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## Japanese Popular Culture Influences in Contemporary Black American Rap and Hip-Hop

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## **Abstract**

Since hip-hop's emergence in New York during the early 1970s, there has been an increasing amount of Japanese popular cultural references in Black American rap and hip-hop. This increase is made possible through globalization and innovations in communication technology. Most previous research on the trend has focused primarily on the impact hip-hop has had on Japanese culture, and how Afro-Asian collaborations have shaped music produced in the East and West. However, this thesis focuses on the influence various forms of Japanese media and history have had on contemporary Black American rap and hip-hop. I evaluate how artists can display these influences sonically (through samples and lyricism), visually (through music videos and fashion), and on their social media platforms. Within each of these categories, there are collaborations between Black hip-hop artists and Japanese musicians, fine artists, and fashion designers. This deep engagement between the respective cultures highlights the versatility of hip-hop to accurately capture and synthesize the richness of Japanese culture among the breadth of African American experiences.

## **Introduction**

Blending and remixing an assortment of sounds and songs, hip-hop synthesizes various experiences and ideas. These syntheses often blend a variety of cultural influences. Some contemporary hip-hop artists choose to introduce Japanese popular culture into their work, including anime, manga, and historical cultural references. Artists such as RZA, Kanye West, Nicki Minaj, and Megan Thee Stallion have been influenced by Japanese culture in a number of ways, including blending common tropes within anime with aspects of Black and Brown experiences in America. As hip-hop evolved, so have the ways that artists have incorporated various elements of East Asian, specifically Japanese, culture. For example, as a member of the Wu-Tang Clan, RZA frequently sampled Chinese and Japanese martial arts films on albums like *Enter the Wu* (1993) and *Liquid Swords* (1995), later drawing comparisons to the “journey of the Black man in America” and the popular anime series *Dragon Ball Z* (RZA, 2010). Similarly, Kanye West incorporated aspects of popular anime movie *Akira* into the music video for his song “Stronger” (2007). Additionally, Nicki Minaj’s music video for “Your Love” (2010) shows drama unfolding between a samurai-in-training, complete with a sword-fighting scene. In addition to the artists listed above, artists like Lupe Fiasco, Childish Gambino, and Lil Uzi Vert also incorporate these sonic, visual, and collaborative elements of Japanese popular culture into their work. Hip-hop continues to innovate the way it expresses ideas and concepts, due in part to advances in technology. Similarly, the emergence of various social media platforms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has fundamentally reshaped the way musicians interact with their fans. With the increased ease of communication, social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter streamlined the ability for fans to learn about aspects of artists’ influences and lives not explicitly reflected in their music. Rap and hip-hop are both sonic and visual mediums, so they possess the flexibility

needed to allow artists to express similarities between seemingly different cultures. This flexibility continues to grow in importance with the rapid reach of technological globalization. To better understand how hip-hop artists demonstrate these connections, this thesis will describe the influences of Asian, specifically Japanese, symbols and popular culture in African American hip-hop music and culture.

## **Background and Methodology**

Since the early 1970s, hip-hop has been an active, expressive art form in America. Born in block parties in New York, hip-hop music started in local neighborhoods and evolved into a mainstream, global genre in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Dye 2007). Core elements of hip-hop culture such as Djing and MCing eventually spread worldwide, including b-boying, graffiti arts, and the presentation of social consciousness and knowledge of self. Rap music began with mixing pre-recorded music with DJs taking bits and pieces from various songs to make a cohesive new piece of music or a mix for live parties and shows. DJs would use pieces from funk, soul, salsa, and disco songs and extend them while the MCs interacting with the crowds in various ways to keep them engaged. In time, the MCs would rhyme and speak in sync with the music, eventually becoming what we now call “rappers” (Dye 2007). DJs and MCs worked together to connect various songs and cultures, contributing their creative vocals and rhymes to set the precedent for the future of hip-hop. Cheryl Keyes explains this process for hip-hop DJs as “predicated on having a unique ear for the most obscure beats that complement the MC’s style.” Geneva Gay further describes the connection between a rapper or MC’s portrayal of themselves in saying that “style translates among Black innovators of hip-hop ‘as that unique, individualistic ambience with which a person invests his or her presence and being’” (Keyes 2004:123). Even though

MCs and DJs use material from other sources, they still create new works of art unique to their personal experiences.

One of the arguments against the collaborative nature of hip-hop is its potential for cultural appropriation (D’Anjou, 2020). While Andrew Bartlett recognizes the cultural impact of hip-hop by describing the evolution of American popular culture as happening with “African American culture at its hub,” a major part of hip-hop has been gleaned inspiration from various cultures and experiences (Bartlett, 2012). This differs from cultural appropriation because hip-hop artists openly share and say where these references come from; they are not taking away credit from the original sources and, in fact, introduce listeners and fans to the sources they are drawing from and referencing. When incorporating Japanese cultural influences into their music, hip-hop artists call attention to the original sources, not taking it as their own. This only supports the argument for the flexibility of the genre as it allows for positive cross-cultural interactions.

Within the field of ethnomusicology, some scholars discuss the influence of hip-hop on Japanese culture, but very few discuss the influence of Japanese culture in hip-hop as this thesis seeks to do. Scholars such as Ian Condry, Ken Mcleod, Zachary Price, and Elliott Powell have begun to evaluate the borrowings, similarities, and representations which result from interplays between East Asian and African American cultures. In his article, “Yellow B-Boys, Black Culture, and Hip-hop in Japan: Toward a Transnational Cultural Politics of Race,” Ian Condry details the influence of hip-hop and Black American culture on Japan (Condry 2007). In contrast, in his article, “Afro-Samurai: Techno-Orientalism and Contemporary Hip-Hop,” Ken Mcleod evaluates Japanese popular culture influences on Black American hip-hop. While McLeod’s analysis does focus on the influence of Japanese culture in hip-hop, he uses a lens of Afro-futurism (Mcleod 2013). In “Resounding Afro-Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of

Collaboration by Tamara Roberts (review)” and “Sounds from the Other Side: Afro-South Asian Collaboration in Black Popular Music,” Zachary Price and Elliott Powell, respectively, both explore the way that Afro-Asian collaborations have shaped the music produced in both the East and the West. Both primarily focus on how artists’ cultural experiences shape their musical production. Altogether, the scholarship on Afro-Asian relations through music only started within the past decade. My thesis extends the work of McLeod, Price, and Powell by evaluating the flow of Japanese cultural influences in Black American hip-hop. Through the analysis of various Black hip-hop artists, my thesis seeks to clearly show the influences of Japanese popular culture on contemporary Black American hip-hop in general, demonstrating how the latter borrows and incorporates aspects of the former to portray shared experiences, similarities, and cultural exchanges between them. Engaging the fields of music history, ethnomusicology and journalism, my thesis will review the ways in which hip-hop artists have adapted and interpreted Japanese culture musically and visually. In terms of identity, this is crucial to understanding and highlighting the ways in which Black artists from the 1990s onward have defined themselves, their images, and their unique sounds.

Most scholarly work explores the influences of rap and hip-hop on Japanese popular culture and society. My contribution to this research area is showing the inverse of the relationship as I will explore the influences of Japanese popular culture in Black American rap music and hip-hop culture. My purpose is to highlight how technological innovations in communication and globalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have enabled fans and members of both communities to create alongside each other, highlighting their similarities in a way that actively interact with rather than passively follow each other. My thesis evaluates the Japanese popular cultural influences as they exist musically, visually, and on hip-hop artists’ social media

platforms, addressing collaboration as relevant in each section. To research and explore this topic, I consulted books, journal articles, periodicals, magazine articles, social media platforms, music videos, albums, song lyric and sampling websites, and many other sources to find examples of influences of Japanese culture in hop-hop artists, Japanese artists, and pop cultural fanbases. To begin, I will provide a brief historical overview of East Asian cultural products that were popular in African American communities during the founding years of hip-hop such as kung-fu movies, video games, and anime. In chapter 1, “Japanese Influences in Sonic Components of Hip-Hop,” I will focus on the auditory components of these influences. This will include analyzing the lyrical content and samples in several hip-hop songs and clearly explaining their connection with the original/referenced material from Japan. Chapter two, “Japanese Influence in Visual Components of Hip-Hop,” will examine the visual aspects of these influences in hip-hop artists through analyzing music videos, fashion choices, and alternate personas that some artists portray in their music or public lives. In these chapters, the primary aim will be to present and analyze examples as evidence that this exchange is occurring on a meaningful level. Chapter three, “Japanese Influence in Social Media Presence of Hip-Hop Artists,” focuses on social media. This chapter examines how Japanese cultural influences manifest in the private lives of hip-hop artists, focusing on fan reactions and interactions to artists’ posts. In these three chapters, I will bring up examples of relevant collaborations to emphasize how globalization and its effect on the promotion of cultural exchanges led to Japanese popular culture influences within Black American rap and hip-hop.

The cultural exchanges described in this thesis have deepened because of the advancements in communication through social media, websites, blogs, and vlogs in the last 20 years. Today, these exchanges even include interactions between artists and fans that were not

yet possible or as readily available during hip-hop's early decades. To accurately capture patterns and trends around artist-fan interactions online and via social media platforms, I also reference these platforms in my research. Prior to the birth of social media, it was difficult for fans to directly peer into the daily lives of their favorite artists. As a result of the Dot-com tech boom in the early 2000s, the rise of social media sites like YouTube (2005), Instagram (2004), Facebook (2004), and Twitter (2007) created a new way for musical artists to interface with fans. By the mid-2000s, fans had almost instantaneous access to parts of their favorite artists' lives. Platforms like these added another dimension to how musical artists present themselves to the public and to their fans, with many artists carefully contemplating how their official social media accounts and pages represent who they are as individuals and what their music stands for. Today, artists are also able to share a behind-the-scenes look at the creation and production of their songs, albums, and music videos in real time. As a result, their professional work, personal interests, and personality became intricately linked, packaged, and presented on a global stage. More specifically, their music incorporates the accumulated experiences and influences through sound (including sampling and lyrical content), visuals (through music videos and fashion), social media interactions, and collaborations. From the 2000s onward, these websites and platforms played an essential role in shaping the methods that fans used to interact both with their favorite musical artists and with international cultures. Thus, to accurately capture these patterns/trends, I observed and cited these same platforms. Additionally, this thesis contributes to hip-hop scholarship because it emphasizes Japanese influences in the music, videos, and other material produced and released from the 2000s onward. By this time, aspects of Japanese popular culture (i.e., anime, depictions of samurai from kung-fu movies) were even more widely known in the

U.S. than in previous decades. Musical artists growing up around this time consumed these forms of media, and the music they produced reflected these experiences post-2000s.

### **Historical Background: Japanese Culture as Popular Culture in Black America**

Black American culture and East Asian cultures have several similarities, and it is because of this that the two have an extensive history of exchange in America. From the 1970s through the 1990s, karate, kung-fu, and other martial arts gained popularity within the States. Kung-fu and karate movies starring martial arts icons like Bruce Lee were almost instantly popular within the US. These movies were among the first to break through negative stereotypes that Americans had about the East, or the Orient, with audiences falling in love with Bruce Lee's lightning-fast moves and sharp, disciplined principles (Blake, 2020). His popularity and status as a cultural icon bridging the gap between East and West was exemplified in *The Way of the Dragon* (1972) where Lee fought, and won, against another American fighting icon, Chuck Norris.

In fact, Bruce Lee was also a very influential figure within Black cinema during this time. In *Enter the Dragon* (1973), produced by Lee, there were "direct references to police harassment of Black people and also the Black martial arts movement" which were shown through the experiences of Black martial artist Jim Kelly who was also cast in the film (Yam, 2020). Bruce Lee experienced racial discrimination in both Hong Kong and America and used those experiences to both relate to and create friendships across racial lines. Lee created friendships and working partnerships with prominent Black figures in the martial arts and sports communities, including with Jim Kelly and basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Daryl Maeda, an assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado-Boulder, describes these

friendships as resulting in “filmic partnership between Asian American and Black protagonists that gestures toward what is possible” (Yam 2020).

Within the Black community, Black action and Blaxploitation films in the 1970s showed the sustained popularity of martial arts and martial arts films. For example, after gaining popularity from his role in *Enter the Dragon*, Jim Kelly became a prominent star in many martial arts and Black action films throughout the 1970s, including *Black Belt Jones* (1974), *Three the Hard Way* (1974), and *Black Samurai* (1976). The popularity of martial arts movies inspired other Black action and Blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (1971) starring Richard Roundtree, *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) starring Pam Grier, and even the Blaxploitation films by comedian Rudy Ray Moore like the *Dolemite* series (1975). Their influence also lasted into the 1980s and 1990s with films such as *The Last Dragon* (1985), *Rush Hour* (1998), *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), and *Romeo Must Die* (2000). Black action and Blaxploitation films demonstrate the impact of interests in martial arts in the Black community. *The Last Dragon* of the early 1980s included a young Black action movie hero but also featured various aspects of kung-fu theater fan culture in urban cities during the 1980s. *Rush Hour* stars comedian Chris Tucker and global superstar Jackie Chan humorously fighting crime together in the late 1990s. *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* stars Forest Whitaker as the character “Ghost Dog,” who follows the *Hagakure*, an actual book written by samurai Yamamoto Tsunetomo detailing the code of the warrior. The music for the film was produced by RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan, who even made an appearance in the film as a disguised samurai. Similarly, *Romeo Must Die* stars martial artist Jet Li and the late singer Aaliyah as love interests from rival organized crime families. The music for the film was produced by rapper and producer Timbaland and bassist Stanley Clarke.

With increased popularity of cable television and at-home movies through VHS and DVDs, the representation of East Asian culture aired on a more regular basis. For example, the sustained appreciation for martial arts movies was later reflected through television show references, such as Martin Lawrence's character "Dragonfly Jones" in *Martin* (1993). Through Saturday morning cartoon programs, television shows, and movies, more than martial arts could be broadcasted directly to living rooms across the country. Cartoons like *Teenage Mutant Turtles* (1987), *Sonic the Hedgehog* (1993), *Pokémon* (1997), *Digimon* (1999), and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (2000) represented aspects of Japanese culture. While *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* started in America, it still incorporated Japanese martial arts, going on to become extremely popular in Japan shortly after its debut in America in the animated form. The rest of the shows listed began in Japan and were dubbed in English and shown on television. Additionally, shows such as *Voltron* (1984) and *Power Rangers* (1993) were directly adapted from Japanese television series like *Beast King GoLion* (1982) and *Super Sentai* (1975), respectively. However, as broadcast channels began competing with kid-focused cable and satellite channels like Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and Disney (each of which also aired Japanese-related TV shows like *Grimm's Fairy Tale Classics* (1987), *Sailor Moon* (1992), and *Naruto: Shippuden* (2009) respectively), and with increased popularity of the VHS and DVD home consumer market, traditional broadcasters like NBC, ABC, and CBS began cutting these cartoons from their Saturday morning time blocks toward the early 2000s (Sullivan, 2014). Some of these shows were extensions of Japanese video games that were becoming popular in America after the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and *Super Mario Bros* (1985). With the development of high-speed Internet in the early 2000s, barriers to communication across countries decreased. Fans could now easily access and download their favorite shows, producers, movies, etc. This increase in technological capabilities

also led to consumer-driven product production through mash-up programs like *Kung Faux* (2003). Mash-up programs focused on fans and artists mixing various clips from different sources, often adding music to them or dubbing over them to create new dialogue. These programs and their use of video mixing acted visually in a way like what hip hop does sonically.

These historic examples of Japanese and East Asian culture in American media culture have been reflected in hip hop culture since its early days. Hip-hop artists reflected the influence of 1970s martial arts films and Black action/Blaxploitation films by referencing them in their rhymes as well as how they identified themselves as artists. For example, founded in 1992, hip-hop group Wu-Tang Clan named themselves after the martial arts film *Shaolin and Wu Tang* (1983) (Akmur, 2020). According to RZA, it was a part of Wu-Tang's mission to "open up the minds of the youth and the people and become aware of our people, our situation, our community, *martial arts*, knowledge of self, and all the things that we put into those songs" (BBC Music). Artists like Foxy Brown made equally explicit references to East Asian culture with her album *Chyna Doll* (1999), with visuals including Chinese characters on the album cover. Her stage name is also a direct reference to the character and movie *Foxy Brown* as well, showing influences from the martial arts inspired Black action films. Rap artists that grew up in the 90s and early 2000s demonstrated their love for these reflections and borrowings in hip hop culture (as well as their own experiences) in their music, visuals, and social media presentations of themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Japanese Influences in Sonic Components of Hip-Hop**

Music producers and artists can show their appreciation and influences through sonic representations. As the available technology increases, the various ways to manipulate and connect sounds and lyrics to their sources also increases. This can manifest in numerous ways, from the technical aspects of track composition to lyrical content. Producers and artists often use some combination of both, and I will explore these through the analysis below. They draw similarities between the referenced work and aspects of their personal lives and intended message, illustrating a deeper understanding of the elements of Japanese popular culture that they reference.

#### **Samples**

One of the most direct ways that hip hop artists and producers have shown their influences is through the usage of samples. Sampling is a common practice when creating the track for a rap or hip-hop song (Keyes, 2004, p.104). According to Bartlett (2012), digital sampling is an art that “is intricately connected to an African American/African diasporic aesthetic that carefully selects available media, texts, and contexts for performative use.” It is a core musical aesthetic in American hip hop and can refer to anything from other songs to dialogue from movies and speeches. Of course, the possibilities for creating music through digital sampling increased as the technology to do so became available. To identify and trace the sound sources for samples used in music, I used the website WhoSampled. This website traces connections and samples to their original source and includes the timestamps where these references show up in the song. When producers and hip-hop artists refer to Japanese culture

through samples, most incorporate sounds from anime and manga,<sup>1</sup> popular music from Japan, references to Japanese cultural historical periods, and video games. Specifically, I will evaluate artists such as Wu-Tang Clan members RZA, GZA, and Ghostface Killah, and other artists such as J Cole, Tech N9ne, Lil Yachty, Offset, Big Boi, Killer Mike, Jeezy, Tyler, the Creator, Afrika Bambaataa, Snoop Dogg, Tobi Lou, Wiz Khalifa, SahBabii, Duckwrth, Megan Thee Stallion, TOKYO'S REVENGE, Smino, Ski Mask the Slump God, Lupe Fiasco, MadeinTYO, Masego, and Kyle.

Japanese manga occasionally draw inspiration from historical events, and one such example is the manga series *Lone Wolf and Cub* (1970). This manga series tells the story of a ronin (samurai without a lord or master to serve) who was previously the shogun's executioner. In the series, he loses his position following false accusations and seeks revenge against those who have disgraced him. He brings along his 3-year-old son for the journey. This manga series inspired the live-action movie *Shogun Assassin* (1980) that is referenced throughout the *Liquid Swords* album by GZA and produced by RZA in 1995. The very first song on the album starts with an audio clip from *Shogun Assassin* where the son is recalling the night the shogun attempted to assassinate the "Lone Wolf" Ogami Ittou in his home. Throughout the album, GZA and the other members of the Wu-Tang Clan make connections between the way of the samurai and chess, crime, and philosophy. They allude to the similarities in the way of life, honor, discipline, skill, and relentlessness with which they create and perform their songs. Songs on the album that sample audio content from *Shogun Assassin* include "Liquid Swords," "Duel of the Iron Mic," and "Cold World." The album also includes audio samples of dialogue from other

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<sup>1</sup> Anime is short for the term "animation," often referring specifically to the Japanese genre of animated shows. Similarly, manga refers to the Japanese comic books from which anime is often adapted.

martial arts films such as *Dragon on Fire* (1978) on the track “Duel of the Iron Mic,” and *Shaolin vs Lama* (1983) on the track “Shadowboxin.”

In addition to martial arts movies, many young people in America during the 1990s and early 2000s were exposed to Japanese culture through animation. Among the most popular then and now is Adult Swim’s *Toonami* programming block on Cartoon Network, which primarily shows anime that has been dubbed into English. Popular anime that were (and still are) shown on *Toonami* include *Lupin the Third* (1971) and *Dragon Ball Z* (1989), which aired in the U.S. in 2003 and 1996 respectively. *Lupin the Third* was an anime series based on the wildly popular manga series of the same name that was first published in 1967. Songs from the *Lupin the Third* soundtrack have been sampled numerous times. J Cole’s song “4 Your Eyez Only” from 2016 samples “The Way to the Oasis” by Yuji Ohno from the 1978 *Lupin the Third* soundtrack. In the song, J Cole raps about trying to avoid taking the wrong path in life to his friend’s daughter, telling the story of his friend’s life and ultimate downfall. Finding “the way to the oasis” alludes to J Cole’s hopes that the daughter does not repeat her father’s mistakes, learning from them and understanding why her father made his choices. Another popular anime is *Dragon Ball Z*; airing on *Toonami* in 1998, it is tremendously popular and one of the most easily recognizable action anime in the United States. In 2006, South Carolina artist Jeezy sampled “Dragon Ball Z (Pikkon’s Theme)” in his song “U Know What It Is.” In the series, the song is played when Pikkon, a side character, enters the battle arena. In Jeezy’s song, he raps about himself being the best rapper from the Southern United States, with “Pikkon’s Theme” serving as his own theme song in the background of this track.

Another anime series, *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), is one of the most popular anime in the United States due to its continuing influence. It debuted on *Toonami* in 2001 and is regularly

sampled by numerous hip hop artists and producers. Tech N9ne sampled “Rain” from the *Cowboy Bebop Original Soundtrack* released in 1998 in his song “The Rain,” which was released in 2006. In the song, he raps about being away from his family while on tour. The part of the song sampled for the chorus refers to walking “in the rain,” questioning if the path is the right one. In the same way, Tech N9ne acknowledges that he has a responsibility to both his fans and his family but also questions the pitfalls his profession brings to his family. He needs to perform to earn money for them, but he also wants to physically be with his family. Lil Yachty and Offset also sample a song from the same *Cowboy Bebop* soundtrack album, “Green Bird,” in their song “DipSet” which was released in 2016. According to song lyrics website, *Genius*, to “dipset” means to casually leave a place. In *Cowboy Bebop*, “Green Bird” was originally played during a scene where Spike was thrown out of the window of a church building, leaving in a very conspicuous way. The connection between the context of the original audio and the meaning of the song shows Lil Yachty’s deeper appreciation for and familiarity with the original work.

In addition to sampling dialogue from martial arts movies and background music from popular anime, hip hop artists and producers also sample songs from popular Japanese musicians. For example, in 2017 on the song “Kill Jill,” Big Boi, Killer Mike, and Jeezy sampled the song “DATA 2.0” featuring popular Japanese Vocaloid Hatsune Miku.<sup>2</sup> Vocaloid is a software program that allows users to create music performance characters/personalities by typing in a melody using pre-recorded voice samples and digitally produced personalities or performers. This has led to a boom of Vocaloid “singers” that perform in Japan. Even though the “Vocaloids” are fictional, they are treated as real performers. In concerts, they are projected onto

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to sampling Miku’s vocals, “Kill Jill” is a nod to the American martial arts film *Kill Bill* (2003) directed by Quentin Tarantino, which includes music produced by RZA in the movie’s filmscore. *Kill Bill* also heavily draws from Japanese influences, with the main character Beatrix Kiddo wielding a samurai sword that she got from a swordsmith in Japan, a performance from Japanese band the 5, 6, 7, 8s, animated scenes, and much more.

screens and occasionally have live back-up dancers on stage as they perform. Their design is often influenced by the style and aesthetics of anime characters. Hatsune Miku is among one of the most popular Vocaloids to “exist.” After the release of her Vocaloid character and its huge popularity as a performing AI, the popularity of the Vocaloid software in general exploded into a multi-million-dollar business in East Asia (Roseboro, 2019). In the beginning and throughout “DATA 2.0,” Hatsune Miku can be heard singing in Japanese. Beyond sampling Miku’s pre-existing songs, in 2014 hip-hop producer and rapper Pharrell Williams collaborated with Hatsune Miku in the song “Last Night, Good Night (Re:Dialed).” The original version<sup>3</sup> of the “Last Night, Good Night” served as the theme song for renown Japanese multi-media artist Takashi Murakami’s debut film *Jellyfish Eyes* a year earlier in 2013.

Real Japanese artists can influence hip-hop as much as virtual ones. For example, Japanese artist Tatsuro Yamashita is a very influential “city pop” artist, a genre of Japanese pop music from the 1970s-1980s that has surged to popularity in the United States within the past few years (Matsunaga 2020). In 2019, artist Tyler, the Creator sampled Tatsuro Yamashita’s “Fragile” from 1998 in his song “GONE GONE / THANK YOU.” On this track, Tyler, the Creator sings about losing the person he was in love with — a theme throughout the entire *IGOR* album — and finishes the song by heavily borrowing lyrics and the melody from Tatsuro Yamashita’s “Fragile.”

In addition to the influence of Japanese artists, Japanese video games also have played a very influential role on Black American hip hop since its beginnings. The “Godfather of Hip-Hop” Afrika Bambaataa was a tremendously important figure in transitioning hip-hop from the

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<sup>3</sup> “Last Night, Good Night” was created by a Japanese EDM producer named Aura Qualic who occasionally uses Vocaloid software. He used the software to feature Hatsune Miku on the song. Both Qualic and Miku are given credits for “Last Night, Good Night’s” creation.

“Old School Style” to the “New School Style” by adding synthesizers, drum machines, and computerized 1970s and early 80s arcade sounds to the music (Keyes, 2004:74-75). Bambaataa sampled numerous video game sounds in ways which makes it difficult to pinpoint exact sources, but his music is known for its “epileptic bleeps” based on the arcade sounds (SPIN, 2012). As a result, it should be no surprise that the *Super Mario* franchise is heavily sampled today as it almost single-handedly saved the American video game market in the mid-1980s (Aneja and Fitzpatrick, 2015). In fact, music producer Koji Kondo is viewed as a legend for video game music production, producing music for Nintendo’s *Super Mario* and *Legend of Zelda* franchises. In 2012, Spanky Danky ft. Snoop Dogg, Tha Dogg Pound, and Soopafly made a song titled “Super Mario Bros.,” which directly samples the “Super Mario Bros. Theme” by Koji Kondo from 1985. Snoop Dogg raps about talking to women with his “Super Mario Bros,” who are his fellow artists on the track. Similarly, in 2015, Tobi Lou’s “Game Ova” samples Koji Kondo’s “Game Over” from the 1991 *Super Mario World* soundtrack for most of the track. Tobi’s song talks about “playing games” with a girl with whom his relationship is now over, signaling his loss with the “Game Over” song that plays once a player runs out of lives and loses the game.

Another popular video games series that is regularly sampled is Capcom’s *Street Fighter* game series which was initially released in 1987. One example of a song that samples content from this series is “Dead Man’s Tetris” by Flying Lotus, Captain Murphy, and Snoop Dogg, released in 2014. It samples sound effects from the 1991 *Street Fighter II* video game by Yoko Shimomura and Isao Abe. Throughout the album, Flying Lotus explores the concept of death, showing that it is inescapable no matter how one may try to fight it, and *Street Fighter* is known for being a fighting game where the characters fight fiercely. In “Dead Man’s Tetris”

specifically, the subject of the song is unsure of whether he or she is truly dead and fights the idea and takes it lightly, as if it were a game.

Another commonly sampled video game from SEGA is *Sonic the Hedgehog*. In 2009, Wiz Khalifa samples the iconic “Green Hill Zone Theme” music from the 1991 *Sonic the Hedgehog* by Masato Nakamura in his song “Ms. Rightfernow.” In the song, the sample makes up most of the music for the track, with Wiz Khalifa rapping about progressing quickly in his relationship with a woman, with a speed like that of the famous hedgehog. Multi-instrumentalist and producer Thundercat also uses *Sonic the Hedgehog*’s 1991 sound effects in his 2017 release of “Show You the Way.” The sound effects he used signify the player passing onto the next level in the video game, continuing the message on the track of passing through dark moments to reach the positive ones.

## **Lyrics**

In addition to sampling Japanese media and video games, hip-hop artists illustrate their influences and interests through their lyricism. Lyrics can provide commentary through “ambiguity, allusion, imagery, metaphor, braggadocio, or insults,” and artists can also use those same elements to manipulate meaning, simultaneously portraying multiple messages (Keyes, 2004, p. 131-132). In other words, artists make references and make statements by drawing on their knowledge of subjects to create the meaning they want. In the examples below, I evaluate the artists’ choices to reference and allude to anime, video games, and even use the Japanese language itself to make connections and relate aspects of their situation to the listening audience and competitors. These examples are only a representative sample; further examples will be listed in the appendix.

When discussing contemporary rap artists who show their love for anime in lyrics, one of the first artists to cover is SahBabii. In 2018, music critic and *Pitchfork* contributor Sheldon Pearce noted how SahBabii “cross-pollinates rap and anime in a way no one has before, turning entire plot points of the popular anime *Naruto* into bars” in his song “Anime World” (Pearce, 2018). *Naruto* is one of the most popular and easily recognizable action anime, debuting in Japan in 2002 and airing in America for the first time in 2009. With lines such as “R.I.P. Nujabes (Yeah), Eleven tails a Jinchuriki,” and “I’m a hit it like Rock Lee (Rock Lee), dressed in green like broccoli (Broccoli),” SahBabii associates himself with aspects of the *Naruto* universe in ways representing his power in relation to his competition. For example, Jinchuriki are humans with powerful tailed beasts sealed inside of them. As the number of tails increase, so does the power of the Jinchuriki. However, there are only 10 jinchuriki in the show and each jinchuriki have a corresponding number of tails to match their power. For example, the weakest out of the 10 only has one tail, and the strongest has 10 tails. So here, SahBabii is using braggadocio to refer to himself as someone who is even more powerful than the characters in the show to illustrate his strength and power relative to his competitors and rivals. Additionally, Rock Lee is an incredibly powerful ninja trained in taijutsu, a martial arts style that is purely physical, unlike the chakra-influenced metaphysical fighting styles featured by all other characters in the show. The character’s signature apparel consists of a green leotard, and by referencing this, SahBabii is simultaneously calling attention to the amount of money he has. This connects to the image of power that he is presenting, as he is using wordplay to say that his wealth and subsequent power are apparent.

Other artists that reference *Naruto* make connections between the ninja themes of the show with the camaraderie with others in the neighborhoods they are from. In other words, rap

artists have been drawn to the similarities between the ninja and samurai code depicted in some anime and gang culture. In his 2015 song “Naruto,” Duckwrth uses the lines “Ain’t been to the hood in a minute, But I may have to show up// Twist my fingers like Naruto, Gang signs have been thrown up.” In these lines, he references the visual similarities in the *Naruto* hand signs used to create “ninja techniques” and gang signs, while also showing the deep connection he has with his old neighborhood. Referencing the ninja hand-signs evokes the ninja and samurai codes of brotherhood, honor, and community, all of which are similar to some of the codes present in gang culture. Through this, Duckwrth demonstrates a deeper connection to themes present in *Naruto*.

*Dragon Ball Z* is also commonly referred to in hip-hop lyrics. In the 2012 song “Pink Matter,” Frank Ocean and André 3000 present vivid color imagery by referring to the character Majin Buu in the first verse:

“And the peaches and the mangos  
That you could sell for me

What do you think my brain is made for?  
Is it just a container for the mind?  
That great grey matter  
Sensei replied, “What is your woman?  
Is she just a container for the child?”  
That soft pink matter  
Cotton candy, Majin Buu, oh, oh, ohh”

Frank Ocean compares different experiences of sexual encounters with women, hinted at by the reference to peaches and mangos. By “selling them,” he alludes to pimping which is a common theme throughout the album. He is saying that these sexual experiences can either be sweet and soft, like peaches or cotton candy, or consume/destroy the other person. The connection to Majin Buu illustrates the destructive nature, as Majin Buu is a blob-like, pink character from *Dragon Ball Z* who can turn his opponents into sweets before eating them alive.

Houston rapper Megan Thee Stallion also referenced *Dragon Ball Z* in her 2020 song “Go Crazy” with Big Sean and 2 Chainz. She raps, “Why I gotta prove myself to bitches that I’m better than// as if I wasn’t at radio stations goin’ Super Saiyan (Super Saiyan).” In this line, she compares the powerful transformation certain characters in the show undergo to how she powerfully performs freestyles at radio stations. Also in 2020, artist TOKYO’S REVENGE name drops *Dragon Ball* character Vegeta in his song “IRRESPONSIBLE.” He references Vegeta’s position as the heir to the throne of the Saiyan race with the line, “Put dots on you like cheetah, run up then I’m airin’ the scene// I feel just like Vegeta prince and I’m an heir to the seat.” Vegeta is also one of the characters with the ability to undergo the “Super Saiyan” transformation. With this line, TOKYO’S REVENGE simultaneously connects Vegeta’s abilities to his own power and abilities as a rapper.

Anime references in rap are not limited to older series. Artists also reference other, more recent anime such as *Attack on Titan* and *My Hero Academia*, released in 2013 and 2016, respectively. One song that references both shows is TOKYO’S REVENGE’s “GOTHAM,” from 2020. “Blade on me, Attack on Titan (Huh?)// Luffy One Piece, I stretch out my funds” references the “blades” that the characters use to kill the Titans that are terrorizing them in the show, connecting it back to the ruthlessness with which he attacks his opponents. In addition to

referencing the more contemporary *Attack on Titan*, this line also pays homage the main protagonist of the long-running anime *One Piece* which began in 1999 and is still ongoing. Luffy has the ability to stretch his limbs, and TOKYO compares that to how “long” and extensive his wealth is. In another section of the same verse, TOKYO’S REVENGE says, “I heard he want heat, Bakugo my gun/ I heard he want heat, Endeavor my rifle.” This references Bakugo and Endeavor the explosive main characters from *My Hero Academia*. Both characters have fiery “quirks,” the equivalent of superpowers. In the same verse, TOKYO’S REVENGE is referencing how he can bring powerful guns to any altercation with the same explosiveness as if these were his own powers.

Lyrics in hip-hop also sometimes refer to popular Japanese video game characters. The *Pokémon* series initially debuted as a video game series for the Nintendo Game Boy in 1996. It became so popular worldwide that the craze was dubbed “Pokémania” (Alt, 2020).<sup>4</sup> Due to this popularity, Saint Louis rapper Smino referenced the fire Pokémon Charizard in his 2018 song “Coupe Se’ Yern.” He references the rarity of the Pokémon in the line “Rare as it get bitch, feelin’ like Charizard,” with his rarity increasing his value similarly to the value of the Pokémon and its corresponding Pokémon cards. Similarly, rapper Ski Mask the Slump God says, “Ashin’ on your b\*tch, this that Pokémon trainer shit,” in his 2018 song “Faucet Failure” to reference “ashing a blunt” and the ease with which he can pick up women (Goulbourne, 2019). The line is also a playful reference to the English name of the main protagonist from Pokémon, Ash Ketchum.

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<sup>4</sup> *Pokémon* also later developed into an anime series and card game that grew to worldwide popularity.

Before the release of the Nintendo Game Boy, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) was another popular video gaming system that influenced hip-hop culture. A popular side-scroller game for the system was *Shinobi*, released initially in 1987. In the eloquently crafted line, “Black obi, shinobi hittin’ Kenno in the face with all my throwin’ knives,” Lupe Fiasco calls on *Shinobi* in his 2015 song “Mural.” Lupe draws connections to the video game where the protagonist must fight the level boss/ninja master Ken Oh. Continuing the ninja theme, one of the primary weapons used in the game was a “throwin’ knife,” also known as kunai, one type of weapon used by ninja in Japan during the Edo period. The intricacy of this line demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the game and its storyline.

The previous examples incorporated their references in English, but some artists take the creativity in their lyricism a step further, speaking in Japanese in various amounts. Artist MadeinTYO’s 2018 song “Moshi Moshi” uses the typical way to answer the phone in Japanese in the lines, “Ayy, Moshi moshi/ (Two cellphones)/ Got a plug in Shibuya for the dead stock.” “Moshi moshi” (申し申し) is a contracted form of “moushiagemasu” (申し上げます), literally translating to “I’m going to talk.” The shortened version is a typical way to answer a phone call, and MadeinTYO is using it here to talk to his connection in Shibuya, Japan for sneakers that are unavailable in the United States. MadeinTYO lived in Japan for a few years while in high school, so the usage of the Japanese phrase here shows his familiarity with and continued interactions with the Japanese culture and language.

Similarly, Jamaican-born artist Masego’s 2020 song “Passport” features a verse that is almost entirely in Japanese. Throughout the verse, he speaks of eating sushi and drinking sake with girls before saying:

“Kyou no yoru wa hima desu ka (今日の夜はひまですか。)

Kinou mama ga yonde kureta (昨日まあまあが読んでくれた)

Ohimesama to oujisama ga (お姫様と王子様が)

Shiawase na kisu wo shitan da kedo (幸せなキスをしたんだけど)

Japanese on the street, we’re learning new things.

We’re getting off our feet, steppin’ out singin’

Which translates to:

“Are you free tonight?

It was read yesterday that

The princess and the prince

Created happiness with a kiss.”

By saying this in Japanese, Masego shows how he has been dedicated to learning more about the Japanese language and culture. This is more effective than simply describing it, as it also implies that he was saying this to a girl as a pick-up line.

Similarly to Masego, California rapper Kyle also has a pre-chorus verse in Japanese in his 2018 song “Ikuyo.” In this song, singer Sophia Black sings:

“Dokokara mitemo Itsuma demo (どこから見てもいつまでも)

style mo jinsei sutekidayo (スタイルも人生素敵だよ)

Ishou killin' it fuan demo (一生 killin' it 不安でも)

Dokokara mitemo sutekidayo (どこから見ても素敵だよ)”

Which translates to:

“Looking at you from anywhere, forever and ever,

Your style and life are wonderful.

You've been killin it all your life, even if you're insecure.

Looking at you from anywhere, you are wonderful.”

Before the actual chorus with Kyle and 2 Chainz, Kyle also says “Ikuyo (行くよ),” which translates as “let’s go” or “here we go.” Throughout the song, Kyle is reminding himself of how he rose to fame and is simultaneously reassuring and encouraging himself to keep going. The Japanese verse by Sophia Black serves to emphasize this further.

Kyle, Masego, and MadeinTYO incorporate the Japanese language in their lyrics to show a very direct connection with Japanese culture itself. Though the earlier examples used instrumental or English-dubbed materials and references, they still illustrate a similar engagement with Japanese popular culture. Rather than choosing samples at random or simply name-dropping shows or characters, the artists and producers established their relationship with and understanding of various aspects of Japanese popular culture.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Japanese Influences in Visual Components of Hip-Hop**

How hip-hop artists choose to visually present themselves and their work is essential to authenticating themselves with their fans and within the industry. Keyes described the way that MCs present themselves through speech, dress, and body gestures as “authenticating his or her association with a street aesthetic” (Keyes, 2004:124). Hip-hop artists are selective in their visual representations, using them to authenticate their association with the cultures they draw influences from. This can manifest as a direct nod or through a thematic undertone. In the examples of this chapter, I explore how artists express visual aspects of their personality and influences in music videos, through music videos, alter egos, and fashion.

#### **Music Videos**

Music videos are an artist’s opportunity to provide official visuals for a track or album. They can be elaborate or simple, telling a story or simply providing something interesting for audiences to view. With the time, money, and energy hip-hop artists pour into them, these depictions are intentional and convey a theme or project a desired image of the rapper. For example, artists can use “famous anime titles, original animation, or nod to aesthetics” to incorporate these influences into their visuals (Russell, 2019). I will evaluate the more apparent Japanese influences present in music videos from Ghostface Killah, Flying Lotus, Anderson .Paak, Nicki Minaj, Tobi Lou, MadeinTYO, Kanye West, Pharrell Williams, Logic, and FULMETALPARKA\$.

When Ghostface Killah created a music video for his 1996 song “Daytona 500,” he paired it with videos from the popular anime *Speed Racer*, which premiered in Japan in 1967.

Produced by RZA, this was one of the first anime music videos (AMVs) created and one of the first to be aired on television. An AMV is typically a fan-made video consisting of scenes cut from an anime series and matched with the theme and timing of a song; these videos demonstrate the dedication and appreciation a fan has for the show. Currently, it is difficult to find the video because of restrictions from Sony, but partial recordings and captures of the video are on archival sites. The video opens with a shot of one of the race cars from *Speed Racer*, an anime about a young man named Speed Racer who enters a race hoping to earn money for his family. The race is rigged by a corporation, however, so in the end, no one wins any money. The anime mainly focuses on the race, matching the title of the song “Daytona 500,” which Ghostface Killah uses as to connect the fast-paced nature of the song with one of Nascar’s most important races.

Similar to AMVs, some hip-hop artists choose to create original animation for their music videos. An example of this is the 2019 song “More” by producers, musicians, and rappers Flying Lotus and Anderson .Paak. The video is entirely animated in the style of Japanese anime, showing an unfortunate astronaut who crash-landed on an unknown planet. He meets a robot who raps Anderson .Paak’s verse to him, causing him to sprout into a tree. This video is directed by Shinchiro Watanabe, the director of *Cowboy Bebop*. Watanabe provided eerily compelling visuals that matched the idea voiced in the song about there “being more to life.” Watanabe is also known for directing the 2005 anime *Samurai Champloo*, which mixes hip-hop and hip-hop culture with late Edo-period Japan. This illustrates his familiarity with fusing hip-hop and Japanese popular culture in a way similar to what Flying Lotus and Anderson .Paak wanted to accomplish with this particular video.

Tobi Lou and MadeinTYO not only include anime references in their lyricism but also in their visuals. In the music video for “Solange” in 2018, Tobi dances in front of a green screen

that has scenes taken from several anime sources. He borrows from Studio Ghibli movies, a Japanese animation studio whose films are known worldwide for their compelling landscapes and dynamic characters (Romano, 2020). Additionally, he pulls scenes from other popular older anime such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995). The video is simultaneously nostalgic and freeing due to the aesthetic coming from the older, yet adventurous scenes played in the background. This matches with the message of the song, as Tobi raps about having his heart broken, nostalgia, and exploring new ways of expressing his personality. MadeinTYO also used scenes from anime in his 2015 music video for “I Want.” In the introduction scenes, he is watching *Naruto* and *Attack on Titan* on his laptop as Japanese bossa nova music plays in the background. Following that scene, he spends the rest of the video rapping on an empty subway car with yellow, antique-style subtitles translating his words into Japanese. Tobi also utilizes vintage-style subtitles in his video, although his lyrics remain in English.

In contrast, Kanye West’s “Stronger” music video from 2009 is entirely live-action and was filmed in Japan. The plot of the music video has heavy techno-futuristic themes and reproduced scenes from the 1988 anime film *Akira*. *Akira* is a post-apocalyptic dystopian film where the main protagonist gains telekinetic powers following a motorcycle incident. These scenes were adapted by Kanye, with Japanese subtitles conveying actions in the video’s plot rather than Kanye’s lyrics. He uses “musical technologies and futuristic pop cultural references” to “manifest a fusion of techno-Orientalism and Afro-futurism” (McLeod, 2013). Focusing on the science-fiction depiction of transhumanism in the movie, the music video correlates with Kanye’s “transformation” to become stronger. Daft Punk’s robotic-voice in the background throughout the song also accentuates these themes well, connecting the techno-oriental visuals to a similar sonic theme.

In addition to making connections to anime, some hip-hop artists also reference video games in their music videos. In the music video for “Game Ova,” Tobi Lou spends part of the video in an arcade. There are countless arcade machines displayed in the background, several of which are in Japanese. The games feature *Super Mario*, *Pac-Man*, and other Japanese combat games such as *Street Fighter*. This matches the “Game Over” sample that Chapter 1 of this thesis analyzes, since it is a classic video game. Pharrell Williams made these connections in a different way in his 2014 music video for “It Girl.” Directed by artist Takashi Murakami, the video features elements of Murakami’s famous “superflat” art style to animate its dating-simulation plot (The Art Story Foundation, 2021). In the video, Pharrell is an anime video game character who is trying to win the heart of the girls at the beach and a Japanese-style festival. Both locations are also common themes for various genres of anime (TVTropes Staff, 2021). This depiction matches the concept of the dating-simulation cut scenes of the video, as the lyrics sing about the physical and emotional effects that the “it girl” has on him.

Sometimes the references are not the primary focus of the video but are still present. In Logic’s final music video in 2020 for the song “DadBod,” he raps about his everyday life. Most of the video is filmed at his home, showing him enjoying his life with his wife and son. Throughout the video, he shows his old mixtapes, vinyl records that inspired him, and his hobbies. In one of the scenes, he was playing a *Dragon Ball* game on a Game Boy Color. He also briefly shows his fully completed set of *Dragon Ball* manga, his entire set of *Cowboy Bebop* on DVD, and a samurai sword that he owns. Through this video, he shows that he has clear influences and interests in various aspects of Japanese popular culture.

Another interesting aspect of Japanese popular culture that hip-hop occasionally draws from are Japanese game shows. Japanese game shows are an aspect of popular culture that some

broadcasting channels usually use as a reference for American remakes. One such show is MTV's *Silent Library*, which aired from 2009 to 2011. The show offered competitors money for accomplishing eccentric tasks while remaining quiet, and it was filmed in a library. Viewers could see the noise level of the contestants by a decibel sound meter that remained present on the screen. FULMETALPARKA\$ (FMP) parodied this show in his 2020 music video for the song "Silent Library." FMP pays homage to the show while simultaneously demonstrating his love for anime by having each category based on a different show or video game. For example, the first few categories are called "Prison School," "Food Wars," "One Punch Man," and "Tekken Tag." *Prison School*, *Food Wars*, and *One Punch Man* are all anime, all three airing in 2015. *Tekken* is a series of combat video games that premiered in 1995 originally. FMP blends them all together in this Japanese game show parody, demonstrating his deep knowledge of each.

### **Alter Egos and Fashion**

Another way for hop-hop artists to represent themselves is through alter egos and fashion. A rapper's alter ego can be as simple as a pseudonym or as complex as an entirely different persona with a completely different style, voice, and lyrical content. Hip-hop artists often use these personas to "share another side of themselves" (Seabrook, 2020). Likewise, an artist's choice of fashion can convey his or her personality and interests while also authenticating their connection to whatever they are presenting. For this section, I chose a few representative examples that combined alter egos and fashion because they often build off and influence each other. One hip-hop artist that I use as an example is Nicki Minaj. She has several alter egos; one of them, Harajuku Barbie, encapsulates both another personality and demonstrates her love of Harajuku culture. The other artist I will use as an example is Megan Thee Stallion. Her alter ego of Tina Snow evolved to illustrate her love for anime through the creation of Todoroki Tina.

Nicki Minaj’s alter ego “Harajuku Barbie,” is a combination of an aspect of herself that she wishes to personify and her love for the Harajuku culture. In an interview, Nicki expresses her love for the culture, saying that “the way they dress is the way I am on the inside. Free-spirited, girls just wanna have fun, kick-ass, pop, rock-n-roll, whatever the fuck you want to do, Hip-Hop. That’s how I feel and that’s what my music is gonna feel like when I do my album” (HipHopStan.com, 2009).



*Figure 1. Two girls dressed in Harajuku style near Harajuku, Japan.*

Harajuku is a commercial gathering place for street youth culture in Japan, most notably characterized by girls dressed in pink, hyper-feminized, elaborate wigs, and costumes. These images are often also associated with Hello Kitty and characterize what Christine Yano describes as a “Japanese concept of cuteness” (Yano, 2009). In crafting the Harajuku Barbie alter ego, Nicki chose bright, pastel-colored wigs, large, over-sized bows and hair accessories, and short,

doll-like dresses. She personifies this “Japanese concept of cuteness” in both her fashion choices and her personality when performing as the alter ego; Nicki Minaj portrays herself as bubbly, fun, and energetic. While this persona may not differ too drastically from Minaj’s regular personality, it is a very stark contrast to one of her other alter egos, Roman Zolanski, who dresses in darker clothing and is a more aggressive, male alter ego. Harajuku Barbie represents a feminine, Japanese concept of cuteness, while Roman is the masculine, darker side of Nicki’s personality.



**Figure 2.** Nicki Minaj’s Roman Zolanski alter ego beside her Harajuku Barbie persona.

Likewise, Megan Thee Stallion created the persona of “Tina Snow” to pay homage to one of her favorite rappers, the late Louisiana artist Pimp C. According to Pitchfork writer and editor Eric Torres, Tina Snow is “an exceptionally vulgar, frosty-haired” alter ego who will “casually threaten to take your man, snatch your wig, and clock you with a Giuseppe Zanotti heel” (Torres,

2018). The persona of Tina Snow evolved when Megan expressed her love of anime by wearing a red and white wig and blue jumpsuit to cosplay popular *My Hero Academia* character Shoto Todoroki. Popular anime streaming platform Crunchyroll even created a drawing of the new “Todoroki Tina,” creating an anime-style drawing of Megan’s new alter ego. In this case, Todoroki Tina wears a hairstyle and outfit that directly refer to a character from an anime Megan loves, showing her appreciation for it.

Other than fashion related to alter egos, some Japanese clothing brands are popular choices among hip-hop artists. A BATHING APE, also known as BAPE for short, is a Japanese fashion brand that has “remained as a symbol of street fashion for 28 years” (BAPE World, 2021). Numerous hip-hop artists have sported BAPE clothing, including The Notorious B.I.G, Pusha T, and many more. Saba, Cardi B, Kid Cudi, Big Sean, Wiz Khalifa, and other artists participated in BAPE’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in Madison Square Garden. In music videos, interviews, and other appearances, countless hip-hop artists have sported the BAPE brand. Artist Tyler, The Creator even graced the 2011 cover of A BATHING APE’s Winter Collection. Pusha T also said, “I don’t think any brand says hip-hop culture more than BAPE,” in an interview with Pitchfork contributor Sheldon Pearce (Pearce, 2019). In addition to countless hip-hop artists sporting BAPE in their videos and personal lives, Pharrell Williams partnered with Nigo, the creator of BAPE. Pharrell and Nigo created the Billionaire Boys Club in 2003, which is a streetwear clothing and accessory brand. With headquarters in both New York and Tokyo, the brand itself is a representation of popular Japanese streetwear combining with American streetwear and hip-hop culture. Similarly to how Pharrell also creates hip-hop music, Nigo is also a producer and DJ of the Japanese hip-hop group Teriyaki Boyz. Likewise, the extent of the relationship between hip-hop artists wearing Japanese fashion brands, cosplaying, or recreating

niche Japanese fashion cultures shows a clear relationship between Japanese fashion culture and how many hip-hop artists present themselves.



*Figure 3. Tyler, the Creator modelling a jacket from A BATHING APE's 2011 Winter collection.*

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Japanese Influences in Social Media Presence of Hip-Hop Artists**

Over the past 10 years, social media presence has become an essential part of a musician's public image. Rappers can become famous seemingly overnight because of a viral video or social media posts by an influencer. Staff at *XXL Magazine* even make the comparison between social media and sharing music by passing out CDs in Harlem, with the former having the ability to “reach millions of existing or potential fans in moments” (XXL Staff, 2019). With potential to reach so many people so quickly, anyone can easily search for an artist on social media to learn more about their personality, interests, and influences. Broadcasting companies and channels will also post interviews with artists on the social media page for the respective company, contributing to the public's perception of the artist. The examples I use for this section are a combination of various artists' social media posts and interviews, including Megan Thee Stallion, Saweetie, the late XXXTentacion, Lupe Fiasco, Logic, and the late Juice WRLD. Though these examples are on Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, these are a representative sample of artists referring to their influences from Japanese popular culture across these and other platforms.

#### **Social Media**

While Megan Thee Stallion may not have discussed anime in her debut album, she has mentioned, reposted, and commissioned various anime on her Instagram account. When she released the 2020 single “Girls in the Hood,” she promoted the release by posting a picture to her Instagram account. The caption for the Instagram post read “Stream GIRLS IN THE HOOD to find your sasuke,” with a provocative Photoshopped picture of *Naruto* character Sasuke Uchiha

behind her. However, she took the picture down after a few days due to fan-backlash. The original photo used a picture of Sasuke from the original *Naruto* series where the character was 12 years old instead of the more recent *Naruto: Shippuden*, where he is 20 years old.<sup>5</sup> The post was a reference to the lines in the song:

“Yeah, he call me Patty Cake ‘cause the way that ass shake

I’m ma make him eat me out while I’m watchin’ anime.

Pussy like a Wild Fox, lookin’ for a Sasuke

One night with him make him lose it like a prom date.”

Here, she makes the connection to the relationship between Naruto Uzumaki (with the Nine-Tailed Fox) and Sasuke Uchiha, who have a very close friendship and rivalry; the two complimented each other throughout both series as they both completed their respective journeys. This complimentary nature combined with her genuine love for this aspect of Japanese popular culture is why she chose this picture to promote the song on her Instagram.

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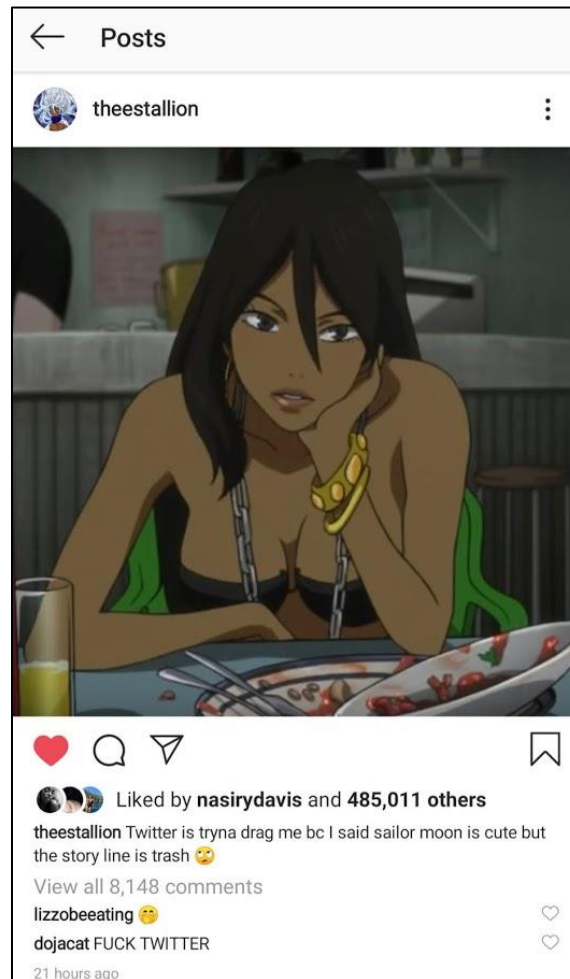
<sup>5</sup> The original *Naruto* series aired from 2002 to 2007, and *Naruto: Shippuden* aired from 2007 to 2017. The characters age over time and across both series, but it is common for fans to refer to both series and age ranges frequently, due to the long airtime.



**Figure 4.** Megan Thee Stallion’s now deleted Instagram post to promote “Girls in the Hood.”

Outside of promoting her own music, Megan Thee Stallion also used the platform to share her casual interaction with anime with fans. In late 2019, she also posted a picture of Michiko Malandro, a Black anime character from the anime *Michiko to Hatchin* (2008). The caption for this post read, “Twitter is tryna drag me bc I said sailor moon is cute but the story line is trash.” The expression Michiko wears is one of incredulity, mirroring Megan’s feelings about her fans’ reactions to her opinion of *Sailor Moon*’s plot. *Sailor Moon* gained popularity in the United States after airing in 1995. Sailor Moon is a moon-princess who tries to defend the world against all evil forces attacking Earth, a very simple plotline for its younger target

audience. Megan's post reflects not only her familiarity with the plot of several anime, but it also demonstrates her interactions with fans around the influences of Japanese popular culture.



**Figure 5.** *Megan Thee Stallion's Instagram post complaining about Twitter fan reactions.*

Another example of fan interaction with Megan on Instagram involves the reposting of fanart. On February 17, 2020, Megan Thee Stallion reposted user @miso.art's digital drawing of Megan as her alter ego, Todoroki Tina. The drawing of Megan's cosplay is also done in a nostalgic, 90's anime art style. This demonstrates that not only are fans aware of the way an artist presents themselves on social media, but they also create content including the artist to show their appreciation. This is a positive interaction between an intersection of fandoms and

musical artists, demonstrating the interconnectedness that social media enables across and within fandoms. Artist @miso.art voiced her excitement directly under the post by commenting, “OMG MEGAN!! GIRL I DONE SCREAMED WHEN I SAW YOU SHARED MY ART thank you so much! #TodorokiTina.” Her level of excitement shows how appreciative she is of both Megan’s acknowledgement of the fan art and Megan’s anime-related alter ego.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Crunchyroll commissioned a drawing of Megan’s Todoroki Tina persona, reposting it on her Twitter account on December 21, 2019 saying, “Shoutout to my friends @Crunchyroll for bringing Todoroki Tina to life.” Crunchyroll also commissioned a similar drawing for rapper Saweetie. She posted a picture of the drawing on her Instagram on November 3, 2019 with the caption, “Thank you @crunchyroll for my customized anime character ^\_^ & premium subscription!!! I loooove it !!!!! What should we name herrrr??” The drawing depicts Saweetie in the same art style and color scheme used in *Sailor Moon*. Her fans were pleasantly surprised by this, with user @ronniedarnellking commenting, “Saweetie Moon,” combining Saweetie’s name with the main character of the show. Not very many of Saweetie’s fans connected her with this aspect of Japanese popular culture since she typically does not post about it. However, most of the comments were positive after seeing Crunchyroll gift her with this customized portrait based on her love of the show.

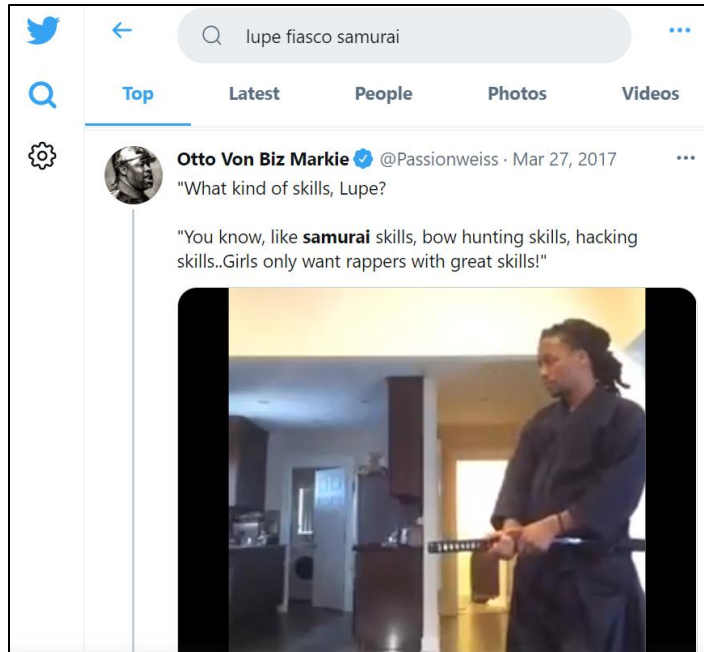


**Figure 6.** *Megan Thee Stallion reposting fan art of Todoroki Tina.*

Although Crunchyroll did not do a commission for him, the late rapper XXXTentacion was very open on his social media about the anime he watched. He answered a fan question on his Twitter account in 2013, saying, “you watch anime? – yes, a lot actually, Naruto shippiden, used to watch death note, full metal alchemist, dragon ...” Fans heard him reference a few anime in his lyrics and became curious about whether the artist was genuinely a fan of the subculture. This confirmed a lot of fan suspicions about some of the Japanese popular culture influences present in his music. Additionally, in January of 2016, he randomly posted a list of other anime he enjoyed, “Hunter x Hunter, One Piece, Blue Exorcist, Death Note, SAO 1 & 2, Naruto

Shippuden, Parasyte, all great animes.” As a result of his posting lists such as these, fans responded very positively. Some fans replied to the posts with questions about his reactions to certain plot points. Some of the anime he listed are more contemporary, while others are older and longer running. Fans previously noticed the occasional references to anime in XXXTentacion’s lyrics, so his Tweets only confirmed that this aspect of Japanese popular culture influenced him.

Similarly, while Chicago rapper Lupe Fiasco has demonstrated his love for anime, he is also very open about his love and appreciation for Japanese samurai culture and history. Old school rapper Biz Markie shared a video of Lupe in March of 2017 on Twitter. In the Tweet, Markie says, “‘ What kind of skills, Lupe?’ ‘You know, like samurai skills, bow hunting skills, hacking skills.. Girls only want rappers with great skills!’” The video attached to the Tweet shows Lupe in his home dressed in a hakama umanori, or older garment worn by the Japanese in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, practicing precise swings and movements with his samurai sword. Lupe’s skills with the sword are not just haphazard, aimless swings. They are precise and intentional, and it is clear that he has had some training. In fact, on the same post, Markie elaborates further, saying, “We should all salute Lupe Fiasco’s dedication to the samurai lifestyle. I hope he buys a zen garden, becomes an abbot and saves the shogun.” Lupe takes his fascination with Edo-period Japan further than other hip-hop groups like the Wu Tang Clan by adopting the samurai code as an actual way of life for himself. He will regularly post videos similar to the one Markie shared where he practices his swordsmanship or martial arts skills.



*Figure 7. Biz Markie supporting Lupe Fiasco's samurai training.*



*Figure 8. Biz Markie encouraging others to support Lupe Fiasco's dedication.*

However, unlike fans' excitement with Saweetie and Megan Thee Stallion, Lupe received a lot of backlash for his embrace of traditional Japanese culture. In his 2007 song "Gold Watch," Lupe mentions in a line that he is "American mentally with Japanese tendencies," and his posts on Twitter have supported that. In December of 2019, Lupe tweeted, "I'm more culturally Japanese than I am African." Numerous fans retweeted and commented their concerns, feeling that Lupe was dismissing and belittling his own African heritage as an African American. Users like @GangstahJim expressed their disagreement by commenting sentiments like, "I get where you're coming from but bro, this post kinda cringe." While numerous users expressed similar sentiments, some users extended support and empathy. Several users quoted the lyrics above from "Gold Watch," and some shared similar personal perspectives. Authors like former editor of the South Florida Times Isheka Harrison describe the tweets disapprovingly, saying the Lupe "chose to exalt Japanese history and practices over his own ancestral African culture" (Harrison, 2019). Lupe has never been shy about explaining his Japanese cultural influences in his music or presentation of himself, so he engaged with fans, trying to help them understand his perspective. This example shows a negative side of fan reactions to hip-hop artists' social media posts about their influences. However, while some of response was negative, Lupe Fiasco defended his experiences and influences, continuing to share them with supporting fans and fellow hip-hop artists.

## **Interviews**

In addition to creating an anime-style drawing of Todoroki Tina, streaming giant Crunchyroll later had an interview with Megan Thee Stallion about her interests. In the April 2020 interview, the Houston rapper begins by saying "I'm half anime character, half rapper." This is in direct reference to her Todoroki Tina persona. However, they only refer to the persona

toward the beginning of the interview. Later, she details the role anime has played throughout her life. Describing her anime crush on protagonist Inuyasha from the anime *Inuyasha* (2000), Megan discusses how she loves the perseverance of the main characters in anime, especially once they have love interests. Additionally, she discusses seeing the “trials and tribulations” of the main character as they “meet new people along the way that help them become the person he needs to be.” She even states that this perseverance is something that she constantly applies to her daily life (Cardine, 2020). While this connection may not be apparent in every song she creates, Megan’s interview with Crunchyroll clearly demonstrates how she internalizes thematic elements from anime and then uses them in her music, career, and personal life.

Another streaming giant, Funimation Entertainment, sat down with Atlanta rapper Logic for an interview. Funimation specializes in dubbing and distributing East Asian media in the United States, notably anime (Funimation, 2021). In the 2015 interview, Logic describes himself as being an anime fan since age 11. The first anime he watched was the movie *Akira*, discovering *Cowboy Bebop* shortly after. However, the interview focuses on more than just Logic’s love for anime. He discusses how his interactions with various aspects of Japanese popular culture shaped his creative process as an artist. “I would create my own fanfiction versions of the shows. That’s what got me into being artistic,” he says. He even describes how Japanese popular culture influences the music he creates by saying, “I like to glorify things like anime and video games and the things that I love... I love taking in my influences and the things that I love” (Funimation, 2015). This elucidates how the things Logic displayed in his “DadBod” music video (see Chapter 2) meaningfully impacted his development as a hip-hop artist. His experiences with creating his own endings and plot lines for the shows he loved contributed to his interest in becoming a creator and musician. Toward the end of the interview, Logic even

lists nicknames he created for himself based on the anime and Japanese video games he loves. He calls himself, “The Rap Spike Spiegel,” “Goku,” and “Young Frieza,” referring to *Cowboy Bebop* and *Dragon Ball Z*. Logic’s ability to spontaneously come up with these nicknames within the final moments of the interview further exemplify his authentic connection with and influence from these aspects of Japanese popular culture.

In addition to Funimation’s interview with Logic, MTV interviewed the late Chicago rapper Juice WRLD in 2018. In the interview, Juice WRLD discusses the effect that death, drugs, and anime had on his career. When he refers to anime, he immediately begins talking about his experiences watching it as he grew up, listing off *Dragon Ball* and the franchise’s additional series like *Dragon Ball Z* and *Dragon Ball GT*. His friends were also fans of the series, leading him to try watching the shows for himself. In addition to his emphasis on the *Dragon Ball* series, he also played the video games. Because the video games closely followed the plot line of the series, he expressed, “I haven’t really watched Dragon Ball Super, but I have played the recent two games that Dragon Ball dropped. And you know, it’s kinda based off Dragon Ball Super but I’m kind of scared to watch it, though ‘cause I don’t wanna like ruin it for myself, you know” (MTV News, 2018). He cared about the series enough to avoid the risk of “spoiling” the plot for himself. While Juice WRLD may not have shown these interests through his lyrical content, a February 2021 interview with Takashi Murakami revealed that Juice WRLD approached the Japanese artist for a potential anime collaboration. Murakami states, “He came to my studio, looks like happy with his girlfriend. He wanted to make for some animation project, kind of the demon and angel battle” (Genius, 2021). Unfortunately, Juice passed away before the completion of the horror-style anime project. However, these interviews highlight that Japanese popular culture influenced hip-hop artist Juice WRLD’s interests and creative decisions.

One of the benefits of technological advancements is the increasing ease with which information flows between people around the world. This allows hip-hop artists to interact with their fans in real-time, reaching millions of people within moments. Because of this, artists utilize social media platforms to shape their public image and share their interests and influences with their fans. Fans can voice opinions about an artist's interests, and they have largely responded positively to Megan Thee Stallion, Saweetie, and XXXTentacion for sharing their Japanese influences. However, fans can also react negatively, as they did with Lupe Fiasco's glorification of Japanese history and culture over his African ancestry. Interviews also provide insight into how a hip-hop artist's love for contemporary Japanese media aligns with other companies the fandom most likely interacts with. Crunchyroll and Funimation are both widely known among the anime community for their prominence as leading anime streaming platforms. Current and potential fans that follow those platforms will also see some of their favorite hip-hop artists there discussing their influences. This shows how much more common Japanese popular cultural influences are throughout contemporary rap and hip-hop.

## **Conclusion**

Japanese popular culture continues to influence Black American rap and hip-hop in various ways. The influence started off broadly in hip-hop's earlier days. Most of the material available in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s from East Asia were martial arts films. As the popularity of martial arts grew in America, the number of ways producers incorporated martial arts, ninja, and samurai historical culture also grew. Simultaneously, musical production technology improved and became more sophisticated, and more people began interacting with information from around the world due to the increase in usage of the Internet by the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As technology and access to global information increased, so also did the breadth and depth of references to Japanese popular culture.

More recently, the ways that Japanese media, artists, and history are reflected in rap and hip-hop have become much more specified. Rather than referencing the general East Asian region, the references now target specific countries, cultures, and even niche subcultures. Because of the nature of rap and hip-hop, synthesizing and evoking Japanese works and histories is increasingly present in contemporary Black American rap and hip-hop. Specifically with Gen Z and Millennials who grew up watching the shows and playing the video games, it is easier to see these experiences reflected in their music, fashion, and social media.

This thesis demonstrates the ability of two separate cultures from two different geographical locations to blend and create from each other mutually because of advancements in technology and internet. Through hip-hop, some artists highlighted the similarities between the brotherhood and honor codes present in the Bushido code to the brotherhood and honor codes present in gang and street culture. Additionally, the artists share the ways they incorporate the Japanese popular culture into their lives, whether through adopting cultural practices or by

actively participating in the media fandoms. Within anime specifically, common themes include overcoming hardships, constant self-development, and proving skill and abilities. These similarities were capitalized by RZA and other Wu Tang members by incorporating martial arts into their mission as a group. Also, contemporary artists like Megan Thee Stallion, Logic, and SahBabii refer to their favorite anime characters when showing their superiority over their competitors. In this way, hip-hop serves to juxtapose Black American culture and Japanese culture to show that these two distinct cultures share enough commonalities to consistently attract them together.

## **Future Research**

During my research, I uncovered an intricate pattern of influences going both ways – hip-hop influencing Japanese culture and vice versa. I noticed that there is a cycle of borrowing and creating, with the new creation then contributing again to the original culture. In other words, the influences were cyclical in how they affected each other. One of the specific ways I noticed this happening was through the creation of the genre of lo-fi hip-hop. Specifically, the late Japanese producer Nujabes created mellow tracks inspired by American hip-hop and jazz producers (i.e., J Dilla, 9<sup>th</sup> Wonder, etc.). Once he perfected his sound, he started working with anime producers that blended hip-hop culture and Japanese culture into a historically themed samurai series called *Samurai Champloo*, airing in 2005. Nujabes's popularity surged following this, and he began working with Black American rap artists until his premature demise in 2010. However, this musical and media collaboration built the foundations for lo-fi hip-hop, which has recently become more widely recognized. The growing fanbase for the genre discuss the late Nujabes and the late American producer J Dilla in the same breath. Both producers inspired some of the contemporary artists I discovered, like Logic, but I was unable to go into detail about this as it

was outside of the scope and focus of this thesis. As a result, this would be an area I would like to focus on in future research.

Another area of focus for future research would be on the collaborations between other actors in Japanese film, anime production, and hip-hop and R&B artists. For example, one director whose name I kept coming across was Japanese-born American film maker Hiro Murai. He has directed the music videos for artists such as Childish Gambino, Earl Sweatpants, Flying Lotus, FKA Twigs, and many others. Similarly, artists like Logic including prominent voice actors like Steve Blum in his album *The Incredible True Story* (2015) speak to an even deeper creative relationship between the two cultures. Given more time, I would explore these areas in more depth as well as branch out to also evaluate references within the R&B genre.

## **Significance**

The research that I present in this thesis illustrates a collaborative relationship between two cultural groups. Black American hip-hop culture and Japanese popular culture often work together, creating new genres and methods of expression in the process. Hopefully, this research allows others to better understand hip-hop as a unique genre that mixes and properly identifies sources and cultures as part of its creation process. It utilizes technology in innovative ways to highlight similarities between hip-hop artists and the cultures and experiences they reference. This makes hip-hop extremely flexible, contributing to its status as one of the world's most popular music genres. Additionally, this relationship highlights the richness and popularity of Japanese culture as people worldwide enjoy its art, films, martial arts, anime, video games, and fashion. Fans and musical artists take the enjoyment a step further, actively creating new, unique works that engage the culture sonically and visually, as with hip-hop.

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## Appendix

Link to Spotify playlist with additional examples:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6mAeiV9KPNIHYoepR94gzD?si=dd879991bb0644c6>

Brief list of songs that can be found on the playlist (not exhaustive):

- |                                      |                                    |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. "Liquid Swords" by GZA            | 11. "Nostalgia" by Chance the      |
| 2. "Moshi Moshi" by MadeinTYO        | Rapper                             |
| 3. "Catch Me Outside" by Ski Mask    | 12. "Cyberpunks" by Del the Funky  |
| the Slump God                        | Homosapien                         |
| 4. "Ikuyo" by KYLE, featuring 2      | 13. "4 Your Eyez Only" by J. Cole  |
| Chainz and Sophia Black              | 14. "Speaking in Tungs" by Cam'ron |
| 5. "Kill Jill" by Big Boi, featuring | & Vado                             |
| Killer Mike and Jeezy                | 15. "The Rain" by Tech N9ne        |
| 6. "Stronger" by Kanye West          | 16. "JAPAN" by Famous Dex          |
| 7. "Touch the Sky" by Kanye West     | 17. "U Know What It Is" by Jeezy   |
| featuring Lupe Fiasco                | 18. "Pink Matter" by Frank Ocean   |
| 8. "GOKU" by Jaden Smith             | 19. "Hood Gone Love It" by Jay     |
| 9. "shinelikewhoa" by                | Rock featuring Kendrick Lamar      |
| L8LOOMER, featuring                  | 20. "Blessings" by Big Sean and    |
| MadeinTYO and tizhimself             | Drake                              |
| 10. "DipSet" by Lil Yachty featuring | 21. "Ultimate" by Denzel Curry     |
| Offset                               | 22. "Water" by Ugly God            |
|                                      | 23. "It Girl" by Pharrell Williams |

- |                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 24. "Oh Mama" by Run The Jewels    | 37. "Girls in the Hood" by Megan |
| 25. "My Shine" by Childish         | Thee Stallion                    |
| Gambino                            | 38. "Latitude" by Moxas          |
| 26. "Super Saiyan" by Lil Uzi Vert | 39. "GOTHAM" by TOKYO'S          |
| 27. "SUPER SAIYAN                  | REVENGE                          |
| SUPERMAN" by Denzel Curry          | 40. "Naruto" by Duckwrth and The |
| 28. "Gold Watch" by Lupe Fiasco    | Kickdrums                        |
| 29. "Chun-Li" by Nicki Minaj       | 41. "Your Love" by Nicki Minaj   |
| 30. "Barbie Dreams" by Nicki Minaj | 42. "Feels Good" by KYLE         |
| 31. "Anime World" by SahBabii      | 43. "In My Element" by           |
| 32. "Uncle Iroh" by Tobi Lou       | FULMETALPARKA\$                  |
| 33. "Game Ova" by Tobi Lou         | 44. "Otaku" by                   |
| 34. "Sailor" by Tobi Lou           | FULMETALPARKA\$                  |
| 35. "Never Catch Me" by Flying     | 45. "Faucet Failure" by Ski Mask |
| Lotus featuring Kendrick Lamar     | The Slump God                    |
| 36. "Wulf Titan" by Xavier Wulf    |                                  |

Link to YouTube playlist for visual examples and interviews:

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWrA5sI3c5r9NogBYlZv5n\\_TwPnU33GrI](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWrA5sI3c5r9NogBYlZv5n_TwPnU33GrI)