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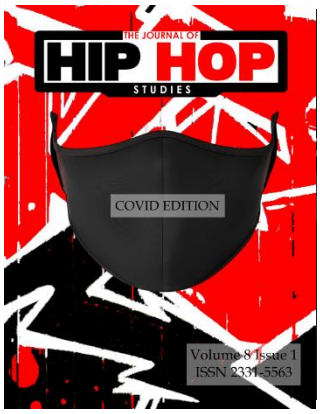

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Flow—an artistic connection to the beat—is essential to the experience and cultural mix of Hip Hop. "Flow" is also a term from positive psychology that describes a special out-of-body state of consciousness, first articulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. When Hip Hop performers get into artistic flow, they sometimes become immersed in psychological flow, and this article examines the combination for Asian American Hip Hop. Based on my national survey of Asian Americans in Hip Hop, I argue that dual flow inspires spiritual transformation and mitigates the dehumanization of social marginalization. However, the combination of terms presents problematic possibilities, given that Hip Hop emerged in diasporic communities and applying psychology can seem like an imposition of Western science on peoples dispersed by Western imperialism. This article takes up my argument as a theme of a cypher, with each voice authentically coming from me yet embodying its own flow and perspective, and each subsequent voice critiquing the previous with evidence, insight, and dignity. In this way, like the non-hierarchical conversational style of Hip Hop, the article does not come to definitive conclusions about Asian American Hip Hop, but rather debates the utility of dual flow and Asian Americans' cultural location within Hip Hop.

Flow—an artistic connection to the beat—is essential to Hip Hop. All Four Elements consciously craft flow; *individually*, to create one's own artistic identity, and *collectively*, to establish artistic styles of crews, neighborhoods, ethnicities, and regions. With flow, an audience connects to the music, bounces their heads, gets into "the zone," goes "dumb," goes "Zen," and shouts "OOOO" when it sets up a beatdown (in battles, of course). Without flow, there is no Hip Hop artist, audience, or culture.

To empower artistic flow, Hip Hop artists can enter "flow"—a term from positive psychology that describes a special out-of-body consciousness. First articulated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, psychological flow was found in chess players and painters who reached a state of peak performance and simultaneously lost their self-consciousness.[1] To attain this state, people take on challenges just above their normal skill range, and the brain assists by diverting power from areas of self-consciousness to areas of related skills. Following upon his early work, Csikszentmihalyi and other researchers discovered psychological flow in other arts, sports, pastimes, and even test-taking. It is not a surprise, then, that Hip Hop artists experience flow states. In mature articulations, psychological flow is a combination of high-level performance, lack of self-conscious doubt, loss of physical pain, and a feeling of euphoria.

[1] See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1975); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). For clarity, flow from the art of Hip Hop will be called "artistic flow" and flow from psychological research "psychological flow." The combination will be called "dual flow."

It is my hypothesis that when Hip Hop artistic flow puts one into psychological flow, Hip Hop is both lethal for battles and transformative for individuals and social groups. Specifically, I researched how this combination of flows might affect Asian Americans in Hip Hop and discovered that it can initiate spiritual transformation while simultaneously alleviating the pain of social marginalization. This article on Asian American Hip Hop will walk through each of these elements—artistic and psychological flow, social marginalization, and spirituality—to illustrate the power of Hip Hop for Asian Americans and to caution about the appropriation of African American, Asian, and white cultures.

The article addresses this intersection for Asian American Hip Hop in the form of the cypher. As such, the whole article and each subsection—like a round around a cypher—are incomplete, with each subsection critiquing the former and providing new insight from a different perspective and style—or "flow." I hope to create the feeling of a profound cypher, which inspires self-critique and aspiration for greatness. Voices in this incomplete conversation (all authentically coming from me) embody Asian Americans on the ground in Hip Hop, Asian American studies, psychological and psychoanalytic contexts, and religious studies. Poetic interventions are written by the author or sometimes sample Asian American MCs that are not exact quotations (samples cited in discography). The more artistic form for this academic article is meant to follow James G. Spady's Hiphopography, which is a Hip Hop research and writing method based in conversation that is nonhierarchical, blurs insider/outsider perspectives, and embodies the meaning, emotions, and style of Hip Hop.[2] Though the cypher's circle primarily embodies Asian American voices, the conversation is meant to peak the ear of outsiders, especially readers of *JHHS* interested in questions of the relationship of Hip Hop and spirituality.

Artistic and Psychological Flow

Mic check, here we go. Flow is like being in love: you experience it, and you know, or you didn't and you don't. Hip Hop artists, like meditating ascetics hoping to catch a glimpse of spiritual heights, engage disciplined work to develop their craft to breach the mundane world of words, body, vinyl, and concrete. Breaking down artistic and psychological elements of flow aids understanding but does not conflate with experience.

Tricia Rose once laid out how artistic flow is essential to Hip Hop. In *Black Noise* (1994), she states that artistic flow does not stand alone in Hip Hop but cocreates, with

[2] Leandre J. Jackson, "Discourse Methodology in Service of Narrative Strategy: Nommo Seeking in a Hip Hop Universe, James Spady's Hip Hop Oeuvre," *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 37, no. 2 (2013): 7, 10; and James G. Spady, "Mapping and Re-Membering Hip Hop History, Hiphopography and African Diasporic History," *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 37, no. 2 (2013): 130.

layering and ruptures.[3] Citing all Four Elements, Rose illustrates that flow initiates and sustains "rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity," while layering adds complexity and ruptures create narratives of managing threats to continuity.[4] Flow is the foundational smoothness and one-directionality that connects the audience to the art, and other aspects add dimensions and meaning. Think of the break on one turntable, a voice sample on the other, then jungle and scratch it up—bring that back, and you don't stop. Rose argues that this set of artistic elements creates a narrative of vibrancy in the face of struggle. For our purposes, artistic flow establishes a voice, but, more than a mundane statement of words, it communicates culture and experience in motion. It is therefore not only rhythmic but evocative and meaningful.

Hip hop scholar Travis Harris takes this a step further by linking artistic flow with the cypher. Building on Edouard Glissant, Gerhard Kubik, and H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook,[5] Harris constructs "flows and ciphas" as foundations of Hip Hop.[6] Flows are transmissions of culture and "when flows go back and forth, they create a cipha."[7] In this sense, flow has artistic style and more profoundly communicates culture—an expression that embodies place, time, and power relations. The cipha takes flow's one-directional movement and develops an exchange—a relationship also within a particular context or history of contexts. By making the art reference a history of contexts, Harris argues that flows and ciphas express patterns of cultural survival and appropriation by African diaspora. These patterns and an understanding of their complex historical, social, and artistic meaning are foundations of Hip Hop, making Africana patterns of survival and appropriation a criterium for analyzing any use of Hip Hop culture.

We can further explicate Harris' definition to see how flow is multiple. Flow is a vehicle of transmission: it is comprised of a transmitted cultural form, embodies the sociopolitical context of that transmission including place, time, and power, and is a link to the memories and emotions of generations of African diaspora members. The cipha, as exchange, makes the combination of flows evoke more multiplicity, commonly called the blues aesthetic, or the complex emotions of an uneven and asymmetric exchange of cultures. This image of flows and ciphas matches spoken-word theologian James Perkinson's concept of the "modality of the multiple," which is Hip Hop's active

[3] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University, 1994).

[4] Rose, 59.

[5] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999); and H. Samy Alim, Awad Ibrahim, and Alastair Pennycook, *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[6] Travis Harris, "Can It Be Bigger Than Hip Hop?: From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop," *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 17–70.

[7] Harris, 56.

development of Africana religious traditions of perceiving the world's holographic multiplicity—its spirit, concrete materiality, and history.[8]

For the present, artistic flow embodies one set of history and culture, and riding along with an artist's flow indicates that the audience "feels" at least some aspect of that history and culture. Flow by Asian Americans, by Harris's definition, must connect in some way to African diasporic patterns of cultural survival and appropriation in order for it to be considered Hip Hop. That said, Harris' definition leaves flow open to global contexts, wherever the African diaspora might theoretically find themselves and utilize their cultural toolkit to negotiate. These cultural patterns include methods of appropriation, so likewise the African diaspora might incorporate Asian cultures (and Hip Hop has appropriated Asian cultures). Asian American flow can therefore draw upon Asian and Asian American cultures and authentically be Hip Hop, as long as Asian Americans respect its Africana roots and serve as disciples of its active patterns of cultural learning.

Harris further provides a spectrum of appropriation and authenticity within Hip Hop: on one side, "a thriving and vibrant African and African diasporic community coming together against oppression and hegemonic Whiteness aiming to keep control on the other."[9] The question is then whether Asian Americans in Hip Hop cultivate the roots of thriving or rip out the plant to control the fruits of African diasporic sacrifice. As legend Doze Green has stated, "[t]here's room for change, and there's room for new interpretation. … But you need to have that root. … Hip-hop is like a tree, and it's got as many hybrids and low branches around it now. Even hip-hop is connected to a bigger tree called rock 'n roll; rock 'n roll is connected to a bigger tree [and] … before that to Africa, and Africa before that to Kemet, Mu—you know, it's all the same tree."[10] Passed through my ancestry and family tree, from my grandparents, to my parents, to me. The results of my survey of Asian American Hip Hop suggest that flow can bring out the vibrancy of a mixture of cultures in the Asian diasporic experience, which utilizes mechanisms of mixture from the African diasporic experience.

When the artist and vibrant power of surviving and thriving is combined with psychological flow, profound spiritual experiences may arise. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi proselytized psychological flow beyond the field of positive psychology, and as a result many artists and athletes push to learn it. It is a popular aspect of "peak performance," which is a catchphrase for achieving the heights of an endeavor or skill, typically related to sports, high-pressure job tasks, and the arts.

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[8] James W. Perkinson, *Shamanism, Racism, and Hip Hop Culture: Essays on White Supremacy and Black Subversion* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 141.

[9] Harris, 61.

[10] Jeff Chang, *Total Chaos the Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop* (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2006), 330.

It has reached Hip Hop, primarily through musicians and basketball. The latter is most well-known through the "triangle offense" of legendary basketball coach Phil Jackson. The complex system based in reading and reaction and his conception of spirituality in the locker room are extensions of his Zen Buddhism, Christianity, and readings of the Lakota Sioux.[11] Inspired by this multireligious perspective, basketball players adopt spiritual language for their peak performances, e.g., they "went unconscious," "went to a different place," or were "in the zone." In the game now, Steve Kerr, head coach of the champion Golden State Warriors (I'm from the Bay, Go Dubs), continually talks about flow for his version of the triangle offense. Kerr demands that his players execute simple plays to establish flow; this follows Csikszentmihalyi's process of accomplishing easy tasks to increase focus, wherein flow may occur. Musicians often learn about psychological flow through the pursuit of peak performance and come to it from a variety of musical genres, including classical, jazz, and electronic. I have heard many of these musicians using language similar to Phil Jackson's to describe how flow relates to Asian religions, notably the mindfulness of Buddhism and the mantras of Hinduism.

For Hip Hop specifically, psychological flow has been publicly touted by neuroscientist Heather Berlin and partner MC Baba Brinkman. As Berlin argues, psychological flow is common in "spontaneous creativity," notably freestyle rap and improv comedy.[12] Brinkman for his part regularly performs by bringing Berlin onstage as freestyle and comedy muse. While Hip Hop as a whole does not utilize neuroscience's language of psychological flow, I encountered its presence several times in both my formal interviews and free discussions with Asian Americans in Hip Hop— so often that I investigated it for my first book, though these results did not make the final version. I presume, without formal survey, that others in Hip Hop likewise generally experience psychological flow. In broader Hip Hop, I hear the basketball language of flow's effortless success— "Messed around and got a triple-double" or "My drive be perfect Kyrie Irving / Down the 495 swerving."[13]

With or without the science language, psychological flow works by shifting our brain's mode of operation. Csikszentmihalyi and later neuroscientific studies state that psychological flow takes brainpower from the prefrontal cortex which plays a central role in self-consciousness and diverts it to the frontal cortex which plays a central role in nonconscious body coordination. This creates an experience of intense concentration, a

[11] Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hachette Books, 1995).

[12] Heather Berlin, "What Time Feels Like When You're Improvising: The Neurology of Flow States," *Coordinates* 61 (June 7, 2018), https://nautil.us/issue/61/coordinates/what-time-feels-like-when-youre-improvising

[13] Ice Cube, "It Was a Good Day," *The Predator* (Lench Mob, 1992); Flowsik, "Kari," *Kari* (Southpaw, 2018).

merging of action and awareness, a loss of self-reflective consciousness, a sense of personal control, a feeling of time distortion, and a sense of an intrinsically rewarding activity.[14] Combined, this is euphoric and provides an immediate sense of power and success, and typically these coincide with actually accomplishing high-level tasks.

The central claim that flow states decrease prefrontal cortical activity and increase frontal cortical activity has not been conclusively proven, but studies of related sub-phenomena suggest the correlation. For example, some studies of relaxation and meditation utilize the same distribution of brain activity.[15] Studies of chemical and hormone levels suggest other component processes. Corinna Peifer found a correlation of cortisol levels with flow states.[16] Cortisol mediates the body's response to stress by helping the brain selectively react to stimuli related to a particular stress. Interestingly, flow states are positively correlated with cortisol levels that are found in people reacting to everyday stresses and negatively correlated with those responding to overwhelming stresses. In other words, flow feels more like facing normal challenges instead of mortal dangers. This corresponds to a central flow characteristic that difficult tasks seem easy or accomplishable. Dopamine levels have not been proven correlated, but testimonies that psychological flow feels rewarding and positive match descriptions of people with increased dopamine levels.[17]

Psychological studies reveal a variety of preconditions, components, and consequences of flow states. For example, one can enter a flow state while doing a mundane or uninteresting task, in which case the transcendent experience is not particularly meaningful, memorable, or joyful. This means that flow states are not necessarily "affective," which means that they did not add emotion to tasks.[18] On the other hand, if one enters a flow state while in a meaningful task—like one that enhances one's career or is a rare moment of joy—the transcendent experience adds to the depth, complexity, and euphoria of the whole experience. As a result, many describe the combination of transcendence, meaning, and euphoria as spiritual.

To the spiritual it goes / Brings high mountains low / From culture trees it grows / Mix, survive, flow. Dual flow wields psychological states of empowerment to mitigate oppression with style and the collective knowledge of diaspora. We use proper hand gestures to conjure ancestors. Accordingly, this article does not use psychological flow to legitimate Hip Hop as scientific but to articulate the experience of Hip Hop's

[14] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

[15] Corinna Peifer, "Psychophysiological Correlates of Flow-Experience," in *Advances in Flow Research*, edited by Stefan Engeser (New York: Springer, 2012), 150-51.

[16] Peifer,154–56.

[17] Peifer,152.

[18] Stefan Engeser and Anja Schiepe-Tiska, "Historical Lines and an Overview of Current Research on Flow," in *Advances in Flow Research*, ed. Stefan Engeser (New York: Springer, 2012), 1–22.

intergenerational transcendent power that emerges in contexts of oppression. Asian Americans in Hip Hop attest to this.

Spiritual Empowerment of Asian American Hip Hop Flow

Power, get more power! To glimpse into the combined power of artistic and psychological flow for Asian American Hip Hop, I conducted a nationwide online survey (open November 2015 to November 2018).[19] The sample is small, fourteen individuals, but it includes some of the biggest Asian American artists. It was technically anonymous, but voluntary information about career and follow-up correspondence allowed me to decipher the identities of many of the participants. The ethnic diversity was also strong, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Cambodian, and Hmong, along with a respective diversity of religious affiliations, including Buddhist, Christian, spiritual, and non-religious. Largely the sample consisted of MCs and producers because they are the elements of Asian American Hip Hop that I personally know best and whom I could ask to tap their networks. Since the sample was small, I am supplementing it in this article with media interviews of DJ Qbert. I will take selected quotations and allow them to speak about the power of dual flow for Asian American Hip Hop. I will insert my voice to illuminate these quotations further, especially the larger social context of marginalization.

In total, the Asian American voices of this subsection are exemplary and not meant to imply dual flow occurs for all Asian Americans in Hip Hop. In my next book project, I plan on publishing more of the survey, more interviews, and unpublished data from my first book. Additionally, the focus of the upcoming manuscript will be on the intersection of spirituality and radical politics for Asian Americans, instead of Asian American Hip Hop specifically.

Now they speak. When asked about life struggles or difficulties during the time of a flow experience, many commented that it alleviated suffering from marginalization. In fact, several said that Hip Hop saved their lives. Here are two examples:

> I experienced flow when I made a hard knocking beat. I felt like my mind was in a different world and I just magically knew what to do next in the beat. I had a strong sense of how and where I needed to progress the beat. My emotions were also the strongest at that point because I had just faced the harsh reality that I could no longer play the drums because of the pain of carpal tunnel and that my future did not mainly involve drumming.

[19] For more on Asian American Hip Hop in general, see Christine Bacareza Balance, *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Anthony Kwame Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009); Sunaina M. Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002); and Oliver Wang, "Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC," in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture and Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham, NC, 2007), 35–68.

> In short: Parents were from Japan and came to US in the 70s. I was born in California. No real ties to the families who were here already. No real ties to Japan. Always an outsider. Hip hop saved my life. Seriously.[20]

In general, respondents indicated that the union of the narrative of Hip Hop's artistic flow with the out-of-body experience of psychological flow reduces pain, and specifically the quotations discuss the physical and emotional pain of a motor injury and the emotional distress of social alienation. The second quotation expresses a feeling of being separated from a country of ethnic origin, Americans broadly speaking, and other Asian Americans who have had more generations in the United States. This has been called living in the "hyphen" of Asian–American and a permanent "sojourner" status, i.e., not finding a sense of home in any Asian or American community.[21] Hence, the transcendent experience in an art form that explores themes of belonging and marginalization provides the benefit of a sense of home for Asian Americans.

Hip hop is also particularly powerful to combat the model minority myth. In short, the model minority myth is that Asian Americans are economically successful because of an outsized work ethic.[22] While this may seem like a positive image, it has painful results. First, it ignores discrimination in education and the workplace while affirming that the United States is a meritocracy (Kim 1999). Simultaneously, it puts undue pressure on Asian Americans to succeed and to reach the middle class, and should they not achieve this goal, they would seem to fail their race, culture, family, and individual potential. The following respondent illustrates how the model minority myth often infects Asian American households, with some cases turning abusive.

> The pressure to do well in school has always been relevant in my life and the consequences from not doing well made [me] afraid about future where I didn't do well in school. I would be threatened with violence from mostly my dad. I know he meant well, but I don't think beating children is worth an increase in their gpa. Hip-hop really help[ed] me rationalize those experiences and gave me a sense of relief because I could rap about it and not hold it all in.

This respondent illustrates how Hip Hop directly counters marginalization through analyses of complex social and familial experiences, with psychological flow able to provide a euphoric experience that affirms these discoveries. Consciousness is

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[20] Note that I did not correct grammar and spelling of survey responses, choosing to leave the quotations true to the original expression.

[21] Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford, 2005); and Fumitaka Matsuoka, "Learning to Speak a New Tongue: Imagining a Way that Holds People Together—An Asian American Conversation," in *Asian and Oceanic Christianities in Conversation: Exploring Theological Identities at Home and in Diaspora*, ed. Heup Young Kim, Fumitaka Matsuoka, and Anri Morimoto (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 217–230.

[22] Nellie Tran, and Dina Birman, "Questioning the Model Minority: Studies of Asian American Academic Performance," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 1, no. 2 (2010): 106–118, https://doi.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fa0019965.

being "raised" in several forms.

With the powerful combination of artistic and psychological flow, the survey respondents asserted that they underwent a spiritual transformation. When asked if flow felt religious or spiritual, they responded across a spectrum of spiritual orientations. On one end of the spectrum, the discovery of a life-saving and community-building art led some to reject religion. For example, one spoke plainly:

> Fuck religion. Religion is another form of politics. What I felt can't be labelled. It was spiritual, it was soul, it was my life saver, but most importantly, it was Hip Hop.

By connecting religion to "politics" or what I interpret as political ideology, this respondent demonstrates that flow can affirm a spiritual orientation that rejects religious institutions. That is, a transcendent experience in a context outside traditional religions can reaffirm a sense of organized religions' spiritual bankruptcy. For those not committed to the rejection of religious institutions, such an experience can shift one towards questioning institutions or at least towards not relying upon them for spiritual experiences. This matches a trope in contemporary spirituality that religion is synonymous with institutions and dogma, while "spirituality" is freer and authentic.

On the other end of the spectrum, flow brought some closer to traditional religion. One respondent thought that the spiritual power of flow would be best explained by sending me a video of a performance. As an Evangelical Christian, he rapped with two other Asian American musicians at a local coffee shop about biblical stories and linked them to his own personal spiritual struggles.

Another associated it with the complicated mix of culture and spirit for Southeast Asian Buddhists:

> I'm not religious and don't really believe in God even though I am Buddhist. Being Buddhist to me is more cultural rather than spiritual. I guess you can say that my cultural experiences is spiritual because I was going through a lot of depression recently and being around my Khmer people healed me.

Southeast Asians, like the Cambodian American who spoke here, commonly arrived in the United States as a result of the Vietnam War, often as refugees or otherwise displaced peoples. One consequence was that Southeast Asians developed strong intraethnic ties as they fled their countries and underwent common traumatic experiences across class, sub-ethnicity, and religion. Religious organizations served as ethnic resources, like they do for most ethnicities, but in this case, they worked across Southeast Asian religions. As a result, Christians often attended Buddhist and Muslim

services and holidays, and the same reciprocally.[23] Thus, religious identifications have become nearly synonymous with an intraethnic identity, and ethnic identity is synonymous with a pan-religious identity. By extension, Southeast Asian Hip Hop crews may be multireligious and Hip Hop experiences may feel like they span religious categories or feel particularly ethnically or culturally Southeast Asian. For the previous respondent, flow in a context of a Khmer crew may have brought him to see the healing power of Khmer culture.

Viewing this together with earlier comments quoted here, it becomes clear that context matters. If, within a context that identifies with a single religion, then flow may affirm that religion; if in a context that is mono-ethnic but multireligious, then it may affirm the power of that culture; if outside of religious contexts, then it may affirm the futility of religion. That is, the transcendent power of dual flow lifts pains of marginalization and strengthens the bonds of one's community, whether that be considered religious or not.

Most, however, when asked about the flow experience being religious or spiritual, noted that it had an undefined spiritual power and expanded their sense of self:

> Most definitely a spiritual experience because to know and experience Hip Hop means is to know that it is greater than just our individual self.

> Definitely spiritual. I think it is communal also. If it happens, I don't ever feel like I was the only one there in flux light that. It was always a group effort to push each other and the whole room into a higher expression.

> Spiritual learning experience to toughen me as an individual of society. Learned that nothing in life was going to be handed to me, and that I had to find ways to take it.

From responses like these, the lack of definition or religious location seems to be intrinsic to dual flow's power. Psychological flow can be individualistic when individuals meet challenges. In Hip Hop, individual challenges are understood in larger social contexts, whether that be in an intimate context like a crew, the desire to represent one's community, or within larger racial and ideological structures. As the respondents asserted, experiencing psychological flow in the social context of Hip Hop can make one "greater" and "toughen" the self while simultaneously raising one's consciousness to the inequities of society and the power of one's community. In other words, to "represent" is to embody the community's spiritual heights, physical strength,

[23] Thomas J. Douglas, "The Cross and the Lotus: Changing Religious Practices Among Cambodia Immigrants in Seattle," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, ed. Jane N. Iwamura and Paul Spickard (New York: Routledge, 2003), 159–175.

and courage to face oppression. The exact details of these elements of reppin' vary, but flow is nonspecific enough to elevate all of them.

The undefined power of flow is palpable and, in the mind of a visionary, like the preeminent DJ QBert, it can transform one's consciousness to see beyond this world. In public interviews, QBert has expressed the method and power of Hip Hop flow.

> Skratching is a form of meditation. When you get into a zone, you're only thinking of one thing—the music being created at hand. All your being, soul, and energy is compressed into a continuous string of creation flowing through you from the universe. At this stage in my life, I'm trying to be able to get to that nirvana (zone, meditative state, groove) at will.[24]

This transcendent power brings him to great questions:

> Where's the center of the universe? What is God? . . . It's like there are so many questions that are hidden from us in this world because this world is like a prison planet. We're just kind of like cattle to the rulers that own this planet and so they're keeping all these secrets of eternal life from us and so I'm trying to learn about all that stuff.[25]

Instead of hoping that the "secrets" would be released by earthly powers, he looked elsewhere:

> Since Earth is like a primitive planet, what about the more advanced civilizations, how does their music sound? So I would imagine it, whatever they were doing, and that's how I would come up with my ideas.[26]

Following upon Afrofuturist musicians and visionaries Sun Ra and Afrika Bambaataa, QBert has come to see our planet as "primitive" and a "prison." One might isolate futurism by racial minorities as a form of countercultural postmodernity or connect them to music drug cultures of LSD and MDMA, but the concept of dual flow puts DJ QBert's visions in a new light. Instead of being merely a countercultural statement, they may reflect the experience and transcendent perspective of dual flow. Psychological flow provides an experience of stepping outside of the physical, social, and psychological pains of the moment, revealing the possibility of overcoming marginalization and thus how oppression has limitations. These are boundaries of the "prison," and their revelation means that this prison planet does not necessarily provide all the answers to deep questions nor the solutions for practical problems of material scarcity and social inequality. Artistic flow provides a style of creative survival, built upon a common framework of Afrofuturism, including the tactic of stepping outside of white perspectives for a realistic view of oneself and an expansive view of

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[24] Jim Tremayne and Michael Wong, "The Many Phases Of QBert: With His New Animated Wave Twisters Movie, Turntablism's Master Craftsman Shows the Next Cut," *DJ Times Magazine*, March 2001.

[25] Mike Maniaci, "DJ Qbert," *Career Cookbook*, May 7, 2007, http://thecareercookbook.com/article.php?article_id=157.

[26] *Scratch*. Directed by Doug Pray (New York: Palm Pictures, 2001).

time—one's undistorted history and possibilities for the future.[27] In other words, alien consciousness and higher intelligence are not only metaphors or euphemisms for drug use, but descriptions of the out-of-body, healing, intelligent, and socially conscious-raising power of dual flow.

The responses I quoted reveal just a taste of the power of dual flow. As these Asian Americans assert, it provides important physical, emotional, and spiritual buffers against the dehumanization of oppression. It can raise their analysis of society and culture by addressing the issues that they historically faced and currently face. Dual flow's power can affirm spiritual orientations, whether they be associated with traditional religion, ethnic identity, or anti-religious spirituality. Moreover, it can transmogrify one spirituality to question one's current spiritual worldview or even to reach beyond earthly worldviews.

Asian Americans attest to the power of entering new states of consciousness and of Hip Hop's bigger tree of cultural survival and appropriation maintained by the African diaspora. It is a thriving and vibrant Asian diasporic community coming together with the power of an African diasporic art to fight against oppression.

Critical Reflection or: Hold Up!

Hold up! That was some imperialistic garbage! You mean that some crazy rich Asians take some psychobabble from some crazy rich white people, feel good about it, and that's supposed to be Hip Hop! Remember what Travis Harris said about the OTHER end of the Hip Hop spectrum: "hegemonic Whiteness aiming to keep control."[28] Danger: I see a lot of white in that spirituality and a lot of white in that psychological flow.

First: spirituality. In *Religion and Hip Hop*, Monica Miller clearly states that any use of the term religion and its variants (eh hem, "spirituality") in Hip Hop should be critically evaluated: "Terms such as religion, the sacred, spirituality and so on, not only have complicated inheritances, they are likewise discursive, manufactured, and disciplinary—words that have complex histories used to measure the validity of certain (privileged) experiences."[29] In other words, spirituality gets used by some in Hip Hop cultures to validate their experiences. The Asian Americans quoted above use "spirituality" to make their Hip Hop seem powerful, either to situate it within their religious traditions and thereby enhance the power of their traditions or to assert that it comes from outside of religious organizations and thereby validate not following religion.

[27] This transcendent view of the past, present, and future is also, I think unironically, a definition of prophecy in Abrahamic religions.

[28] Harris, 61.

[29] Monica Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 12.

How does the term "spirituality" do that? It came from white people, so its value comes from its association with whiteness. It originated with the Baby Boomers in the Counterculture Era, when predominantly white Americans sought forms of religion that were not infected by industrialism, authoritarianism, and warmongering.[30] This postwar period also saw an influx of new immigrants and their religions, creating a dynamic mixture of religions that white Americans repurposed for their own needs and desires. Sociologist of religion Peter Berger argues that this era's forces of secularization and religious pluralism pushed many into a kind of spiritual homelessness, where traditional religions did not match boomers' spiritual demands for a variety of spiritual paths that they might undertake.[31] Often these so-called "spiritual seekers" would look outside traditional western religions to Asian, African, and Native American religions for their answers, and adopted pieces that seemed to fit—or were made to fit—their spiritual demands. As they got richer (and higher in the white supremacy spectrum), these appropriations grew all the more egregious, with junk versions of dream hoops, voodoo dolls, and yoga pants.

Asian Americans should be aware of this issue since their cultures get horribly appropriated all of the time by these folks. Spirituality often follows Orientalist tropes that praise Asian religions for their beauty, naturalness, wisdom, and peacefulness. And spiritual white people socially and economically support Asian religious figures who assert the same image, sometimes even literally bringing them from overseas. As a result, few Asian Americans run spirituality yoga and "Zen" spa retreats, but somehow there is plenty of room for white spiritual celebrity "gurus." For Asian Americans in Hip Hop (and this article's author), using "spirituality" sounds awfully like trying to get back a piece of the whiteness pie!

Not to mention psychological flow—dig a little and you will find that it is imperialist science. The founder, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, took observations of French painters and then began to apply them universally as something hardwired into everyone—and that was without concrete evidence. Even today there is no definitive neuroscientific mechanism identified. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon imperialistic tactic. As many critics of Western science have argued, the value for universal phenomena stems from an imperial mentality. Namely, the Western scientific desire for universal truths arose in the context of world dominance by Europeans.[32] Anthropologists, philosophers, and others would craft their visions of human and social evolution with the "new" evidence of peoples discovered in newly explored places.

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[30] Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

[31] Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind; Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

[32] Sandra G. Harding, *Sciences from Below: Feminisms, Postcolonialities, and Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

Likewise, the presumed universal greatness of technological invention and religious truths would be tested against the technologies and religions of these people and in comparison, to competing imperial nations. That is not to say that Western science does not discover truths, but the impulse to assert universality or to legitimate research based on connections to universality is rooted in an imperial mentality, which is obviously tied to colonialism, Orientalism, racism, and other ideologies of dominance. Doesn't this application of psychological flow to Hip Hop sound awfully similar?!

Dig deeper into psychological flow and there is more whiteness. Without evidence from science, Csikszentmihalyi speculated that flow could have been the result of the evolution of humanity and simultaneously inspired humanity's evolution.[33] He says that flow makes taking on challenges euphoric and expands one's ability to take on challenges, so feels that it might have pushed humans towards risk and the achievement of great things, thus speeding on evolution. At the same time, it simplifies complex brain processes for the sake of accomplishing tasks, so may have been the result of evolving such a multifunctional brain.

He also connects psychological flow to the development of human spirituality. In order to fit flow into spirituality, he created a tidy definition: "what is common to all forms of spirituality is the attempt to reduce entropy and consciousness";[34] that is, spirituality smooths and simplifies existence. To fit spirituality into evolution, he argues that evolution increased the complexity of the mind's functions, necessitating "an internal traffic cop" (22) that sorts perceptions and sensations, or else there will be "disorder within human consciousness that leads to impaired functioning" (170). For Csikszentmihalyi, spirituality is an organizing mechanism that helps human consciousness find a sense of harmony and better function. Likewise, flow decreases complexity and makes one enjoy and feel capable of navigating life challenges (190). Accordingly, flow can be an important tool for spirituality (in Csikszentmihalyi's definition) because it reduces psychic entropy and affirms life.

His definition of spirituality and of psychological flow's role in spirituality reflects his cultural preferences. According to Csikszentmihalyi, a disordered life is disjointed and depressing, so society makes normal life predictable and manageable, albeit often boring. At the same time, to evolve, humans must seek new challenges, which leaves a life that is less predictable and more manageable (190–191). Flow enters here; it makes humans seek challenges, which brings disorder, yet rewards challenge-seekers with pleasure. This logic matches the classic Freudian love and death drives, described as the conflicting desires to seek order and unity for the former, and

[33] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ed. *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology: The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihaly* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Netherlands, 2014).

[34] Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self*, 239.

complexity and multiplicity for the latter.[35] Psychological flow bridges the two drives to a small degree, making one "love" complexity, thus spurring on evolution.

This link of psychological flow to evolution and spirituality only make sense from a place of privilege. The presumption in Csikszentmihalyi's argument is that normal life is predictable and manageable, and consequently people must be pushed to seek challenges that might bring disorder. But, what about if you live a marginalized existence, one filled with diasporic dislocation and disruption? (The one foundational to Hip Hop ….) Normal life is not predictable, manageable, and banal! Psychological flow therefore holds little value for Hip Hop since it is about inviting disorder into a privileged life. Q.E.D., mic drop, Hip Hop has no use for psychological flow, let alone its imperialist–scientistic spirituality.

Dialectical Psychoanalytic Response or: "**Again**"

As Morpheus said, "Again!" Dig deeper, my friend. Spirituality and flow are not necessarily the tools of the master's house but deep reservoirs of the ancients. To pierce the veil of privilege, we need to dig deeper, into death. Let me take you to the realm of the dialectic, specifically the psychoanalytic.

Let us start with literary theorist Abdul JanMohamed, who will help us rewrite the script of counterculture spirituality and Csikszentmihalyi psychology. In *The Death-Bound-Subject* (2005), JanMohamed uses psychoanalysis to articulate the effects of the inversion of a privileged world.[36] Specifically, he analyzes the works of Richard Wright to uncover how African Americans might psychically confront social death. With JanMohamed's psychoanalytic view of social death, we can replace Csikszentmihalyi's framework of the love and death drives that is undergirded by privilege.

Building on the foundational analysis of slavery by Orlando Patterson as a practice of human parasitism, JanMohamed argues that the condition of the enslaved, which Patterson coined "social death," cannot be overcome by direct rebellion against this status.[37] That is, when a society deems a people of no social status, those people cannot force a status change. The shift to a free self is impossible both in social and in psychic terms, where the socially dead self continues an inevitable march towards physical death. As JanMohamed argues, the only escape from such a status of social death is a symbolic transformation of facing death. However, this is a temporary ritual that must be repeated. In psychoanalytic and Hegelian terms, the negation of a socially

[35] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey. The Standard ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).

[36] Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

[37] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

dead state alters it at the symbolic level, but unlike typical Hegelian logic the new self lasts for a short duration only, and then reverts to its previous, socially dead state.

Here, we can dig deeper into the earlier discussion of flow and privilege. For African Americans, the institution of slavery initiated social death and was followed by new instantiations—Jim Crow, redlining, the school to prison pipeline, and so on. The presumption by Csikszentmihalyi that life is banal comes from the perspective of the socially alive, where society supports citizens' humanity and mitigates life challenges—normal life becomes boring thanks to social enfranchisement. For the socially dead, society does the opposite of support—it exploits, ignores, and murders them. In the mind of society, these disciplinary acts upon the socially dead maintain the social order by keeping consequences of exploiting the socially dead, such as their pain, complications, and morally gray realities, outside of society, creating a significant disconnect in the sense of "order" for the privileged and the socially dead. Marginalized African Americans' normal, everyday life is filled with dread, and order is disciplinary. Moreover, as should be evident, society does not mitigate life challenges but adds to them.

While this dialectic may seem to confirm that psychological flow has no value for Hip Hop, in fact, it shows a different and perhaps more fundamental need. Recall that psychological flow takes challenging or disorderly states of mind and provides a feeling of mastery over challenges—often to the point of euphoric fun. In scientific terms, psychological flow states reduce cortisol levels to the level of everyday stress; this reduction of stress can increase health and again can make the seemingly insurmountable seem manageable. Likewise, dopamine levels increase, further calming the mind. These effects partially explain the experiential value of the arts and sports for the marginalized, given that these are commonly available ways to reach flow states.

Does this change from dread to manageable remove the socially dead status? No, but it provides a window—albeit brief—into social life. Here, let's bring back JanMohamed's dialectic, and we can see a possibility of how Hip Hop can negate social death. In the dialectic, one engages a ritual that directly negates the symbols of social death and does so by directly facing death. In Hip Hop, realness requires confronting the realities of social death without mitigating words, whether that be organizing against racist policies, calling out intra-racial oppression like sexism and homophobia, and embracing pleasures of communal belonging, sex, and drugs. Repping a crew, neighborhood, city, or culture is intrinsic to Hip Hop rituals, and images of social life are part of the symbolic negation of social death. Moreover, repping means embracing the existential risks that the social group faces everyday (the opposite—the wack—are those who try to rep a group while never facing the challenges). With the euphoria of psychological flow, there is an additional embodied assurance that fighting the power uplifts the self and community. In sum, psychological flow as a combined flow creates a possible foundation for the expressions that Hip Hop is love, respect, and realness, and counters white supremacist packaging that Hip Hop glorifies Black violence.

Using a similar dialectic, Asian Americans in Hip Hop can negate their marginalized social status without embracing hegemonic whiteness or taking Csikszentmihalyi's privileged viewpoint. Unlike the social death experienced by members of the African diaspora, Asian Americans experience the social alienation of the "perpetual foreigner." As Claire Jean Kim and Mia Tuan have both articulated, white hegemony toggles Asian Americans between the model minority and forever foreigner in an effort to discipline other racial minorities (as the "model" minority to assert that others are "lazy") and to reject the belonging and citizenship of Asians when convenient (as the foreigner to galvanize others against Asians).[38] This racialization provides circumstantial social life (again, when beneficial for the white hegemony), so it is categorically different than social death. However, this degree of social life comes at the cost of the dissolution of national belonging, and United States' policies repeatedly target Asian Americans to reduce their opportunities for, degree of, and value of American citizenship. Take for example the World War II internment camps that switched the status of US-born Asians from citizens to enemy alien, or the so-called "anchor babies" moral panic that threatened to remove the citizenship of Asian Americans whose parents were not American citizens at the time of birth. So, it is not the vampiric parasitism of social death, but the drip-by-drip erosion of social dissolution.

In practice, social dissolution takes place domestically but in reference to global conditions. As we recently experienced, an international concern around a global pandemic brought white supremacist circles to conspire that it was an attack by China, leading to anti-Asian violence across the United States without consideration for the character, ethnicity, or national status of Asian Americans. This also occurs in the context of globalization, which, building upon structures of colonialism, takes international economic and political inequality and selectively applies it locally. For example, in *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop*, M. T. Kato mentions how, at the time of the 1992 L.A. riots, globalization's process of economic upheaval and unjust jurisprudence undergirded some of the antagonism between African Americans and Asian Americans.[39] While Hip Hop was releasing tracks that pointed out these oppressive realities (e.g., "Cop Killer" and "Black Korea"), Hollywood was obfuscating the interracial and pan-Asian revolutionary work of Bruce Lee (*Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*). In this way, globalization with the one hand instills unrest and with the other whitewashes its traces, often misrepresenting Asian Americans as the face of oppression. Social dissolution isolates Asian Americans from others and tears off pieces of their citizenship—conquer, divide, and divide more.

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[38] Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–138; and Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

[39] M. T. Kato, *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop: Globalization, Revolution, and Popular Culture* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2007), 173.

Kato, analyzing the work of Bruce Lee, provides a dialectic for removing the socially dissolved status. In the narrative of *Game of Death*, Lee's final movie, Lee's character moves into the unknown to face death. Specifically, the character takes an existential risk by entering a tower of unknown martial artists and styles, indicating a "willingness to surrender himself to infinite possibility" (196). The final opponent (played by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) represents a style beyond style and the absence of the fear of death (194, 198). As Lee battles successive opponents, he incorporates more Asian martial arts styles, and thereby becomes increasingly pan-Asian. When he reaches the final challenge, he comes to embody the "autonomous power of the people of Asia" and the "pursuit of transcultural pan-Asianism" (200). However, when meeting the final opponent, he must use the power of nature (a trope in philosophical Taoism) to overcome Abdul-Jabbar's transcendent style that has no fear of death. In this way, the film illustrates that, to defeat social dissolution, pan-Asianism requires the embrace of a symbol that unites beyond human difference. Kato proclaims that the final triumphant Lee, who further learns from Abdul-Jabbar's style, foreshadows "the global circulation of people's struggle in the context of the post-Black Power and post-Third World social movements" (200). The end of the movie follows an over-exhausted Lee, who must continue to struggle even after his victory.

In conversation with JanMohamed's dialectic of social death built on the works of Richard Wright, we can see an analogous dialectic explicated by Kato and illustrated by Bruce Lee. For Asian Americans, social dissolution involves breaking the self into pieces, predominantly by invalidating pieces, sometimes by uplifting one piece as a "model minority" and using it to discipline and to exploit others, but perpetually to keep the self from wholeness and belonging. In Wright's work, the negation of social death meant facing death, and analogously in Lee's work negating social dissolution meant facing dissolution, or the infinite pieces into which one has been broken. In *Game of Death*, Lee faced the dread of infinite possibility, where death could come from every angle.[40] At each stage, facing dissolution, he gained more martial power and wisdom from Asia. The final challenge meant embracing the symbol of nature, which in philosophical Taoism has no definition yet fundamental, infinite power. The dissolution of Asia by colonialism and racist discord are thus reversed and forges together the self with a spiritual power beyond the human. Moreover, in JanMohamed's dialectic, social death is never totally overcome but requires repeated rituals wherein temporary social life is experienced. In Kato's dialectic, Lee repeatedly faced dissolution and death, experienced temporary transcendence, and repeatedly returned to the struggles of daily marginalized existence.

Just as Hip Hop provides a ritual space for African Americans to face social death, Hip Hop provides space for Asian Americans to face social dissolution. Despite decades of participation and achievement in Hip Hop (e.g., MC Joe Bataan with "Rap-O

[40] *Game of Death*, dir. Robert Clouse, 1978.

Clap-O" in 1979, DJ QBert as DMC World Champion in 1992, Bboy Cloud as Red Bull DC One Finalist in 2009, Jabbawokeez as first dance crew show in Las Vegas 2010), the Asian body still has an uncomfortable place in Hip Hop. Whatever the battle, opponents and haters abound, and Asian Americans frequently find themselves in other people's territory. They experience the threat of social dissolution and the ignorance that comes from their racialization, yet Hip Hop simultaneously provides the ritual space wherein they can face social dissolution and embrace the multiplicity of their identities, while connecting to cultural patterns attuned to combat white hegemony.

Similarly, Counterculture spirituality participates in hegemonic whiteness, but digging deeper, one will find that it has foundations in negating aspects of hegemonic whiteness. First, the Counterculture was rejecting forms of authoritarianism, mass industrialization, and world war; these are themes that racial minorities embrace, though from different angles than their white counterparts. Secondly, racial minorities can take concepts popularized by white groups and appropriate them for their own purposes. For example, "spirituality" has the air of countering religion, but the concept of "religion" also varies across and within racial groups. For those of Christian backgrounds, embracing spirituality can mean following non-Christian metaphysical traditions like spiritualism, card reading, and fortune telling, many of which predate Christianity. African Americans, under the term "spiritual," continue a diversity of African rituals and beliefs, engage spiritual and folk healing practices, and hold mystical worldviews.[41]

Asian Americans utilize "spirituality" to maintain traditions of religious skepticism and familism, both once rooted in Asian religions, but in the context of the United States are categorized as nonreligious and considered spiritual.[42] The longer history of Asian diaspora is that the term "religion" was often imposed on Asians by foreigners, like the United States used trade treaties in the 1860s and the American Occupation after World War II to impose American hegemony in Japan. For this reason, Asian Americans take the term "spiritual" as a counter to imposed colonial frameworks for "religion." Spirituality thus links to the counterculture connotation of being antiauthoritarian and antiwar, though from different cultural and historical frameworks. Put together, the idea of spirituality can be very "Asian" for Asian Americans, referring to a history of surviving colonial violence and encompassing a variety of Asian traditions deemed nonreligious. It thus signifies precolonial cultures while holding

[41] Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

[42] Russell M. Jeung, Seanan S. Fong, and Helen Jin Kim, *Family Sacrifices: The Worldviews and Ethics of Chinese Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Russell M. Jeung, Brett J. Esaki, and Alice Liu, "Redefining Religious Nones: Lessons from Chinese and Japanese American Young Adults," *Religions* 6 (July 2016): 891–911.

memory of the process of surviving colonial domination through hiding Asian cultures within American frameworks.

At the same time, we can recognize how minority forms of spirituality can be undergirded by structures of whiteness. For example, Oprah Winfrey presents forms of spirituality in ways that are approachable to a racially diverse audience, while many of these spiritual products, practices, and interpretations of non-white spiritual traditions (of African, Asian, and Native American origin) follow common reductions of their cultures. Here, we can see how whiteness-inflected spirituality can found secondary appropriation, or the appropriation by nonwhites of nonwhite cultures transformed to fit white desires. Bruce Lee, for example, while doing revolutionary multiracial work on the communal level, adopted Western philosophical Taoism from college courses and predominantly white new religious movements. Thus, Lee's martial arts philosophy is both powerful for developing a pan-Asian revolutionary consciousness and for transmitting white appropriations of Asian cultures. I suppose that means that when Hip Hop appropriates Bruce Lee's philosophy or Russell Simmons's positive thinking influenced by yoga and mindfulness, then it would be doing tertiary appropriation of Asian cultures, but that is beside the point; racial minorities may respond to the deleterious effects of white supremacy by healing with spirituality poisoned by whiteness.

Do these whiteness infections make spirituality impossible to use by Hip Hop without transmitting white hegemony? I respond "no." The dialectics of social death and social dissolution were not created by the oppressed—nor was the process of cultural appropriation. As diasporic survivors within these systems, African Americans and Asian Americans use the tools they had to do the most they could. We adapted to survive, and as a result we are left with complication, messiness, and infections. That does not mean that we are unaware of the scars, sores, and symptoms; these are part of the long road, the briars from the fields, the rot from the stagnant waters. Instead, we can remember this history, value the seeds that were kept safe, and eat the fruits of the rising plants. Flow and spirituality are examples of terms from white hegemony that wrap gifts from the diaspora. We can keep them.

There is a Price

No disrespect to the ancestors, but we put away paper for later, so we're stable. We don't have to cloak our preserved heritage in whiteness. If we keep up these old defensive appropriations of white culture, there is a price that we will continue to pay: we will invest more into whiteness without whiteness giving anything back to us. Instead of psychological flow, consider Afro-Latino religious states of consciousness or even the psychological term, trance. Instead of spirituality, seek the real deal from Asia. Let us rediscover these old paths. We can honor the price that our ancestors paid, while cultivating what they paid to keep.

Instead of flow, consider states of consciousness from Afro-Latino religions, which are already part of Hip Hop heritage. In Afro-Latino mediumship and shamanism, one communicates with the ancestors, becomes possessed or "ridden" by a spirit, and reads transcendent energies for healing, competition, and fortune-telling. The "flow" that one enters is the energy of those spirits, transformed and translated to the human body. Immersed in Hip Hop, people hear the ancestors, embody iconic sounds and movements of heroes and powerful technology, and feel electricity, love, and other transcendent energies surge through the body. Since the ancestors of Hip Hop struggled through slavery and its reiterations, it is these traditions that more appropriately define the Afro-diasporic consciousness of Hip Hop.

If we want to tap into modern science, consider the psychological category of trance that may be closer to Afro-Latino states of consciousness. In general, psychology defines trance by a mixture of four characteristics: focused attention, absorption, relaxation, a sense of automaticity and altered experiences of self-agency.[43] The classic pop culture image of trance is a doctor who hypnotizes a patient who then will hypnotically follow the doctor's commands. This is not necessarily what occurs, but the popular image does articulate the four characteristics of trance.

To create these effects, neuroscientific studies point to trance's ability to affect the anterior cingulate cortex, which plays important roles in attention, emotion, and impulse control. This partly explains trance's ability to alter one's control of the body, where patients may act out of character or believe a part of the body is paralyzed. Similarly, trance can lower or increase one's perception of pain. With focus, absorption, and relaxation, those in trance can also be taken on a guided journey or to relive pleasant memories. Given Hip Hop's body control, emotional intensity, and absorbing narratives, it seems likely that Hip Hop regularly engages trance rituals that partly originated in Afro-Latino religions.

Trance may also better explain the value of Hip Hop's higher states of consciousness. Fully absorbing an audience in a story about survival places the audience in a context of oppression, thus creating deep empathy, safely reliving trauma for healing and clarity of perception, or escaping to alternate universes. Further, the mitigation of pain when in trance helps the audience physically cope with oppression. Sure, one may consider that the category of trance originated in western science to diminish the religions of "primitive" peoples, but at least there is a definitive line of the term to ancient traditions, instead of psychological flow that points to French painters. And even though trance has an association with the primitive, at least there are neuroscientific studies that confirm and define its mechanisms, so we can appropriately,

[43] David A. Oakley, "Hypnosis, Trance and Suggestion: Evidence from Neuroimaging," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hypnosis: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. Amanda J. Barnier and Michael R. Nash, New York: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2012.

without outright speculation, connect aspects of trance to Hip Hop.

Instead of spirituality, just take the time to learn about religions before colonial conquest, or even go to the religious places of Asia, Africa, Meso-America, the indigenous peoples of the world, and so on, and learn from those religious specialists. This may take time and effort to find a religious master and to research one's own history, but you can do this. I am also going to say that it is not disrespectful to your ancestors to go looking for the descendants of your ancestors' relatives. This is called searching for truth, becoming your true self, and putting a nail in the coffin of the colonizer. If you want to call this "spirituality," then you are welcome to, but here is a better option: fully embrace your diasporic reality and identify with the real terms for your inherited traditions.

What Do You Mean, Safe? (Not Yet)

Yes, yes to real roots. No, no—it is not safe to be Asian in America, so we can't just drop our defenses in search of truth. Nah, nah, they are not going to let a better something better come. After September 11th, they murdered us for having darker skin, having beards, covering our heads, and just existing in the United States. Fast forward twenty years, and they murdered us for a disease that we did not create, haul over, or purposefully spread. And that's just the murder. Asian Americans across gender and sexual identities are raped, beaten, harassed, depicted as angry, depraved, frail, sickly, hyper- and hypo-sexual, not to mention treated as out-of-place, out-of-time, and out of their presented identities. And that's just the physical and representational violence. They are perennially trying to take away our citizenship, to deport us (to countries that we do not know), to strip us of our jobs, and then to accuse us of stealing college seats. No, it is not safe. It is not time to forget the history and the mechanisms of surviving. Instead, like Hip Hop, we should use these tools, even if our ancestors mixed their cultures with whiteness.

And, we do not have to do this by fiat; we can see the results of states of consciousness that match psychological flow and the experiences that they deemed spiritual. From the survey of Asian Americans in Hip Hop: "I just magically knew what to do next in the beat." "Spiritual learning experience to toughen me as an individual of society." "It was spiritual, it was soul, it was my life saver." Hip hop saves lives, and the combination of art and experience does this saving. Asian Americans are using the term "spirituality" to communicate the impact and validity of their Hip Hop experiences. We should not seek to strip them of this existential scaffold just because we desire a diasporic past that is pure.

And on that purity thing, the search for a precolonial past can be futile or just as neocolonial as white spirituality. In white hegemonic spirituality, there is a constant search for pure cultures, untouched by modernity, yet little critical analysis of this search or what is found. Namely, the search is a call to the days of colonial exploration,

a time when Europeans sought Edenic locations, encountered primitive peoples, and proved the value of science over their superstitions and so-called "magic." This is also a sense of imperial history that flows in one direction where Western technology continually grows more powerful and quintessential.[44] In this way, ironically, white spirituality romantically explores the globe to find peoples untouched by colonialism but also hopes that these discovered cultures will perfectly align with modern Western science. If they find people touched by colonialism, they are viewed as corrupted; if they find people with beliefs that conflict with Western science, they are viewed as barbaric. If anything were beyond the capabilities of modern science (like the Egyptian pyramids), then their ingenuity is denied and called the result of massive human abuse and enslavement.

In short, romantic spiritualists don't want to meet people; they want to find an instantiation of their own image of purity. If they go to Japan, for example, they want to meet katana-wielding samurai, or rice-planting peasants, or meditating Buddhists in mist-covered temples. Likewise, if I, a Japanese American, search for a pure precolonial past in Japan, am I not simply looking for my own image of purity—perhaps something ancient, pastoral, samurai-y, and misty-mystical? Isn't this what white hegemonic spirituality does? The spiritual seeker me would not want to meet real Japanese people in all their complications, but to find the image of Japan that affirms my hopes for an ancient, buried, inner purity.

If I actually sought to understand Japanese people, I would find that they challenge my ways of thinking. Japanese people pushed their religions to survive modernity, a survival history that included persecution, state-sponsored indoctrination, and different forms of colonial impositions by Japan, the United States, and other nations. Yes, many or even the majority in Japan survived by becoming one with colonial Japanese ideologies; others, however, survived through resistance. To understand Japanese people, I would learn about these survival tactics under the oppression of multiple governments. I would not find a pretty picture of pure Japanese roots that make me feel better about myself, but a deep history of cultural survival, where cultures mixed and shifted over time.

In essence, I would be learning about how my distant relatives took sometimes blasphemous steps to survive and to pass on heritage but survive they did. To be honest with myself, that is very much the story of my Japanese American ancestors, though in a different context. So instead of searching out there in Japan for my ancient and pure precolonial past, I might as well look here to my own diasporic history and the transformation of Japanese American cultures under oppression. In fact, I started this work in my book, *Enfolding Silence: The Transformation of Japanese American Religion and*

[44] Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2003).

Art under Oppression (2016).[45] I discovered that Japanese cultures mixed with cultures in the United States because of my ancestors' sociopolitical negotiations and creative survival strategies. Undeniably, nationalistic ideologies from the United States and Japan became incorporated into Japanese American culture, but they were also done strategically, and with deep emotional legacies, communicated through silences.

Hip Hop is one art form that facilitates and strengthens the process of coming to a complex understanding of an Asian American self, precisely because Hip Hop does this work. Hip Hop has roots in African diasporic strategies of survival and thriving, and it is mixed with white hegemony in complex ways, and I should add is self-reflective about this mix. Asian Americans in Hip Hop sit squarely in this contradiction, going dumb, showing grillz, searching for our ancestors, and flying off this prison planet. They know that it takes a generation time to change a situation, and Asian Americans in Hip Hop are using tools at their disposal, like artistic flow, psychological flow, and spirituality, to make something from nothing as best as they can.

[45] Brett J. Esaki, *Enfolding Silence: The Transformation of Japanese American Religion and Art under Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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