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Rice and Rap:

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and the Role of the U.S. Multicultural Neoliberal State

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

by

Michelle Mihwa Chang

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Rice and Rap:
Hip Hop Music,
Black/Asian American Racialization,
and the Role of the U.S. Multicultural Neoliberal State

by Michelle Mihwa Chang

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2015
Professor Kyungwon Hong, Chair

This paper explores Black and Asian American racialization within the multicultural neoliberal state. Looking at Los Angeles in the 1980s and early 1990s, I examine the rise of multiculturalism and neoliberalism within the US as it parallels the rise and commercialization of hip hop music sub-genre, gangsta rap. By examining the multicultural neoliberal state, and its consequences for communities of color, I look at the ways in which Black/Asian American racialization occurred through the tropes of the gangster and the model minority, respectively. Moreover, I contend that the multicultural neoliberal state relied on popular constructions of Asianness and Blackness in order to maintain whiteness, conceal state-violences, and define its national borders of inclusion and exclusion, and gangsta rap provided an ideal space for this. My project also explores progressive rap and the ways in which it

manifested from the same conditions of gangsta rap, yet managed to produce itself differently. Lastly, I conclude with a close examination of the hip hop duo Blue Scholars (featuring Asian American emcee Prometheus Brown) and their song, "Morning of America," which addresses and challenges this particular moment of the 1980s through the lens of the colonized subject and racialized other.

The thesis of Michelle Mihwa Chang is approved.

Aisha K. Finch

Victor Bascara

Kyungwon Hong, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

DEDICATION

To those who fight the good fight.

Keep on keeping on.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

I. Introduction

In 1984, while running for his second term as President of the United States, Ronald Reagan ran an ad campaign, which begins with Reagan announcing, "It's morning again, in America."¹ The political campaign runs for a minute, with Reagan's soothing voice reminding voters that interest rates are at a low, more men and women will go to work tomorrow, and more families are able to buy a home, get married, and "can look forward with confidence to the future." At the end, Reagan rhetorically asks, "Why would we ever want to return to where we were, less than four short years ago." Throughout the advertisement, Reagan's narration is intended to evoke nationalist pride and is complemented by dominant images of white, nuclear families, suburbia, heteronormativity, American flags, and the U.S. Capitol Building. This advertisement not only works to remind viewers, but specifically voters, of the "good old days" and appeal to nostalgic memories of American values as illustrated through the family structure. At the same time, it also reinforces specific types of American values of national inclusion - white, middle-class, heteronormative. Absent in these images are working-class neighborhoods, non-normative values, and families of color (although there is a brief glimpse of a little girl whose phenotype is ambiguous, perhaps purposefully so). The images reflected in Reagan's political campaign illustrate conventional family values and norms and also shows how ideas of American-ness and national belonging are directly aligned with notions of whiteness, which are then conflated with middle-class, heteronormative values. As consequence, these values and

¹ ""Morning in America" Ronald Reagan 1984 Presidential Political Campaign Ad." YouTube. August 18, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vx2Ik1Rckss>.

images begin to re-shape and reinforce dominant notions of belonging and national inclusion.

My research looks at Black and Asian American racialization and the commercialization of hip hop beginning in the 1980s. My project examines the ways in which the commodification of gangsta rap mediated certain Black and Asian American racializations, and how these racializations reinforced the state's multicultural and neoliberalist agenda. Under the conditions of the multicultural neoliberal state, images of the Black rapper and the model minority were utilized in order to convey particular images of Black and Asian American racialization, respectively, that reinforced the status quo, especially within the Black-white binary and in relation to whiteness. Not only did U.S. national culture construct diametrically opposed images of Asianness and Blackness in order to maintain whiteness, but it also exploited the language of multiculturalism and neoliberalism to justify and conceal the inherent racist implications of such an agenda.

This project will explore the genealogy of hip hop music in the west coast - the rise of gangsta rap in Los Angeles and the hip hop duo Blue Scholars in Seattle - tracing the role of the multicultural neoliberal state in producing binary images of the Black rapper, and the model minority, and subsequently, the ideological paradox of the figure of the Asian American rapper. I examine these two locations in the west coast, even though hip hop formed in New York City, because Los Angeles is an arena where Asianness and Blackness intersect and converge, and are articulated and contested. Furthermore, I analyze the Blue Scholars in particular because these hip hop artists are socially conscious, recognize their positionality, and navigate the terrains of Asianness and Blackness in unique ways. More

specifically I look at the Blue Scholars' song, "Morning of America," because it critiques the multicultural neoliberal state and addresses the complexities of US national culture (along with national culture's co-opting of Black culture) from the marginalized perspective of the colonized subject, perpetual foreigner, and racialized other. Additionally, "Morning of America," addresses 1980s popular culture and politics, and in doing so, utilizes popular culture in order to re-radicalize a decade that has become successfully de-radicalized and termed the "winter" of Civil Rights.² Even the act of using hip hop as a weapon recaptures the origin story of hip hop, which emerged as a critical, disruptive genre, whose parts later become commercialized as will be discussed.

In order to analyze Asian American rappers, my research complicates traditional linear narratives that attribute their absence to issues of racial authenticity. I challenge this narrative by looking at the racialization of Blacks and Asian Americans and the production of hip hop within the national dialogue of multiculturalism. To begin, gangsta rap's emergence into mainstream popular culture in Los Angeles, and hip hop's mainstream association with solely the sub-genre of gangsta rap, occurred in tandem with the changes in socioeconomic conditions and historical events of Los Angeles during the post-civil rights era. My research investigates the conditions that propelled this rap sub-genre into the limelight, the process in which gangsta rap became conflated with the broader cultural form of hip hop, and subsequently criminalized and coded as "black." These processes of racialization and criminalization developed simultaneously, labeling rap

² Omatsu, Glenn. "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s." In *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, edited by Karin Juan. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994.

as a Black cultural form along with the racialized associations of the term "Black," with violence and danger. The commercial appropriation of gangsta rap and hip hop culture also produced and popularized a criminalized "Black" racial identity within larger society; and vice versa - hip hop as a commercial genre is also produced by these ideas of race. Driven by capitalist needs for profit, the commercialization of hip hop manufactured a racially "authentic" image of the rapper, which further perpetuated a coding of hip hop culture as "Black." The commercialization and racialization of hip hop constructed a specific image that became associated with rap, and immediately positioned Asian Americans as diametrically opposite - as model minorities. At the same time, other sub-genres of rap, such as progressive rap, were relegated to the underground scene. As gangsta rap became a marketable product because of the images of "Black" culture it claimed to represent, it also began to define itself as the only form of hip hop culture.

In order to investigate the ways in which hip hop culture became associated with a certain racial framework, the US multicultural neoliberal state that emerged in the 1980s must be examined. In the post-civil rights era, the language of multiculturalism validated neoliberal political practices that transitioned the country from a welfare state to one that focused on the individual and self-enterprise. Not only did these political decisions have real-time economic ramifications, especially for communities of color as evinced by the dilapidated conditions of Los Angeles inner-cities, they also affected racial formations. By the 1980s, discussions of multiculturalism largely dominated the political dialogue of the United States. Multiculturalist language served to exacerbate racial divisions, while the narrative of neoliberalism functioned by denying inequalities caused by racial difference. On one

hand, Asian Americans were racialized as the “model minority,” the ideal citizen who epitomized characteristics of whiteness, but could not actually be white; on the other, African Americans were juxtaposed as violent, thug-like, criminal, and a threat to the state and the sanctity of whiteness.

II. Literature Review

Hip hop scholar and cultural critic, Oliver Wang attributes the absence of Asian American rappers in mainstream popular culture to the lack of “racial authenticity.”³ The historic gendered racialization of Asian American men produced them as feminized subjects, thus positioning them outside perceptions of hip hop and masculinity. Wang concludes that Asianness and Blackness are perceived as polar opposite identifiers. Therefore, Asian Americans lack the racial authenticity to be accepted as rappers. My project challenges this linear approach to race genealogy as Wang’s approach simplifies and reinforces race as a singular modality. Though Wang’s scholarship provides a necessary basis to understand Asian Americans and hip hop, race is not constructed in an isolated vacuum and therefore, the racialization of Asian Americans cannot be examined as a linear process.

Likewise, Kevin Fellezs’ uses a similar argument to Wang in his discussion of Asian Americans and jazz.⁴ Fellezs examines the absence of Asian Americans in jazz discourse, also claiming that this invisibility is due to race. He contends that the jazz arena has been staged for Black-white competition and cooperation, therefore

³ Wang, Oliver. “Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC.” *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, edited by M. Nguyen, T. Tu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

⁴ Fellezs, Kevin. “Silenced but Not Silent: Asian Americans and Jazz.” *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, edited by M. Nguyen, T. Tu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

leaving Asian Americans out of the conversation. Like Wang, Fellezs also poses stereotypes of model minority as dominant factors prohibiting Asian American inclusion in jazz. Here, many scholars like Oliver Wang, Kevin Fellezs, Bill V. Mullen, and Fred Ho attempt to destabilize mainstream perceptions of Asian Americans that largely consist of model minority stereotypes, and shift conversations of racial discourse that blanket Asian Americans as high-achieving and therefore a successful model of assimilation. These scholars denounce model minority myths by discussing the racial struggles and histories of oppression in Asian American communities. Through this connection, they also attempt to illustrate historical moments of Afro-Asian solidarity, arguing Asian and African Americans share a history of colonization and appropriation. In doing so, these scholars utilize comparative race studies to show the historical parallels of these two groups in an attempt to illustrate the possibilities of future Afro-Asian solidarity and to justify Asian American racial authenticity, to a certain degree, in rap. However, as Grace Hong and Roderick Ferguson argue, scholarship that strives to negotiate racial difference by utilizing this nationalist form of collectivity to promote solidarity use comparative models that can become problematic and are limited.⁵ It is not enough to highlight historical moments of inter-ethnic cooperation in order to justify and build productive relationships across social lines. Rather, as Hong and Ferguson write, comparative racial formations “not only articulat[es] commonalities between communities of color but imagin[es] alternative modes of coalition beyond prior models of racial or ethnic solidarity based on a notion of homogeneity or

⁵ Hong, Grace Kyungwon, and Roderick A. Ferguson. "Introduction." In *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*. Durham [NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

similarity.”⁶ Though comparative racialization studies by earlier scholars are vital to the foundation for future comparative studies, Asian and African American racialization is a complicated process that needs to be examined beyond a dichotomous, comparative approach that relies on past instances of solidarity to argue for, and legitimize, future collectivity.

Although Wang’s scholarship and that of earlier scholars provide the necessary foundation to study Asian Americans in Black cultural music forms such as hip hop, my project aims to move past binary modes of thinking and a single-identity politics approach. Both Wang’s and Fellezs’ research relies on race as a primary unit of analysis in order to explain historical conditions that have rendered Asian American musicians invisible. However, the historical structures that shaped these racial categories influenced, and were influenced by, the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Moreover, the relationship between “Asianness” and “Blackness” requires a deeper investigation than a race-focused scope permits, and beyond a traditional comparative Afro-Asian politics approach.

One approach to go beyond the Black-white binary is Claire Jean Kim’s racial triangulation theory.⁷ Kim’s theory attempts to explain how Asian Americans have become positioned within a “field of racial positions,” as opposed to a linear model. Kim argues that Asian Americans have been racially triangulated through relative valorization and civic ostracism, vis-a-vis whites and Blacks. Asian Americans are seen as “better” than Blacks and thus valorized as model minorities, but since they are perceived as perpetual foreigners they are ostracized and never quite viewed as

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105-38.

white. In other words, Asian Americans are used as proof of the American Dream, yet they are relegated as second-class citizens who lack social citizenship. Her theory compliments Wang's and Fellezs' claims of Asian American invisibility - since Asian American racialization is imbedded in the model minority myth, Asian Americans cannot, and are not, seen in arenas that extend beyond the presumed realm of possibilities for model minorities.

However, Kim's theory is limited in scope and relies on the fundamental flaws of the black-white binary. Though the racial triangulation theory provides the theoretical foundations to understand how racialization functions, it assumes that racialization works across a linear path. In this case, Kim posits Asian and African American racialization relative to the dominant group, whites. Both points of relative valorization and civic ostracism are determined by whites. Though this is true, Asian and African American racialization manifests in more complex ways, and often times in relationship to each other. While Asian Americans are racialized according to whites, my research expands on racial triangulation, claiming the process of racialization is not just between the dominant and inferior group, but a more complicated web (that is hard, if not impossible to untangle) that can be analyzed at the points of contact among various groups - whites, Blacks, and Asian Americans. As such, my project attempts to borrow from Andrea Smith's "Three Pillars of White Supremacy," which "does not assume that racism and white supremacy is enacted in a singular fashion; rather, white supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated, logics."⁸ Though Smith's framework is used to discuss women of color in particular, her approach provides a useful

⁸ Smith, Andrea. "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing." In *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2006.

means in thinking about my research - Black/Asian American racialization, the colonized subject and model minority, popular culture and the power of white hegemony - in dynamic and cross-cutting ways.

My research looks at hip hop beginning with the 1980s, within the context of the US multicultural neoliberal state, and utilizes a multilayered lens to investigate Asian American and Black racialization. I rely on Helen Jun's argument, which provides an alternative approach to Black and Asian American racialization, arguing that these two groups have been historically racialized in relation to one another. Though Asian Americans were simultaneously valorized and ostracized by whites through the model minority trope, Asian American racialization was also dependent on Black racialization, vice versa, and had high stakes for social citizenship. As Helen Jun argues, Asian and African Americans historically struggled to attain social citizenship, a form of entitlement and badge of national inclusion.⁹ Jun coins two terms for describing new forms of racial discourse - *Black Orientalism* and *Asian uplift* - in order to illustrate how the subjugation and marginalization of Blacks and Asian Americans within the national framework are entrenched in relational, historical racial processes.¹⁰ On one hand, Jun uses Black Orientalism to describe how Blacks used Orientalist differences and the fear of the "Other," in order to claim a space within the national culture. By exploiting exclusionary practices towards "Orientals," such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Blacks at times asserted their own agency and re-defined their inclusion within the national body by defining those who existed outside of it. In other words, Black Orientalism describes

⁹ Jun, Helen Heran. *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-emancipation to Neoliberal America*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 3.

¹⁰ Jun, 4.

the process in which Chinese exclusion provided an opportunity for Black inclusion. On the other hand, Asian uplift describes the process in which the success of Asian Americans, largely portrayed through model minority stereotypes, were used to uplift the status of Asian Americans within the parameters of citizenship. Their successes and ability to overcome struggles such as Japanese American incarceration, were compared against the perceived failures of Blacks. As consequence, Asian Americans are celebrated as contributing, model citizens, and encouraged to identify with the white supremacist state, while their Black counterparts are thereby subjected to marginalized statuses of non-respectable.

Jun bases her argument on the concepts of social and juridical citizenship, contending this "race for citizenship" transpired within the larger national framework of white hegemony. Over time, as evident in the contemporary multicultural neoliberal state, existing racial ideologies were maintained by white hegemony, while concealed through the narrative of multiculturalism. Thus, regardless of these shifts of inclusion and exclusion, Jun concludes neither Blacks nor Asian Americans achieve the status of full citizenship and inclusion in the national imagination.

Through the language of multiculturalism and neoliberalism, the state produced Asian uplift to describe Asian American successes juxtaposed against the perceived individual social and economic failures of Blacks. Though these differences in achievement gaps were rooted in the effects of the 1965 Immigration Act, racial inequalities, and broad generalizations, multiculturalism and neoliberalism claimed that this gap had nothing to do with race and instead was

solely a problem of the individual.¹¹ By the 1980s, the U.S. was reacting to the shifting political makeup and social dynamics brought on by the achievements of student protests and civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s. In order to adapt to these changes, by the 1980s neoliberal and multicultural narratives were used across state, capitalist, and academic lines to conceal racism and create a facade of racial equality. In *The Reorder of Things*, Ferguson traces the rise of multiculturalism to the 1960s and 1970s.¹² Largely characterized by student protests, such as the 1969 San Francisco State Strike that established the first Ethnic Studies department, and civil rights movements, the 1960s and 70s threatened heteronormative American cultural standards that had become embedded in U.S. culture post-World War II and during the Cold War Era. Ferguson contends that protests during this time threatened white supremacy and networks of power - the state, capital, and academy. By the 1980s, these networks of power adapted and appropriated minority culture and difference, through the guise of multiculturalism and neoliberalism, in order to maintain whiteness. For instance, Ferguson introduces an example of Coca Cola's "First United Chorus of the World." Seeking to increase its profits, Coca Cola branded itself as a universal commodity by exploiting narratives of multiculturalism. Through its universally iconic commercial, Coca Cola used the same images of the 1960s and 1970s - students of color - to exploit difference and construct utopic visions of multiculturalism. This time, instead of holding picket signs and marching for equality, students of color were presented as peaceful and innocuous minorities, holding Coca Cola bottles and

¹¹ Melamed, Jodi. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011.

¹² Ferguson, Roderick A. *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2012.

singing. As Ferguson concludes, capital successfully manipulated multiculturalism by using images associated with student activism and minority difference. These networks of power thereby discovered that the same two images of activism and difference could be exploited and appropriated to extend white hegemony.

At the same time, multiculturalist language within US national culture and the state shaped and were shaped by the role of the US as a globalizing power and empire. The images used by Coca Cola's advertisement campaign were also appropriated from images of anti-war protesters, who criticized US imperialism and the Vietnam War. Through this multiculturalist discourse and Coca Cola's dominant presence in globalization (Coca Cola's "First United Chorus of the World" reflected multiculturalism at home and overseas), images of US imperialism are also lumped into notions of benevolence and euphemistic US savior narrative. For instance, the School of the Americas and the CIA's role in illegally dismantling governments (which will be addressed in Chapter 3) for the "sake of democracy" become written in dominant US history as such and atrocities committed by the US state are literally erased.

In short, the systems of power which were once threatened in the 60s and 70s exploited the same threatening language of multiculturalism to maintain power. Multiculturalism in the 1980s was appropriated to celebrate and manage difference, applaud diversity, and justify a neoliberal political agenda, while subtly maintaining white hegemony and the status quo. At the same time that multiculturalist language and the model minority narrative are used to erase minority difference, these narratives also act to legitimate the US as a benevolent and benign society at this moment of neocolonialism.

While Ferguson examines the exploitation of minority culture and difference by various systems of power to extend white hegemony, Jodi Melamed emphasizes the construction of state-recognized U.S. antiracisms that replaced historic, conspicuous forms of white supremacy with more evolved, clandestine forms of racism. Melamed goes on to address the state's antiracist agenda, which appeared through various forms of liberalism and multiculturalism, and became the ideological modes used by systems of power to erase racial difference and racism as legitimate factors that explained inequalities. As a result, these state engineered racial procedures re-formed racialized privileges and racialized stigmas. Multiculturalism and neoliberalism further naturalized the privileges of those who benefited from white hegemony and dispossessed those without.

Under the conditions of state-constructed multiculturalism and neoliberalism, the time of the emergence of gangsta rap in Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the racialization and criminalization of Blacks were presented as a seemingly natural process. To elaborate, since systems of power exploited multiculturalism to celebrate difference, and neoliberalism blamed inequalities caused by racial difference as individual flaws, by the emergence of mainstream gangsta rap in the early 1990s, the racialization and criminalization of Blacks were not read by the public as racism. Instead, as Tricia Rose argues, culture and behavior were conflated, and gangsta rap provided the ideal scapegoat to show that the problems and inherent racisms of the state were a "black-created problem."¹³ The state blamed gangsta rap for advocating crime and violence, and thereby successfully diverted attention away from the state-induced socioeconomic

¹³ Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop - and Why It Matters*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

conditions caused by Reaganomics, structural racism, and historical inequalities that gangsta rappers were rapping about. However, the rise of the hip hop sub-genre, gangsta rap, was not a coincidence, but rather produced and commercialized within the conditions of the multicultural neoliberal state and constructed against the narrative of the model minority, and vice versa.

IV. Conclusion

My research explores Black and Asian American racialization within the multicultural neoliberal state, while looking at the commercialization and transformation of hip hop music. In order to do so, I first look at the historical context of the 1980s and the process of Black and Asian American racialization, especially during this period of Asian uplift. Next, I explore the rise of hip hop culture and the commercialization of the sub-genre gangsta rap, by looking specifically at Los Angeles and the rap group, NWA. My focus on hip hop music then shifts to the sub-genre of progressive rap, which I argue emerged from the same conditions of the multicultural neoliberal state of the 1980s, but produced hip hop music differently from gangsta rap. Lastly, in the final chapter I introduce one example of progressive rap artists, the Blue Scholars, and examine their song, "Morning of America," which contests dominant narratives of multiculturalism and neoliberalism in the 1980s through subtle techniques. I look at the Blue Scholars because of their relationship to Black culture and rap music as not just Asian American rappers, but also as US citizens, colonized subjects, and perpetual foreigners. More specifically, Geo is conscientious of his Filipino American identity, acknowledging his relationship to US colonialism, but perhaps more importantly, he

recognizes that his Asian American identity also exists in a shared realm of oppression within the multicultural neoliberal state. By analyzing the Blue Scholars and "Morning of America," I intend to illustrate the complex relations of Black and Asian American racialization, its implications on dominant understandings of hip hop culture and who can be its producers, the ways in which the multicultural neoliberal state attempts to conceal white supremacy, and how the Blue Scholars challenge this through rap music.

CHAPTER II: Black/Asian American Racialization and Hip Hop

I. Black and Asian American Racialization and White Fears

As dominant images in popular culture and hip hop culture expressed specific, generalized ideas of whiteness, Blackness, and Asianness, all three ideologies were positioned in distinct spaces, relative to whiteness.¹⁴ The racialization of Blacks and Asian Americans homogenized each group and ascribed Blacks and Asian Americans with particular characteristics that materialized in popular culture through images of the Black rapper and the model minority, respectively. First, I will examine the emergence of the model minority, the historical conditions that allowed for its widespread acceptance and permanence in popular discourse and the national imagination. Next, as many scholars have already done, I will explore the implications of the model minority narrative, specifically looking at the ways in which the model minority narrative is used to racialize Asian Americans and subsequently produces popular understandings of "Asianness." However, I also argue that this racialization and the production of Asianness does not stand alone. Rather, Asianness is constructed and reinforced out of Blackness, and vice versa.

Model Minority

By the 1960s, the model minority trope emerged out of the consequences of U.S. state violences, while also erasing these violences. Largely credited to William

¹⁴ As Claire Jean Kim's theory suggests, Blacks and Asian Americans were portrayed in popular culture through notions of racially triangulation. However, my intervention is to suggest that we need a more complex analysis to understand these processes of Black and Asian American racialization. While Blacks and Asian Americans may appear through these neatly formed binaries, these processes are much more complicated and messy.

Petersen's "Success Story: Japanese American Style," published in 1966, the term "model minority" first appeared in *The New York Times* and commented on the economic success of Japanese Americans. Peterson remarked that Japanese Americans had an uncanny ability to rebuild after incarceration during World War II, writing:

Barely more than 20 years after the end of the wartime camps, this is a minority that has risen above even prejudiced criticism. By any criteria of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed. Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to this success story.¹⁵

Petersen exclaimed that despite the trauma and injustices Japanese Americans faced, they were able to overcome and find success - following U.S. cultural narratives of the American Dream and Horatio Alger. By citing Japanese American success beyond that of Horatio Alger - a person whose personal success story of pulling himself up from his own bootstraps has come to epitomize the American Dream - Petersen reified notions of success with Asian Americans.

I argue that by using capitalist narratives of Horatio Alger success stories, which emerged during the American Industrial Revolution, the state exploited a rags-to-riches story in order to erase state violences. By claiming that Japanese Americans were model minorities, it ignored the racist undertones of Executive Order 9066 and the unconstitutional removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Moreover, it dismissed the trauma and injustices Japanese Americans faced; by claiming that since they were now successful the injustices they endured were

¹⁵ Petersen, William. "Success Story, Japanese-American Style." *New York Times*, January 9, 1966, 180.

dismissible. In this way, I contend that the model minority narrative contributed to the literal erasure of Japanese American incarceration during World War II within state education systems. There is an absence of the state's own wartime atrocity within K-12 academic literature and common perceptions that Asian Americans do not have a history of struggles - largely due to model minority and the omitting of Japanese American incarceration from American history.¹⁶

Thus, the model minority narrative became a concept that started to define the racial position of Asian Americans. Not only did this stereotype ignore Asian American histories of struggles, but it also dismissed capitalist exploitations in two ways. First, as already addressed, it concealed U.S. state violences. Second, it was used to argue Asian Americans were "naturally" successful, despite their struggles and adversities, in order to argue that economic immobility and social failures of other ethnic minorities were a result of their own individual flaws and inadequacies, not state-induced racism. For example, the Immigration Act of 1965 "opened" immigration into the United States to the rest of the world. Instituted during the height of the Cold War, the Immigration Act of 1965 was legally constructed to open immigration to all, but racially coded to open immigration to Europeans, not those in the Asiatic Barred Zone.¹⁷ Though lawmakers intended to open immigration to Europe, the state saw an influx of migration from Asia under the two categories of family reunification and skilled labor. The 1965 Immigration Act prioritized professional/skilled immigrant laborers and by doing so, lawmakers believed it would only attract migrants from Europe. However, it unintentionally re-opened the

¹⁶ Bascara, Victor. "Cultural Politics of Redress: Reassessing the Meaning of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 After 9/11." *Asian Law Journal*, 2003, 101-30.

¹⁷ Keely, Charles. "The Immigration Act of 1965." In *Asian Americans and Congress: A Documentary History*, edited by Hyung Kim, 529-542. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996

gates for massive waves of Asian immigration. As a result, the United States saw a rise in highly educated and skilled Asian immigrants. This particular economic selection reinforced the narrative of Asian Americans as “model minorities” - inherently successful - while disregarding the law that intentionally chose these select immigrants.¹⁸

As the trope of the model minority came to dominate the national imagination, it also legitimized the American Dream. It showed that anyone, regardless of his or her history of struggle, could overcome any obstacle as long as she or he worked hard enough. And more importantly, the dominance of the model minority stereotype in popular imagination also paralleled the erasure of Asian American struggles. By ascribing Asian Americans with characteristics of hard work, success, and triumph, Asian Americans became the heralded minority, whose history of oppression and colonialism were erased. This story of success was used by the multicultural neoliberal state to create inter-ethnic tensions, particularly between Blacks and Asian Americans in Los Angeles, and to celebrate multiculturalism and racial difference. As Jun argues, this resulted in Asian uplift, the process by which Asian Americans were racialized and produced as idealized subjects at the expense of Blacks, who were racialized as the opposite of model minorities.¹⁹ Consequently, Asian American racialization was not only produced by white supremacy, but also in relation to Black racialization. The processes of citizenship and national belonging for Asian Americans and Blacks are not

¹⁸ Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

¹⁹ Jun, *Race for Citizenship*.

historically distinct from one another. Instead, these two racial groups are racially defined in relation to one another.²⁰

Asianness and Blackness

On one hand, Asianness was expressed through the dominant trope of the model minority and racially triangulated away from whiteness and Blackness.²¹ On the other, Blackness was reflected in popular culture either according to white standards of respectability such as *The Cosby Show*, or as a threat to whiteness, in this case hip hop culture. With the introduction of gangsta rap into the mainstream, these newer images of Blackness were associated with Black hyper-masculinity and violence, but more importantly, a threat to Whiteness. In this case, the rise of hip hop music and NWA. - even the physical presence of the music as it is blasted out of car stereos and at parties - presents both the psychological and physical threat to the status quo. Dominant representations of rappers challenged the sanctity of whiteness reflected in popular culture, such as the nostalgic memories of the 1950s, as illustrated in the acclaimed classic, *Grease* (1978). Moreover, rap music did not just threaten whiteness, but it also contradicted heteronormative and acceptable images of Blackness that were linked with the nuclear family in *The Cosby Show* and the upbeat, pop music of Michael Jackson.²² At the same time, images of the Black rapper validated and reinforced white fears of Blackness, and the model minority narrative provided the perfect compliment to this binary of model citizens and non-respectable citizens.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans."

²² Michael Jackson pushed the boundaries of gender, and at times race, later on in his career. But at the same time, Michael Jackson was largely seen as a non-threatening figure for a majority of his early career (his infamous court hearings over child molestation would later change his reputation, as would his death).

The construction of Asianness is depicted through the model minority trope, which is utilized and perpetuated by the multicultural neoliberal state to blame Blackness for its “inherent” flaws. As model minority emerged in racial discourse, it acted as an illusion, seemingly advocating for the inclusion of Asian Americans, who by their own individual success established themselves as model citizens and thereby earned a spot within the national framework. This form of Asian uplift also relied on traits of Blackness on the other side of the racial spectrum. Blackness provided polar opposite characteristics to that of the model minority narrative, further perpetuating the criminalization, demonization, and marginalization of Blacks, along with their exclusion to the national body as model and productive citizens. As Vijay Prashad argues regarding South Asian Americans, the model minority narrative was widely celebrated and became part of a normative index to be used against Blacks and their perceived failures.²³

In the end, the culmination of both structural and cultural institutions of US laws and policies, law enforcement and authority, national culture, economic processes, and mass media exploited the language of multiculturalism and neoliberalism to legitimize the inherent inequalities of such a policy, and further perpetuated dominant racial ideologies. By the 1980s, the state subtly sanctioned these dichotomous racial discourses by adopting multicultural and neoliberal discourses as its chief ideological agendas. Again, the state dismisses the structural racism and larger social and historical conditions that have shaped understandings of Blackness as synonymous with gangsta rap culture. Instead, the “success” of Asianness is used to dispute the “failures” of Blackness. The two images of the

²³ Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*.

model minority and the Black rapper legitimate the multicultural neoliberal state's claims of self-enterprise and success as attributed to bootstrap narrative and individualism on one hand, and failures as inherent flaws of the individual on the other. Asianness is then paraded to show how anyone can succeed and thereby exploited by the state as a safety valve to maintain white hegemony. And in Los Angeles, this narrative becomes evident in 1992.

By 1992 the multicultural neoliberal state's construction of the Blackness-Asianness binary would not only become a main point of gangsta rap songs and help fuel gangsta rap into mainstream commercial success, but this constructed binary between Asianness and Blackness would also become the major focus of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots/Uprising.²⁴ As Los Angeles erupted into flames moments after the not-guilty verdict from the Rodney King Trial, the media was quick to point to a Black-Korean conflict, specifically between working-class Black consumers and Korean immigrant shopkeepers.²⁵ Blaming these two groups for causing the destruction, the distinction between Asianness and Blackness, the model minority and the gangster, were further solidified within popular imagination.²⁶ Furthermore, after the city simmered down, 'next steps' to prevent another riot were largely centered around mediating the Black-Korean conflict, not addressing the systemic

²⁴ Songs like "Black Korea," featured in Ice Cube's (former member of NWA) *Death Certificate* (1991) which was released shortly after Latasha Harlins was killed by Soon Ja Du.

²⁵ Kim, Rose M. "Violence and Trauma as Constitutive Elements in Korean American Racial Identity Formation: The 1992 L.A. Riots/insurrection/saigu." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*: 1999-2018.

²⁶ As Helen Zia suggests in *Asian American Dreams*, before the Uprising, many Korean Americans regarded themselves as model minorities, embracing ideas of the American Dream and Horatio Alger narrative, while many Blacks met these new entrepreneurs with disdain. And the news media made sure it capitalized on these "Black-Korean" stories leading up to the Rodney King Trial and beyond.

inequalities and poor infrastructure caused by the multicultural neoliberal state's policies and the institutional racism embedded in the LAPD.²⁷

The Los Angeles Uprising becomes this moment of explosion for the multicultural neoliberal state, the emergence of hip hop culture, and the racialization of Blacks and Asian Americans. Black and Asian American solidarity, tensions, and relations started to consolidate and reify with the Uprising and rise of gangsta rap. The model minority narrative and the image of the gangster become further polarized and embedded within national imagination and popular culture. The media-constructed Black-Korean conflict seemed to verify this within the mainstream, and as the Uprising was largely blamed on the Black-Korean conflict, the multicultural neoliberal state rendered itself invisible in its policies that resulted in social dislocations, oppressions, and state-sponsored violence.

II. The Rise of Hip Hop Culture and Commercialization

By the 1980s, hip hop music was slowly seeping into other cities, gradually captivating a larger, multiracial audience that extended beyond the Bronx. In *The Tanning of America*, Steve Stoute argues hip hop erupted onto the mainstream in the 1980s with Run DMC's live event at the Madison Square Garden on July 19, 1986.²⁸ As Stoute recalls, Adidas' US sales were floundering. By the mid-1980s, Nike and Reebok were on the rise, challenging Adidas' share of the U.S. sneaker market, forcing Adidas into a meager 3 percent share. So in the summer of 1986,

²⁷ The 1992 Los Angeles Riots/Uprising, or known to the Korean American community as Sa-I-Gu, require more research and analysis than this thesis can provide. Addressing Los Angeles leading up to 1992 was originally part of this project, but as I would later discover, making the Uprising a focal point of this research requires more time and space than a thesis would allow.

²⁸ Stoute, Steve, and Mim Eichler Rivas. *The Tanning of America: How Hip-Hop Created A Culture That Rewrote the Rules of the New Economy*. New York: Gotham Books, 2011. 46.

when Run DMC performed their song, "My Adidas," Adidas executives were at the performance, watching. As Run, the emcee of the hip hop group, took off his Adidas sneaker and held it high chanting, "My Adida!" the crowd responded, reaching down to remove one sneaker, holding it above their heads. The events that followed that moment changed hip hop's presence within popular culture. Run was offered his own Adidas line, a marketing move Stoute claims was unprecedented in market history. Adidas, internationally renown for selling athletic shoes, had just endorsed a group of rappers to promote their shoes not on the company's merit for making quality athletic shoes, but as a signature product that epitomized youth culture. Adidas was re-branding themselves within the sneaker market, attracting consumers on the basis of fashion and style. In other words, Adidas suddenly became branded as "cool" and appropriated minority culture and difference to do so. By packaging and selling hip hop culture, or "street culture," Adidas provided white consumers with opportunities to embody and perform parts of "Blackness" and Black masculinity, which were otherwise seen as offensive and threatening to white heteronormative values.

As the rise of hip hop culture in the mainstream snowballed, many corporations began to realize the profit that could be made off this youth culture movement and by capitalizing on selling "Blackness." By associating one's products with a youth culture that defied authority, empowered youth, embraced ideas of individualism, and relied heavily on appearance, companies were able to earn huge profits with the right product. Moreover, by capitalizing on hip hop culture, capital systems of power were exploiting a culture that had originally emerged from communities of color and stemmed from conditions caused by racial difference. By

packaging, marketing, and then selling “hip hop” to the masses, while also relying on the rhetoric of multiculturalism, minority culture would be co-opted by popular culture and exploited to extend white hegemony.

At the same time, the socioeconomic conditions of Los Angeles disenfranchised youth and communities of color, creating a void that rap artists began to fulfill. By the mid to late 1980s rap music was gaining prominence in Los Angeles, a city that symbolized the harsh consequences of the economic policies of Reaganomics coupled with a long history of racial profiling, police brutality, race riots, racially restrictive housing covenants, and redlining.²⁹ One group that brought gangsta rap into the market mainstream was NWA. with their debut album, *Straight Outta Compton* (1988). Their songs addressed a variety of issues including police brutality featured on their aptly titled song, “Fuck Tha Police” and their lives growing up in the projects, as featured on “Gangsta Gangsta.” Their vulgar lyrics not only raised public alarm, but the lyrical content and such vivid imagery of life in Compton caused a media frenzy. Conversations of its impact on youth, such as concerns that songs about violence will directly influence youth to commit those violences, and outrage by law enforcement agencies for NWA’s blatant lyrics threatening police authority and endorsing attacks on police not only further spurred gangsta rap into the limelight, but its commercial success was also largely due to its consumer base of white suburban youth. As Robin Kelley notes, 70% of consumer sales came from white suburban youth who looked for an outlet and sense of adventure away from the dull, routine life of the suburbs.³⁰

²⁹ Kelley, Robin D. G. "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: "Gangsta Rap" and Postindustrial Los Angeles." In *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press, 1994.

³⁰ Ibid.

As gangsta rap started to gain capital prominence, coupled with the corporate investment and exploitation of this rising youth culture, distinctions between studio and street gangsters began to blur, and gangsta rap became another popular culture platform in which the criminalization and racialization of Blacks, and as consequence Asian Americans, occurred. Steve Stoute recalls his own role in the booming hip hop marketing and advertising industry, and the commerciability of hip hop culture and how it changed the market economy. In one example, Stoute points to NWA's role in the commercialization of hip hop culture. At the same time NWA released their first album in South Central Los Angeles, two predominant gangs - the Bloods and the Crips - were running the inner-city streets.³¹ As Stoute recalls, NWA avoided the colors red and blue because of their associations with the two gangs, and thus adopted the colors black and silver, which also represented the NFL team at the time, the Los Angeles Raiders.³² Once NWA started wearing Raiders attire, Stoute claims, "In 1994, the NFL's annual licensing and merchandise revenues went from \$300 million to \$3 billion" and for youth in Los Angeles, wearing Raiders gear was all part of fashion - the look, the style, the cool, the attitude.³³ However, at the same time NWA unwittingly caused a revenue increase and changed both the trajectory of hip hop and the general sports fans' mentality of "fly your colors," the commercialization of hip hop culture occurred in tandem with the gangsta-ization and criminalization of it.

Hip hop culture was packaged and sold through images that appealed to urban street culture and sense of ghetto adventure. More specifically, by the early

³¹ *Crips and Bloods: Made in America*. Directed by Stacy Peralta. Los Angeles, CA: Balance Vector Productions, 2009. Film.

³² Stoute, *The Tanning of America*, 46.

³³ Stoute, *The Tanning of America*, 47.

1990s hip hop culture became largely associated with the sub-genre of gangsta rap. Gangsta rap's rise to musical prominence can be credited to the corporate mainstream and capital's vision of gangsta rap's potential to maximize profits. Hip hop culture introduced a new economic niche in the market, a prime opportunity for capital to cater their goods and services to youth and a multiracial audience. Rap music no longer offered a space for music sales, but also a space to sell various goods and services that reflected and shaped the lifestyle.

As Stoute argues, hip hop culture is youth culture and it has resulted in a cultural tanning of the United States. Stoute uses the term cultural tanning to explain hip hop's appeal to a multiracial audience and its ability to transcend the borders of race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, I contend that this is a very nostalgic and inaccurate view of hip hop culture. Stoute's term of a cultural tanning is not a cultural, but a capitalist process. Hip hop does not solely function because of its ability to transcend racial borders. By claiming to appeal to such a diverse audience, corporations maximize their consumer demographic and thereby stand to maximize profits. Furthermore, while Stoute claims that hip hop has a multiracial consumer audience, with a few exceptions, hip hop's artistic producers are mainly Black men. This image of authenticity is also reinforced by capitalism as it stands to benefit when economic demand is high, because of such a large multiracial consumer market, while supply is low because of its strict parameters of who qualifies as an "authentic" rapper.

As Robin Kelley and Jeff Chang both note, gangsta rap by the early 1990s was becoming commercially appropriated for profit. Driven by the concept of authenticity, the commercialization of hip hop aimed to reach out to a multiracial,

youth audience - who Kelley points out were mainly white, suburban youth - while advertising gangsta rap and hip hop as a genre with strict racial boundaries whose producers represented images of Black culture and reinforced criminalization and hypermasculinity. Moreover, Chang argues the contemporary multicultural neoliberal state produced and reinforced the processes in which various cultural forms became stigmatized and commercially appropriated.³⁴ For a cultural form like hip hop, though its origins are in multiracial youth movements, it became racialized and coded as "Black." Notions of authenticity become manipulated by capital in order to legitimate who can be producers of hip hop music, and more importantly, who consumers will accept as authentic rappers.³⁵

At the same time, the capital success of gangsta rap among white suburban male youth is also in part due to images of Blackness and its appeal to American manhood. The escape from the mundane life in the suburbs allows white men to experience transgressions of Blackness without suffering the disadvantages of being Black. In other words, white male teenagers can embody and take up parts of projected Black masculinity (and American masculinity) while exempt from the ramifications that might occur if their phenotypes were black. This example is prevalent in *Malibu's Most Wanted* (2003) a comedy written and featuring comedian Jamie Kennedy, and co-starring Taye Diggs and Anthony Anderson. In the film, Bradley Gluckman (Jamie Kennedy) otherwise known by his rap name "B-rad" grows up in Malibu, CA, is from an extremely affluent family, and is white. B-rad also dresses and speaks like a "gangster," wearing baggy clothes, a sideways visor,

³⁴ Chang, Jeff. *Who We Be: The Colorization of America*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014.

³⁵ Johnson, E. Patrick. "Introduction." In *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003.

a gold chain, and constantly using slang and rapping in daily conversations. B-rad's "rap persona" comes to a crossroads when his father campaigns to be the next governor of California and realizes he cannot have his son hurting his political image of white masculinity, heteronormativity, and acceptability. As consequence, his father hires two Black actors (Taye Diggs and Anthony Anderson) to take B-rad to the ghetto and scare him out of his previously diagnosed "Gangstaphrenia." From the beginning, the ridiculousness of this film and the satirical accuracy of white masculinity co-opting Black masculinity in problematic, complex ways is reflected throughout this film. In short, this film illustrates the consequences, or lack thereof, of young white men subsuming a gangsta rap persona, as compared to Black gangsta rappers who are pathologized as innately criminal and threatening.

Moreover, gangsta rap and the corporate mainstream did not single-handedly introduce dominant ideas of Blackness that were criminal and ghetto. Rather, this process occurred because of the deep historical racialization of Blacks in the United States. As hip hop culture started to emerge from the Bronx and into the mainstream, hip hop was viewed as an "authentic" form of Black culture. In other words, hip hop culture was seen as a cultural characteristic that was inherently written in the genetic code of all Black youth. Hip hop culture was naturalized as a "Black thing." And as hip hop culture started to enter the mainstream, but more specifically, as hip hop culture started to invade spaces of whiteness - such as the white suburbs - white fears of Blackness started to manifest through unsurprising and historic ways of criminalization and gangsta-ization.

Additionally, hip hop scholar Tricia Rose points out that a result of the mass commodification of hip hop "the language, styles, and attitudes associated with hip

hip hop are coded and understood and performed as 'black.'"³⁶ In other words, as hip hop offers new markets of profit, these images and fears of Blackness continue to be solidified and justified by seemingly rational explanations that are blamed on Black culture. Rose intervenes, making the distinction between culture and behavior, a distinction that capital fails to make. Rose argues that the "hyper-gangsta-ization" of hip hop culture and music positively influence sales. If an artist is seen as more gangsta, than their album is more likely to sell, thereby maximizing capital profits. For example, when Snoop Dogg first released his album, which was preceded by several news stories of his arrest, sales continued to skyrocket as more stories of his criminal behavior was fed into the media and surfaced among the public.³⁷ As consequence, the commercialization of hip hop also perpetuated the gangsta-ization, and subsequent criminalization, of hip hop culture, conflating it with specific images of Blackness, hyper-masculinity, and violence.

In order to challenge these preconceptions, Rose asserts hip hop needs to be divested from this commercialized brand of Blackness that is seen as criminal and violent. Hip hop is associated with dominant notions of gangsta rap - criminal, Black, urban, and dangerous. However, hip hop must be understood beyond this narrow focus of gangsta rap, which cannot be understood as a random and spontaneous moment in mass culture. Instead, the prevalence of the gangsta rapper is rooted in historical processes of racialization and continues to be re-created by capitalist networks of power and reinforced through commercialization.

The process of commodification involved a specific type of packaging and marketing in order for hip hop to be sold. First, it was the hip hop music sub-genre

³⁶ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*.

³⁷ Ibid.

of gangsta rap that gained prominence and attention in the mainstream, and became associated with dominant notions of hip hop culture. Second, the rise of gangsta rap was not an accidental fad or an act of happenstance in popular culture. As Dick Hebdige argues, the relationship between culture and society is a related one in which "everything in everyday life is dependent on the relationship between society and the world."³⁸ So while the rise of gangsta rap might seem random, the social, political, economic, and historical processes that provided the space for gangsta rap's rise, coupled with dominant ideologies associated with Blackness, resulted in the rise of gangsta rap. Third, the rise of gangsta rap is also synced with networks of power that aim to maintain white hegemony, particularly the multicultural neoliberal state and capital. Because the 1980s celebrated multiculturalism and the individual, while subsequently erasing racial difference, stereotypes of the gangsta rapper became associated with inherent and natural qualities of Black culture, and therefore used to further neoliberal agendas of individuals failures over the government's shortcomings. In short, gangsta rap seemed to offer an explanation that justified the racialization of Blacks, while simultaneously reinforcing pathologized beliefs that validated the potential dangers of Blackness if whiteness failed to maintain order.

III. Gangsta Rap vs. Progressive Rap

"Hip hop is not dead, but it is gravely ill."³⁹
- Tricia Rose

³⁸ Hebdige, Dick. "From Culture to Hegemony." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 357-367. London: Routledge, 1993.

³⁹ Rose, *Hip Hop Wars*.

While gangsta rap was both commercialized and excoriated, a parallel formation in hip hop emerged as a counter-example, progressive rap. In contrast to gangsta rap, progressive rap is another aspect of hip hop that is labeled socially conscious and political. As Tricia Rose argues in *Hip Hop Wars*, progressive rap is defined by the subject of the story - what is being told and how it is being told. Is it socially conscious? Is it political? Does it address inequalities and injustices? And perhaps more importantly, what is the artist's' intention and what does it do for the community? Tricia Rose reflects on hip hop's nostalgic past, lamenting the commodification of hip hop culture, which was originally political and devoted to the community. But, as Rose and Cheryl Keyes both recount, over time hip hop became another victim of commercialism. Hip hop became packaged and sold, commodified, and shaped for the needs of capitalism and the desire to maximize profits. Hip hop forgot its origins, its roots. Hip hop was birthed from the ashes of poverty, dilapidated neighborhoods, and social inequalities, providing a medium in which disenfranchised youth of color could feel empowered. Yet over time the love of community and mutual respect, which were the prominent forces that held hip hop together, were forgotten and replaced with the need to make money. While I argue that there are differences in gangsta rap and progressive rap, placing them on a scale of "which one is better" is futile. There are shortcomings to this argument and instead, by looking at the emergence of these two sub-genres within the same historical conditions of the 1980s, as well as the rise of one over the other, can provide more insight to the larger systems and processes that have continued to exploit minority difference and maintain white hegemony.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*.

While I argue that rappers in both genres are conscious of their position within society, one distinction between these two genres is the artists' approach to the lyrical content. For example, while N.W.A. rapped often about police brutality, the projects, and the harsh socioeconomic conditions of the inner-city, their lyrics often contained misogynistic and hypermasculine content. On the other hand, a progressive rapper like Lupe Fiasco eventually recognized the consequences of his rap persona (society's inability to distinguish studio gangsters with street gangsters) and chose to change his approach to the subject matter of his songs. In an interview, he recalls the moment he realized the consequences of his raps that focused on violence and decided he did not want to perpetuate gangsta narrative, so he changed the lyrical content of his work. The song "The Show Goes On," in his album *Lasers* (2011) reflects this. Lupe Fiasco raps:

One in the air for the people ain't here
Two in the air for the father that's there
Three in the air for the kids in the ghetto
Four for the kids that don't wanna be there
None for the niggas tryin' to hold them back
Five in the air for the teachers not scared
To tell those kids that's livin' in the ghetto
That the niggas holdin' them back, that the world is theirs⁴¹

Similar to some of N.W.A.'s songs, Lupe Fiasco addresses the dilapidated conditions of the inner city, the broken family structure largely caused by institutional racism and law enforcement, and the desire for kids to try and make it out of the projects. Yet, Fiasco does so through a tamer approach, in contrast to the hypermasculine and violent and threatening tone of N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police":

Fuck tha police
Comin straight from the underground

⁴¹ Lupe Fiasco 2011. "The Show Goes On." <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/lupefiasco/theshowgoeson.html>

Young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown
And not the other color so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority
Fuck that shit, 'cause I ain't tha one
For a punk muthafucka with a badge and a gun
To be beatin on, and thrown in jail⁴²

However, this is not to belittle gangsta rap or argue that it lacks social consciousness. In fact, N.W.A. was very socially conscious of the systemic inequalities and institutional racism their communities faced and addressed these issues head-on. Rather, I use these differences to illustrate how progressive rap and gangsta rap are two different manifestations of the same conditions of the 1980s, and how the commercialization of gangsta rap starts to shift the content to superficial lyrics about gang banging and hustling. Gangsta rap is exploited by capital for its images representing thug life and gangsta-isms in order to sell, while progressive rap's label is contingent on its approach to the lyrical content. For instance, as Robin Kelley argues, gangsta rap's main consumers were white suburban youth who sought adventure and escape from the boredom of suburban life. So while N.W.A. was alluding to police brutality in Los Angeles, at face value, "Fuck Tha Police" simply seemed to pay homage to "gangsta" mentality. On the other hand, unlike gangsta rap's thug life appeal, progressive rap does not necessarily need to rely on dominant images of the gangsta. Instead, progressive rap exhibits other characteristics of rap music that are also appealing, such as lyrical content, the catchy beats and tunes.

Moreover, another distinction between gangsta rap and progressive rap is the former's emphasis on constructing an alternative reality composed largely of life in

⁴² N.W.A. 1988. "Fuck Da Police." <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/n-w-a/fuck-tha-police.html>.

the projects, dealing, and gang banging. To borrow from Tricia Rose, gangsta rap is characterized by depictions of the trinity - the Black gangsta, pimp, and ho. As hip hop continues to be commercialized, these images become promoted and accepted, and gangsta rap gradually dominates the genre's storytelling worldview.⁴³ In other words, hip hop culture undergoes a process of hyper-gangsta-ization through the sub-genre of gangsta rap, which then becomes the dominant association of hip hop music overall. However, the gangsta narrative is not intended to reflect a realistic portrayal of life in the ghetto. Instead, gangsta rappers use this space to create a hyper-reality in order to empower themselves within the context of the unforgiving lifestyles of the inner-city; it allows rappers to create a very specific narrative about that life. For instance, to go back to NWA's "Fuck Tha Police," the rap song was one mode of empowerment for these rappers who were constantly victims of institutional racism, such as the LAPD's history of racial profiling and police brutality. While NWA may not be able to physically attack the LAPD without reprisal, they assert their agency by attacking the LAPD in the studio. Through gangsta rap, these rappers collapse the real and imaginary onto each other, blurring the lines between rap as performance and rap as reality. However, this space becomes misinterpreted as a literal depiction of these rappers' lives, and packaged and sold as reality for profit.

As George Lipsitz once stated, popular culture "ain't no sideshow."⁴⁴ Not only does popular culture reflect hegemonic knowledge systems and dominant racial ideologies of modern society, but it also acts as a production and reproduction site

⁴³ Rose, *Hip Hop Wars*.

⁴⁴ Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 3-20

of these very narratives. Popular culture is a reflection of dominant discourse and offers a unique examination in the ways in which popular culture reproduces and reinforces the consumption and production of dominant narratives of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which are built on the hegemonic assumptions of whiteness. The rise of gangsta rap in popular culture was not an isolated event, but rather emerged out of various social, historical, political, and economic conditions. By examining gangsta and progressive rap within the larger context of the multicultural neoliberal state, even larger processes of racialization and commodification are understood, not as isolated moments, but as an interconnected web. The aesthetics, idioms, imaginary, and language associated with gangsta rap pervade hip hop as an entire genre, but we also see progressive rap making similar critiques as its counterpart. Gangsta rap and progressive rap at times share similar content - both critique state violence - but also address them in different ways.

In the next chapter, I will explore the Blue Scholars, who fall under the category of progressive rap, and while their image does not rely on the same level of gangsta-ization as gangsta rap, the Blue Scholars are one way in which the continuities between progressive rap and gangsta rap are evident. Although the Blue Scholars present their artistic talents in different ways, their song "Morning of America" pays homage to gangsta rap artists of the 1980s, addresses the multicultural neoliberal state's lucrative agenda, and highlights the similarities between these two sub-genres.

CHAPTER III: The Blue Scholars and "Morning of America"

I remember thinking, wow, I've never seen old people react like this to music before. They were trippin' like someone stole something from them or insulted their family. Because of music. And not even music they were familiar with, but music that someone else told them was bad. That's when I really turned it up and listened to every rap record I could. I knew that whole "rap is bad" propaganda was bullshit because I was actually learning things from these songs that I wasn't learning in a classroom.

- Prometheus Brown⁴⁵

I. Introduction

At a young age, George "Geo" Quibuyen (also known as Prometheus Brown) discovered the power of rap. Growing up in Hawaii and the state of Washington, Geo found the influences for his music in his personal and familial stories of struggle as a Filipino American. While living in Honolulu, Hawaii, Geo recalls a sense of belonging and comfort, which dramatically changed once his family moved to Washington. On his first day of 5th grade, a white student sitting next to Geo complained to the teacher, wanting to move seats. When the teacher asked him why he wanted to move, Geo recalls his white classmate saying, "Because I'm prejudice."⁴⁶ Thus began Geo's consciousness of his complicated Filipino American identity. Largely motivated by his own personal experiences with racism, prejudice, and alienation, Geo utilizes rap as a medium to express himself because hip hop music provided the avenue and arena in which Geo began to understand and construct his Filipino American identity. Albums such as Ice Cube's *The Predator* (1992) and *Bootlegs and B-Sides* (1994) finally articulated Geo's identity struggles

⁴⁵ Prometheus Brown. "Put Your Hand up If You've Never Seen a Filipino Dude Rap." *Empire of Funk: Hip Hop and Representation in Filipina/o America*, edited by Mark R. Villegas. 2014.

⁴⁶ *Conversations: Asian American Arts and Activism*. UCLA EthnoCommunications, 2010. DVD.

- the contested feelings of belonging/nonbelonging and citizen/foreigner caused by his daily interactions with white racism.

In the early 2000s while a student at the University of Washington, he teamed up with Sabzi (Alexei Mohajerjasbi) an Iranian American DJ to form the hip hop duo Blue Scholars.⁴⁷ Since then, the Blue Scholars have produced two albums, *Bayani* (2007) and *Cinemetropolis* (2011), along with other singles, and have engaged in community work as advocates and activists. As Geo recalls, when he first met Sabzi, Geo was just rapping. Then Sabzi suggested that Geo rap about social and political issues and use rap as a platform for political and social change. Since then, the Blue Scholars utilize hip hop as a platform to voice their politics through both the lyrical content of their raps, as well as Geo's rap performance. In particular, I will examine the song "Morning of America," which addresses the socioeconomic conditions of the 1980s and attempts to reconstruct the historical memory of that decade.

A socially conscious hip hop artist, influenced by both Black and Asian American culture, Geo utilizes hip hop to stage imperial and colonial contestations. "Morning of America" specifically addresses and criticizes ideas of multiculturalism and neoliberal rhetoric that emerged out of U.S. foreign and domestic policies. Moreover, in this song, Geo takes a wishful look at his childhood, the toys and television shows that make up his memory, while also acknowledging voices of alienation and discontent. He explores the relationship between mass consumer culture, commodification, Black popular culture, and the multicultural neoliberal

⁴⁷ In an interview with *Conversations: Asian American Arts and Activism*, Geo credits Sabzi for shifting the content of Geo's raps. Instead of just rapping, Sabzi suggested that Geo rap about important issues. As an Iranian American DJ, Sabzi's own identity as a victim of US empire is also another avenue to be explored in possibly future research.

state. By juxtaposing popular culture references with anti-imperialist narratives of world events that criticize the multicultural neoliberal state, Geo remakes the origin stories of US history and hip hop. Furthermore, I also argue that Geo performs an Asian American body that contests dominant tropes of Asian Americans, stereotypes that mark them as "model minorities." His performance as an Asian American rapper intervenes in hegemonic perceptions of the "Asian American" and forces the acknowledgement of the role and presence of Asian Americans as contributors to, and destroyers of, the American cultural fabric.

"Morning of America" addresses the ways in which systems of power, operating within the multicultural neoliberal state, successfully reinforce white hegemony by appealing through popular culture. In addition to the multicultural neoliberal state's ability to exploit multiculturalism and neoliberalism to press its agenda, it also functions as a form of cultural imperialism - cultural conquest of other cultures, in this case Black popular culture. The narrative of multiculturalism implies the indiscriminant acceptance of all cultures, ethnicities, and races. However, this is a superficial change in the ideological justifications of cultural exploitations - networks of power utilize the discourse of multiculturalism to enable capitalism's exploitation and appropriation of other cultures, while also reinforcing white hegemony. For instance, multiculturalism accepts and continues to reproduce particular images of Blackness as thug-like and dangerous, and Asianness as model minorities - both of which have historically maintained, and continue to maintain, white hegemony. In this instance, hip hop, but more specifically gangsta rap, reinforces images of Blackness that are hyper-masculine, threatening, and criminal. Capitalism then works to accept Black culture within the American cultural

fabric by re-appropriating it as an American cultural form to distribute to a multiracial audience and maximize profits, while simultaneously defining its borders of authenticity by ascribing authentic rappers as those who fit dominant parameters of Blackness. As consequence, networks of power successfully erase the complicated struggles that produced these various types of Black popular culture - hip hop in this case - and repackages it as quintessentially American and commodifies it for profit.

Through the Blue Scholars' "Morning of America," Geo challenges the state's multicultural neoliberal agenda, along with the historical memory of the 1980s, remaking America's story through anti-imperialist and marginalized perspectives. While his rap revisits consumer culture during this time, expressing and portraying a sense of nostalgia for the 'good old days,' Geo contests this nostalgic memory of the 1980s by juxtaposing popular culture with historical events of the time. These historical events, however, are told from marginalized perspectives through Geo's complicated identity as a US citizen, colonized subject, model minority, and perpetual foreigner. Not only is his participation as a consumer complicated by his racialization - he experiences, and remembers, 1980s consumerism through the perspective of the colonized subject and racialized other - but Geo also uses consumerism as a language for articulating his critique of the multicultural neoliberal state.

II. "Morning of America"

The era of multiculturalism in the 1980s relied heavily on multicultural language to create racial divisions to maintain white hegemony and on narratives of

neoliberalism to deny inequalities caused by racial difference. Using this discourse, popular culture and whiteness began to establish boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and hip hop artists like NWA and Blue Scholars contested this. Through rap music, artists like NWA and Blue Scholars critique state violence and state-induced socioeconomic inequalities that are undergirded by multiculturalism and neoliberalism, albeit in different ways. As evinced in the Blue Scholars' song "Morning of America," the song's 1980s popular culture references are ridden with contradictions.

Within the cyclical relationship between popular culture and national culture, the origin story of U.S. history is told and re-told through the point of view of the colonizer, the victor, the dominant ideology of whiteness. Popular culture reinforces hegemonic narratives that become intricately weaved into the story of the U.S. nation-state. However, in "Morning of America," Geo utilizes popular culture in order to re-tell the origin story of the nation-state by pointing out the contradictions that exist in US imperial, and national, culture. Geo employs the significance of popular culture as markers of national culture and juxtaposes them against historical events that criticize U.S. multicultural neoliberalism, thereby using the contradictions within culture to challenge U.S. origin stories and dominant narratives perpetuated by national culture.

As Lisa Lowe writes, U.S. national culture "shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget."⁴⁸ National culture dictates dominant culture by erasing differences of subjecthood and histories of colonialism and exploitation, to create a national culture. From this national culture, the

⁴⁸ Lowe, Lisa. "Immigration, Citizenship, Racializations." *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 2. Print.

citizenry identifies through a specific set of memories that reflect white hegemony. However, as Lowe argues, national culture is a site of contradiction - it attempts to homogenize the nation-state, but by doing so becomes an inherent contradiction because it attempts to erase differences of culture. The production of national culture is intended to interpellate citizens of the nation-state the same way through the national identification of culture, but as Lowe argues, "Asian American cultural productions [are] countersites to U.S. national memory and national culture," and Asian American rappers participates as cultural producers who counter national culture.⁴⁹

In the example of "Morning of America," Geo points out these contradictions in national culture through the cultural references he makes of the 1980s, which are specific references to Black culture. For instance, Geo remembers the 1980s through cultural icons Prince and Marvin Gaye, Black musicians who changed the music culture of the United States, along with several Black hip hop artists like Run DMC, who helped introduce rap music to the mainstream. These Black artists changed the national culture of music and became iconic figures in popular culture. By using Black musicians to reflect on the national culture of the 1980s, Geo shows the contradiction in national culture - it produces itself through the appropriation of Black culture. Geo challenges the dominant storylines of the 1980s that recall popular culture as white cultural forms by addressing Black cultural references, remembering the 1980s through the lens and memories of the colonized subject.

Moreover, by utilizing Black cultural forms as popular culture references to describe the 1980s, he re-tells the history of the 1980s by highlighting alternative

⁴⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 4.

cultural forms that do not embody white hegemony. As a citizen of the nation state, Geo remembers the 1980s through the fabric of the national culture, but as a colonized subject he remembers the 1980s through an alternative culture that threatens white narratives of U.S. history. Subjected to narratives of empire, Geo employs hip hop as a weapon to challenge national, white hegemonic culture.⁵⁰ One way Geo does this is through the historical events he chooses to highlight in his lyrics. He intentionally references historical events in the past that dominant national culture and memory attempt to erase and purposely forget. For example, when civil rights struggles are remembered, dominant narratives repeat stories of Martin Luther King Jr., the non-violent efforts of sit-ins and boycotts, and the peaceful impact the Civil Rights Movement made on the 1980s. However, Geo raps the story as such, "Reflections and questions and not enough answers/ the rise of gang banging was the death of the Panthers," remembering civil rights struggles through a violent, militant lens of the Black Panther Party and an incomplete storyline. His reference to the rise of gangs, the destruction of the Black Panther Party, and the questions with unanswered questions, are also a reference to the FBI's COINTELPRO, a series of secretive operations that illegally infiltrated organizations that were deemed a threat to the U.S. government, like the Black Panthers. Covert operations conducted within domestic borders, the FBI's COINTELPRO were aimed at any opposing factions labeled a threat to the nation-state. At the same time however, Geo seems to blame gangs rather than the state as the US transitioned into a post-civil rights era that attempted to undo civil rights progress by manipulating the language of multiculturalism. Geo re-tells the civil

⁵⁰ Schlund-Vials, Cathy J. "Lost Chapters and Invisible Wars: Hip-Hop and Cambodian American Critique." *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota, 2012. 161. Print.

rights struggles through an anti-imperialist lens thereby challenging traditional forms that remember the past as peaceful, reinforce national culture as nonviolent, and glorify the nation-state. The stories of state-sanctioned violence that are erased from dominant narratives are told through Geo's perspective in "Morning of America."

The lyrics Geo chooses in "Morning of America," paints a particular image of the national culture of the U.S. in the 1980s. By choosing to use Black culture, Geo points out the contradictions in national culture and re-tells the history of the 1980s through anti-imperialist narratives that challenge white hegemony. National culture seeks to homogenize bodies of the nation-state through a multiculturalist process that sanitizes certain forms of difference and erases racial difference to claim Black culture as national culture. Another way he contests dominant narratives is through the lyrical content of "Morning of America" and his wordplay. Geo juxtaposes consumer culture with world events, showing how he remembers the 1980s as a Filipino American. Though he participates in the national body as a consumer, he experiences and remembers the 1980s as a victim of the U.S. multicultural neoliberal state, as a colonized subject and racialized other. For instance, Geo raps, "The School of the Americas put heads to sleep/ Like Ted DiBiase the Million Dollar Dream." Geo juxtaposes the School of the Americas, a military school spawned out of the Cold War, with Ted DiBiase also known as the Million Dollar Man, his professional wrestling persona. He uses a simile to juxtapose history with consumer culture, implying that the Million Dollar Man knocks people out to put them to sleep, a critique of the deadening effects of dominant popular culture. This wordplay also portrays a sense of Geo's identity as citizen and colonized subject. By making a

common reference to popular culture icon, Ted DiBiase, Geo shows that he is a consumer of popular culture, while also referencing his positionality as a victim of the state. Moreover, both references induce images of American masculinity and accepted, passable forms of violence - military necessity and sport.

However, the less obvious reference he makes is to the School of the Americas, a school that trained military personnel in Latin America to combat communism and wars the U.S. secretly administered in Latin America. Geo uses this reference as a synecdoche to convey a larger message that criticizes U.S. empire. The School of the Americas represents state-sanctioned violence that puts heads to sleep, a euphemism for death. On the other hand, the School of the Americas can also refer to literal schools, and the broken education system in the United States that literally puts students to sleep. The K-12 education system strictly sticks to stories that repeat white hegemony, often times ignoring the colonized. For instance, U.S. colonialism of the Philippines is told through the point of view of U.S. benevolence, not violence. The history of the Spanish-American War is remembered through savior dialogue. The US defeated Spain and freed the Philippines from oppressive conquistadors, while implementing its own system of colonialism that is re-told as Western benevolence - U.S. occupation "civilized" and "modernized" the Philippines. For Geo, these dominant narratives favor the colonizer, while erasing the stories of the colonized - erasing stories he could relate to as non-white citizen and therefore finds boring. Geo uses a double-meaning to send his message - the U.S. military and public education system are embedded in notions of imperialism and work to perpetuate white hegemony. Through creative

wordplay, Geo carefully juxtaposes historical events with popular culture to create a double entendre, re-telling U.S. history through his perspective.

In addition to his lyrics, his rap performance of "Morning of America," also contests the multicultural neoliberal state. Geo does this through his delivery of his lyrics. For example, "Twenty three years gone, still 1984/ Still fighting more undeclared wars/ Caught `em shipping arms to Iran for Nicaraguan Contras" is read on paper with a pause in between the words "gone" and "still," and "1984" and "still." However, he performs the line without a break, heard as, "Twenty three years gone still 1984 still fighting more undeclared wars." This continuous flow and delivery changes the meaning of his lyrics. For instance, by placing the word "gone" before "still," Geo disrupts the notion of time. Gone and still are generally opposite references to time, gone infers the past, while still, the present. By using these two words at the same time and rapping the two without a break, Geo implies that the past and present are the same. In this case, twenty three years ago is still the same as the 2007, the year he releases this song. Moreover, he also introduces another date, 1984 in the same breath. Throughout the song, Geo makes references to different time periods in the 1980s, but the reference to 1984 is also a reference to George Orwell's novel, *1984*. Here, the year 1984 carries a double meaning. In the year 1984, AIDS was identified, the Cold War was still ongoing, and it was the beginning of the Crack Epidemic in Los Angeles. In *1984*, the novel takes place after an atomic war in a totalitarian state of constant surveillance and policing. Geo implies that the struggles and sufferings in the past are still present, while also insinuating that the modern day nation-state reflects similar characteristics as those of George Orwell's dystopia.

Geo also criticizes U.S. foreign policy during the 1980s that were driven by imperialist motivations. "Undeclared wars" is another reference to U.S. imperialism during the Cold War, which involved the Iran-Contra Affair, a political scandal where U.S. officials were discovered illegally selling weapons to Iran in order to fund the Nicaraguan Contras, an anti-communist rebel group that the U.S. covertly funded to destabilize the Nicaraguan government. However, he utilizes sense of time again to show that the wars fought in the 1980s are still fought today, and the problems of the 1980s still exist - Nicaragua has one of the world's worst economies and continues to be politically unstable. Again he conflates the past with the present and disrupts the linear trajectory of time. This time, by 2007 (the year he releases "Morning of America") the U.S. has invaded the Middle East, driven by imperialist ambitions, but conceals invasion as a nationalist cause to protect the sanctity of the United States and its citizens. Through rap performance, "Morning of America" is heard differently, but Geo continues to send the same message opposing U.S. multicultural neoliberalism and hegemonic narratives of the past. Additionally, he uses references of time and the past to underscore that the past is still present and the status quo has not changed.

Through performance, Geo challenges perceptions that place the images of rapper diametrically opposed to racialized images of Asian Americans, and forces the acknowledgement of the role, and presence, of Asian American rap artists as cultural producers and destroyers. Through popular culture, national culture, and historical events, Geo reconstructs the historical memory of the 1980s and challenges hegemonic knowledge systems that produce and reproduce narratives of U.S. benevolence and erase the memories and present-day consequences of U.S.

multicultural neoliberalism. "Morning of America" also shows the active participation of Asian Americans in the cultural fabric of the nation-state. Marginalized and racialized in society, Geo re-tells the origin story of U.S. history through the perspectives of the oppressed, the colonized, and the minority, empowering these marginalized groups. Moreover, the song also reflects the significance of the commodification of Black culture during this particular decade of the 1980s, and how it was instructive and informative for a variety of youth, like Geo, growing up in this era.

Geo utilizes hip hop as a political tool and "Morning of America" forces listeners, the younger generation, to critically reflect on the present, challenge the status quo, and continually seek justice from the past. Lastly, Geo challenges traditional memories of the past that remember history through nostalgia by remembering the 1980s through contested historical events, state-violence, injustice, and popular culture. He reminds us, "It wasn't all good way back in the day/ Struggled then, struggle now, still standing." "Morning of America" reminds us of the historical struggles and contestations of the past that are erased from dominant narratives, along with the necessity to challenge hegemonic ideologies and knowledge.

CHAPTER IV: Conclusion

The relationship between Blacks and Asian Americans are largely told either through stories of conflict, such as the media-constructed Black-Korean conflict of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising, or through stories highlighting Afro-Asian solidarity. However, I suggest a different approach that looks at the relational racialization of these two identities, within the larger framework of the multicultural neoliberal state of the late 20th century and present. Although this is neither a complete assessment of Black and Asian American racialization, nor is it intended to be, by examining gangsta rap and progressive rap through Black and Asian American perspectives, my intention is to illustrate an alternative mode of thinking about inter-ethnic relationships, the role of popular culture, and the implications of the nation-state's success in erasing minority culture and reproducing national culture through multicultural neoliberalist discourse.

As rap gains more attention in the late 1980s and becomes commercialized, capital begins to package and sell rap, in this case gangsta rap, as a commodity. More importantly however, is that this process reinforces racialized and pathologized perceptions of Blacks as delinquent and dangerous. As argued, this process does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, Asian Americans are also racialized in subtle, intricate, and inconspicuous ways. In this instance, the image of the Black rapper, dominant perceptions of Blackness, and the threats to whiteness continue to reinforce Asian Americans as safety valves, whose racialized "Asianness" seems to validate the model minority narrative and provide model examples of what others can and should achieve. Through languages of multiculturalism and

neoliberalism, the state successfully erased its own violences, placing the impetus on the individual to succeed, regardless of his or her circumstances. So while the defunding of the welfare state led to dilapidated neighborhoods in working-class communities, high unemployment, and increasing wealth disparities, the model minority narrative became a solution to these growing issues. Because by claiming Asian American successes as ones by individuals who seized opportunities and the American Dream offered by the state, it thereby dismissed the state's violences against largely Black communities, constructed and re-produced Asianness and Blackness as polar opposites, and reinforced white hegemony in the process. Current debates over hip hop music range widely from questions of authenticity to what qualifies as hip hop music. For example, why is Eminem accepted as a legitimate rapper, while others are seen as posers? And does rap have to be political in order for us to consider it "real rap" or do hypermasculine and misogynist songs still count? These questions continue to circulate throughout arguments over hip hop music, and while they are important to be cognizant of, there is no right answer. Instead, this thesis is an attempt to look beyond these questions of authenticity and to reflect on the larger social systems and state-constructions that have led to our understanding of racial authority, culture as capital, and popular culture as ownership. As the multicultural neoliberal state continues to produce, perpetuate, and reinforce dominant ideologies of Blackness, Asianness, and its encounters, it is vital that we continue to think and re-think the impact on popular culture, the implications of such on our daily interactions, and the subtle ways in which white hegemony is maintained.

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