

“I Don’t Really Know What She’s Sayin’”: (Anti)Orientalism and Hop Hop’s Sampling of South Asian Music”

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For many rap scholars and mainstream music critics, U.S.-based hip hop’s engagements with South Asian music during the first decade of the twenty-first century represented a sonic extension of the “Indo-chic” cultural moment of the late 1990s. Seemingly initiated by Madonna’s *Ray of Light* album and marked by the increased commercialization of South Asian style commodities like *bindis*, *mehndi* (henna), and U.S.-marketed Bollywood films, this period allowed U.S. consumers to participate in an Orientalist project that silenced South Asian labor and positioned South Asia as an exotic and feminine spectacle accessible to white consumption. Noting black hip hop artists’ ostensible lack of knowledge about South Asia and the apparent invisibility of South Asian musicians in U.S. rap during the early years of the twenty-first century, scholars quickly situated this era of U.S.-based hip hop within the Orientalist cultural trajectory sparked by 1990s white pop artists. Yet, by uncritically positioning and equating Afro-South Asian sonic fusions of U.S. rap with pop, we paper-over complex social forces and histories that structure these genres, and aide processes by which predominantly white genres are upheld by and function through maskings of black voices and the music undergirding them. As a result, a set of questions arise: What happens when we separate these black genres and their Afro-Asian sonic moments away from their white counterparts? What new set of alternatives emerge when we split African American hip hop musicians’ investments in South Asian music and artists away from Orientalist processes that commodify and fix South Asia and South Asians as foreign and feminine spectacles available to the white gaze?

In what follows, I would like to briefly explore some possible answers to these questions, as well as pose others, by examining two U.S.-based hip hop songs that were released during the early years of the genre's engagement with South Asian music and culture: Erick Sermon's "React" and Timbaland and Magoo's "Indian Flute," released in 2002 and 2003, respectively. Upon initial listen to these songs and a brief view of their corresponding music videos, some might quickly claim that both records perpetuate Orientalist representations of South Asia(ns) as feminine, primitive, and exotic, and thus, should be understood as an extension of the Indo-chic cultural moment. However, I argue that if we resist analyses that automatically associate Afro-South Asian musical interactions with white Indo-chic, and therefore Orientalist, projects, we are presented with a more complicated picture. While not completely dismissing Orientalist readings of the records, I contend that these tracks also counter the logics of Orientalist discourse, that they powerfully express other forms of knowledge production and kinship relations as well. These points of anti-Orientalism give us a clearer understanding of Afro-South Asian cultural exchanges in U.S.-based hip hop, and highlight the ways in which African and South Asian diasporic communities maintain bonds in a post-9/11 era that consistently uses discourses of patriotism and citizenship to pit African Americans against South Asians and South Asian Americans (i.e., the traditional racialized national threat turned (African) American patriot vs. the former model minority turned terrorist).

Rereading, Relistening, "React"

In the fall of 2002, African American New York rap legend, Erick Sermon, released a song entitled "React," the first single off of his fifth solo album by the same name. Produced by Just Blaze and sampling the Bollywood song "Chandi Ka Badan" from the 1963 film, *Taj*

Mahal, the track garnered mild commercial success, but is probably most remembered for the ways in which music journalists and academics heavily critiqued the song and its corresponding music video. Through the music video's frequent display of camels, snakes, shots of open-space, harems, racially ambiguous women draped in Indian and Middle Eastern dress, and belly dancers, scholars and music critics highlighted the ways in which the video problematically (re)produces Orientalist logics of South Asia, and by extension members of the subcontinent and diaspora, as always-already exotic, feminine, homogenous, and uncivilized. Moreover, the video's apparent elision of visually identifiable South Asian women sparked a number of popular culture and academic articles that aligned "React" with the Indo-chic imperial project, whereby white American consumption of South Asian aesthetics is enacted through the exclusion of actual South Asian bodies—a particularly dangerous move, as "React" emerged during the "War on Terror"/post-9/11 era that demands the managing and disappearing of South Asian communities.

Yet, although the music video caused quite a stir within mainstream popular media and scholarly circles, the bulk of the criticism took aim at the lyrics of "React" and its relation to the Bollywood song it sampled. Instead of featuring sampled instrumentation of "Chandi Ka Badan," "React" relies heavily on a sampled Hindi verse from the 1963 track for its chorus. The verse, sung by Asha Bhosle, can be loosely translated as, "If someone has a fondness for suicide, what can one do?," to which Sermon responds, "Whateva' she said, then I'm that." For these critics, the seemingly incompatible dialogue between Sermon and Bhosle (and the apparent absurdity of the sampled lyric itself), illustrates Sermon's and Just Blaze's disinterested stance to understanding the sampled Hindi verse, in particular, and South Asian culture in general. Moreover, the critics argued, the ostensible incongruity between the sampled Bhosle verse and

Sermon's rap indexes Orientalist logic of difference that maintains East/Orient and West/Occident as mutually exclusive categories, regions, communities, and cultures. Thus, the ill-fitting chorus of Sermon and the sampled verse from "Chandi Ka Badan," stifles an opportunity to forge bonds between African Americans and the South Asian and South Asian American community.

While I do not disagree with the critiques leveled against the Orientalist imagery in the music video for "React," I want to complicate the criticism of the lyrics of the record, specifically the relation between sampled line "If someone has a fondness of suicide, what can one do?" and Erick Sermon's response "Whateva' she said, then I'm that." Rather than viewing Sermon's answer as ignorant and the verbal exchange as nonsensical, I want to argue that the relation between the sampled lyric and Sermon's reply actually makes sense, particularly when we consider Erick Sermon's alleged suicide in 2001, a year prior to the release of "React." Indeed, on September 25, 2001, an unidentified woman called 911 to assist a man who was unconscious and bleeding from his head, and who was lying near a Patterson, New Jersey apartment building. While the local EMTs rushed the victim, later identified as Erick Sermon, to the hospital, the Patterson police investigated the scene and interviewed people in the area. The police later claimed that Sermon's injuries, which included head, neck, and leg trauma, resulted from an apparent suicide attempt. Sermon initially claimed that he was involved in a car accident and nowhere near an apartment complex, but later retracted that claim. Instead, Sermon issued a statement that simultaneously refuted suicide allegations yet admitted that he "could not really explain what happened."

How might criticism of the dialogue between Sermon and Bhosle's sampled verse in "React" shift in light of Sermon's alleged suicide attempt? "If," as one South Asian critic of

‘React’ noted, “you’re not Indian then it [the chorus of ‘React’] sounds fine but *I* understand and everyone I know thinks it sounds stupid,” then I ask how might we grapple with South Asian (American) and non-South Asian (and for the purposes of this paper, African American) listeners who understand Hindi *and* are familiar with Sermon’s assumed suicide attempt? In what ways does this force us to reimagine the relation between Bhosle’s sampled lyric and Sermon’s response, and perhaps even “React” itself?

I contend that placing “React” within the context of Sermon’s apparent suicide attempt provides us with an alternative reading of the song. This alternative framing not only resists dominant critiques of “React” that figure the seemingly incongruous dialogue between Sermon and Bhosle as mimicking the Orientalist dissonance between “East” and “West,” but also the effect of this dominant logic that embraces a cultural and political project that produces African Americans as U.S. “domestic citizens” through and against the “exotic foreigners” of South Asia. Instead, this alternative reading of “React” points to a moment of overlap, of convergence, across time and space. I posit that the sampled Hindi verse in “React,” translated as “If someone has a fondness for suicide, what can one do?” works as a sonic specter of Erick Sermon’s alleged suicide past. Some might argue that neither Sermon nor Just Blaze realized that the sampled verse from “Chandi Ka Badan” spoke about suicide, and thus this link to Sermon is simply a coincidence. While I agree with such an assertion, I want to dwell on those moments that dominant narratives silence or ignore, such as moments of happenstance. By focusing on this musical coincidence, I am less concerned with intent than the work that coincidence does, the new set of meanings that are produced by this coincidence. As a result, if we take this coincidence seriously, then the dialogue between Sermon and Asha Bhosle’s sampled verse does not operate as a failed and unequal attempt at communication between a black man and an

imaginary South Asian (American) woman, but rather a connection made with and across one's own past. Indeed, given the purported suicide attempt and Asha Bhosle's sampled comment on suicide, Sermon's reply not only serves as a point of commonality and relation, but also, as samples are sounds from the past inserted into a new soundscape, it constitutes Sermon's encounter with a past that he tried to forget and that he asked us to overlook. I am not suggesting that on "React," Sermon admits to attempting suicide, but rather his response "Whatever she says that I'm that" recalls, for him and the song's listeners, the events of September 25, 2001. In a much larger paper, I use recent work in queer theory to think through "queer temporalities" and relations that are made across time. However, for this paper, I want to hone in on the argument that when considering Sermon's alleged suicide attempt in our analysis of "React," we witness not only a union formed between Sermon and Bhosle across time and space, but also a bond established between Sermon and his past. In other words, rather than analyzing "React" through the dominant lens that highlights categorical cultural and regional divergences produced by the perceived incompatible dialogue of Sermon and Bhosle, our reimagining of "React" illustrates the syncing up of bodies and memories. Put simply, our alternative framing points to the bonds forged across time and space that resist Orientalist and Indo-chic processes that aim to reinforce dichotomous boundaries of differences of East/West, Orient/Occident, and the like.

Replaying the "Indian Flute"

A year after the release of "React," African American rap duo, Timbaland and Magoo, released "Indian Flute," the second single from their third album, *Under Construction Part II*. Despite its failure to impact the music charts, "Indian Flute" shared much with "React" in terms of the song's structure and corresponding music video. Indeed, like the music video for "React,"

“Indian Flute’s” video featured an array of Orientalist imagery, including: racially ambiguous women belly dancing, an elderly snake charmer, harems, and shots of the Taj Mahal. Moreover, the song’s storyline centers on Timbaland, Magoo, and rapper Sebastian hitting on the same South Asian woman, ostensibly voiced by a sampled lyrics from a Bollywood *filmi*. Although all three men try to woo the imagined South Asian woman, they soon learn, like Erick Sermon, that she only speaks Hindi and therefore “Can’t understand a word [she’s] sayin’.” In a last ditch effort, Magoo, Sebastian, and Timblanad attempt to connect with their love interest by throwing around a couple of poorly pronounced Hindi pick-up lines.

For most mainstream audiences, “Indian Flute” produces a similar Orientalist narrative to that of “React.” By representing South Asia(ns) as feminine, remote, and pre-modern in comparison to the masculine, urban, and civilized United States, the music video for “Indian Flute” reproduces the rigid boundaries between East and West. Furthermore, the song itself musically reinforces these borders by seemingly using sampled Hindi lyrics in lieu of collaborating with a South Asian (American) singer. Indeed, as samples are sounds of the past, using a sample structures South Asia as backward-looking and the U.S. as modern and progressive.

Yet, while most listeners of “Indian Flute” assumed that the featured female voice on the track came from a sampled Bollywood recording, the vocals were actually that of Timbaland’s protégé, South Asian American vocalist, Raje Shwari. Instead of singing in her natural voice, Raje, manipulated her voice to mimic that of a sample—an engineering trick the produces an aural impression of temporal and spatial distancing. In what ways does this information challenge mainstream readings of “Indian Flute” as Orientalist? I contend that Raje’s voice on “Indian Flute” powerfully breaks from previous hip hop songs like “React” that relied on

sampling a South Asian song to represent South Asia, and opens up new ways of understanding and articulating Afro-South Asian bonds in hip hop and perhaps beyond.

Timbaland and Raje first met in the fall of 2002, coincidentally around the same time as the release of “React,” after Timbaland received Raje’s demo tape. Born Rajeshwari Parmar in Philadelphia to Gujarati parents, Raje aspired to become the “next Janet Jackson” of music. Under the tutelage of African American house producer, Todd Terry, Raje achieved minor success in Europe, but soon moved back to the U.S. in order to break into the American music industry. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Raje explained that while putting together her demo in July of 2002, she started “hearing Indian samples in hip-hop, so I sang some background vocals and made them sound like samples.” The finished demo landed in the hands of Bill Pettaway, celebrity producer and A&R of Timbaland’s production label, *Timbaland Productions*. As Pettaway later informed me, Timbaland desired to take U.S.-based hip hop’s relation to South Asian music in a different direction, and actively searched for something or someone to help him make that shift. Undoubtedly, Raje’s demo perfectly aligned with Timbaland’s new sonic vision, and he quickly signed her to *Timbaland Productions*.

After collaborating with A-list artists like Missy Elliott, Jay-Z, and Nas, Raje began working with Timbaland on “Indian Flute,” a song that they both viewed as breaking away from previous U.S.-based hip hop songs, like “React,” that incorporated forms of South Asian expressive culture. Due Raje’s and Timbaland’s desire to transform the ways in which U.S. hip hop engaged South Asian culture, we might read “Indian Flute” not as another Orientalist hip hop record that samples South Asian music, but instead as a parody of these types of songs. Through Raje’s vocal imitation of a sample and the presumably failed communication between this presumed sample (i.e., Raje) and Timbaland, Magoo, and Sebastian, “Indian Flute” makes

fun of and exposes the flawed nature of and politically dangerous practices by artists and producers who appropriate South Asian music without any investment in cultural exchange. Indeed, while, as I have stated above, I believe critics misread “React,” “Indian Flute” expresses their critiques via satire, highlighting the ways in which previous hip hop songs that used South Asian musical motifs engaged in processes of Othering, and subsequently hindered, rather than encouraged, Afro-South Asian cross-cultural unions.

Moreover, part of the power in this parody plays out in the way Timbaland and Raje illustrate the productive nature of cross-cultural alliances. Through the collaboration between Raje and Timbaland, “Indian Flute” reverses the Orientalist aural gaze of rapper-as-active-speaker to the passive sample that allows the West to produce knowledge about the East. Instead, Raje, through emulating sampled Hindi lyrics, controls the way the record and its articulations of South Asians/South Asian Americans and South Asian (American) culture to play out. In other words, and in reference to Marx and Fred Moten, in co-writing “Indian Flute” with Timbaland, Raje quite literally allows the commodity to speak (back).

It is for these reasons that Timbaland and Raje viewed “Indian Flute” and their future joint projects as pushing toward what they would later call in the *New York Times*: “world hip hop.” While they did not elaborate on this concept, I argue that world hip hop is a musical subgenre and vision produced through cross-cultural and transnational bonds. This is to say, world hip hop does neither describes U.S.-based rap that samples world music nor hip hop outside of the U.S., but is instead a culture, aesthetic, and consciousness that violates constructed boundaries. World hip hop does not have a central location; it is structured through alliances across space. Within the context of “Indian Flute,” world hip hop is articulated through correspondence and collaborations between African and South Asian diasporic subjects, bringing

together likewise listeners, and disrupting post-9/11 practices that aim to separate these two communities. Put simply, “Indian Flute” embodies world hip hop by breaking away from practices and readings that recenter whiteness and/or the West, and instead moving toward new cultural expressions produced by lateral connections among racially marginalized communities.

Conclusion

What I’ve tried to do in this paper is briefly sketch out what happens when we take a more critical approach of post-9/11 Afro-South Asian musical intersections in U.S.-based hip hop. Rather than automatically contextualizing it as simply an extension of the Orientalist Indochic cultural moment, we need to explore the presence of South Asian music, culture, and people in U.S.-based hip hop as its own relationship, independent of white consumption of South Asian cultural commodities. By doing this, we open up new understandings of this subgenre. While songs and artists connected to this subgenre might very well be engaging in Orientalist projects, they are also involved in anti-Orientalism. While I have only examined two songs in this paper, I see this paper as more of a thought piece that I hope will start a conversation around this Afro-South Asian subgenre in general and its moments that counter the logics of Orientalism in particular. It is my hope that through a further engagement with this Afro-South Asian sonic project, we will be able to highlight other artists, producers, and audiences invested in radically challenging Orientalist binaries and post-9/11 practices, and actively searching for and creating points of overlap and structures of belonging.