

# Yellow Skin, White Masks

Mina Yang

*Abstract: Ethnic studies scholars have long bemoaned the near absence of Asians on the big and small screens and popular music charts in the United States, rendering them as outsiders vis-à-vis the American public sphere. In the last few years, however, Asians have sprung up on shows like “Glee” and “America’s Best Dance Crew” in disproportionately large numbers, challenging entrenched stereotypes and creating new audiovisual associations with Asianness. This essay considers how emerging Asian American hip-hop dancers and musicians negotiate their self-representation in different contexts and what their strategies reveal about the postmillennial Asian youth’s relationship to American and transpacific culture and the outer limits of American music.*

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Music, as purveyed by the MGM Grand Hollywood Theater and Monte Carlo Resort & Casino in the heart of Las Vegas – the entertainment mecca of the United States – is supposedly the very inspiration for life itself. Featuring JabbaWockeeZ, the winning hip-hop group from the first season of the televised dance competition *America’s Best Dance Crew* (ABDC), *MŪS.I.C.* (read both as “music” and as “muse I see”) is comprised of fanciful episodes from a life lived creatively. The show featured synchronized dancing, comic miming, athletic feats, extravagant lighting effects, and glittery costumes, held together by a thumping soundtrack made up of familiar tunes, old and new. The JabbaWockeeZ members, who specialize in popping and b-boying, brought dance front and center in this musical experience, citing classic dance moments from the history of American popular music, from Gene Kelly’s elegant footwork in *Singin’ in the Rain*, to James Brown’s struts and Michael Jackson’s moonwalk, to the more recent hip gyrations of Beyoncé’s “Single Girls” and the “Party Rock” shuffle courtesy of LMFAO.

From the beginning to the end of the show, one element remained constant: the blank white masks that the dancers wore and that have become JabbaWockeeZ’s signature look. Used as props and as part

of the stage set, the masks signify mystery in one moment and represent the everyman in the next. In addition to the masks, the dancers' costumes cloaked every inch of their bodies, covering hair, skin, hands, and any other features that would distinguish one dancer from another (see Figure 1). Unless one had some acquaintance with JabbaWockeeZ from before the show, it would have been nearly impossible to know that this crew, embodying and celebrating the history of American popular music in this hyper-commercial venue, is in fact made up predominantly of Asian American men.

Masks are deployed in contemporary performances for an array of reasons. They could represent a throwback to older dramatic traditions like the Japanese Noh and ancient Greek pantomime or could refer to rituals from masquerade ceremonies that take place in various parts of the world. In the case of JabbaWockeeZ, however, the fact that the masks have something to do with race is confirmed by the dancers' own explanations. For example, one article about the popular dance group reported that "Jabbawockeez includes dancers of various ethnic backgrounds, including Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, and African-American. 'But that's the beauty of the mask,' [group member] Nguyen says. 'When we put it on, it's not about who we are or where we came from. We're all one.'" In another interview, JabbaWockeeZ dancer Eddie Gutierrez put it even more bluntly: "The idea of the mask is to remove all ethnic and social barriers when we perform."<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to "remove all ethnic and social barriers" through masking? Does the removal of these barriers achieve for the group a state of racelessness, which in the U.S. sociopolitical context is equivalent to whiteness, making the JabbaWockeeZ mask a Fanonian "white mask" that hides from view the t(a)int of color?<sup>2</sup>

Or rather, is this another means of facilitating neo-minstrelsy, of allowing a more privileged group to appropriate black music and dance in an act of "love and theft," a misguided attempt to tap into the hipness long associated with African American culture without having to be directly accountable for crimes committed?<sup>3</sup> The late political scientist Michael Rogin, in his study of Jewish entertainers, suggested yet another model to explain the appeal of minstrelsy's racial cross-dressing, and it might also apply to JabbaWockeeZ: that through their participation in blackface minstrelsy, a racialized culture of black and white working-class Americans, immigrant Jews (or Asians, in this case) could emerge as full-fledged Americans.<sup>4</sup>

As significant as these contributions have been to understanding American race relations, they do not go beyond the paradigmatic binary racial scheme of black and white, and thus their concepts of racial passing/crossing/co-opting/emulating fall short of adequately explaining the dynamics at work for these Asian American b-boys. To better grasp the multiracial and polycultural complexities of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, other cultural theorists situate the United States within larger global forces, keeping in view the fluid interplay of economic, social, and cultural flows across racial and national boundaries. For example, sociologist George Lipsitz, following literary scholar Gayatri Spivak, sees in the cultural exchanges between communities of color a mode of "strategic anti-essentialism," whereby youths of one group temporarily assume the cultural practices of another group in order to express aspects of themselves that would otherwise not be comprehended or acknowledged by the mainstream. By practicing black dance, Asian American artists highlight the "families of resemblance" that unite minority communities in the United States,



From JabbaWockeeZ, “Devastating Stereo” music video, JBKWZ Records (2011).

even as mainstream institutions continue to promulgate policies of “divide and rule.”<sup>5</sup>

The last decade has seen the publication of several scholarly volumes devoted to the complexities of Afro-Asian relations. In one of the most recent of these, *Afro-Asian Encounters*, writers who have contributed significantly to this scholarship – Vijay Prashad, Gary Okihiro, and Fred Ho, among others – remind readers of the historic connections between the formerly colonized peoples of Asia and Africa and the cultural overlaps shared by Asian and African Americans in areas like martial arts and music, even while they recount past incidents of racial tensions between the two minority groups. Shining a spotlight on hip-hop in particular, Oliver Wang and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley caution against romanticizing the relationship between the two groups: against the

backdrop of persistent structural racism in the United States, some African Americans have expressed their resentment of Asian Americans “stealing” their musical culture, and black rappers are just as guilty of circulating and perpetuating Orientalist ideas and images as are those in positions of power.<sup>6</sup> In a book-length study of South Asian Americans in hip-hop, Nitasha Tamar Sharma argues that her subjects are more likely than not to be knowledgeable about the historical allegiances between colonized peoples and to identify personally with the counter-hegemonic rhetoric of politically conscious rappers, especially as South Asian Americans have come under intensified racial scrutiny in the post-9/11 political climate.<sup>7</sup>

There are perhaps elements of all these arguments, especially at the level of the individual actors, but as a whole, JabbaWockeeZ’s *MŪS.I.C.* emblemizes what

Karen Shimakawa has identified as the liminal positionality of Asian Americans “between the poles of abject visibility/stereotype/foreigner and invisibility/assimilation (to whiteness).”<sup>8</sup> Behind the white masks, the members of Jabba-WockeeZ dance within the constraints imposed upon Asian American artists generally, between the poles of whiteness and blackness, presence and lack, visibility and invisibility, subject and object. As part of the fastest growing racial group in the United States, which is nonetheless nearly invisible in mainstream popular culture, JabbaWockeeZ and the other Asian American hip-hop artists analyzed in this essay must negotiate “a process of *abjection*, an attempt to circumscribe and radically differentiate something that, although deemed repulsively *other* is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole.”<sup>9</sup> Through their masked performances, they mark the outer limits of American music.

JabbaWockeeZ is not the only Asian American act to achieve mainstream stardom as dancers. In the first six (of seven total, from 2008 to 2012) seasons of *ABDC*, telecast on MTV, every winning group had several, if not all, Asian members, and another popular televised dance competition, *So You Think You Can Dance* (on Fox since 2005), has also spotlighted a disproportionately high number of Asian American dancers. The prominence of JabbaWockeeZ and a host of other Asian Americans in hip-hop dance may be surprising to those who have, in the past, followed the frustratingly stunted careers of Asian MCs like the Chinese American rapper Jin and rap trio Mountain Brothers, and who have noted the tenacity of anti-Asian stereotypes as borne out by William Hung’s fifteen minutes of pop music infamy. As music critics Rachel Devitt, Oliver Wang, and Deborah Wong have pointed out,

Asian Americans have participated in the larger hip-hop culture from its early days, yet their contributions often go unrecognized, especially in rap, which is by far the most lucrative and visible element of hip-hop.<sup>10</sup>

Representing a smaller subculture of aficionados who prize skill over commercial viability, Asian deejays like the Filipino American DJ Qbert, Mix Master Mike, and DJ Apollo have dominated international championships and inspired a younger generation of turntablists, but their achievements are for the most part ignored by mainstream pop culture.<sup>11</sup> Asian American b-boying, which has received little scholarly attention, especially when compared to rapping or deejaying, has had an even greater impact on Asian America, as makeshift basement and community dance studios and university dance organizations have, in the last twenty years, become hotbeds of Asian American creative expression. The dance crew Kaba Modern, for instance, which placed third in the first season of *ABDC*, grew out of the Filipino student association at University of California, Irvine, and now includes an under-18 subgroup for neighborhood kids. Irvine is also home to the Vibe Dance Competition, one of the largest of its kind on the West Coast, started in 1996 by UC Irvine’s Asian-interest fraternity, Lambda Theta Delta.<sup>12</sup> Such university-level competitions and grassroots-organized community events, like the Korean American Kollaboration talent shows that have occurred annually since 2000 in large cities across the United States, provide Asian American dancers with venues in which to showcase their skills and help them build a supportive audience base, which is key to the success of the crews that compete on *ABDC*. In articles and editorials in ethnic periodicals, such as *Asianweek*, *Hyphen*, *Filipino Express*, *Northwest Asian Weekly*, *International Examiner*, and *Asian*

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Reporter, fans have been busily pointing out and expressing jubilation at the rising prominence of Asians and Asian Americans in dance shows.

Why, then, would the JabbaWockeeZ dancers want to cover their skin in its entirety and deny their Asian American fans the opportunity to identify physically with their idols? In addition to the fraught triangulated movement between black, white, and Asian as discussed above, Asian American b-boys must contend with the formidable challenge of performing in front of audiences who come with certain expectations that have been shaped by pernicious stereotypes of Asian (non)manhood. (I should note that the audience for *MÜS.I.C.* when I attended the show was very diverse in terms of race, age, and gender.) Subjected to lynching and other physical violence in the nineteenth century, rounded up like cattle and placed in internment camps during World War II, once made to portray villainous rapists and, more recently, impotent, asexual hyper-nerds in popular culture, the Asian American male body has survived more than its share of ignominy.<sup>13</sup> The latest incarnation of the nerd, in particular, who is all brain and no body (or at least no sexuality), is especially problematic for those involved in a dance genre that is based on overt displays of masculine swagger and power, and on a value system derived from the streets of corporeal risk-taking, competitiveness, and improvisation.

Further, for any male dancer, the gaze of the public – which associates dance with effeminacy – can be discomfiting; for a male dancer of color, such a gaze is even more potentially troublesome. In *The Male Dancer*, dance historian Ramsay Burt writes of Bill T. Jones, the celebrated black director-choreographer: “as a black man on stage being watched primarily by white spectators he felt that his state in the world was that of being ‘such a mar-

ginal, “special black.”” He felt that he was a ‘commodity’ and that this ‘must be a feeling that women have.’”<sup>14</sup> An Asian male dancer must not only adapt to such an objectifying gaze, but also fight off the specters of *American Idol*’s William Hung, the Long Duk Dong character in *Sixteen Candles*, Mr. Yuneyoshi from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and all the other popular images of Asian malehood that largely define Asian American men for the mainstream American public. These anxieties come to surface during a few key moments in JabbaWockeeZ’s *MÜS.I.C.*: at one point, the narrator on the soundtrack addresses one of the dancers and admonishes him that real men don’t dance, to which the crew launches into a parody of Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” dance with exaggerated hip and wrist movements played for laughs; later, the group woos a woman from the audience and one of the dancers runs off with her and returns jubilantly following an implied sexual conquest. Even as the masks hide their problematized Asianness from view, these Asian American b-boys are nevertheless preoccupied with the representation of their masculinity and seem compelled to overcompensate in their efforts to establish their heteronormative maleness.

Such negotiations within the liminal space of Asian American hip-hop dance and music are also borne out in the work of Harry Shum, Jr., whose most famous dance performances have likewise involved the erasure of his individuality. As one of the silhouetted dancers in the popular series of iPod commercials, Shum sported a mohawk for one ad and cornrows for another, hairstyles associated with specific racial profiles not his own (see Figure 2). Just as certain vocal and musical styles are thought to be coded black or white in the popular imagination, dance styles have accrued specific racial associations; and the Asian body does not assume whiteness or

Figure 2  
Harry Shum, Jr., in silhouette

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From the iPod commercial “Hey Mama” (2005).

blackness in dance without some friction. However, when the individual (racially marked) characteristics of the body are obscured via silhouetting, as for Shum, or through the use of masks, as for Jabba-WockeeZ, the viewer can enjoy the spectacle of virtuosic dancing bodies without the “distraction” of racial incompatibility. Shum acknowledged such a point, commenting on the iPod audition process: “[I was happy to have this job] just for the fact that I was chosen for my dancing and just my dancing alone. It was a silhouette of me so looks and race didn’t play into it unlike most of the jobs I would audition for.”<sup>15</sup>

Shum’s role as Mike Chang on the hit television series *Glee* further brings the tensions between race and dance into relief. During the first season, Shum remained in the background as a dancer, and his character did not have a voice (metaphorically and literally, as in singing and speaking

lines). By the second season, Chang began to be incorporated into the story lines when he and Tina Cohen-Chang (Jenna Ushkowitz), the only other Asian character in the cast, became involved in a romantic relationship. But Chang did not truly gain dramatic substance or earn his first singing solo until an episode titled “Asian F” (Season 3, 2011), in which he rebels against his father by choosing to dedicate himself to glee club and dance rather than focus exclusively on academic achievement. It is only by disavowing his “Asian” obligations to his father, a stereotypical Asian tiger parent, and abandoning the model minority path to success via Harvard to instead pursue his own dream of becoming a dancer that Chang is able, at last, to transcend the stigma of Asianness (invisibility, silence) and become a legitimate artist in the world of *Glee*.

A final example from Shum’s portfolio: directed by Jon Chu, the popular Holly-

wood dance films *Step Up 2: The Streets* and *Step Up 3D* spotlight the stories of white protagonists whose personal lives are messily intertwined with the outcome of big dance battles. African American and Latino supporting casts add the requisite touch of authenticity; Asian dancers, including Shum and JabbaWockeeZ's Reynan Shawn Paguio, are more ornamental than essential (and one wonders if they would have been used at all if the director himself were not an Asian American dancer).<sup>16</sup> In all of these examples, Asian dancers occupy a liminal space: there but not there, seen but not seen.

The interactions between dancing bodies and music tell us even more about the boundaries around American popular music that Asian American artists delineate through their abject position. The first decade of the twenty-first century marked important milestones for Asian American musicians, including the public failure of William Hung, who became a celebrity after his humiliatingly tone- and rhythm-deaf audition on *American Idol*, and of MC Jin, the first Asian rapper to sign with a major label, who was featured in high-visibility media outlets before the release (and subsequent flop) of his first album, and their redemption, via the phenomenal success of the Far East Movement (a.k.a. FM), the first Asian American group ever to score a number one hit on the *Billboard* charts with the single "Like a G6" (2010). Together, these performers stand for the two sides of Asian American abjection: Hung, who conforms all too painfully to the fresh-off-the-boat Asian nerd stereotype, and Jin, who chose to foreground his Chinese heritage with preemptive strikes against his race-baiting opponents in his rhymes (particularly in his first single, "Speak Chinese" from *The Rest Is History*) and in interviews, represent that which is irredeemably foreign and repulsively other;

on the other hand, FM, which purveys an electronic-cool brand of dance music, a kind of hip-hop with race stripped away, exemplifies the invisible, "assimilated into white" end of the spectrum.

Of course it is a bit more complicated than that, and a closer look at FM in particular demonstrates just the sort of tensions Asian American artists must negotiate between different audience expectations of cultural legitimacy and commercial viability. A quartet of Japanese/Chinese-, Korean-, and Filipino-Angelino musicians, FM began its ascent to stardom by performing on the Asian American circuit of local talent shows and concerts, getting its big break when its song "Round Round" was featured on Justin Lin's film *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006).<sup>17</sup> FM has pursued distribution deals in Asia as well as in the West and continues to collaborate with notable Asian and Asian American filmmakers and dancers. Yet its music and self-representation largely "erase" its Asianness. Members of FM sport dark sunglasses (see Figure 3) in most of their appearances, obscuring their eyes, the most ethnically marked features on an Asian face (think slanty eyes, almond eyes, chink eyes, and so on; the eyes are also the most surgically altered features of Asian women since Westernization). Musically and lyrically, FM eschews any overt reference to Asianness, forgoing the pointed political barbs and/or Asian-sounding instrumentation of Jin and other earlier Asian American hip-hop artists for more universalized techno-infused party music.

In a musical genre that banks much of its legitimacy on specific cultural (read: black) roots (in actuality, narrowly constructed notions of blackness), Asian Americans have not fared well in the past, having to contend with the stereotype of the perennially foreign model minority that runs against the grain of hip-hop dis-



From Far East Movement, “Like a G6” music video (2010).

courses around street cred and authenticity, an often insurmountable challenge that Oliver Wang calls the “authenticity crisis” of Asian American rappers.<sup>18</sup> FM simply bypassed such stereotyping and achieved mainstream popularity, it seems, by hiding from view any overt signifiers of Asian-ness. FM’s Prohgress and Kev Nish went so far as to express their cognizance of the commonality in FM’s and JabbaWockeeZ’s ways of packaging themselves, noting that, “We had a ‘Jabbawockeez’ type of mentality, where we didn’t want people to judge our music by our race or face, so we [originally] started with the name ‘Emcee’s Anonymous.’”<sup>19</sup> Nish later conceded that trying to hide the group’s ethnic makeup was futile: “Emcee’s Anonymous is wack – that’s about being scared to own up to who you are. We respect and take pride in our culture.”<sup>20</sup> In these equivocating opinions, as well as in the following examples from their body of work, the members of FM reveal their ambivalence about their self-representation as Asian.

Before the mainstream success of “Like a G6,” FM was more visibly ensconced in the environs of Asian America, as can be seen in the video for “Dance Like Michael Jackson” (2008).<sup>21</sup> A collaboration of Wong Fu Productions, a trio of Asian American filmmakers who started making short films while students at the University of California, San Diego<sup>22</sup>; the third-season winners of *ABDC*, the all-Asian Quest Crew; and FM, the video conveys a new Asian American hipness that, through the celebration of Michael Jackson’s artistry, pays tribute to African American music and dance all the while showing Asian Americans to be capable of the physical mastery and sensual pleasures captured in the king of pop’s seminal videos. The FM video opens with an Asian guy clumsily trying to replicate Jackson’s famous dance moves from the 1982 “Beat It” video. He plays the role of the stereotypical Asian male, dorky and comically unnatural in his attempts to mimic Jackson’s sexually suggestive crotch



grabs and hip thrusts. Quest Crew dancers enter the scene, and their gracefully executed sequence that remixes and reinterprets Jackson's signature moves provides a welcome foil to the fumbling missteps of the wannabe dancer who falls on his face and exits the video before the music begins.

Quest Crew continues to run through the opening sequence, adding more and more dancers, while FM sings the lyrics, also a remix of Jackson's song titles and lines:

Yeah, feel the beat in your stomach  
Put on a glove and love it  
Feel the bass, intro out of space  
Moonwalk all over your face  
I'm priceless, my identity crisis  
You dance, I dance to white disc  
I got the moves to thrill ya, looks to kill ya,  
straight up like tequila  
Go gorilla, this no monkey business  
This hip hop no quantum physics  
Good Vibe, Bad though, Mixarto,  
Blend it like a Mulatto  
Spin around kick like taekwondo  
You gotta work those shoes right to the soles  
Boogie on down,  
Billie Jean style  
Say "Ow" when the freaks come out!

The lyrics foreground bodily sensations around the gut, hand, face, and feet while slipping in seemingly irrelevant racial signifiers, such as "white disc," "tequila," and "Mulatto." Dancing like Michael Jackson is all about the body, and these Asian artists are clearly embracing the corporeal as they dance and intone: "This hip hop no quantum physics . . . Spin around kick like taekwondo" – lines that privilege the physicality of hip-hop and taekwondo over the brainy pursuit of quantum physics, the domain of the stereotypical Asian nerd. When in the next verse FM glosses over the earlier racialized slippages by rapping "It don't matter if ya black or white /

Everybody get down when I'm on the mic," the ambiguities of Jackson's own relationship to blackness, captured in all its messiness in the 1991 video "Black or White" and the controversy inspired by it, become a potentially loaded subtext to what looks at first glance to be an innocent song about dancing and partying.<sup>23</sup>

Through his music and dancing, Jackson was able to leave a lasting legacy that put to rest or at least troubled the tabloid speculations about his sexual and racial identity; as several scholars have observed, Jackson's performances in "Thriller" and "Black or White," among others, played with, acknowledged, and defied sexual and racial conventions in ways that complicate public perceptions of the superstar.<sup>24</sup> In this song and video, FM and Quest Crew align themselves with Jackson the "freak," who with his ability to transmute and take on different shapes and forms (that is, a zombie, werewolf, panther, the many iterations of himself) was able to craft alternative identities that eluded mainstream attempts to reduce or contain him within a rigid racial stereotype. Just as Jackson challenged conventional representations of black masculinity, these Asian American artists communicate through sound and image their transcendence of mainstream stereotypes without explicitly addressing their Asianness.

Halfway through the video, as Quest Crew continues to dance and FM to rhyme and make beats, an attractive young woman appears, and it looks as though the remainder of the video will tell a conventional boy-meets-girl story. The woman starts to dance and is embraced by the crew, and the story turns out to be not about a romance between a girl and a boy, but rather, about a community and its love of dance. The tightly synchronized choreography of the group dance breaks down, and the individual dancers show off their singular freestyle skills in the cipher among

cheering friends. As more and more Asian bodies occupy the space, the dancers are urged to up the ante, and the dancers oblige, performing power moves that defy gravity and the physiological limitations of non-dancing bodies. What dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster has written of an earlier generation of b-boys applies just as aptly here: “The power and eloquence of the dance resulted from bodies negotiating precarious, dangerous tensions between anatomy and gravity coupled with the critical and witty commentary on other bodies and dance forms.”<sup>25</sup>

These dancers start the video by dancing like Michael Jackson, but by the end, they are dancing exuberantly as themselves, venturing farther than Jackson ever did into the physically thrilling realm of hip-hop and b-boying. The sunglasses are off, and the young Asian artists look straight into the camera, confidently showing their peers the strength and agility of their bodies, proving that, in dance, “It don’t matter if ya black or white” – or something else altogether. In fact, the virtuosic performances of Quest Crew and FM, informed by Michael Jackson, who was generally thought to be ambivalent about his own blackness, blow wide open the dominant black/white paradigm still prevalent in American discourses of race and difference. They show that hipness and artistry exist across the color spectrum, and they make explicit the cross-hatching of intercultural influences in music and dance. There is little here that conforms to the mainstream stereotype of the studious, inscrutable Oriental; through black music and dance, Asian American youths are literally embodying their refutation of such stereotypes as well as signaling their affinity to other communities of color.

Perhaps newly sensitized to its own abject position following a series of articles in

mainstream media that highlighted its racial makeup, FM has lately been pursuing a more internationalist strategy that takes the group well beyond the limits of the American pop market. The first album released post-G6, *Dirty Bass* (Cherrytree, Interscope, 2012), features popular artists from hip-hop, R&B, electronic dance music, and pop who span racial and geographic spectrums. Artists include the half-Asian/half-black rapper Tyga, Japanese mixed-race singer Crystal Kay, Barbadian group Cover Drive, mixed-race American singer Cassie, German singer Bill Kaulitz, Canadian singer Kay, Dutch DJ Sidney Samson, Cuban American rapper Pitbull, and African American rapper Flo Rida. The first single, “Live My Life,” features current pop idol Justin Bieber, and the remix of that song, also included on the album, features Bieber and Redfoo, half of LMFAO of “Party Rock” fame. Although the featured talent in “Live My Life” is North American, the video goes international, as the earlier multiracial casts of Los Angeles’ Koreatown (in “Like a G6” video) and downtown (“Rocketeer”) are replaced by the cosmopolitan one of Amsterdam. Quest Crew also dances in this video, but its Asianness is somewhat hidden by the costuming and the bodies of other dancers – emphatically multiracial – who are more prominently featured in the visuals. Asianness here is not erased, but normalized by the sheer variety of bodies occupying the frame. In this internationalized context, FM and Quest Crew are integral, rather than liminal, to the production and performance of hip-hop.

For other Asian American artists, the international music market has offered a means of escape from their position of liminality within the United States. With the widespread adoption of peer-to-peer file-sharing of music and increased mobility of people and cultural commodities around the world, pop hybrids like K-pop,

J-pop, Canto-pop, bhangra, and Pinoy rock have exploded beyond the borders of their originating countries, creating transnational communities of devoted fans in the United States, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> North America has served not just as a potential market for new consumers of this music, but as a source of new talent as well. Seattle-born Korean American Jay Park, for example, is among a handful of Korean Americans who have achieved pop celebrity in Korea in the last decade; Park, in particular, has helped fan the flames of the burgeoning craze for b-boying in East Asia.<sup>27</sup> MC Jin, for another, relaunched his career in Hong Kong following the disappointing sales of his first U.S.-released album. There he has collaborated with artists like Leehom Wang, a New York-born musician who stumbled onto a huge career in Asia after winning a talent contest in Taiwan, and he looms large over the popular landscape, shown on billboards endorsing a number of consumer products.

Although the international scene is not immune from racism or bigotry, it does give Asian b-boys the freedom to take off their masks. The 2007 documentary *Planet B-Boy*, filmed by Korean-Canadian director Benson Lee, follows the stories of five of the top-ranking dance crews around the world leading up to the 2005 Battle of the Year in Braunschweig, Germany. Dancers from Asia, Europe, and the United States compete as much for their country as for individual glory. The battles between the final four crews constitute the dramatic high point of the film, with Korea's Last for One taking first prize; Japan's Ichigeki second; Korea's Gamblerz third; and France's Phase-T fourth. (The American crew, Knucklehead Zoo, placed sixth.) The film concludes with the Korean public fettering the returning champions.<sup>28</sup> Although some of the dancers express jingoistic sentiments that echo widely held stereotypes

within the United States, the international scene, as portrayed in *Planet B-Boy*, seems to take for granted the cosmopolitan and multiracial cast of hip-hop and allows artists to shine on their own merits.

Asian Americans, as underrepresented as we are in the pop charts, contribute to American music by rendering concrete the liminal boundaries of popular music. From the masked JabbaWockeeZ and the silhouetted Harry Shum dance moves to FM's musical and representational mutations, there is clearly more than one way to be Asian American in hip-hop. But all these performers share an experience of abjection vis-à-vis the mainstream, so that even as they wholeheartedly engage with a musical subculture in which they grew up, they are nevertheless characterized as being its antithesis and repelled as other.

While markets abroad have welcomed some Asian American artists and the balkanized world of online social networks has created a constellation of Asian American stars celebrated by their peers, the more visible mainstream market still operates on a racist logic that requires Asian American artists to don a symbolic, if not always a literal, mask. American music (and all musics, for that matter) is about the body and its pleasures, sensations, and movements. Thus, the disciplining and constraining of certain bodies, based on physical phenotype rather than skill and ability, speak volumes about the larger body politic.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lisa Sagolla, "Dancing with the Jabbawoockeez," *Back Stage* 51 (31) (2010): 17; and Marie-Lorraine Mallare, "Behind the Mask," *Asianweek*, July 11, 2008, 12.
- <sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957); and John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- <sup>5</sup> For Lipsitz's definition of "strategic anti-essentialism," see George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994), 62; and for examples of artists from marginalized communities implementing strategic anti-essentialist practices, see Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 69–94.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, the model minority myth was, in essence, fabricated by mainstream media during the civil rights era to upbraid one minority community (African American) with the putative success of another (Chinese American). Blacks and Asians are also pitted against one another in debates around affirmative action, and the real life tensions between these groups came to blows in the 1992 Los Angeles riots. For more on Afro-Asian relations in the United States, see Fred Ho and Bill Mullen, eds., *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); "The Afro-Asian Century," special issue of *positions* 11 (1) (2003); and Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters," *Social Text* 20 (2) (2002): 49–64. See also Oliver Wang, "These Are the Breaks: Hip-Hop and AfroAsian Cultural (Dis)Connections" and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, "Black Bodies/Yellow Masks: The Orientalist Aesthetic in Hip-Hop and Black Visual Culture," both in *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 146–166, 188–203.
- <sup>7</sup> Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).
- <sup>8</sup> For a cogent and relevant analysis of how Asian American stage artists negotiate their precarious position vis-à-vis Americanness, see Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 160. Dance scholars have also recently begun to address issues surrounding the invisibility and liminality of Asian American dancers on stage: see, for example, Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middlefield, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); and Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
- <sup>9</sup> Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Rachel Devitt, "Lost in Translation: Filipino Diaspora(s), Postcolonial Hip Hop, and the Problems of Keeping It Real for the 'Contentless' Black Eyed Peas," *Asian Music* 39 (1) (2008): 108–134; Oliver Wang, "Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity and the Asian American MC," in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 35–68; Deborah Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and "GenerAsians Learn Chinese," *Art in the Lives of Immigrant Communities in the United States*, ed. Paul DiMaggio and Patricia Fernández-Kelly (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 125–154.
- <sup>11</sup> For more on Qbert and the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, see Doug Pray's documentary film *Scratch* (Palm Pictures, 2001); Jennie Sue, "Itching to Scratch," *AsianWeek.com*, July 12–18, 2002, [http://www.asianweek.com/2002\\_07\\_12/arts\\_dmc.html](http://www.asianweek.com/2002_07_12/arts_dmc.html); and Oliver Wang, "Spinning Iden-

titles: A Social History of Filipino American Deejays in the San Francisco Bay Area (1975 – 1995),” Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2004.

- <sup>12</sup> For more on the connection between Asian fraternities and sororities and hip-hop dance, see Tiffany Tse, “Dance Culture in Asian Greeks,” *Asianweek*, December 22, 2005, 7.
- <sup>13</sup> This is not to deny or minimize the bodily harm – real or metaphoric – inflicted on Asian American women. My focus here is Asian American men because they constitute the majority of the b-boys who have found some success in the mainstream; also, the issues around Asian American masculinity are, though interdependent with those around Asian American femininity, distinct and of particular pertinence in the discussion of b-boying.
- <sup>14</sup> Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 52.
- <sup>15</sup> Kirsten Benson, “‘Glee’ Star Harry Shum Jr. Starred in One of the First iPod Ads!” Hollywood Life.com, <http://www.hollywoodlife.com/2011/10/06/harry-shum-jr-ipod-commercial/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Shum does play a much bigger role in Chu’s online dance series, *The Legion of Extraordinary Dancers* (a.k.a. *LXD*, 2010 – 2011), as a starring character and choreographer. *LXD* broke with Hollywood conventions in many ways, including in its use of an ensemble cast drawn from the dance world, which is much more racially and ethnically diverse than Hollywood. In online interviews in which he identifies the model minority stereotype that defines his Mike Chang character, Shum seems aware of some of the issues discussed in this essay. He has also vocally supported enterprises like Kollaboration, an annual Asian American talent show held across the country.
- <sup>17</sup> For more on FM, see Jeff Weiss, “Eastsiders (way east); Asian American hip-hop hasn’t received much in the way of props. But Koreatown-based Far East Movement has four guys aiming to change that,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 2009; and Oliver Wang, “Behind Koreatown’s Far East Movement, a Deep History,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2010.
- <sup>18</sup> Wang, “Rapping and Repping,” 41.
- <sup>19</sup> Matteo, “Inside the Music: Far\*East Movement,” *Allkpop*, February 20, 2009, [http://www.allkpop.com/2009/02/inside\\_the\\_music\\_fareast\\_movement](http://www.allkpop.com/2009/02/inside_the_music_fareast_movement).
- <sup>20</sup> Weiss, “Eastsiders (way east).”
- <sup>21</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCtEvOdOZvg>.
- <sup>22</sup> See the CNN feature on Wong Fu Productions at <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/showbiz/2009/08/15/rowlands.wong.fu.productions.cnn>.
- <sup>23</sup> Several scholars have noted the incongruity in “Black or White” between the on-the-surface paean to multicultural color-blindness in both the lyrics and the video sequence of morphing faces and the explosive racial anger captured in Jackson’s panther dance that closes the video; see Tamara Roberts, “Michael Jackson’s Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream” and Elizabeth Chin, “Michael Jackson’s Panther Dance: Double Consciousness and the Uncanny Business of Performing While Black,” in a special issue dedicated to Michael Jackson of *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23 (1) (2011): 19 – 39, 58 – 74; and Carol Clover, “Dancin’ in the Rain,” *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 722 – 747.
- <sup>24</sup> See, for example, Roberts, “Michael Jackson’s Kingdom”; Chin, “Michael Jackson’s Panther Dance”; Kobena Mercer, “Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*,” in *Sound & Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwon, and Lawrence Grossberg (1993; London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 93 – 108; and David Brackett, “Black or White? Michael Jackson and the Idea of Crossover,” *Popular Music and Society* 35 (2) (2012): 169 – 185. For an analysis of another reenactment of Michael Jackson’s dance steps by Asian dancers, see J. Lorenzo Perillo, “‘If I was not in prison, I would not be famous’: Discipline, Choreography, and Mimicry in the Philippines,” *Theater Journal* 63 (4) (2011): 607 – 621.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," *Signs* 24 (1) (1998): 14.

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the transnational flows and hybridization of Asian popular culture and music, see Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); Koichi Iwabuchi, *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004); Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); Ian Condry, *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006); Su Zheng, *Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Anjali Gera Roy, *Bhangra Moves: From Ludhiana to London and Beyond* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> For more on Korean Americans in K-pop, see August Brown, "K-pop Enters American Pop Consciousness," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> For more on *Planet B-Boy*, see Kerry Howley, "Our Flag Is Hip Hop," *Reason* 40 (3) (2008): 60–61; and Philip W. Chung, "We Are the World," *Asianweek*, March 28, 2008, 10. An anonymous column in *Asianweek* recommends that "For Best Hip-Hop Dancers, Look to South Korea," August 8, 2008, 19.