

*Too many Asian American hip-hop artists are anti-black. Will that ever change?*

By Alicia Soller

## **The Tempest**

<https://thetempest.co/2017/07/24/culture-taste/hip-hop-culture-is-black-culture/>

Accessed 1/14/18

Whenever rap would start playing on the radio, my Asian American family would immediately turn the dial.

I was a kid when I heard hip-hop for the first time, and I'll admit that I didn't initially appreciate it because of the attitudes I was raised around. Anti-blackness in the Asian American community is real, and my family was no stranger to this. Whenever rap would start playing on the radio, they would immediately turn the dial. They also often associated street style fashion with being "thug," along with predisposed notions of criminality in the Black community. It took me years of self-education and awareness to dismantle my biases around blackness, and when I did, I finally realized that hip-hop wasn't just about catchy hooks and street style—it's also a movement of struggle and resistance.

Hip-hop was born in the South Bronx from Black youth in the late 1970s. It's a black cultural art form exploring the lived experiences and struggles of Black and Brown people through these [elements](#): deejaying (or turntabling), rapping, graffiti, and b-boying, which encompasses hip-hop dance, style, attitude and body language.

I gravitated toward stories of shaking up the status quo because I grew up fighting for a sense of belonging as an Asian American woman in the South. Hip-hop is powerful because it seeks to embrace being the "other" in the most unapologetic ways possible. This resonated with me as someone who's felt like an outsider for much of my life.

When I was in college, my Asian American peers and I shared the common experience of feeling like outcasts in a southern university. Fostering a sense of community was paramount to feeling empowered in a region and university that has so often erased our experiences and needs, and hip-hop was a pivotal tool in undoing this.

For me, the music and stories spoke to me in a way that mainstream, white-centric art failed to do. To others, the entire art form encompassing music, dance and fashion let them be unapologetically themselves. We admired Asian American rappers like Dumbfounded and Awkwafina, while some adopted Black vernacular and street style aesthetic. It was also almost a rite of passage to dance hip-hop at some point of your undergraduate career. While hip-hop was crucial to our identity formations as young adults, there was often a cognitive dissonance within the community between hip-hop culture and blackness. While they were all about showing up for the next Kendrick or Drake album, I was often one of the only handfuls of Asian Americans who wanted to create dialogue around #BlackLivesMatter.

I wanted to show solidarity, but I was frustrated because I felt virtually alone. I found it troublesome to revere hip-hop culture, which literally comes from Black lives, but not actual Black lives.

I got into a conversation with a friend, who although touted himself as a hip-hop expert, vehemently defended the ignorance of hip-hop's origins in our community. So many of our peers found their voices and identity through the culture cultivated in our community, and he wanted to preserve that, not strip it away.

Here's the thing: While we can hold reverence for an art form and how it's impacted our identity formation, we cannot claim hip-hop as exclusively our own. I acknowledge how aspects of hip-hop resonate with us because we are marginalized, but I see that appreciation turn into appropriation when people sport the style, music, dance without having sincere conversations about how hip-hop culture is inherently connected to Black culture.

I knew my peers revered Asian American rappers or dancers, but they often failed to recognize how Black figures paved the way for these artists to exist in the first place. The Asian American community I knew was striving to reclaim visibility and counter the idea that Asian Americans are undesirable and uncool. But we adopted hip-hop sensibilities without recognizing its connection to Black culture and disenfranchisement. We need to have conversations about this connection, or else the appreciation we thought we had for this art form turns into another case of appropriating Black culture in America.

Asian Americans have an incredible opportunity to collaborate with Black Americans to fight for liberation, and I firmly believe that hip-hop can foster cultural exchange, solidarity, and activism between these communities. Look at how [kung fu](#) has influenced hip-hop since its conception. Hip-hop pioneers revered Bruce Lee, who had a philosophy of self-reliance and discipline that resonated with the messages of the Black Power Movement.

The Black and Asian American community have the potential to be powerful allies, but Asian Americans must recognize how white supremacy positions us against Blackness. Although we did not ask to be used as pawns in anti-blackness, we must examine the ways we can stop being complicit in Black oppression, even with an art form like hip-hop.

Within the realm of hip-hop, Asian Americans have to develop a way to speak about injustices against our community without co-opting Black voices for our benefit. We need to use hip-hop to assert identity without appropriating Blackness connected to it. We need to uplift Black voices, not take from them.