


Chapter 3

Bridging and Bounding Asianness in Hip-Hop Lyrics and Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This chapter applied the framing theory and the racial-aesthetic boundary model to examine how Asian rappers mark their racial identities and how media receive and present Asian artists' lyrical messages. The examination spans three generations of rap artists in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. Results indicate significant differences in terms of identity, appropriation, and non-race frames. Results also show a linear-like correlation for identity framing, in that messages under identity frames in lyrics were well perceived and presented by journalists. Coverage involving two other frames, segregation and appropriation, were exaggerated in their presentation. The reporters would mention Asian-ness when they cover and review Asian artists even though the lyrics examined never mentioned race. Implications are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

An Asian American rapper had never signed with a major record label until MC Jin, a Chinese- American rapper, signed with Ruff Ryders Entertainment (a subsidiary of Universal Music Group) in 2002. Sixteen years later, Brian Imanuel, known by his stage name, Rich Chigga (now Rich Brian), became the first Asian rapper active in the U.S. who topped the iTunes hip-hop chart.

Rap, or hip-hop music, is a form of hip-hop culture – deejaying, MCing, breakdancing and graffiti – in popular music. Hip-hop music originated from Black music but is also seen as a melting pot, as Coco Fusco (1995) states that hip-hop music “is perhaps today’s most resonant cross-cultural American language for defiant self-affirmation” (p. 32).

However, Asian rappers still keep “racial distance” in the hip-hop industry, where Black masculinity – with stereotypes of “hypermasculinity and sexuality, physical aggression, and the underclasses” – is seen as the opposite of stereotypes of Asian masculinity, which typically is “effete or asexual, passive, and middle class” (Wang, 2007, p. 41).

Several scholars describe rap music as “a communicative tool” (Durham, 2002; Nielson, 2009, 2012; Ball, 2011), and rappers express themselves in terms of race and identity in their lyrics. One of the leading scholars of Asian American hip-hop’s racial identity expression is Oliver Wang (2007), who charts the following trend:

Asian American rappers in the early 1990s made race a central part of their image production and songwriting. In the mid 1990s, race and ethnicity became more muted and were replaced with a rhetoric of universalism. In the early 2000s, race was deployed publicly again but as a strategic, “preemptive strike” against potential critics rather than an explicit, politicized embrace of racial identity (p. 38).

However, there is little follow-up research about this new trend of racial expression in Asian rap, which this chapter considers as a pivotal development after MC Jin’s success. Hip-hop music is one of the most popular genres of music in the U.S. (Recording Industry Association of America, 2019); it reflects American popular culture. Therefore, it’s important to reconsider Asian identity in the American hip-hop and popular music scene with hip-hop’s surging popularity, which can be a mirror of Asians’ racial and social status in mainstream American society.

This chapter seeks to examine how Asian rappers mark their racial boundaries. To do so, we analyzed the music of three prominent Asian rappers, namely the members of the Mountain Brothers, along with MC Jin and Rich Brian, representing three generations who debuted in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, and who applied four aesthetic-racial boundary frames in their lyrics.

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