning Best Supporting Actress for her role as Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*. Relevant to this investigation of early intersections of Blackness and Asianness in American popular performance, Juanita Hall famously played the Tonkinese Bloody Mary in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* as well as the Chinese Madame Liang in *Flower Drum Song*. An African-American actress, Juanita Hall dons yellowface in *Flower Drum Song* to sing "Chop Suey," a song about assimilating into American life. Hall toured as Liang around the United States, appearing as Liang in the film version of *Flower Drum Song* and as Bloody Mary in the film version of *South Pacific*. As pictured here, Juanita Hall dons a silk Chinese-style dress to play the character of Madame Liang. Few at the time

questioned Hall's cross-race portrayal in these musicals, which perhaps speaks to the lumping together of the non-white or foreign Other.



Juanita Hall as Madame Liang in a stage performance of *Flower Drum Song*, 1958-1960, photographed by the Friedman-Abeles firm/ courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York/ 68.80.8641

Kathryn Edney examines the meaning that *Flower Drum Song,* a musical about Chinese immigrants set primarily in San Francisco's Chinatown, held for African-

American audiences during the 1950s. Although mainstream press reception surrounding *Flower Drum Song* was lukewarm, Edney notes that the musical garnered much more attention from Black newspapers. Many of these newspapers billed Hall as the star of *Flower Drum Song*, as the one African-American actress in the otherwise Asian cast (Edney 262). White publications rarely covered Hall's performances, but Black newspapers celebrated her achievements. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* was the first Broadway musical about Asian Americans to star Asian Americans, with Rodgers claiming that "the main point of *Flower Drum Song* was assimilation and the ability of people to get along with each other, no matter their generation or nationality" (Edney 267). Hall's character, Madame Liang, is determined to become a citizen of the United States, leading the cast in singing "Chop Suey," a celebration of the blending of Eastern tradition with Western culture to create a new "Americanness." David Krasner states that African-American audience members have historically "seen double," requiring an understanding of African-American performance of Blackness for white audiences and the performance of authenticity for Black audiences. In response to this, Edney writes that as Liang, "Hall did not perform Blackness…[but] instead performed "Americanness"…[which] connected to, but did not explicitly highlight, Hall's own racial identity" (Edney 268).

Liang's song, "Chop Suey," speaks to the assimilation of Chinese immigrants within the larger American society. Hall's performance of the song as read by African-American audiences can be reframed to refer to the broader message of racial integration, during a time when American public schools were just beginning to integrate. In *Flower Drum Song*, Liang finally acquires citizenship, and her brother-in-law admonishes her for

her happiness, saying that she is just like Chop Suey, "that Chinese dish that the Americans invented," to which Liang affirmatively responds, "That is what is good about my new country. Everything is in it—all mixed up" (Edney 269). Through this statement, Liang admits that she is an inauthentic Chinese person, fully immersed in her Americanness. Hall's portrayal of a Chinese character as an African-American actress adds to a larger message of quiet integration and assimilation as an acceptable and positive performance of race in America. In 1959, *Ebony* magazine featured Juanita Hall's *Flower Drum Song* performance in an article, relaying the following anecdote:

> "A Chinese-American child of a friend of Hall's…proclaimed upon learning that Hall would be in *Flower Drum Song* that the actor was 'Chinese after all. She [had] been passing for colored all the time!' The article concludes with Hall describing how in the past when mistaken for a person of Asian descent, she would proudly proclaim 'I'm a Negro'. However, now when the actor was asked if she was Asian, Hall 'now a little older, wiser, more tolerant, smiles, [and] says, "I'm an American"' (Edney 270).

This anecdote suggests that for Hall, just as for Madame Liang, "Americanness" means the triumph of nationality over race, country over culture. Americanness does not mean Blackness or Asianness, but rather the swallowing of Blackness and Asianness. Printed in a Black magazine in 1959, this article, published at the time that Juanita Hall was touring the country performing as Madame Liang, encourages a "wise" and "tolerant" view of race in America. Wisdom and tolerance, at the time, meant assimilation and integration, with pride in country as the ultimate outcome.

Theater performance in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century introduced now-familiar tropes and stereotypes used in the performance of American Black and East Asian racial identity. This period demonstrates the give-and-take between minority and dominant cultures, between media production

and consumption, and between politics, policy, and popular culture. Racial performance during this time also makes clear that African-American media representation and Asian-American media representation do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, both intersect with one another as well as with dominant white media production. As is the case for the American Afro-Asian relationship, historically, performances of racial identity in the United States have both influenced and been influenced by multiple cultures. From the 1850s through the 1950s, although African-American and Asian-American people were represented in American popular culture, these representations were frequently negative and stereotyped. These representations of Blackness and East Asianness served to position non-white cultures as foreign or Other rather than American; Americanness could be achieved through the blending of culture, but this blending often entailed the swallowing of the minority culture by the dominant white culture rather than a true hybridity.

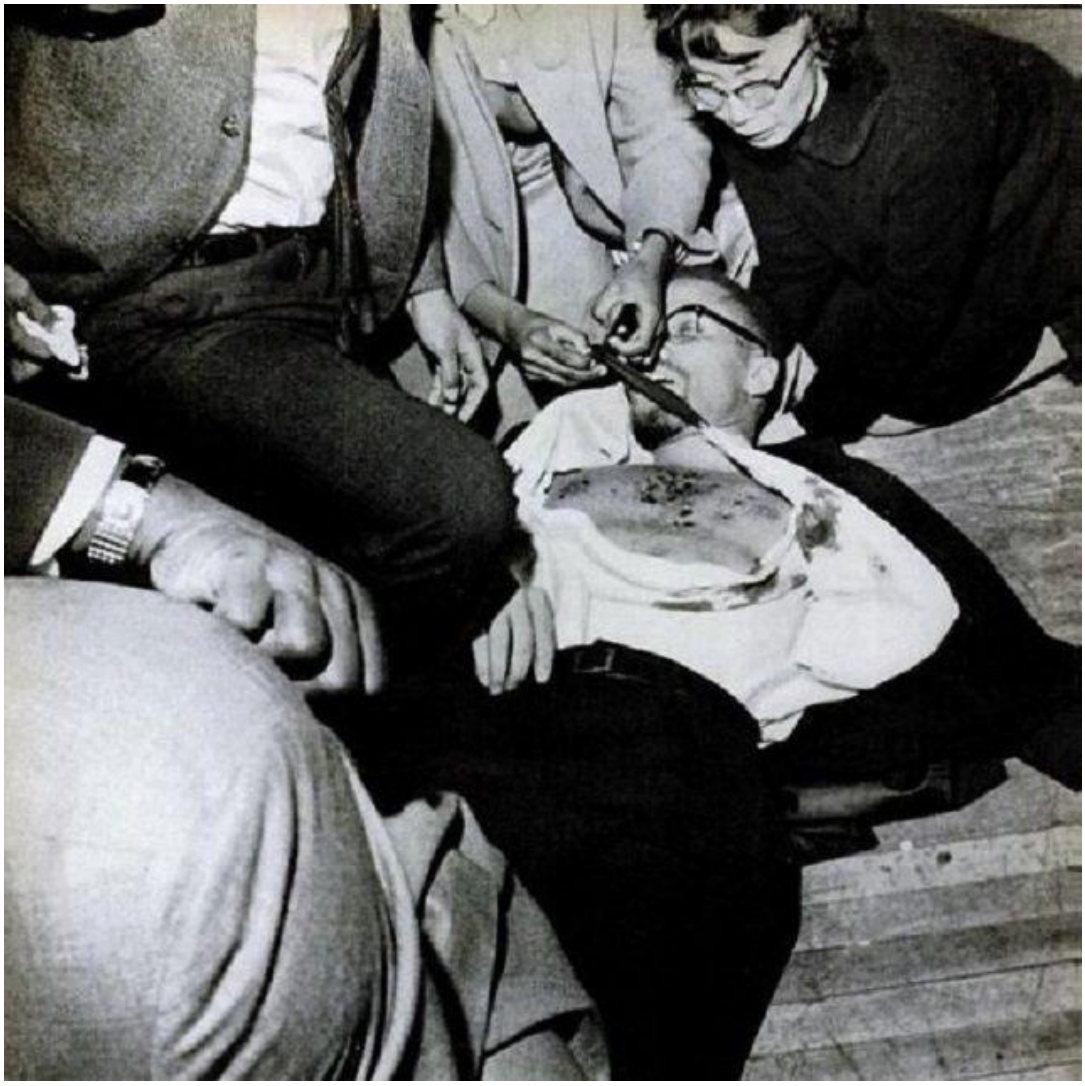
b. Resistance in the Civil Rights Era

During the civil rights era, the Afro-Asian relationship through representation extended beyond these early performances of racial identity to encompass reciprocal resistance and solidarity. In this section, this continued history of intersecting minority cultures is told through the stories of two prominent Asian-American activists within the Black Power movement—and later, as leaders of Asian Power and Third World Liberation movements, Yuri Kochiyama and Richard Aoki. Additionally, this section provides a brief look at the relationship between Black Power and Asian Power groups, demonstrating the disruptive, oppositional power of each group's influence on the other. Asian Power groups like the Red Guard set a precedent for later Asian cultural producers to gain legitimacy and clout by simulating Blackness through their performance of racial

identity and masculinity. Popular images of Afro-Asian resistance from this era also highlight the potential power in solidarity and opposition to dominant cultures, marking two racial groups united in protesting against injustice. Although both the Black Power and the Asian Power movements have their flaws, activist cultural production from this period serves as a model of minority resistance—strength through supporting the other. In the previous section, African-American and Asian-American cultural producers were pitted against the other. Here, the American Afro-Asian relationship stretches towards symbiosis.

At the house of Yuri and Bill Kochiyama, two Japanese-American activists, Malcolm X spoke to survivors of the 1945 Hiroshima bombing: "You were bombed and have physical scars. We too have been bombed and you saw some of the scars in our neighborhood. We are constantly hit by the bombs of racism" (Fujino 306). Malcolm X viewed Japan as a militarily powerful, non-white nation that had not succumbed to Euro-American imperialism, making the country figure romantically into the Black imagination (Maeda 123). During the 1950s and 1960s, Afro-Asian solidarities were strengthened, especially between young Black and Japanese-American activists. Japanese-Americans whose families were interned during World War II came of age incarcerated by an oppressive state, while Black soldiers who fought for the United States overseas returned to a country that systematically denied them civil rights and liberties. Their sociopolitical realities marked by the injustices of a post-World War II America, Blacks and Japanese-Americans banded together in protest. Asian-American activists were heavily involved in the movement for Black liberation, and later began their own

liberation groups, like the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) and the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA), which drew influence from the Black Power movement.



The assassination of Malcolm X, 1965, photographed by Earl Grant.

Diane Fujino writes compelling biographies of Yuri Kochiyama and Richard Aoki, two Japanese-American Leftist radicals heavily involved in the movements for Black liberation. Both hold a powerful place in American memory of Afro-Asian civil rights resistance due in large part to two iconic images that quickly became symbols of transcultural solidarity. The first, of Kochiyama, is a 1965 photograph of the activist

cradling the wounded body of Malcolm X in her lap as he lay dying. The image was first published in *Life* magazine in a spread titled "The Violent End of the Man Called Malcolm," announcing the assassination of the man. In the photograph, only Kochiyama and Malcolm X's faces are visible, although Malcolm X's body is surrounded by three other people aside from Kochiyama. Kochiyama occupies the top right section of the photograph, peering over X's lifeless body. Although X is the first subject that draws the eye, for me, Kochiyama's face is the image's punctum, the visual prick that lingers in my mind. This photograph struck the national consciousness, serving as living proof of cross-racial solidarity in civil rights activism and causing many to ask who the woman holding Malcolm X was. John Tagg writes that photographs are not just documents of history, as "they themselves are the historical" (Tagg 260). Photographs cannot be removed from their political function and historical context, as they create history, actively influencing how viewers respond to cultural events. Here, the photograph creates a history of Afro-Asian cultural resistance.

Yuri Kochiyama was incarcerated in Santa Anita Racetrack as a Japanese-American internee during World War II. This experience, along with exposure to the writing of then-contemporary civil rights activists, led to Kochiyama's commitment to sociopolitical activism. Initially, Kochiyama disagreed with Malcolm X's "harsh stance on integration," but later shifted her stance, stating that "if integration means moving to something white is moving to something better, then integration is a subterfuge for white supremacy" (Fujino 298). Kochiyama's politics stressed self-determination and autonomy over integration, and she increasingly dedicated herself to Black liberation groups. Along with her husband, Bill Kochiyama, who was also a political activist,

Kochiyama's house became a meeting place used to "house numerous Black militant groups" (Fujino 301). Members of these groups remember Kochiyama as the first person many turned to when they were arrested or released from prison, relying on her extensive legal expertise and network of activists. Kochiyama believed that Black Power was the most revolutionary social movement in the United States, so she prioritized her work there despite "work[ing] intensely" in the Asian-American movement (Fujino 304). Many in the Black Power movement detailed being awed by Kochiyama's dedication to a community that was not her own, but she gained trust within the Black activist community as a "Third World person" (Fujino 305). Through belonging to the "Third World" and living in a housing project in Harlem, Kochiyama was seen as someone outside of the model minority construct. Despite her activist work within both the Black Power and Asian-American Liberation movements, Kochiyama has been criticized by some Asian-American activists for failing to develop Black support for Asian liberation; her dedication to the Black Power movement was seen as a slight to her own community.

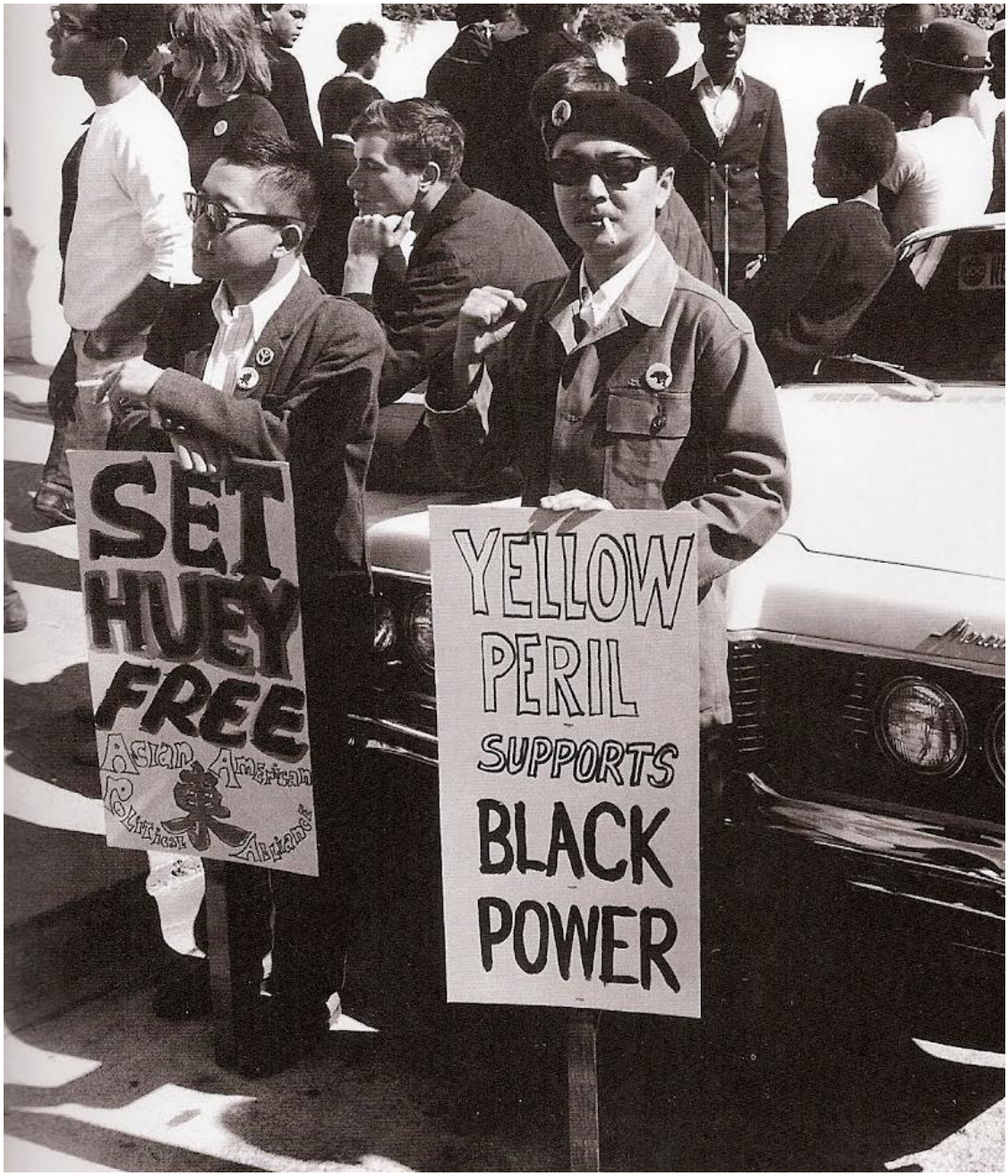
Japanese-American activist Richard Aoki's family was also interned during World War II, an injustice that destroyed Aoki's family. After their release in 1945, Aoki moved with his brother and father back to West Oakland. The Little Yokohama neighborhood of West Oakland had primarily housed Japanese-Americans before the war, but after the war, when Japanese-American began to return to their former homes, they found that a new social climate had replaced the neighborhood that they had known. During the war, Southern Blacks moved in to Little Yokohama to work in the shipyards, while whites had moved to Piedmont and other exclusive neighborhoods (Rosenfeld 420). This was not uncommon after the war; Maya Angelou details the changes in San

Francisco's Nihonmachi neighborhood: "Where the odors of tempura, raw fish, and cha had dominated, the aroma of chitlings, greens, and ham hocks now prevailed" (Maeda 123). Aoki therefore returned to a poor Black neighborhood, coming of age having borne witness firsthand to police brutality, extreme poverty, and his own internment. As a result, Aoki became convinced that minorities were treated unequally in the United States. He joined a gang, worked to become a strong street fighter, and was frequently arrested for petty crime. Eventually, Aoki joined the army, with high hopes of becoming the army's first Asian-American general. Instead, after seven years, Aoki took an honorable discharge from the army and went back to school.

At the behest of the FBI, Aoki joined several left-wing political organizations while taking classes at Merritt College, a community college in Oakland, including the Vietnam Day Committee, the Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party, the Labor Youth League, and the Young Socialist Alliance. A charismatic and fierce leader, Aoki rose quickly through the ranks of these groups while acting as an informant for the FBI, a fact still denied by many of Aoki's contemporaries which only came to light through posthumous investigative reporting (Rosenfeld 421). Aoki became good friends with Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, giving the Black Panthers some of their first firearms, as infamously recounted by Seale in his autobiography:

> "Late in November 1966, we went to a Third World brother we knew, a Japanese radical cat. He had guns for a motherfucker: .357 Magnums, 22's, 9mm's, what have you. We told him that we wanted these guns to begin to institutionalize and let Black people know that we have to defend ourselves as Malcolm X said we must. We didn't have any money to buy guns. We told him that if he was a real revolutionary he'd better go on and give them up to us because we needed them now to begin educating the people to wage a revolutionary struggle. So he gave us an M-1 and 9mm" (Rosenfeld 423).

Aoki himself noted that he was "somewhat responsible for the military slant to the [Black Panther] organization's public image," contributing to confrontations between the Panthers and police (Rosenfeld 423). In 1967, Newton and Seale named Aoki the Black Panther Party's minister of education, since they were all students at Merritt College



Richard Aoki outside the Oakland Courthouse, 1969, photographed by Roz Payne.

together and knew that Aoki had studied the writings of Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and W.E.B. Dubois (Rosenfeld 424). As a graduate student at UC Berkeley, Aoki kept a low profile even as a Black Panther, until radical student groups at the school began mobilizing and combining forces, creating the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF).

The second iconic photograph of Afro-Asian civil rights activism features this complicated figure, Richard Aoki, a leader in the Black Panther Party and in the Asian-American Political Alliance. In this widely-dispersed photograph, Aoki holds up a fist and sign in solidarity with other protestors of Huey Newton's arrest. Behind Aoki, white and Black protesters gather. The clenched fist held high is a famous symbol of Black Power. Used by Aoki, the fist takes on a cross-cultural revolutionary meaning. Aoki stands in the front of the photograph with another member of the Asian American Political Alliance. He wears a beret in the style of the Black Panther Party, a cigarette in his mouth, one hand on his sign. The sign, in itself a media artifact, reads "Yellow Peril supports Black Power," a slogan that has come to dominate narratives of Afro-Asian political solidarity. On the poster, the words "Yellow Peril" are outlined in box letters, all in capitals. "Black Power" is written authoritatively, in thick black paint, again, all capitals. The sign is simple and effective; like yin and yang, the two lettering styles counter and fill in the other. As a media artifact, the sign Aoki holds has spread through our national and transnational consciousness, altering a sociopolitical history of American protest. Just as famous as the sign itself, this photograph, too, has permeated American popular remembering of the civil rights era, serving as evidence that Asians were in fact part of the resistance. Our cultural memory of civil rights protest usually

exists in a Black-white vacuum. Aoki's protest of Huey Newton's arrest, memorialized in a photograph, complicates the Black-white binary, offering proof of Asian-American activism in all its complexities.

Students at UC Berkeley formed the Asian-American Political Alliance (AAPA), driven by Yuji Ichioka, a Japanese-American graduate student who had been interned during the war, and his wife, Emma Gee. Seth Rosenfeld details the radical naming of the group by Ichioka. Before the creation of pan-Asian groups like the Asian-American Political Alliance, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, and Koreans rarely cooperated with one another, aware of their historical and political differences. Ichioka hated the term "Oriental," considering it the equivalent of the N-word for Blacks. Coined by Ichioka, the term "Asian-American" newly united pan-Asian people, as the AAPA called all Asians to arms in the fight against a historically racist American society that "[exploits] all non-white people" (Rosenfeld 427). Meanwhile, at San Francisco State College, minority students formed the Third World Liberation Front, demanding academic programs for ethnic studies. Frustrated by a lack of progress at UC Berkeley, members of the Afro-American Student Union mounted a strike, enlisting the Mexican-American Student Confederation and the AAPA in their efforts. Richard Aoki of the AAPA argued that the minority groups needed to band together to achieve their aims, despite the groups' differences (Rosenfeld 429).

Directly influenced by the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State, this new union of Berkeley's militant minority groups named themselves the Third World Liberation Front, too. In January of 1969, the TWLF led a strike at Berkeley, shutting down academic buildings and student centers in a successful effort to disrupt all

university activity. The TWLF accused the university of discriminatory hiring and racist teaching, demanding that the university establish an ethnic studies college. The strike was violent, with the National Guard called in, using tear gas and rifles to disperse protesters. As a leading member of the TWLF, Aoki continually argued for escalating violence against the police and FBI agents, but tired strikers ended their fight. Aoki later boasted that the strike was the longest, bloodiest, costliest student strike in UC Berkeley's history, costing the university almost $900,000 in damages (Rosenfeld 445). Despite Aoki's double agent status, the activist/ informant's bold leadership shaped the direction of Afro-Asian political resistance and solidarity.

In the late 1960s, young people of color across the United States began forming their own radical militant organizations modeled after the movement for Black Power. The Brown Berets, Young Lords, Red Guard, and American Indian Movement were all heavily influenced by the vision of the Black Panthers and other Black liberation groups (Ogbar 29). Using the Black Panthers as an example, the Red Guard was an Asian-American radical organization founded in the Bay Area in 1969. Openly communist, the Red Guard was named for Mao Tsetung's unit of young communist revolutionaries during the Chinese Revolution. The Black Panthers admired Mao's Red Book and communist teachings, just as the Red Guard drew inspiration from the community work and vigilance of the Panthers (Ogbar 31). Following the vision of the Black Panthers, the Red Guard helped prevent the closing of a tuberculosis testing center in San Francisco's Chinatown, worked conjunctively with the Asian Legal Services to help draft resisters, and created a Breakfast for Children program to help feed Black and Asian children (and, later, poor elderly) from housing projects in and around Chinatown (Ogbar 32).

Beyond the AAPA and the Red Guard, other radical Asian-American organizations of the late 1960s included I Wor Kuen (IWK), the Yellow Brotherhood (YB), and the Asian-American Hardcore. The Yellow Brotherhood, like the Panthers, resisted integration, assimilation, and the confines of the model minority label, with one member saying, "We were told to outwhite the white and groups like the YB…said 'Fuck the whites. Fuck that shit'" (Ogbar 35). Similarly, the Asian-American Hardcore grew out of the political disquiet of the 1960s, finding empowerment in the model of the Black Panther Party. Like the Panthers, the Hardcore adopted wearing army fatigues and red berets. This raises the possibility of Asian performance of Blackness. The Hardcore and Red Guards pushed for and played at tough, violent masculinity in an imitation of the authoritative hardness of the men of the Black Panther Party. Daryl Maeda writes that performances of Blackness "catalyzed the formation of Asian-American identity," as the Red Guards adopted the Black Panthers' language and style (Maeda 119). Frank Chin went as far as to argue that the Red Guard Party's performances of Blackness "constituted a 'yellow minstrel show,'" as Asian-American radicals sought to adopt the Panthers' hypermasculinity and politics (Maeda 130). Bobby Seale and David Hilliard of the Panther Party visited Leway, a community agency in San Francisco's Chinatown and one of the Red Guard's hangouts, and were surprised to find "…a Black thing…jazz, soul music, that was the kind [of] ambience it had" (Maeda 127). The association of Black Power groups with Asian-American liberation groups gave these Yellow Power groups more political clout and legitimacy, an aspect of the Afro-Asian relationship later mirrored by the approval of Asian-American rappers by African-American rappers.

Members of the Hardcore also met with national Panther leaders like Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver, developing their movement to mimic that of the Panthers. Like the Red Guards in San Francisco's Chinatown, the Hardcore established detox programs for drug addicts, classes for the community on politics and protest, and programs for the elderly. The influence of the Black Power movement on the movements for Yellow Power and Third World Liberation were not fully one-directional. Rather, the Black and Asian movements for liberation informed each other, with overlapping political ideologies, key icons and figures, and even members, as demonstrated by the activism of Yuri Kochiyama and Richard Aoki. Black identifications with Asian politics ranged from the prominent teachings drawn from Mao's Red Book in the Black Panther Party to Muhammad Ali's famous 1967 statement upon refusing his induction into the army—"Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong" (Maeda 123). Addressing the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, Black Panther Party chairman David Hilliard said, "You're Yellow Panthers, we're Black Panthers" (Maeda 123).

Extending from oppositional and countercultural political groups, resistant Afro-Asian imagery reached the mainstream American cultural imagination during the 1950s and 1960s. Although the most well-known iconography from this era centers on African-American resistance, the presence of Asian-American activists like Yuri Kochiyama and Richard Aoki in Black Power circles and the creation of Asian Power and Third World liberation groups complicates model minority narratives about East Asianness. Through the performance of Blackness and Black masculinity in particular, Asian-American activists cultivated a new, countercultural racial identity. The active process of signification and cultural production served to spread these images and performances

through American mass media, altering perceptions of Asianness in the American imagination. As iconic images like that of Yuri Kochiyama holding Malcolm X's body and Richard Aoki's "Yellow Peril Supports Black Power" sign circulated, two racial groups found common ground, expressing solidarity and opposition to racial injustice. These shifting cultural dynamics stretched past these burgeoning political solidarities following the civil rights era and the Vietnam War; as the next section shows, African-American and East Asian-American cultural production and consumption continued to bump up against one another, colliding and converging through music and film.

c. New Avenues in the Post-Civil Rights Era

Onscreen in the 1970s and 1980s, new visions of Blackness and East Asianness moved through the American consciousness, aided by expanded views of African-American and Asian-American sexuality and masculinity following the work of Black Power and Yellow Power groups. Cultural solidarities established during the civil rights era advanced following the Vietnam War, with African-Americans and Asian-Americans increasingly consuming the cultural products of the other. Music and film from these decades expanded options for Black and East Asian characters, offering alternative representations of Black and Asian masculinity, sexuality, and power to traditional tropes and characters. During the 1970s and 1980s, films starring Black and Asian characters became commercially successful and viable. In particular, Blaxploitation and kung-fu films posted strong box office numbers while also widening the possibilities for Black and Asian characters onscreen. With similar formulaic narrative structures, the two genres created new avenues for Black and Asian expression and consumption. This section will offer a non-comprehensive look at Blaxploitation and kung-fu film following

the civil rights era, detailing the relationship between the two genres and the significance of that relationship in American Afro-Asian popular culture.

Following the Vietnam War era, images of East Asianness on American movie screens often depicted Asia and the Orient as "inscrutable" spaces "ripe for conquest and rule" (King 169); (Fuller 4). In the late 1980s, the musical *Miss Saigon*, based on Puccini's Orientalist opera, *Madame Butterfly*, linked Orientalist texts with the real-life events of the Vietnam War. Karla Rae Fuller writes of the "often fluid though persistent" relationship between artistic practices and the larger sociopolitical experience of Asian Americans" (Fuller 4). In *Miss Saigon*, the plot of *Madame Butterfly* is moved to 1970s Saigon during the Vietnam War, with the romance between a U.S. Marine and a teenaged Vietnamese girl replacing *Madame Butterfly*'s romance between a U.S. lieutenant and a geisha. The Vietnamese girl, Kim, has a baby with the U.S. Marine, Chris. During the second act of the musical, Kim believes that she will go back to America with Chris, but he has remarried. Kim meets Chris' wife and, distraught, pleads for the pair to take her son back to America with them to have a better life. At the end of the musical, Kim shoots herself so that Chris can stay with his American wife and so they will take her son from her.

The events of this musical reprise typical tropes of Asian sexuality: the expendable Asian, the Orient as a "sexualized and sexually compliant space that is ripe for conquest and rule," the geisha, and the Asian woman's perpetual sexual availability for Western men "even as her convenient demise delimits such liaisons" (Studlar 160). In the wake of the Vietnam War, Asian imagery in American popular culture featured primitive emotion and sexuality, or else moved towards enigmatic, futuristic images of technological

sophistication. Homay King writes of this new, coordinateless form of East Asian Orientalism in which "the savage makes way for the cyborg," and where the 'hieroglyph' of the Hollywood era returns as a condensed mass media image that still resists decryption (King 169).

Out of this context of insultingly simplistic imagery of race onscreen, Blaxploitation and kung-fu films countered these hegemonic, patriarchal media texts through a celebration of Black and Asian power and resistance. Melvyn Van Peebles, director of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, explains that Blaxploitation films "sought to reclaim the Black spirit from centuries of manipulation by the white power structure" (Bausch 259). Blaxploitation film emerged in 1969, creating new images of Black onscreen sexuality, masculinity, femininity, and heroism. The term 'Blaxploitation' combines the words 'Black' and 'exploitation;' exploitation films are films that try to succeed in commercial markets by occupying specific niches, exploiting trends and stereotypes, and displaying gratuitous amounts of gore and sex. Blaxploitation films were action films primarily aimed at Black audiences, enjoying immense popularity in both Black markets and, later, in the larger American cultural market. These films were often criticized for heavy-handed scenes featuring drugs, sex and rape, violence and murder, and stereotypical characters, yet they marked the first time that films made by African-Americans and featuring primarily Black casts became financially viable in the Hollywood market. To be sure, Blaxploitation films—featuring Black protagonists who *win*, even against police—were made possible by the Black Power movement.

Blaxploitation films made a lasting impression on Black audiences—particularly young Black male audiences—and altered popular representations of Blackness in the

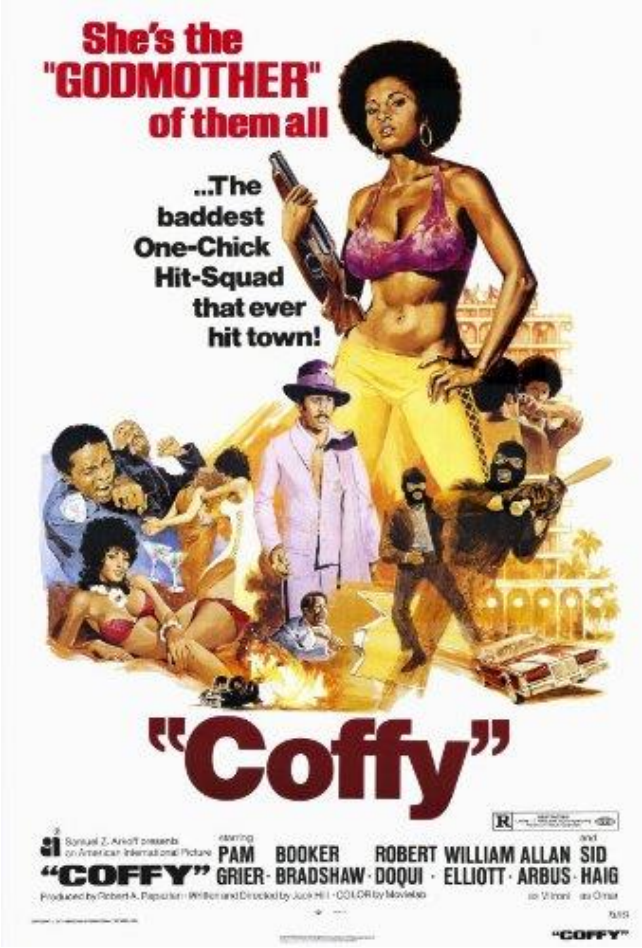
American imaginary. Nelson George points to the radical appearance of "aggressive Black heroism" as the reason Blaxploitation film felt so impactful in Black communities (George 104). He writes,

> "Never in the history of American cinema had there been so many aggressive, I-don't-give-a-damn black folks on screen…In Blaxploitation black people shoot back with big guns, strut to bold jams, and have sweaty, bed-rocking sex. Whatever story the often loopy plots tell, they are usually secondary to full-bodied action" (104-105).

This description speaks to the novelty of Blaxploitation film in the American cultural market in the late 1960s and early 1970s, constructing new visions of Black heroism and sexuality. Blaxploitation films generally follow a formula: somehow, the protagonist has been wronged, often by a racial oppressor. The protagonist swears that they will get revenge by whatever means possible—usually through killing the oppressors, who are often white gangsters or corrupt white people who at first appeared to be "allies." Sometimes, characters take on the guise of "low-caste" identities, pretending to be prostitutes or drug addicts to evade suspicion. By the end, the protagonist has accomplished what they have set out to do, leaving a slew of bodies in their wake. Despite some calling these films symbols of Black empowerment, critics of Blaxploitation believed that these films only strengthened racist and sexist tropes and characters through their overuse of drugs, sex, and violence. Certainly, these films were created to make money; the Blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was the highest grossing independent film of its time ("BaadAsssss Cinema").

On the one hand, Blaxploitation films featured Black actors and actresses in resistant roles, frequently fighting racial oppressors powerfully, successfully, and with moral righteousness. Famous Blaxploitation film star Pam Grier played strong Black female

leads in films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, enacting revenge on enemies through quick thinking, courageous action, and steely resolve. Grier explains that through these characters, she created "a new kind of screen woman, physically strong and active…able to look after herself…[a woman who] was the prototype for the more recent and very popular white Bionic and Wonder Women" (Sims 79). The movie poster for *Coffy*, pictured here, features an illustration of Pam Grier, powerfully sexual holding a gun with natural hair. Despite this, in Blaxploitation films, female characters are drug addicts, prostitutes, or mothers to delinquent sons, with critics arguing that these films reinforced sexist stereotypes of Black women on film as mammies, seductresses, whores, and mulattoes. Film critic Patricia Smith argued that the only difference from classic Hollywood films is that in Blaxploitation films, when Black female characters are the "ornaments snapped onto the end of male arms…now the male arms are Black" (Smith, quoted in Bausch 270). Despite the creation of new archetypes for Black leads by Blaxploitation directors, producers, and writers, Black women were again maligned and mistreated onscreen, representing a transference rather



Actress Pam Grier as Coffy in the *Coffy* movie poster, illustrated by George Akimoto.

than transformation of tropes. By the mid-1970s, Blaxploitation films had lost their popularity, instead often achieving cult success.

Blaxploitation and kung-fu film marked some of the first commercial success earned by films with nonwhite leads in the American popular culture market. In the early 1970s, Warner Brothers began double-booking Blaxploitation and kung-fu features at inner-city theaters. Kung-fu films overlapped with and later replaced Blaxploitation films at these theaters, with box office numbers indicating that kung-fu films consistently garnered strong attendance in majority-Black audience theaters in Chicago (Cha-Jua 214). Kung-fu films arrived in the United States in the early 1970s, a time when many Blacks "not only opposed the Vietnam War but also wished for a Vietnamese victory" (Cha-Jua 217). Asian, Black, and Hispanic audiences kept kung-fu films' popularity alive into the 1980s. As neighborhoods were abandoned by white flight, kung-fu became a "downtown genre," played in inner-city venues, consumed by Black audiences (Ongiri 33). Similar to the narrative structure of Blaxploitation film, kung-fu films often featured protagonists skillfully fighting back against the violence of racial oppressors. Sundiata Cha-Jua describes Bruce Lee and the formula that the popular actor established for kung-fu films as political in "much the same way" as Blaxploitation films: "nationalist visions of self-defense or retaliatory violence against racial oppression, albeit fueled by individual grievances" (Cha-Jua 217). Racial oppressors, often portrayed as gangsters, commit violent acts, which the protagonist responds to with equally vicious acts, yet the acts of the protagonist are infused with moral righteousness.

As African-Americans searched for alternatives to white, Western cultural imagery, kung-fu films and martial arts culture emerged as powerful popular culture

depictions of strength in nonwhiteness. Through the genre's focus on "virtue lost and found, individual determination, righteous vengeance, and community struggle against all odds," martial arts became seen as the "ultimate tool of the righteous but wronged" underdog (Ongiri 35). Kung-fu films featured characters who won against oppressors through careful practice, discipline, and self-determination, appealing to young African-Americans downtrodden by America's racial politics. Importantly, kung-fu protagonists succeeded through a "differently articulated body politic," relying on intellect and moral virtue along with physical capability more than exaggerated force and aggression (Ongiri 36). This body politic helped foreground alternate forms of nonwhite bodies, masculinities, and strengths. Blaxploitation's appeal is the onscreen depiction of "naked Black aggression, [while] kung-fu provides a nonwhite, non-Western template for fighting superiority" (George 105). Blaxploitation film offered triumphant Black characters and plotlines, taking onscreen Blackness back from white power cultural production and newly displaying Black anger, aggression, and sexuality. Kung-fu film introduced Asian characters who fight against oppression through unabashed nonwhiteness and morality, proffering new images of nonwhite body and movement.

The Afro-Asian connection through Blaxploitation and kung-fu in American popular culture suggests the possibility of cultural resistance and solidarity through engaging with film. Nelson George reflects on this relationship in the 1970s, writing that "in Black homes in the '70s, it was typical to find a Martin Luther King portrait in the living room while in the basement, next to the component set and the velvet black light Kama Sutra horoscope, hung a poster of [Bruce] Lee, a truly worthy nonwhite icon" (George 106). Blaxploitation film and kung-fu film expanded the list of potential

characters, tropes, and plotlines for Blackness and Asianness onscreen, finding some commercial success with largely resistant genres. Indeed, as the above quote reveals, nonwhite audiences embraced Blaxploitation and kung-fu heroes alike.

Still, contrary to visions of potential reclamations of Blackness and East Asianness from white supremacist cultural production, this commercial success also limited how resistant Blaxploitation and kung-fu film could be. Amy Abugo Ongiri explains that African-American attraction to Asian culture via martial arts films provides moments in which totalitarian power and western notions of aesthetics, culture, and dominance are undone. Despite this, she goes on to say that commercially successful yet stereotypical films like *The Last Dragon* or *Cleopatra and the Casino of Gold* demonstrate the limitations of these moments in producing "a truly resistant narrative around race and power rather than simply reproducing colonial stereotypes" (Ongiri 39). Through Ongiri's words, we return to bell hooks' conception of transference versus transformation of racial representation in media content. Exploitation films attempt to find financial and commercial success in part through exaggerated displays of violence, drugs, and sexuality. As Blaxploitation and kung-fu films gained popularity and attention in the American market, cultural producers repeatedly invoked tired tropes and stereotypes of Blackness and East Asianness through formulaic characters and plotlines. In this way, despite potentially radical images of Black and Asian strength onscreen, these films failed to disrupt dominant, patriarchal racial narratives.

In the 1970s and 1980s, onscreen images of Black and East Asian actors altered popular racial narratives in the United States, following the Black Power and Vietnam War era of the 1960s. Notably, the emergent popularity of Blaxploitation and kung-fu

film marked the first time that films by nonwhite cultural producers featuring nonwhite casts found commercial success in the American popular culture market. This commercial success was a double-edged sword. New images of Blackness and East Asianness provided expanded visions of race, from physical strength and mental wit to sexual power and virility. In spite of this, as cultural producers sought commercial success, the true resistant power of this imagery was limited, confined by the racial narratives of the dominant American media market. Even when nonwhite people produce media content, that media content will not necessarily be resistant, transgressive, or progressive. Cross-cultural production in this period demonstrates the complicated forces of culture and capital at play in media creation and consumption. Carrying on from the civil rights era, the examples of Blaxploitation and kung-fu film reveal the evolution of Afro-Asian cultural output as it relates to American capitalism and commodification. The intersection of Afro-Asian cultural objects, dominant white culture, and flows of capital continues into the 1990s and 2000s.

d. Commercial Success and Stereotype in the 1990s and 2000s

Following the 1970s and 1980s, Afro-Asian cultural production became increasingly commercial, finally moving from primarily subcultural content into the mainstream American cultural market. The influence of cross-cultural content from the previous era can be seen in 1990s and 200s hip-hop stylings as well as in new iterations of urban martial arts film. During the 1990s and 2000s, Afro-Asian influences combined and blended like never before, setting the stage for now-familiar hybridities. This section offers a short examination of rappers like Wu-Tang Clan, an all-Black hip-hop group who adopt Asian and kung-fu signifiers, and Jin, an Asian-American freestyle rapper who

found success on Black Entertainment Television (BET)'s Freestyle Friday segment. Through the example of Wu-Tang Clan, who mainly climbed American rap charts in the 1990s, and Jin, who was on BET's Freestyle Friday in the early 2000s, we can begin to get a sense of the connections between early Internet flows and Afro-Asian cross-cultural media output. The loosening of cultural flows through both geographic proximity in urban neighborhoods and digital media access altered the cross-cultural media landscape, allowing for more cross-pollination and continuing a tradition of one racial group using the iconography of the other. More than ever, questions of spatial and sexual imaginaries created through cultural production and consumption arise, complicated by flows of capital and content.

Through hip-hop, the aggressive Black heroism, masculinity, and sexuality first widely seen through Blaxploitation film became the norm, losing their novelty. In the book *Hip Hop America*, Nelson George details the influence of Blaxploitation on a new hip-hop generation: "…the genre [Blaxploitation] is evident in the iconography of hip-hop and R&B. Where my generation was the first to experience the heady exhilaration of commercially available Black aggression, the hip-hop generation has embraced in-your-face as a guiding principle" (George 105). As was the case with Blaxploitation film, hip-hop artists and music received criticism for supposedly portraying Black people in a negative light, through the overuse of images of and lyrics about drugs, sex, and violence, peppered with swearwords. To this point, Dick Hebdige notes that "notions concerning the sanctity of language are intimately bound up with ideas of social order" (Hebdige 90). Just like punk and rock-n-roll cultures before them, rap artists collided with dominant

conceptions of social order, both stretching the limits of these conceptions and losing countercultural meaning through increasingly adhering to mainstream standards.

Born in the 1970s as a form of dance music, hip-hop itself moves deftly between subculture and dominant culture, at times simultaneously resistant to and enveloped in mainstream consumerism. Hip-hop emerged from the streets of New York, quickly gaining popularity across the city and nation. Rap rose in conjunction with graffiti and breakdancing, all symbols of the larger hip-hop culture. Breakdancing, a form of dance typically done to hip-hop music, celebrates Black male solidarity, strength, and competitiveness. As a dance form, breakdancing's movement into the mainstream largely negated its countercultural status, inadvertently linking breakdancers with "the society that had previously excluded them" (Hazzard-Donald 510). Katrina Hazzard-Donald writes that hip-hop's "critical vision comes out of a marginalized youth culture with its own language, its own values and symbols, its own dance and style, yet unlike a true counterculture, hip-hop does not reject the mainstream materialism of designer leisure wear, brand-name kicks, expensive cars, and (until recently) dookie gold" (Hazzard-Donald 512). This combination of Black language, symbols, and body with materialist and consumerist stylings complicates the idea of an oppositional culture. Can subcultures and capitalism actually work conjunctively, or is all cultural resistance lost by this linkage? Hip-hop presents a symbiotic relationship between American consumerist culture and the subculture of the streets, commodified in an "easy-to-open package of hip" (Watts 602).

Today, hip-hop is the most dominant music genre in America, financially and culturally (McIntyre). As a young music genre in the 1970s, though, hip-hop began

moving more broadly into the national consciousness in the late 1980s and early 1990s, popularized by rap artists like Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G., Public Enemy, and Wu-Tang Clan. During the 2000s, television shows and music video screenings on BET and MTV extended hip-hop's reach. Hip-hop's relationship with its countercultural roots spans decades of ebb-and-flow, push-and-pull, and give-and-take. Popular rap artists like Tupac and Wu-Tang Clan were influenced by Blaxploitation and kung-fu film, taking the characters and stories of the past into their own artistic creations. African-American activist Afeni Shakur describes the impact that these films had on her son, Tupac, in the Blaxploitation documentary film "BadAsssss Cinema:"

> "My son [rap artist] Tupac was greatly influenced by the films of the '70s. He actually, by the time he died, had amassed a collection of all of those films. He watched them as a kid and he watched them over and over again. What he watched as a kid was these [Blaxploitation] films, and Bruce Lee's films, and all of the martial arts films, and that was his basic culture" (Shakur, quoted in "BaadAsssss Cinema").

Rap artists of the 1980s and 1990s grew up watching the Blaxploitation and kung-fu film of the 1970s. These cultural texts changed the way young rappers like Tupac and RZA viewed the streets and became part of their cultural understanding, later influencing their music. RZA of the rap supergroup Wu-Tang Clan details first watching kung-fu films growing up in New York:

> "I got my introduction to kung-fu flicks in '78 or '79. You'd get a triple feature on Forty-Second Street for $1.50. At that point, all of Forty-Second Street had kung-fu movies. They'd have three on this side of the street and another three on the other side and they'd rotate them. They'd play them with regular first-run movies. Any given night, you could see *Fright Night, Motel Hell, Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*—plus two kung-fu flicks" (RZA 58)

In RZA's book titled *The Wu-Tang Manual*, the rapper details the influence of martial arts and kung-fu, specifically, on the philosophy and music of Wu-Tang Clan.

Widely considered one of the most influential hip-hop groups of all time, Wu-Tang Clan released their debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* in 1993. Wu Tang's members include RZA, GZA, Ol' Dirty Bastard, Method Man, Raekwon, Ghostface Killah, Inspectah Deck, U-God, and Masta Killa. RZA and Ol' Dirty Bastard took the group's name from the Hong Kong martial arts film *Shaolin and Wu-Tang*. The group's debut album name comes from the Hong Kung kung-fu film titled *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*; both *Shaolin and Wu-Tang* and *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* belong to the Master Killer Collection, produced by the famous Shaw Brothers and starring Gordon Liu. Masta Killa, of the Wu-Tang Clan, pulls his name from these films as well. The films depicted young peoples' revolution against the Manchus, an oppressive government. RZA explains the group's attraction to *The 36th Chamber* film: "You had the government oppressing all the people, but the young didn't even know that they were oppressed…they didn't know they were oppressed, they figured that's how it's always been. I could relate to that on a lot of levels" (RZA 59). Aside from that, the name 'Wu-Tang' just sounded "fly as far as the street level of it" (59). Kung-fu films meant a lot to the members of Wu-Tang, but they also rang true to an entire generation of young African-American men, cementing a kinship through resistance between Asian and Black men. RZA notes the importance of brotherhood in both martial arts films and in the hood:

> "That movie [*The 36th Chamber of Shaolin]* is *real*. It's a kung-fu movie, but it's a real story. These eight brothers who go out and they get betrayed and they fight to the death for each other—it hit us. And n—was saying, 'I'm the Fifth Brother!' 'I'm the Sixth Brother!'…I think what got them was the betrayal and the brotherhood…Listen, we're oppressed. It does feel like we as a people were betrayed a long time ago. I can't really describe it any other way. It's real because the issues are alive with us. You're living in the hood and you've got knowledge and dreams and you got wars between neighborhood and neighborhood and neighborhood. Everybody's backstabbing everybody. And when you know someone

> who's got your back, that's a life-or-death thing. That's a real bond, a real brotherhood" (RZA 62-63).

Themes in kung-fu films reflected the streets of New York, where young Black men relied on each other, valuing loyalty, resilience, and strength above all else. RZA details loving movies like *Scarface* and *The Godfather* along with Chinese and Japanese crime movies because they felt real and relevant to his experience—Ghostface Killah samples the Japanese crime film *Crying Freeman* in his track titled "Fish." Hip-hop was part of the youth culture and "the whole subculture of America," from martial arts movies to skateboarding to comics, influenced Wu-Tang's music (86).

In *The Wu-Tang Manual*, RZA describes kung-fu samples and John Woo references as "part of our [Wu-Tang's] lives," calling hip-hop "moviemaking" (RZA 107). In the Master Killer films, Wu-Tang is the best sword style. For Wu-Tang Clan, hip-hop is power: "…With us, our tongue is our sword…We either gonna control them through knowledge and influence their minds, or we gonna bring the sword and take their heads off" (RZA 63). Wu-Tang was inspired by the "warrior aspect, the brotherhood of the art, the challenge of [kung-fu];" the group considered MC battles to be challenges of the sword, applying kung-fu principles to "everything [they] do, from the sound of it, to the competitive swordplay of the rhyming, to the mental preparations" (RZA 64). East met West through shared values and experiences. Kung-fu films offered young Black men tools and philosophies for survival in an oppressive culture, teaching Black youth like Wu-Tang to value brotherhood, mental discipline, and physical prowess. In the 1990s through the early 2000s, Wu-Tang dominated radio airwaves, reaching young people across the United States.

Growing up in Miami in the 1990s, Jin Auyeung was known as "the Chinese kid who raps" (Wang). During high school, Jin would sit in his bedroom and memorize Tupac lyrics instead of doing his homework. Born to immigrant parents from South China who owned a strip-mall Chinese restaurant, Jin grew up in North Miami Beach during the tail end of hip-hop's golden age. North Miami Beach was diverse at the time, with Jin growing up on a block with Blacks, whites, and Latinos. Jin's parents' restaurant was located in a Black neighborhood, but Jin's parents did not understand Jin's love for hip-hop—or his friendships with Black kids. Once he started getting into rap music, Jin explains that his parents would say, "You really think you're Black, Jin? Bottom line—you're not Black, Jin" (Coates 56). In a feature written about the Asian-American rapper just after the release of his first album, Ta-Nehesi Coates writes, "there's something a little shocking about watching him rap, not only because of specific Asian-American stereotypes—the nerd, the overachiever, the serious kid—but also because of the tension that exists in America between Blacks and Asians" (Coates 57).

In 2002, Jin made live appearances on the BET network's "Freestyle Friday" rap battles on the show *106 & Park.* For a record-setting seven consecutive weeks, Jin won battle after battle, shocking audiences with on-his-feet rap skills. One former high school classmate told Coates that when Jin got in rap battles, "every person he battled had an Asian remark…He was ready for stuff like that. He would flip it on them so they knew, 'You got to come at me like a rapper, not a racist.' And he'd have the crowd on his side" (Coates 56). In an infamous retort to an ethnic insult from an opponent during a "Freestyle Friday" rap-off, Jin rapped, "yeah, I'm Chinese/ now you understand it/ I'm the reason that his little sister's eyes are slanted/ if you make one joke about rice or

karate/ NYPD be in Chinatown searching for your body" (Chan). Through lines like this one, Jin evoked "longstanding stereotypes of Chinatown as a place of mystery and peril," winning audience approval through using the tropes and stereotypes of East Asianness that onlookers knew well (Kajikawa 147).

As an Asian-American rapper, Jin had to prove his masculinity and hardness, weaponizing his racial identity through his lyrics. Another freestyled line went "ask your girlfriend; she was doing something at my house/ as a matter of fact, she had my eggroll and dumplings in her mouth" (Kajikawa 145). By using racial and sexualized lyrics, Jin turned ethnic insults from his rap battle opponents on their head, taking advantage of stereotypes about Asian-American men as asexual, weak, and effeminate. A profile from 2003 details Jin's adoption of classic hip-hop materialism and style, describing his diamond-studded, platinum chain and baggy pants (Chan). Despite his use of hip-hop style, swagger, and sexuality, Jin could not escape his racial identity.

Jin's success on *106 & Park* sparked a buzz, especially among Asian-American and underground hip-hop fans. In 2004, Jin became the first Asian-American to release a solo rap album on a major label in the United States (Wang). This record met mixed reactions and gained limited success in the American market. Jeff Chang, author of *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, explains, "Jin was trying to basically break the old mold of Asian-Americans being sort of kung-fu artists or the folks who kind of stood in the background to play the supporting role" (Wang). Even though Jin had talent and skill, America was not ready for an Asian rapper—or, at least, America was not ready for an Asian rapper to rap about anything other than his race. Chang suggests that Jin met limited success in part because he was the first Asian rapper to try

to break into the American market, arguing that he might have found a larger following today, especially if he could get young Black audiences behind him (Wang). In the early 2000s, though, Jin's success faded away, in spite of his best efforts to either play up or obscure his race, depending on the forum. Loren Kajikawa writes, "rather than creating a true alternative to rap's hood-based authenticity, Jin merely gives it a Chinese makeover" (Kajikawa 147). At the time, mimicking this "hood-based authenticity" may have been Jin's only route.

By the early 2000s, Afro-Asian cultural content had hit the American consciousness, albeit through crude, often comedic formats. Martial arts buddy comedy films like the *Rush Hour* series, starring Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan, grew in popularity as a strange medium mixing African-American and Asian-American masculinities in the late 1990s and early 2000s. If Bruce Lee made martial arts mainstream, then Jackie Chan has made martial arts commercial. *Rush Hour* enjoyed tremendous box office success, capitalizing on the comedic impact of its "odd-couple" pairing. Minh-Ha Pham writes cynically, "…the multicultural moral of this biracial odd coupling is that racial differences are never so significant that they cannot be overcome and never so insignificant that they cannot be turned into a profit" (Pham 126). The film features two lead detectives, who are "at the very least caricatures of African-Americans and Asian-American," as the film "[trades] in overt stereotypes" (Oh 351). Analyses of *Rush Hour* argue that the film simulates progressivism, using multiculturalism to disguise racist representation while protecting whiteness (Pham 126); (Oh 351). Unlike in Blaxploitation film, *Rush Hour* advances no political message in favor of the protagonists. Instead, criminals in the film series are all Asian, positioned as a 'yellow

peril-esque' economic and sexual threat to white society (Marchetti 3). In *Rush Hour 3*, actress Youki Kudoh's femme fatale character is listed solely as "dragon lady" in the end credits (Oh 353).

Despite this, Chong Chon-Smith writes that the "cross-racial solidarity" in martial arts buddy films have potential for "subversive politics," as vehicles for "wide-ranging antiracist and anti-imperialist critiques" (Chon-Smith 85). These films have widened the scope of African-American and Asian-American masculinity, creating sympathetic characters through the comedic pairings of wise and "ethical" martial arts heroes with "streetwise" African-American stars with hip-hop stylings. Through this coupling, Asian-American men, often seen as weak or less masculine, are physically competent and dominant, while African-American men, often seen as dangerous and violent, can be bumbling and silly. Chon-Smith notes that the martial arts genre "packs a multi-million-dollar punch" because it combines "the cultural juggernaut of urban hip-hop with the physical spectacle of martial arts" (Chon-Smith 86). Previously, hip-hop and martial arts were subcultures, mixing in the streets of big American cities like Chicago and New York City, maligned by a dominant white middle class. By the early 2000s, though, martial arts and hip-hop were becoming culturally and commercial dominant, triumphing over their underdog beginnings.

Each of the examples in this section—Wu-Tang Clan, Jin, and the *Rush Hour* series—highlight the increasingly commercial setting for Afro-Asian cultural output in the 1990s and early 2000s. The popularity of interracial martial arts buddy films and the fusing of hip-hop and kung-fu set the scene for the Afro-Asian relationship through representation into the 2010s. Cross-cultural output during the 2000s was infused with

humor and comedy, as film directors, actors, rappers, and audiences alike recognized the absurdity of the distance between Asian-Americans and African-Americans in America. During the 1990s and 2000s, Afro-Asian cultural production blended like never before. In the 1800s, the two racial groups collided from time to time, fighting for dominance and the coveted label of "American." By the middle of the next century, African-American and East Asian-American activists were working together, modeling racial disparity despite lingering tensions. Following the civil rights era, in the 1970s and 1980s, Black people and East Asian people appreciated the cultural output of the other, consuming Blaxploitation and kung-fu films and expanding the roles that Black and Asian actors could play. These films brought Black and East Asian cultural production further into the commercial mainstream, even though audiences who watched the films were largely nonwhite. By the 2000s, though, Afro-Asian cultural production finally hybridized and became part of dominant commercial production, yet the examples of Wu-Tang Clan, Jin, and the *Rush Hour* series reveal that for the most part, this cross-cultural output remained stereotypical. Heading into the post-Internet age, this non-comprehensive history of Afro-Asian cross-cultural production and consumption in the United States is the political, economic, and social foundation upon which contemporary superhybrid production and consumption is built.

6. Constructions of Identity in the Internet Age

a. Dematerialization, Destabilization, and Disembodiment

Through the invention of the computer and digital technology, the nature of signification has shifted. In Katherine Hayles' seminal book titled *How We Became Posthuman*, the author writes that the pressure towards dematerialization impacts human

and textual bodies as a material shift and as a change in codes of representation. The "interdigitated" connectivity pulling these changes create new models of signification; as information technologies alter modes and mechanisms of text production, storage, and dissemination, they "fundamentally alter the relation of signified and signifier" (Hayles 1999, 29-30). Hayles characterizes these evolved modes of representation as 'flickering signifiers,' "carrying the instabilities implicit in Laconian floating signifiers one step further" (30). One element of the 'flickering' descriptive is that for a sign to be interpreted digitally, the user must type a signifier command, which the computer reads as signified, before producing a signifier that the user then reads as signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified along with the designation of each becomes even more arbitrary and unstable, as information flickers between signifier and signified, mediated by technologies of inscription. With cybernetics, signs and their producers become disembodied, as they exist in data storage and binary numbers. Computer users could be human; they could also be AI. Previously, Stuart Hall wrote of the body as cultural text. Using her term of 'flickering signifiers,' Katherine Hayles, too, writes of the body as a discursive construction, left somewhere between the immateriality of information and the material conditions of its production (Hayles 1993, 147).

The flickering signifier represents a shift in the conceptualization of space and body in the digital age. In *The Ecstasy of Communication,* Jean Baudrillard writes that the human body now seems superfluous as everything is concentrated in the brain and genetic code, "which alone sum up the operational definition of being" (Hayles 1993, 148). Discussing disembodiment in her piece titled "The Materiality of Informatics," Hayles explores the construction and deconstruction of the body as an immaterial

structure within postmodern discourse. She uses Foucault's depiction of torture in *Discipline and Punish*, in which Foucault details the shift from corporal, physical punishment to mental torture, to illustrate the relationship between body and embodiment. In contrast to the body, which is "always normative relative to some set of criteria," embodiment is contextualized in time and space (148). Internet users include AI programs and apps that complete their programmers' commands, meaning that the websites, programs, and forums that Internet users interact with may not have a body at all. Hayles writes that first-wave cybernetics conveyed the "disturbing and potentially revolutionary…idea that the boundaries of the human subject are constructed rather than given" (Hayles 1993, 84). Through the flickering signifier and cybernetics, looser signifiers open space for looser identity and constructions of body, reducing policing of cultural boundaries.

b. Cyberculture, Counterculture, and the Body Politic

"People here communicate mind to mind, not black to white. There are no genders. Not man to woman. There is no age. Not young to old. There are no infirmities…There are only minds. Only minds. Utopia? No. The Internet." Pulled from a now-infamous 1997 commercial from MCI Telecommunications, these words from MCI's Anthem commercial speak to the early utopic possibilities of the dematerialization of body. This vision of the Internet promised a virtual space where race, gender, age, and disability are gone, or at least no longer matter. In two books written at the turn of the twenty-first century, *Race in Cyberspace* and *Cybertypes*, Lisa Nakamura writes of these dreams of the Internet as techno-fantasy. The biological body no longer represents truth or reality; it can be escaped, once and for all. Through the Internet, the possibility of disembodiment

seemed within reach, facilitated by virtual systems (Nakamura 31). In some ways, as Katherine Hayles highlighted above, this proved true. The Internet offers the possibility of crossable borders and boundaries, where users can shield their identities behind animal avatars and fake names. Nakamura explains: "On the Internet…it is possible to 'computer cross-dress' and represent yourself as a different gender, age, or race. In millennium America, this supposedly radically democratic aspect of the Net is celebrated frequently and unconditionally" (35). Through these possibilities, early cyberspace emerged as a sort of theater of performed identities.

Even as this early cyberspace promised escape from body, early Internet users who chose to characterize themselves racially or in terms of gender met pushback from other users. In chatrooms, those with usernames that included racial terms were frequently white men engaging in racial performance (Nakamura 37). Meanwhile, players who described themselves in racially 'othered' terms, identifying themselves as Asian, African-American, or Latinx were often seen as engaging in "a form of hostile performance," introducing a "real-life 'divisive issue' into the phantasmic world of cybernetic textual interaction" (Nakamura 37). This negative reaction to online racial identity challenges the notion of early frontiers of cyberspace as racially amorphous. To not label oneself racially indicated whiteness; labelling oneself was the racist act. Although many early Internet cultures were subcultural, few were resistant or in opposition to racist hegemonic practices. Nakamura quotes the work of Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, who write that "…the odds are firmly stacked against the efforts of those committed to creating technological countercultures" (Penley & Ross, quoted in Nakamura 46).

c. Transnationality and Transculturality

Emerging from the destabilization of body and material identity in the digital age, nationality and cultural identity transform into transnationality and transculturality through the opening of social spheres via global information flows. Digital media form virtual spaces, which are global public spaces where discourse is developed and disseminated (Schachtner). Through global labor and information flows, lifestyles extend past national borders into outside cultures; migration, trade, and technology create transnational, transcultural space where information, images, and commodities may circulate (Schachtner). New possibilities for cross-border cultural identification online and offline pose challenges for the traditional political concepts of the sovereign state and the citizen. Seyla Benhabib refers to this new reality as a "crisis of territoriality," writing of the devolution of the presupposition that a dominant and unified state has total "jurisdiction over a clearly marked piece of territory" (4). Globalization, in regards to free markets and the growth of international digital cultural networks, has helped create a new cultural climate that pushes beyond nation-state boundaries. Virtual communities, then, can be considered post-national communities, where voluntary members make up the community regardless of nationality (Benhabib 9). At both the material and virtual levels, digital media destabilizes conventional barriers and boundaries.

Several philosophers and theorists have attempted to characterize this destabilization. Wolfgang Welsch writes of the distinctions between culture and transculturality in noting the ways in which different cultures "permeate" each other (Welsch 263). These cultural flows that cross national borders move in all directions; they do not solely end in the influence of the West upon all else (Schachtner). Ulrich

Beck believes that the term 'transnationality,' which emphasizes territoriality where transculturality highlights cultural meaning and production, runs counter to "all concepts of social order" by defying the logic of the nation-state (Schachtner). To Beck, transnationality and transculturality are interconnected through the cosmopolitan, implying that the meeting of nations results in the meeting of cultures. The prefix 'trans-' as opposed to 'inter-' as in the word 'international' reflects this movement across natural and cultural border through spaces, speaking to informal relationships built between nonstate actors (Kraidy 14).

d. Techno-Capitalism and Consumer Cannibalism

Expanding on transnational and transcultural global flows, Douglas Kellner proposes a dialectical critical theory of globalization that appraises its positive and negative features. He titles this theory "technocapitalism," or the synthesis of capitalism and technology through globalization. Technocapitalism "points to the increasingly important role of technology and enduring primacy of capital relations of production," as opposed to postmodern theories which often argue for technology as "the new organizing principle of society." Globalization exaggerates flows of capital, technology, culture, people, and goods, circulating mass culture around the globe. Communication systems spread capitalism and the production of technocommodities and techno-culture. Kellner presents globalization as an amalgam of homogenizing forces and heterogeneity or hybridity. On one hand, Kellner writes, globalization "unfolds a process of standardization in which a globalized mass culture circulates the globe creating sameness and homogeneity everywhere" (Kellner). At the same time, globalized culture materializes through unique appropriations around the world, "thus proliferating hybridity, difference, and

homogeneity" (Kellner). Kellner distinguishes between globalization-from-above, or technocapitalism imposed on peoples, and globalization-from-below, meaning the grassroots spread of culture and goods. Technocapitalism shifts to enclose new technologies, preventing the radical use of technological innovations by capturing them in a cannibalistic cycle of commodification.

Global commodity culture swallows both new technologies and cultural differences through an act that bell hooks calls "consumer cannibalism." hooks writes that "the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (373). Through this displacement and decontextualization, consumer cannibalism eradicates difference and resistance, untethering signs from their critical meaning. hooks goes on to write,

> "When young Black people mouth 1960s Black nationalist rhetoric, don Kente cloth, gold medallions, dread their hair, and diss the white folks they hang out with, they expose the way meaningless commodification strips these signs of political integrity and meaning, denying the possibility that they can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action. As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption" (hooks 375-376).

Here, through the act of consumption, symbols of Black power lose their significance even when used by Black people themselves. The commodification of symbols of Afro-Asian power and resistance result in the diffusion of those symbols' meaning, even as they reach a larger global audience. Signs of cultural difference or resistance are swallowed through an increasingly globalized technocapitalist commodity culture. Through contemporary global crossover, cultural production has expanded to "enable the

voice of the non-white Other to be heard by a larger audience even as it denies the specificity of that voice, or as it recoups it for its own use" (hooks 373). Recuperation therefore is an act of negation or eradication, making cultural difference and resistance palatable for white audiences.

e. Subculture and Recuperation

Stuart Hall, John Clarke, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts explain that a hegemonic cultural order tries to frame all competing definitions of the world within its range, "[providing] the horizon of thought and action within which conflicts are fought through, appropriated (i.e. experienced), obscured (i.e. concealed as a 'national interest' which should unite all conflicting parties) or contained (i.e. settled to the profit of the ruling class)" (Clarke et al. 39). In this way, a hegemonic world order prescribes the limits—not the contents—of ideas and conflicts. Oppositional cultures and countercultures form in response to this dominant world order, fighting to work against hegemonic systems of communication and production. Still, in forming a dialectic with dominant cultures, countercultures are necessarily tied to a hegemonic cultural order. John Clarke describes the diffusion and defusion of style in the context of subcultures. Cultural diffusion transforms subcultural style into market or consumer style through commercial expropriation. These subcultural styles are only of interest to commercial industries if the styles and signifiers can be "sufficiently generalized to meet similar 'needs' of their consumers on a broader scale" (Clarke 187).

Furthering his discussion of 'mass' processes of subcultural redefinition and reappropriation, Clarke defines cultural defusion as the dislocation of a style in the aim of making it widely marketable—especially through making that style's novelty

commercial. Clarke writes, "From the standpoint of the subculture which generated it, the style exists as a *total lifestyle*; via the commercial nexus, it is transformed into a *novel consumption style*" (Clarke 188). More "acceptable" elements are stressed, while the cultural industry glosses over less acceptable elements. This process is not a conspiracy as much as the "natural" function of ideological production and commodity. The elements of a subcultural style are dislocated from the sociopolitical context and social relations of its origin and instead become consumed by mass, commercial industry.

In his critical text, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige refers to the cultural production of subcultures as "noise," writing that we should "not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation" (Hebdige 90). Subcultures therefore hold tremendous power for disruption in systems of representation, threatening hegemonic strongholds on cultural production and consumption. Through standing in opposition to mainstream, dominant cultures, subcultures develop alternative signs and systems. During the civil rights era, the Black Power movement influenced radical Asian activists, and vice versa, with both countercultural movements adopting signs and symbols of the other. Later, young Black men found power in the characters, themes, and narratives in kung-fu films, using the signs of one subculture to uplift their own. The history of American Afro-Asian representation is one of resistance and flirtations with both dominant and oppositional culture. At times, one side ostracized the other to better fit with dominant cultures, as was the case with early yellowface and blackface minstrelsy. Often, however, one found a mutual solidarity and resistance through mixing with the

cultural production of the other. Regardless, Afro-Asian systems of representation in the United States have always been inextricably tied to a dialectic relationship between dominant and subcultures, along with economic forces of consumption and capital.

As subcultures spread through popular culture, once-disruptive signs and symbols become increasingly familiar. Subcultures, too, are "eminently marketable," with their visual and verbal vocabularies eventually, yet inevitably, available to be assigned to the most convenient referential context (Hebdige 94). Hebdige echoes the words of Stuart Hall, arguing that the media situates resistance "within the dominant framework of meanings" through the process of recuperation. Recuperation involves the conversion of subcultural signs into mass-produced objects or commodities, along with the labelling and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups like the media (Hebdige 94). The former is the 'commodity form' of recuperation, while the latter is recuperation's 'ideological form.' Through the process of recuperation, once-deviant and once-disruptive signs are swallowed into the dominant system of representation. Henri Lefebvre punctuates this dissolution of meaning: "Has not this society, glutted with aestheticism, already integrated former romanticisms, surrealism, existentialism, and even Marxism to a point? It has, indeed, through trade, in the form of commodities! That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods; consumption thus engulfs what was intended to give meaning and direction" (Lefebvre 95). This bears repeating—"That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods." To destroy resistance, absorb resistance. Subcultures lose their resistant meaning through the process of recuperation. In a technocapitalist system of representation, new

technologies and cultural differences are rendered meaningless through "consumer cannibalism," in which signs are decontextualized, disembodied, and displaced.

f. The Political Economy of the Post-Internet

Herman Gray asks the following: "Can we produce critical cultural projects that actively contest for popular hegemony when the very representations over which we struggle and the cultural practices in which they are embedded are structured in the logic of global capitalism and grammar of digital bits, cyberspace, and the information superhighway that defines the technological revolution in communications?" (Gray 204). Do neoliberalism and transnational cyberspace offer cultural openness and economic freedom or do they corrode culture and community? Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd push back against aforestated pessimistic views of cultural production, consumption, and commodification. In their work titled *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, Lowe and Lloyd argue that both "antagonism and adaptation" have always been part of the process of modernity; the meeting of culture and politics reveals complex contradictions between "contemporary global capitalist development and the culture whose social relations have an extended history that is always in part determined by encounters with emergent modernity" (16). Emergent cultural forms permit economic reproduction and exploitation while also allowing for the development of oppositional modes of production. Action prompts reaction. Any dialectic necessarily includes opposition and evolution.

John Hess and Patricia Zimmerman cite electronic space as one of the most important sites for the development of global capital and new power structures (Hess and Zimmerman 185). In this transnational era of global capitalism, capital knows no home.

This does not mean that digital space is an abstraction; Hess and Zimmerman attempt to complicate the notion of digital capital as "some mathematical reorganization of cinematic elements that displaces locations within racialized, sexualized, and engendered subjectivities…which displaces material power relations" (182). Even as national borders become amorphous online and capital spreads through cyberspace, digital cultural practices, as Herman Gray notes previously, are rooted in concrete logics of global politics, trade, and capitalism. Indeed, the pair write that most discussions of digitality and digital theory ignore the function of the digital within the transnational economy, choosing instead to solely analyze the digital within national art contexts (Hess and Zimmerman 185). In reality, cultural practices cannot be assessed outside of a political or economic context.

g. Hybridity to Superhybridity

Post-colonial theorists of the early 1990s brought forth theories surrounding hybrid identity and mimicry. Theorist Homi K. Bhabha writes that hybridity is the name for "the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal...[It] is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects" (112). Hybridity is therefore a subversion of colonialism in which the colonial subject opens a new space, belonging in at least two places at once. For the colonizer, the hybrid subject induces fear and paranoia because the hybrid "breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/ outside," running counter to traditional images and presences of authority (Bhabha 115). In an evaluation of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, author and professor Satoshi Mizutani characterizes hybridity as a challenge of "the 'temporal dimension' of colonial discourse: its logic of permanent presence, or of

never-changing identity" (Mizutani 9). For post-colonial thinkers, this conception of hybridity represented the tremendous potential and power for cross-cultural identity as a disruption or attack on colonial authority. Hybridity does not resolve the tension between multiple cultures but does intervene in the exercise of colonialist domination, problematizing colonialist representations of the colonized. Through hybridity, post-colonial theorists believed, the colonized could reverse the process of being acted upon by the colonizer.

Building upon Bhabha's theory of hybridity, *Frieze* magazine writer and director of the Institute for Art in Context at the University of the Arts in Berlin, Jörg Heiser coined the term 'super-hybridity' in 2010, noting the evolving connections between technology and transculturality. Heiser writes that hybridization has "moved beyond the point where it's about a fixed set of cultural genealogies and instead has turned into a kind of computational aggregate of multiple influences and sources," warranting the prefix 'super' (Heiser). Indeed, Heiser notes that celebrations of hybridity as the subversion or counter-force to colonialism and capitalism may ignore ongoing global power dynamics, prematurely declaring cultural victory for the colonized. Such global power dynamics include Western idealization of cosmopolitanism over national identity and the potentially negative impacts of neoliberal free markets on postcolonial societies. Super-hybridity, on the other hand, acknowledges the role of capitalism and global industry flows alongside digital technology in increasing the number of cultural contexts that young artists, musicians, and writers tap into when producing work. One critique of superhybridity lies in the notion that these global cultural and economic flows are universally beneficial and that individual creativity explains global cultural success. This

discourse denies the domination of the United States in global popular culture and economic markets, claiming instead that U.S. popular culture is simply irresistible to foreign audiences (Kraidy 79).

By pulling from numerous disciplines, materials, and genres, the superhybrid paradoxically desires to let go of property and origin while maintaining capitalist boundaries at a certain level, as with intellectual property law, class hierarchy, and patriarchy. This computational aggregate links back to Hayles' concept of flickering signifiers, as defined origins and pathways become harder and harder to pin down. The superhybrid is origin-less because it is comprised of countless origins and property-less because it is comprised of countless properties. With the Internet, raw materials have already been taken out of historical, political, social, and at times, even contemporary context, opening space for the superhybrid. Inherent to the concept of superhybridity is this decontextualization, ironically achieved through the oversaturation of contexts, which leads to a dissolution of meaning. Superhybridity is the culminating combination of cyberspace's instability and dislocation, the transnational, transcultural flows of technocapitalism, and the loss of subculture and cultural difference through consumer cannibalism. By encapsulating the ties between global financial and cultural flows, superhybridity complicates the largely-positive concept of postcolonial hybridity. Through a superhybrid Internet, complex historical contexts, as is the case for the American Afro-Asian cross-cultural relationship, are consumed by an oversaturation of origin and meaning, resulting in the negation of origin and meaning.

7. The Performance of Identity in the Post-Internet: Case Studies in Superhybridity

This cultural landscape of loose signifiers and transnational, transcultural identity is the backdrop and context leading into a rush of Afro-Asian video output in 2016 to 2018. In 2017, rapper Kendrick Lamar played a short film titled "The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny" during his Coachella performance, releasing the music video for his track "DNA.," featuring Asian visual signifiers and Don Cheadle's *Rush Hour* character the next day. Next, in 2018, the Atlanta-based rap trio Migos released their music video to the song "Stir Fry," halting the track midway to have a karate duel in a Chinese restaurant. Not to be outdone, rappers Vic Mensa, Valee, and Chance the Rapper collaborated on the video for "Dim Sum," while Nicki Minaj put out her newest single, "Chun-Li," inspired by the famous video game character, which won the MTV Video Music Award for Best Hip-Hop Video. Around the same time, the then-named Rich Chigga's first track, "Dat $tick," went viral, catapulting Asian rappers into the American cultural consciousness. Before long, Rich Chigga (now known as Rich Brian) joined the newly-formed and all-Asian record label 88rising, forming an Asian rap power-group whose music and videos constantly go viral.

What does contemporary American Afro-Asian cultural production look like in this new media landscape? Case studies of popular cultural producers can serve to supplement this inquiry. To further investigate this question, this section will delve into the performance of identity in the post-Internet, focusing in on the recent digital work of the Pulitzer Prize-winning, African-American rapper Kendrick Lamar and the breakthrough Asian-American music label 88rising. Although several videos containing both Asian and Black imagery were released around the same time frame, this paper focuses on the case studies of the contemporary work of Kendrick Lamar and 88rising as

complex cultural producers who have found both commercial success and critical acclaim through satire, sampling, and strategy rather than mere stereotype, as is the case for some of their peers. While not directly comparable, the complicated cultural texts of Lamar and 88rising are worth analyzing in the context of a superhybrid digital environment. These artists offer the latest cross-cultural output along an intricate timeline of subculture versus dominant culture dynamics, politics and policy, economics and capital, and visual representations of racial identity.

First, this section will begin by introducing Kendrick Lamar's background, critical acclaim, and commercial success, before offering a close reading of three of his recent video releases—the short video titled "The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny," the music video for "DNA.," and the music video for "Doves in the Wind," featuring singer SZA. As an African-American performer, Lamar repeatedly uses Asian signifiers throughout his recent work, playing with racial identity and transgression. Lamar constructs videos with themes of resistance and opposition, even as he reproduces stereotypes of patriarchy and commodity and positions Asianness as Other. Referring back to traditional constructions of American Blackness and East Asianness, these sections will take a closer look at contemporary uses of spatial and sexual imaginaries in new cross-cultural media production. The other case study is the Asian-American music label 88rising, a group that has found unprecedented success as Asian cultural producers in the American media market. This section will detail the group's rise before closely analyzing the label's "Rappers React" videos and the Higher Brothers' "Made in China" music video. 88rising's use of African-American visual signifiers in conjunction with the approval of several famous Black rappers serves to legitimize the group as they play at

transgression. Speaking to the superhybridity of the Internet, the group's video work is the composite of signifiers of many origins, and as a result, appears origin-less and untethered from the subcultures that initially produced American rap music.

This analysis of Lamar and 88rising's work centers on questions of resistance, transgression, and the reproduction or transference of traditional hegemonic tropes of patriarchy and commodity. Although both Lamar and 88rising do produce resistant work, whether Afro-futurist, satirical, pro-Black, pro-Chinese, and so on, their content ultimately cannot be truly transgressive or oppositional, operating within mainstream dominant culture. Instead, both rely on hegemonic tropes of patriarchy and capital to game success in the American hip-hop market. They tease transgression without ever actually creating oppositional work; perhaps *who* is able to create popular content and find success has changed, but the content and tropes that they use have not. Despite Heiser's optimism in labeling his observations of a seemingly origin-less online cultural aggregate, the superhybridity of Lamar and 88rising's work is hardly transformative or transgressive, instead operating neatly within the patriarchal, neoliberal system of cultural production that Afro-Asian producers may once have opposed. By pulling from countless origins and contexts, Lamar and 88rising's cross-cultural production, the latest iterations of American Afro-Asian imagery, fail to critically engage with a lengthy and complex history of Afro-Asian cross-cultural output in the United States.

a. Kendrick Lamar

i. Background

In 2018, African-American rapper Kendrick Lamar was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music for his 2017 album, *DAMN.* The first rapper to ever win the award, the

Pulitzer Prize organization notes that Lamar is "one of the rare artists who has achieved critical and commercial success while earning the respect and support of those who inspired him" ("The Pulitzer Prizes"). Raised in Compton, California, Lamar's work, sometimes autobiographical in nature, deals with the complexities and inequalities of modern African-American life. Signed to Top Dawg Entertainment, Aftermath, and Interscope Records, Lamar's three major studio albums (*good kid, m.A.A.d city*, released in 2012, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, released in 2015, and *DAMN.*, released in 2017) were each certified at least Platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America. Lamar has won 12 Grammy Awards for his work (Eells).

Most recently, Lamar's 2017 album, *DAMN.,* topped the Billboard charts, was nominated for Album of the Year at the 2017 Grammy Awards, won Best Rap Album at those awards, and, as previously mentioned, won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Music as the first non-jazz or classical work to earn the prize (Barker). The track "Humble.," off of the *DAMN.* album, earned the most audio streams of any single during the year of 2017. *Variety Magazine* considers Lamar "the defining hip-hop artist of his generation" (Barker), *Rolling Stone Magazine* calls him "hip-hop's most exciting rapper" (Eells), and *Pitchfork Magazine* writes that Lamar is "a master storyteller," with *DAMN.* his "masterpiece of rap" (Trammell). By the end of 2017, *Forbes Magazine* had named Lamar as one of the "top-earning hip-hop acts of 2017," with a net worth of over $30 million ("The Top-Earning Hip-Hop Acts of 2017").

With the release of *DAMN.* in April of 2017, Lamar kicked off his album tour with a headlining performance at Coachella Music Festival. Analyzing Lamar's use of Asian signifiers throughout his most visible and critically acclaimed album tour yet

reveals an artist willing to play with identity formations through the creation of spatial and sexual imaginaries in his videos. At the top of his game and career, Lamar released three videos: *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny,* "DNA.," and "Doves in the Wind," which each carry Asian tropes and imagery pulled mainly from kung-fu film. Lamar's use of kung-fu tropes serves as a resistant force against anti-hip-hop, anti-Black sentiment and as a powerful symbol of control and mastery of his craft. That said, with the exception of "Doves in the Wind," Lamar reproduces gendered roles and the otherness of Blackness and Asianness in these short films.

ii. The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny

Kendrick Lamar begins his 2017 Coachella performance by showing a short film starring himself as the character Kung-Fu Kenny titled *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny.* The film's opening title is red with yellow lettering, the colors of the Chinese flag; the video's production company's name, Top Dawg Entertainment, is spelled out both in English and Chinese. Part One of the film is titled "The Way of the Glow" in English and Chinese. "The Way of the Glow" opens with a kung-fu master telling Lamar that he is the one who will bring 'the Glow' back but has more to learn first. A montage begins of Lamar learning new kung-fu techniques, superimposed over a graphic background. Part One ends with Lamar staring head-on into the camera, with Chinese characters digitally cloaking his face. The video feed flickers rapidly between Lamar's face, neon images of warriors, and Chinese characters as the narrator's voice, announcing "The Black Warrior," echoes. As the flickering speeds up and intensifies, the crowd at Coachella screams in excitement.

Still from *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny* video, performed by Kendrick Lamar.

Part Two, titled "Trials and Tribulations," opens with Lamar traveling by foot lit by a red backdrop. Now named "The Black Turtle," Lamar fights and wins kung-fu matches as traditional Chinese music plays in the background. The audience watches two women wearing white masks covering their entire faces meet each other in battle or dance, spinning white floral parasols. One woman is Black while the other appears to be an Asian man wearing drag. Both remain masked and faceless until Lamar comes across them. Then, the Black woman's face is revealed, and she dances sensually, knowing that Lamar watches her. The camera cuts to a new view of her, where Lamar and the audience see her in a futuristic cone bra and natural hair, seated and staring into the camera with her legs wide apart. A voice speaks: "Find 'the Glow,'" and 'the Glow' grows between the woman's legs, emanating from her vagina. In the next frame, the woman lies down and the camera looks at Lamar in a point-of-view shot from her perspective. Lamar

stands between her legs with his hands outstretched, causing them to part. Chinese and English text appears on the screen, reading "Where the Black is darkest, the Glow will shine the brightest." 'The Glow' comes from the woman's vagina and is transmitted to Lamar's penis. The video ends with Lamar smiling and winking at the camera, his journey complete, while text on the screen states "Kung-Fu Kenny found the mothafuckin' Glow, hoe." At Coachella, the audience cheers.

Pulling inspiration for the video from the 1985 kung-fu film *The Last Dragon* and the character of Kung-Fu Kenny from *Rush Hour 2,* Lamar pays homage to the mutual otherness in the Afro-Asian cultural experience. Both movies are campy and comical amidst their sincerity, playing up the simultaneous solidarity and strangeness in Afro-Asian encounters. Set in New York with a predominately Black cast, *The Last Dragon* is unlike most kung-fu films and became a cult classic. In *The Last Dragon,* a Black character named Bruce Leroy is on a mission to become a martial artist as great as Bruce Lee. Leroy is tasked with finding 'the Glow,' which means he will reach his fullest potential as a kung-fu master. When Lamar announces that he has "found the mothafuckin' Glow" in *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny,* he declares himself a hip-hop master. To reach the apex of his journey, Lamar must first practice kung-fu, as is nearly always the first course of action in a kung-fu film. During Part One of the video, as Lamar improves his kung-fu skills, his face flickers between his own, covered in Chinese characters, and neon images of Aztec-like warriors. The two eventually combine and Lamar becomes "The Black Warrior" or "The Black Turtle." An overt example of Katherine Hayles' concept of the flickering signifier, this scene visually and audibly

flickers, creating space for superhybrid and fused identity. Signifiers flash until they are no longer recognizable and a better, stronger Lamar emerges into Part Two.

Still from *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny* video, performed by Kendrick Lamar.

In Part Two of *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny*, Lamar builds a pre-modern Asian setting then pulls Afro-futurist sexuality into its space. Lamar depicts himself in traditional Chinese clothing, traveling across mountain and desert to become the best warrior in the land. He fights a female martial artist and wins before coming across the two exotic dancers. As a Black man in Chinese clothing, Lamar creates visual dissonance for viewers, who are generally not accustomed to seeing the two signifiers mix. The Black dancer in a bright white Asian mask, painted with red lips, then, is another unlikely pairing. Her grace compared with her dance or battle partner's jerky movements adds to the jarring strangeness of the space Lamar has constructed. When Lamar enters, the Black woman's face is revealed and now she wears a futuristic cone bra, all gold and silver. Journeying from a traditional kung-fu film landscape, Lamar has learned all the kung-fu he can, and now he has arrived at the precipice of mastery, kept in an Afro-

futurist world. Lamar stands before her between two Chinese gates. Lamar stands before her between her two Black legs. She is the gatekeeper to 'the Glow,' or ultimate power and mastery of craft; her legs part, and she allows Lamar to come through the gates. The Black woman holds ultimate power and mastery through her sexuality; although this may seem transgressive or even feminist, she is defined by her gender and ability to give or withhold sex. By proclaiming "where the Black is darkest, the Glow will shine the brightest" in both Chinese and English, Lamar makes a strong statement about the authority and divinity of Black womanhood, but stops short of subverting women's traditional role in kung-fu and hip-hop film.

Beyond the plot, this piece speaks to a deliberate representation of the resistant and oppositional Black gaze in film, as detailed by Manthia Diawara and bell hooks, respectively. Lamar stares directly into the camera throughout the short film, subverting the camera's gaze which so often finds itself nonconsensually on Black bodies. The Black female dancer, too, looks directly into the camera as she dances, owning her sexuality. Lamar gazes into the camera at the ends of both Part One and Part Two. The first, as he becomes "The Black Turtle," is in fierce resolve and determination; the latter is in pure joy as Lamar feels 'the Glow.' Picturing Black joy onscreen in itself is a resistant act, but forcing millions of viewers online and at Coachella to gaze directly into Lamar's eyes as he expresses joy is a tour de force.

iii. "DNA." and "Doves in the Wind"

Lamar gave his 2017 Coachella performance on April 17, 2017, just two days after dropping the *DAMN.* album. The next day, Lamar released the music video for his song "DNA." With over 189 million views on YouTube, the "DNA." music video

furthered the excitement surrounding Lamar's album release. Kendrick Lamar's alter-ego, Kung-Fu Kenny, is referenced repeatedly throughout his 2017 album, *DAMN.*, as in lines like "new Kung-Fu Kenny" shouted at the start of some of the tracks. His character shows up throughout the *DAMN.* tour and album, whether in *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny* or in music videos like that of "DNA." The Kung-Fu Kenny moniker comes from Don Cheadle's character in *Rush Hour 2*; Cheadle's appearance in the music video for "DNA." references the same character.

Just as the music video for "DNA." mixes Black and Asian signifiers, the *Rush Hour* series features an unusual mix of Black and Asian characters. Cheadle's character, for example, is Black but owns a Chinese restaurant, speaks Mandarin, and is skilled in kung-fu. In the most famous scene of *Rush Hour 2*, Cheadle's character, Kenny, gets in a kung-fu match with Jackie Chan's character, Chief Inspector Lee, wherein the two men realize that they were taught kung-fu by two brothers. One Master Ching lives in Beijing, the other in Los Angeles. Comedic and self-aware, the *Rush Hour* series capitalizes on the unlikelihood of the shared experience of an Asian man and a Black man.

In the music video for "DNA.," Lamar's character kills Don Cheadle's character in a mostly mental battle of strength after the two characters face off in an interrogation room. Lamar exits the interrogation room wearing a kung-fu uniform as Chinese characters spell out the name Kung-Fu Kenny, officially introducing Kendrick Lamar's alter-ego. At the same time, Lamar samples Fox News reporter Geraldo Rivera as Rivera says "this is why I say that hip-hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years." Now, having defeated Cheadle's character, Lamar raps with a group of other Black men, who are introduced with the Chinese characters for family.

This is intercut with clips of a car (outfitted with Chinese decorations) of screaming girls careening down a road. Clad in a kung-fu uniform and aiming kung-fu moves at the camera, Lamar's use of Asian signifiers serves as armor against the beliefs propagated by Rivera and his news network. Giving his friends the label of family while rapping that he has "loyalty and royalty inside [his] DNA" counters the idea of hip-hop as a damaging force by stressing the solidarity and kinship that hip-hop can foster. By choosing to write the word 'family' in Chinese characters, Lamar invokes the vision of brotherhood and loyalty that is often a central theme in kung-fu films to strengthen his argument. Lamar's video for "DNA." reveals the potential for cross-cultural identity flows as a productive and resistant force to racist and hegemonic ideation.

A year after Lamar released *DAMN.*, he and singer SZA dropped the music video to their song "Doves in the Wind." This video served as a continuation of the imagery Lamar used in *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny*. In the video, SZA rides a horse through the desert as Lamar's character, Kung-Fu Kenny, practices martial arts standing on the peak of a mountain. SZA dismounts and attempts to climb the mountain, running past a pair of attacking martial artists as Kung-Fu Kenny shoots darts at her. After reaching the top of the mountain, SZA joins Kung-Fu Kenny for tea in a Chinese garden; their dialogue mimics the poorly-dubbed English common in kung-fu films released in the United States. As pictured in this still, SZA and Lamar wear kung-fu attire as they face-off. SZA wins a match against Kung-Fu Kenny's followers before fighting Kung Fu Kenny herself. At first, SZA struggles and Kung-Fu Kenny tells her that her style is no match for his own. Soon, though, SZA bests Kung-Fu Kenny, mainly due to her ability to

Still from the “Doves in the Wind” music video, performed by SZA and Kendrick Lamar.

levitate and fight from the air. The video ends in a reversal of the end positions in *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny*, as Kung-Fu Kenny is the one lying on his back, looking up at SZA as she rises in the air with ‘the Glow’ radiating from her vagina. In a subversion of the gender dynamics of Lamar’s earlier film, SZA finds power through ‘the Glow’ and owns but is not defined by her gender or sexuality.

b. 88rising

i. Background

Founded in 2015 by Sean Miyashiro, 88rising is a hybrid mass media company that is a record label, management company, content creator, and more. Its members include a multitude of young Asian musicians ranging in genre and style, although most members are rappers. Famous names include Joji, the Higher Brothers, Rich Brian, Dumbfoundead, and Keith Ape. Just like Wu-Tang Clan before them, 88rising has a

member to compete in any subgenre of hip-hop. In a profile on 88rising, writer Hua Hsu notes that Miyashiro's company "is an authority on how to create pop-culture crossovers" (Hsu). Staying ahead of the curve is a difficult task to manage when it comes to Internet cultural trends, but 88rising has found success through its youth-driven, stylized videos that often include collaborations with big-name rappers. Hsu writes that these collaborations have lent 88rising "a kind of credibility" as an Asian company in hip-hop whose artists "often borrow from the idioms of Black culture, but in a way that's increasingly detached from the music's originating streets and struggles. Instead, their sensibility celebrates the free flow of the Internet, in which cultural crossovers should be fast, frictionless, and shorn of historical context" (Hsu). If this sounds familiar, it should. Heiser's discussion of the term 'superhybridity' speaks directly to this sense of an origin-less, context-less cultural aggregate composed of multiple influences and sources. Signifiers become less and less attached to reality; they are enigmatic, they float, they flicker. Those who can figure out how to produce content that feeds into this new digital information exchange gain a continuous audience on the Internet. 88rising, stacking its roster of Asian American music artists, has made its unlikely yet successful start, drawing comparisons to Vice and Disney.

ii. "Rappers React"

In July of 2016, 88rising released their first "Rappers React" video, titled "Rappers React to Rich Chigga ft. Ghostface Killah, Desiigner, Tory Lanez & More." The video was dropped as a follow-up to the massive viral response to controversy surrounding then-16 year old Indonesian rapper Rich Brian (known as Rich Chigga at the time). Rich Brian had released a music video for his song "Dat $tick," which features the

rapper and his friends with bottles of liquor and guns, rapping about "killing pigs," "popping shells," and "holdin' steel Glocks." The video took off right away, racking up views—the video currently stands at nearly 110 million views—and gathering attention, in part because Rich Brian is an unexpectedly talented rapper and in part because nobody knew what to make of this deep-voiced, pink-polo and fanny-pack wearing, Asian kid acting hard. Moreover, he was calling himself Rich Chigga, which nobody was quite sure how to handle, either. A *New Yorker* feature notes that "the song didn't fetishize black culture as much as it frolicked within an outlandish, sex-and-violence-obsessed version of it" (Hsu). Luckily, viewers and Internet-users did not have to decide how to interpret Rich Brian's arrival on the hip-hop scene, because 88rising, helmed by Sean Miyashiro, decided for them.

Still from the "Rappers React to Rich Chigga" video, produced by 88rising.

88rising recruited a number of influential African-American rappers to watch Rich Brian's music video for "Dat $tick" and filmed their reactions, creating the

"Rappers React" video, pictured here. A couple of rappers are skeptical at first, with 21Savage saying "they deadass serious…he got a mothafuckin' fanny pack on," but all approve by the end of the video. Tory Lanez dubs Rich Brian "the hardest n---- of all time," Jazz Cartier says that Rich Brian "snaps" and "is his guy," and Goldlink tells Rich Brian's managers that Brian is "perfect" and "should never change." By publicizing the approval of these successful African-American rappers, 88rising was able to control the narrative around Rich Brian's career debut, legitimizing him as a rapper in the American media market. The legitimization of Rich Brian as a serious rapper through the approval of famous African-American rappers mimics the legitimization of Yellow Power political groups through the approval of Black Power leaders. This direct mirror, though, illustrates a disappointing lack of transgression through this cross-cultural solidarity. Instead of working together for political liberation and resistance, the two racial groups come together in the name of viral success and global capital.

A year later, 88rising released a follow-up in which popular rappers including Migos, Lil Yachty, and Playboi Carti react to the Higher Brothers' song "Made in China," analyzed in further detail below. Again, the rappers are approving, calling Famous Dex "the Chinese Biggie," and making statements like "I don't think I ever wanted to be Chinese more than this moment right now" and "this is the future." One rapper says, "I appreciate that my culture, our culture, reach so fucking far, all the way around the world, bruh. When the sun down here, the sun up there." Another responds, "they bring their culture into it. That's what sticks. That's what makes it amazing." They particularly appreciate that some of the Asian rappers are wearing Black-signified objects, like large diamond chains and top-of-the-line sneakers. The rappers reach a

consensus. They appreciate the enthusiastic combination of Black and Asian culture that 88rising artists like Rich Brian and the Higher Brothers contribute to American hip-hop, and they believe that this will be the future of hip-hop culture nationally and globally.

iii. "Made in China"

The music video for the track "Made in China," released by the Higher Brothers and Famous Dex of 88rising, dropped on the 28th of March 2017, a little less than a month before Lamar released the *DAMN.* album. Like Lamar's *The Damn Legend of Kung-Fu Kenny* short film, the opening screen for the "Made in China" music video is red, with the 88rising logo in yellow. The opening words to the song–"Rap music? China? What are they even saying? What is this Chinese rap music? Sounds like they're just saying ching-chang-chong"—play as the stage is set onscreen, with Chinese carvings, vases, fans, and lanterns filling the mise-en-scène of the shot. Initially, the rappers gather at a mahjong table, each wearing an identical red silk tracksuit.

Still from the "Made in China" music video, performed by The Higher Brothers.

Later, they rap at a concert to a sea of fans and together in an alleyway. They rap in a mix of Chinese and English; sample lyrics include "my chains, new gold watch, made in

China/ we play ping pong ball, made in China/ 给 bitch 买点儿奢侈品 made in China…she all made in China."

In "Made in China," the Higher Brothers and Famous Dex openly satirize conceptions of East Asianness in American culture through their focus on commodity in their lyrics and enigmatic objects onscreen. The video is overloaded with objects that signify the Far East: bamboo plants, mahjong, Chinese fans, Chinese vases, and so on. Through coloring the video in tones of red, the video's producer evokes a Western vision of how China appears. As 88rising satirizes it in this track and video, an American view of East Asianness must be racist, sexist, and capitalist. The music video intends to be clever, tongue-in-cheek, and transgressive, even briefly cutting out and telling viewers that "this video is not available in your country" as a reference to Internet restrictions in China and globally.

"Made in China" does confront American conceptions of Asian music and rap artists, as in the track's opening lyrics, a racist sample. Still, the Higher Brothers and Famous Dex find power and success through patriarchal and sexist lyrics. The song's lyrics refer to the rappers' "bitch," "made in China," which could mean that all of the woman's items of clothing and products were made in China, the label transferring to her as an amalgamation of the products that she owns. Alternatively, the lyrics could suggest that the woman is Chinese, pointing to Western distaste for the "cheapness" of Chinese products despite their fetishization of Asian women. Either way, the label of "bitch" along with either of these interpretations is certainly not a feminist nor enlightened view of women. Further, the artists rap about chains, gold watches, and other products made in China in the same lines that they say "she all made in China," lumping the hypothetical

woman in with a long list of products. Perhaps “Made in China” is tongue-in-cheek and transgressive, but it achieves its aims through the objectification and subjugation of women.

8. Conclusion and Implications

The cross-cultural output of musicians like Kendrick Lamar and 88rising marks the latest iterations of a long and complex history of Afro-Asian representation in American popular culture. An Afro-Asian history of representation in the United States is a story of cultural performance, solidarity, and a dialectical relationship between dominant culture and subculture. This investigation into the causes and implications of a recent rise in Afro-Asian cross-cultural imagery post-Internet involves several factors. First, this paper explored a brief inquiry into the active process of signification and cultural production, followed by an outline of traditional, non-resistant tropes of Blackness and East Asianness and the common forms that those tropes have taken in American popular culture. Next, this paper examined the historical relationship of cross-cultural production and consumption between Blackness and East Asianness, looking towards collisions, solidarities, and the influences that one racial group has had on the cultural output of the other. Turning from an Afro-Asian history of representation in the United States, this paper then interrogated the contemporary, post-Internet moment of cultural production and consumption, building a theoretical foundation for today’s creation of cross-cultural identity through the meeting of cybernetics, technocapitalism, and subculture. Finally, this paper concludes by looking at two case studies of complex cultural producers and objects in the post-Internet: the successful African-American rapper Kendrick Lamar and the breakthrough Asian-American music label 88rising.

Through the invention of cybernetics and computer systems, the relationship between producers and consumers is destabilized. Early visions of the Internet were utopic, with countercultural users envisioning a race-less, age-less, gender-less, body-less cyberspace where identities were superfluous and fluid. Indeed, through the processes of transnationalism and transculturalism, the Internet transcends physical and geographic borders, allowing culture, goods, and media to flow across boundaries. These global flows, as characterized by Douglas Kellner, manifest through a synthesis of technology and capital. Technocapitalism entails the swallowing of technologies and cultural differences; through the processes of consumer cannibalism and recuperation, disruptions to systems of representation are engulfed by global commodity culture, losing their resistant meaning. In a post-Internet political economy, cultural production and consumption cannot operate outside of the context of global capitalist systems, making the creation of meaning far from abstract. Building on the theory of hybridity, superhybridity acknowledges the origin-less nature of Internet flows along with the capitalist, neoliberal spread of global media flows. Superhybridity is the resultant concept from the combining of theories of cybernetics and subculture, claiming that in the post-Internet, origin, context, and meaning are dissolved and dislocated through an oversaturation of origin, context, and meaning.

These theories of subculture, technocapitalism and political economy, transnational cyberculture, and, finally, superhybridity, come together to form a picture of cross-cultural identity formation in the post-Internet. A recent resurgence in Afro-Asian imagery in the American national consciousness has not come from a place of abstraction, but rather stems from a long and complicated history of cross-cultural

collisions, collaboration, and convergence along with a post-Internet that allows for the ready flow of cultural origin and loose identity policing. This contemporary moment offers room for both the continuation of hegemonic, non-resistant, racist practices and oppositional counterculture. Globalization allows for the spread of culture, greater access to technology, and the demand for ever-evolving, novel cross-pollination. The proliferation of Afro-Asian cultural production throughout dominant, globalized culture could represent the triumph of the Other in a technocapitalist system. However, if this triumph can only be reached through the dissolution of meaning due to loss of origin, then the supposed cultural domination of Afro-Asian signifiers is just a simulation of power. An intricate and complex history of Afro-Asian cross-cultural production and consumption in American popular culture is consumed, folded into a superhybrid Internet.

It is worth returning to bell hooks' initial pondering of the transference versus transformation of roles in representation. Racial groups that once were relegated to oppressive, harmful roles within media representation, creating their own subcultures in opposition to mainstream, dominant media production, now find themselves as producers of that dominant culture. This transition from subculture to mainstream culture deserves close examination; Black and Asian cultural producers are not inherently transgressive, even if their production and representation means progress. Even resistant work within hegemonic information systems, such as Lamar's depiction of the complexities of Black male emotion and gaze in *The Damn Legend of Kung Fu Kenny*, does not necessarily translate to a transgressive, feminist, or anti-capitalist larger work. 88rising's "Made in China" video is subversive, in some ways, poking fun at the Chinese government and at

Western consumers, yet it relies on traditional hegemonic tropes of patriarchy and commodity to achieve these aims.

The work of 88rising and Lamar appeals to Internet users through its superhybrid nature, both contributing to and created from neoliberal flows of information and culture. 88rising and Lamar have found tremendous success in a capitalist media system by teasing transgression without ever truly engaging in opposition. Their tracks are poetic, their videos are well-produced and even resistant, yet not *too* resistant. The superhybrid highlights both the positive potential and dangers in the formation of culture and identity through transnational, transcultural Internet flows, as the computational cultural aggregate complicates black and white racial binaries yet discounts the reality of certain cultures as dominant in global hegemony and economy. Despite the promise of a new social order with loose, flickering signifiers opening space for enlightened, countercultural content, the examples of Lamar and 88rising point firmly toward a transference—rather than transformation—of power. Unfortunately, contemporary artists like Kendrick Lamar and 88rising have capitalized on hegemonic tropes of patriarchy and commodity, with a complex American Afro-Asian history culminating in the swallowing of meaning. Perhaps the Internet has loosened restrictions on who signifiers belong to and who is able to produce culture, but the signifiers themselves have not changed.

At their best, superhybridity and transnational, transcultural production and consumption reveal the potential of the post-Internet to increase access and representation while allowing traditionally marginalized populations to produce media. The danger of superhybridity, however, lies in its ability to dissolve and displace meaning along with the nature of transnational technocapitalism as a force that swallows cultural difference

even as these processes play at cultural resistance or transgression. At its worst, superhybridity could disempower a resistant history of American Afro-Asian representation through decontextualization and the performance of racial identity, undermining origin and meaning through an oversaturation of origin and meaning. This means that cultural producers and consumers have a responsibility to critically assess media texts and objects and demand resistant material. It also means that further research into these new cross-cultural media flows is vital.

This paper is limited in scope, providing room for a more comprehensive history and examination of intersectional identities in further scholarship. Future research could include delving into a history of American imperialism and pan-Asian or pan-Black identity, an in-depth analysis of gender, sexuality, and queerness in these cross-cultural texts, an evaluation of the work of female cross-cultural producers, and further political analysis, among other themes (futurism, deviance, neoliberalism, etc.) that this project could not encompass. Through this project, I aimed to add to the somewhat limited literature surrounding the contemporary Afro-Asian relationship in American popular culture. This project additionally involved a close examination of Jörg Heiser's term 'superhybridity' as a productive tool for analysis of media and cultural studies, pushing new media scholarship forward. To this end, cultural production invites research and analysis. It also invites reaction and opposition. In this new media era, cultural producers and consumers must actively work against the reification of traditional hegemonic forces of signification, pushing media in the post-Internet towards the reinstatement of meaning.

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