Introduction

The stakes for identifying new comparative models are immensely high.
—Grace K. Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, Strange Affinities

Side One: Introducing the Other Side

Let’s start with a story. A couple of years ago, I was on a nighttime flight headed to a conference at which I was scheduled to present, and, like most academics, I had yet to finish my paper—which I was supposed to give the following morning—and was frantically trying to complete it. The passenger seated next to me perhaps failed to pick up on any of the clues that I could not be bothered, and decided to tap me on my shoulder and ask me what I was writing. I quickly informed him that it was a presentation based on a book that I was working on (and which you’re now reading). My seatmate then followed with a “So what’s the book about?” response. I was frankly frustrated at this point, but since this kind question is common and tied to our professions as academics, I politely told him that it was about African American musicians’ interest in and collaborations with South Asian and South Asian American music and artists in the United States. To my dismay, however, the passenger was puzzled by my response and proceeded to further probe: “Hmmm . . . African American musicians . . . like who?” Looking to end the conversation, I promptly listed John Coltrane’s well-known embrace of Indian culture and Missy Elliott’s Indian-inspired hit song “Get Ur Freak On” as exemplary case studies with which my book is concerned. But, still not satisfied with my response (and clearly not picking up on my growing frustration with the conversation and him), my fellow passenger paused and asked, “But what about Madonna and the Beatles? Weren’t they also doing the same thing?” To which I then exasperatedly excused
myself, plugged my headphone jack into my laptop, put on my headphones, and tried to imagine that this conversation never occurred.

This story is both real, in the sense that it actually happened, and representative (sans my negative affect), in the sense that it is a recurring experience for me outside of as well as within the academy. Over the past several years that I have been working on and discussing this book, I have encountered some variation of the above conversational exchange. When I talk about my book’s focus on Black and South Asian (American) artists and music with colleagues, family members, friends, or just random people (like my seatmate) interested in striking up a conversation, they invariably and inevitably bring up Madonna and/or the Beatles. These references to the Beatles are most likely tied to George Harrison’s well-publicized studies of Indian music and spirituality as well as the Beatles’ popular participation in the 1960s and 1970s “raga rock” trend; and the allusions to Madonna presumably originate from her storied partnership with English musician William Orbit for her 1998 Indophilic album *Ray of Light*, and Madonna’s own set of highly circulated Orientalist visual performances that accompanied and promoted the record. But while Madonna and the Beatles created music that drew from South Asian culture, neither Madonna nor the Beatles are Black or South Asian—the two racialized groups and cultures that sit at the heart of my book. Therefore, these conversational invocations of Madonna and the Beatles, for me, are as misguided as they are misplaced. By bringing up Madonna and the Beatles, these responses to my work move a conversation initially (and centrally) about Black and South Asian artists and sounds to one now about white and South Asian music and musicians—the focus shifts from an exploration of the kinds of relationalities between two marginalized communities in the United States to a centering of the white–nonwhite binary.

Importantly, while such an anecdote is certainly indicative of the place of the Beatles and Madonna, and their South Asian influences, within in the U.S. popular imaginary, it also overlaps with, and by extension speaks to, a similar and dominant outlook within academic literature on this subject. In an effort to contextualize African American musicians’ interest in and incorporation of South Asian (American) culture, popular music studies scholarship often places such Afro–South Asian cross-cultural activities within the broader place of South Asian sounds in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western popular music. Specifically, this scholarship situates U.S.-based Afro–South Asian musical practices within the 1960s and 1970s
white counterculture psychedelia of acts like the Beatles and/or the late-capitalist “Indo-chic” trend of the 1990s and early 2000s of artists like Madonna. Yet, much like my recurring and representative conversations about my book, these aims in popular music studies to broaden the field (inadvertently) work to whiten it. They place Black artists in relation to white artists, and they entangle and implicate African Americans with Western appropriative practices. This is a potentially problematic rendering as the West has been (and continues to be) upheld through anti-Blackness. Such scholarship, thus, obfuscates the particularities of cross-cultural musical making practices between racially marginalized musicians, shores up whiteness and the West through the privileging and (re)centering of a white–nonwhite binary, and makes whiteness and white Western modes of engagement the origin of such intercultural musical innovation. And so it’s here, at the anecdotal and academic papering over of Afro–South Asian intercultural music making endeavors, that I ask: What happens when we consider Black musicians’ South Asian sonic explorations as distinct from those of their white Western counterparts? What happens if and when we consider the other side of things, the music and sounds from the other side?

Sounds from the Other Side: Afro–South Asian Collaborations in Black Popular Music is a possible answer to these questions. It is a reimagining of African American musical collaborative endeavors with South Asian and South Asian American artists and sounds. By collaborative endeavors, I am not solely talking about interactions that manifest within the realm of the interpersonal, but also music making activities that occur between and among sounds themselves. I read the meetings, blendings, and entanglements of sounds in a recording or performance as key cultural sites and encounters that are just as central to the construction and meaning of Afro–South Asian music as are the Black and South Asian (American) subjects who produce them. The intersections of the face-to-face and sound-to-sound within these Black and South Asian collaborations are indicative of what T. Carlis Roberts calls “Afro Asian performance,” or the “physical and/or sonic spaces in which blackness and Asianness coincide, through the juxtaposition of musical traditions, visual representations, and the identities of the artists that perform them.” Using Carlis’s conception of Afro Asian performance to bear on African American and South Asian musical collectivities, I survey Black popular musics like jazz, funk, and hip-hop from the 1960s to the present, and look to Black artists like John Coltrane, Miles
Davis, Rick James, André 3000, Truth Hurts, Missy Elliott, Timbaland, and Beyoncé in order to reveal, trace, and produce a particular narrative about the rich and robust musical histories of African American interest in and engagements with South Asian (American) music and musicians—what we might call an Afro–South Asian genealogy of sound. My use of genealogy here is deliberate and draws on and aligns with Michel Foucault’s theorization of the term: as an attempt and as a tactic to “desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse.”

The kinds of Afro–South Asian cross-racial musics that I’m interested in, then, are those that are rendered minor, inconsequential, and tangential—those that are situated on and relegated to the other side—under the dominant logics of white–South Asian musical practices. It is thus through an excavation of an Afro–South Asian genealogy of sound that I illustrate how Afro–South Asian performances produce their own knowledge, how they proffer new ways of being and knowing, in Black popular music. Indeed, if, as Stuart Hall argues, Black popular culture, and especially Black popular music, enables “the surfacing . . . of elements of a discourse that is different—other forms of life, other traditions of representation,” then what I am concerned with in this book is interrogating what these other forms and traditions look and sound like when they articulate with (to borrow from Hall again) South Asian cultural production. I’m interested in developing lenses that will help scholars grapple with and underscore the alternative epistemologies and possibilities that are expressed, enacted, and imagined through Black and South Asian relationalities through and as sound.

I call such a lens and the alternative epistemological and imaginative space that it explicates “the other side of things.” The other side of things is an analytical framework that describes and renders legible the sociopolitical and sociocultural import of Afro–South Asian collaborative performances and recordings in and for Black popular music. The other side of things is less about why certain African American musicians incorporate South Asian music in their work or why they work with South Asian and South Asian American artists. Rather, the other side of things names and interprets this musical work and its broader implications—it helps us to see and hear what these cross-cultural musics do and what they produce. In particular, the other side of things examines what these Afro–South Asian collaborative music making practices mean for Black popular music, Blackness, and the
politics of Black social life. It attempts to make sense of and articulate how the work by African American musicians who draw on and embrace South Asian musicians and music foster new and exciting epistemologies of Black life, Black politics, and Black cultural production. In chapter 2 of this book, for example, I explore Miles Davis’s 1972 album *On the Corner*, and illustrate how the centrality of South Asian music and musicians on the album expressed Davis’s belief that South Asian culture and people were key to new formations of Black music and to Black political struggle and freedom, especially for those living and working on the street corner. In this sense, the other side of things is akin to the long twentieth-century Black “radical imagination” that Robin D. G. Kelley calls “freedom dreams.” Notably, Kelley identifies his mother, a Black woman who he explains has made Indian spiritualities a central part of her life (changing her name to Ananda and adopting beliefs of reincarnation), as informing his conception of freedom dreams because “she wanted us to visualize a more expansive, fluid, ‘cosmos-politan’ definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers.” The Black artists and Afro–South Asian performances featured in *Sounds from the Other Side* are key social actors and actions of such a remaking and reimagining of Black freedom dreams. They develop, delineate, and desire something different. For these artists and musics, to pursue the other side of things means to create music that hones in on the political importance of Black and South Asian relationalities, and how they might help us imagine and create other possible worlds of and for Black music, politics, and peoples.

Side Two: Queering the Other Side

Several years ago, I attended and presented at a music conference (not the one mentioned in the previous section) that comprised scholars, journalists, and music industry personnel. My presentation centered on Miles Davis’s *On the Corner* (the album alluded to above and discussed in further detail in chapter 2). I argued that the album’s expression of Black radical politics was not simply inextricable from South Asianness, but that, via the album’s artwork and Davis’s own personal life, it—the album—and they—South Asianness and Blackness—articulated with Black queer aesthetics and sociality. During the Q&A and following my presentation, I was struck by the number of people who told me that *On the Corner* was one of their favorite Miles
Davis albums, that they had always heard the South Asian aspects of the album, but disclosed (sometimes in a hushed tone) that they had never seen or realized its queer expressions until my talk. Like my first story about the failures of reading U.S.-based Afro–South Asian sonic connections in Black popular music as its own distinct formation and genealogy without associating it with and anchoring it to whiteness, this second story about the failures to read race and sexuality together is both a real and recurring conversation I’ve had with others (scholars and non-scholars) about this book. But more to the point, and again much like the first story, this second story is indicative of a much larger problematic in certain scholarly fields.

Indeed, and in particular, this problem with thinking about and taking seriously analyses that center the constitutive relationships of race, gender, and sexuality is one that is especially present in Afro-Asian studies, arguably the field with which this book most explicitly resonates. Afro-Asian studies emerged in the early 2000s as a specific iteration of comparative race and ethnic studies, and it sought to detail the long historical bonds between Africa and Asia and their respective diasporas. Central to these emergent and still dominant writings in Afro-Asian studies are two interrelated ideas. First, the constitutive global violences of white supremacy, capitalism, and U.S. and/or Western European imperialism brought African and Asian (diasporic) people and politics in close proximity and relationality. These shared (but still distinct) forms and experiences of oppression produced transnational and cross-racial, anti-imperial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist solidarity, and thereby created the conditions for Afro-Asian coalitional politics. Consider, for example, the 1955 Bandung Conference that set the stage for Afro-Asian nonalignment during the Cold War, or Lala Lajpat Rai and W. E. B. Du Bois’s friendship that entailed a commitment to shared struggle against anti-Black racism in the United States and Indian independence from Britain. Second, Afro-Asian studies scholarship contends that in part due to, but also exceeding and preceding, these shared experiences of capitalist, white supremacist, and imperial oppressions, African and Asian (diasporic) histories and social identities are not bounded and discrete but rather “polycultural.” Borrowing from Robin D. G. Kelley’s initial coining of the term, Afro-Asian scholars, particularly Vijay Prashad, use polyculturalism to highlight the ways in which the boundaries of African American and Asian American are always already porous and subject to “constant interpenetration.” We might consider the African and Indian roots of Rastafarianism
and the overlapping African and Asian diasporic aesthetics in hip-hop as historical examples of polyculturalism. The polycultural wing of Afro-Asian studies, thus, illustrates how African and Asian America are not, and should not be, antagonistic and oppositional—as the model minority myth attests—but instead projects and formations of collectivity. And it’s here that the two dominant schools of thought in Afro-Asian studies—political solidarity and polyculturalism—demand an understanding of African and Asian (diasporic) comparative racialization as a site of kinship and anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist alliances.

And yet, as scholars like Vanita Reddy, Anantha Sudhakar, and others have compellingly explained, Afro-Asian studies’ tendency to focus on empire, capitalism, and racism as critical rubrics informing African and Asian (diasporic) encounters and exchanges renders unmarked (and by extension unremarkable) gender and sexuality as attendant and constitutive categories of analysis. This unmarking naturalizes norms of gender and sexuality, and it ultimately positions hetero-masculinity (e.g., the relationships between Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi) and heterosexuality (e.g., the marriage and radical politics of James and Grace Lee Boggs) as necessary and central conditions of Afro-Asian solidarity and liberation. Such a privileging of the heteronormative and the heteropatriarchal demands, as Reddy and Sudhakar argue, a “calling for queer and feminist approaches to comparative racialization” that is a “counterdiscourse that challenges not only racism, imperialism, and class disparities, but also heteropatriarchy and sexism.”

As we will see throughout this book, the other side of things, as an analytic and imaginative praxis that is invested in alternative formations of comparative racializations, is one such counterdiscourse that attends to the gender and sexual dimensions of Afro-Asian studies. It acts as a mode of critique that contends with how Afro–South Asian collaborative music and sounds are gendered and sexualized affairs. The other side of things, in part, draws on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s framework of intersectionality and Mari Matsuda’s concept of “asking the other question” to develop a women of color feminist approach to the comparative formations of Afro–South Asian musical performances. Crenshaw uses the juridical inability of the law to recognize racism and sexism as interlocking oppressions of Black women as way to name, via intersectionality, the interlocked ways that people experience and institutions exercise oppression and privilege. Matsuda’s idea of asking the other question builds on this work of intersectionality to mine the coalitional
stakes of such a structural web of oppression. For Matsuda, asking the other question involves a continual interrogation of seemingly discrete social formations such that their discreteness becomes understood as relational and interdependent: “When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’ Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone.”

Following and bridging intersectionality and asking the other question, the other side of things acknowledges the cross-racial alliances and comparative racialization of Afro–South Asian performances while also pursuing what such ethnorracial relationalities tell us about gender and sexuality. For example, in chapter 4, I examine the 2002 hit song “Addictive” by African American female singer Truth Hurts and its sampling of a Bollywood film song sung by Lata Mangeshkar. I look at both songs’ dealings with S/M sex to consider what they might teach us about an Afro–South Asian feminist politics of sex that troubles the policing and surveillance of women of color’s sexual desires and practices, and that imagines a new and transformative collective women of color experience of pleasure.

And as Grace K. Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson remind us, because “lesbian practice and identity were central to many of the most foundational women of color feminists,” women of color feminism directly informs the mode of analysis about and the coalitional oppositional politics against the state regulation of “racialized nonnormative gender and sexual formations” that Ferguson calls queer of color critique. As such, the other side of things, importantly, is a lens that illustrates Afro–South Asian collaborative performances as sites of queer of color formation and possibility. To be clear, and in full disclosure, the majority of the cultural producers in this book identify as cisgender men and/or heterosexual men and women, and so it might seem odd for me to find queerness and queer of color critique to be apt analytics. And yet, by queer here I am not simply talking about queer subjects as defined by sexual identities, pleasures, and desires (though I will be talking about that in this book, too). Rather, I am more interested in following Cathy Cohen’s pathbreaking conception of queer as defined by “one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity . . . [as] those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white
middle- and upper-class heterosexuality.” Routing and rooting queerness in this way allows for people “who may fit into the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support.” Cohen's reading of queer thus advances a much more expansive and broad-base political framework that can facilitate alliances across race, gender, class, and nation—like those Afro-South Asian relationalities that I seek to explicate with the other side of things. Indeed, deploying queerness in the Cohen sense of the term brings into sharp focus a shared (but still distinct) history of Black and South Asian (American) gender and sexual nonnormativity in the United States. From the ungendered enslaved African to the “biologically impossible body” of the Chinese and Indian coolie, from the Moynihan Report pathologizing Black women–led households as perversions of the nuclear family to juridical and media institutions’ production of the sodomizing and miscegenating South Asian immigrant bachelor, from the police murders of Michael Brown and Rekia Boyd through which those victims served “as targets of racial normalizing projects intent on pathologizing them” to the post-9/11 production of the Muslim and South Asian “monster–terrorist–fag,” racialized gender and sexuality nonnormativity in the United States has created “strange affinities” (to borrow again from Hong and Ferguson) between Black and South Asian (American) peoples and histories.

The other side of things is, thus, an attempt to sound such strange affinities. I continue the work of articulating the braided (yet, again, distinct) histories of South Asian and African American relationalities by situating this cultural history within larger global and domestic sociohistorical junctures that link African American and South Asian diasporic communities in the United States—the feminist, queer, civil rights and Black Power, and Third World social movements of the 1960s and 1970s; Reaganomics and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s; the 1980s and 1990s narratives of the (South) Asian American “model minority” as a “solution” to the African American–monitored minority; and the racial and sexual politics of post-9/11 U.S. culture. In so doing, I illuminate how minoritarian artists’ Afro–South Asian performances and recordings are as much about the musical as they are about the extramusical, how they are about music and sound as well as the racial, gendered, and sexualized politics and histories that produce such collaborative music and sound. Simply put, these Afro–South Asian musical crossings are catalytic sites where aesthetics and politics meet. To that end,
the other side of things is a three-pronged approach to studying Afro–South Asian music in Black popular music: (1) it is an intellectual intervention, one that demands that we see African American interest and collaborations with South Asian music(ians) as separate from and a disruption to the white–nonwhite binary; (2) it is an insistence on accounting for how such comparative ethnoracial cultural practices inform and shape the contours of Blackness and Black cultural production; and (3) it is a women of color and queer of color hermeneutic of music and sound that contextualizes these Afro–South Asian musical crossings within the strictures and structures of race, gender, sexuality and excavates their racialized queer relationalities. In the end, the other side of things outlines the ways this Afro–South Asian genealogy of sound in Black popular music is a dynamic, complex, and contradictory cultural site where comparative racialization, transformative gender and queer politics, and coalitional politics intertwine.

Side Three: (In)Appropriating the Other Side

While I was in the final stages of completing revisions for this book, a friend texted “they comin for your work lol,” and then followed this message with a link to what I would later find out was a viral tweet. At nearly five thousand retweets and eighteen thousand likes at the time of this writing, the tweet was a clip of the music video for Truth Hurts’s “Addictive,” a song that is the subject of chapter 4 of this book, as mentioned above. The author of the tweet, @tomorrowmanx, captioned it with the message “Listen . . . when all the Black producers started infusing Bollywood samples in everything . . . you wanna talk about a fuggin ERA in hip hop/R&B??” I was excited to see this tweet for two main reasons. One, it let me know that nearly two decades after its release, “Addictive” still resonated with people. Second, the Twitter user’s use of the word “fuggin,” a euphemism for “fucking,” spoke to some of the main impulses of this book and what I’m calling the other side of things. Fuggin/fucking is deployed to emphasize the ubiquity and greatness of Afro–South Asian rap and R&B during this moment. But it also signals the sexual politics, the literal fucking, that I argue informs much of this music—that sex and sexuality articulate with these cross-racial Afro–South Asian musical performances.

I soon noticed that the viral tweet was the first in a longer thread, and decided to scroll through and read it. The user gave a standard narrative of
the song, including its sampling background and the controversy surrounding it (this is a narrative that I complicate in chapter 4). And then the user finished the thread by stating, “And just in case it’s not spelled out, yes: This would fall under cultural appropriation, and it is indeed problematic. Not cool, but we still love the song,” and then used a GIF of actor Steven Yeun shrugging to caption the tweet. Like the first tweet of the thread, I was struck by this closing statement for two reasons. First, similar to the previous two stories in this introduction, the topic of cultural appropriation was increasingly coming up in academic and nonacademic circles when I discussed this book. And second, despite the user claiming that “Addictive” is a clear and problematic product of cultural appropriation, the Yeun shrugging GIF literally and figuratively signals uncertainty about such a claim.

And it’s this notion and affective position of uncertainty that I believe best captures the complicated terrain of cultural appropriation with respect to Afro–(South) Asian exchanges. Black popular music and culture has historically and contemporaneously (and rightly) sat at the center of discussions about cultural appropriation, especially when it concerns the interrelated formations of power, property, and whiteness. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Afro-Asian studies has not broached or cannot broach the topic of cultural appropriation. For example, Sunaina Maira famously discussed how South Asian American male youth appropriate hip-hop as a way to consume and mark a Black masculine cool. And Nitasha Sharma has also argued for an “appropriation as identification” versus “appropriation as othering” model that reads Afro-Asian exchanges as either (1) offering social critique on issues like imperialism, militarization, racism, and oppression; or (2) espousing a form of “American nationalism aligned with Western imperial projects,” respectively. But as a book about African American–directed engagements with South Asian music and musicians, Maira’s work doesn’t necessarily resonate. And because Sharma’s binary approach to appropriation seemingly relies on a politics of intentionality, it does not fully address the ways in which my conception of the other side of things is more about the how than the why. As Homi Bhabha explains, intentionality is not the best rubric for describing appropriation because “we can never quite control these acts and their signification. They exceed intention.”

Thus, a question still remains as to how can we make sense of appropriation when it deals with dually and differentially marginalized communities like African Americans and South Asians and South Asian Americans?
Indeed, as the works of Claire Jean Kim and Helen Jun compellingly explain, African Americans and Asian Americans are positioned in a constantly shifting racial triangulation that unevenly and contingently confers power and privilege along the lines of race, class, and citizenship status. Moreover, because polyculturalism, one of the defining frameworks of Afro-Asian studies, demands a cultural dynamism and relationality, it complicates facile markers of ownership that are central to the ways in which, citing Bhabha again, “appropriation assumes a proprietorial sense: Who owns what? In what sense do I own my history, or you own your art?”

It is for these reasons that I do not find appropriation to be the most adequate, appropriate, and uniform framework to describe and analyze the music making activities that African American musicians in this book take on when incorporating South Asian sound or collaborating with South Asians and South Asian Americans. I don’t believe that these are zero-sum engagements. I don’t see them as either being totally invested in cultural appropriation or totally devoid of such actions. Instead, I contend that they resemble more of what Deborah Wong sees as the “need to rethink the politics of appropriation in ways that will allow for combustion as well as colonization,” and also allow for the potential for Afro-Asian cross-cultural musics to be “pedagogical rather than appropriating, [where] we can see anger, interrogation, coalition, action, revolution, in motion.” Sounds from the Other Side, then, wades into the entanglements of appropriation. If, as Stuart Hall famously argued, the terrain of popular culture is a battlefield stuck in the double movement between containment and resistance, then this book remains attuned to such shifting terrain, exploring what Black and South Asian musical and sonic collaborations might reveal about the place of power, privilege, and belonging within such musical relationalities.

Side Four: Narrating the Other Side

In order to excavate and narrate this women of color feminist and queer of color Afro–South Asian genealogy of sound that I’m calling the other side of things, I rely on what Jack Halberstam and Gayatri Gopinath have separately referred to as a “scavenger methodology”: a queer approach that “uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior.” Alternative epistemologies—proffering a new narrative
of African American artists’ interest in and collaborations with South Asian music(ians)—require attendant methodological reimaginings, those that disrupt the boundedness of traditional disciplinary approach. And to that end, I use personal interviews, archival materials, music analysis, and close readings to make sense of periodicals, recorded interviews, recorded music, and album covers as well as my own interviews with visual artists, sound engineers, producers, managers, and recording executives. Bringing these methodologies together allows this project to highlight the historical and contemporary issues that this research raises. It allows the book to chart a specific arc and genealogy. Further, the multitude of voices and sources used in my book present a textured account of African American musical engagements with South Asian musicians and sound that ultimately demonstrates how producers, studio musicians, and other social actors envision(ed) the musical, cultural, and political significance of South Asian (diasporic) culture and artists within Black popular music. And in so doing, I highlight the complexity and meaning-making practices of the artists and cultural products for and with whom and which there is deep political and personal resonance, affinity, and promise.

The first chapter begins the study of Afro-South Asian collaborative music and sound with one of its most prominent figures: jazz saxophonist John Coltrane. I refer to Coltrane as a leading figure for the ways in which jazz critics have remarked on Coltrane’s excursions into South Asian music as innovative, and for how his musical approaches to South Asian sound frame and inform the kinds of cross-cultural engagements that will be explored for the remainder of the book. Coltrane’s use of South Asian music held in tension the complex, dynamic, contradictory, and politically transformative meanings and imaginings within this alternative narrative of Afro-South Asian sound that I’m calling the other side of things. Key to grappling with Coltrane’s Afro-South Asian political imaginings is to reframe how we typically understand Coltrane’s forays into Indian culture and his general political impulse. Indeed, jazz and African American studies scholars frequently analyze Coltrane’s interest in Indian culture as depoliticized endeavors, and instead contend that Coltrane developed a Malcolm X– or Martin Luther King–inspired political approach to song with his more explicit Afro-diasporic song choices (e.g., *Africa/Brass*, “Reverend King”). This chapter posits that we cannot disarticulate Coltrane’s Indian and Afro-diasporic interests, and the political potential residing in both. As Coltrane began to
incorporate Indian culture into his work, jazz critics began to refer to him as the “James Baldwin of horn sound.” This chapter takes that nickname seriously to ask what happens when we route Coltrane’s persona through the queer spiritual, musical, and transnational politics of James Baldwin? How might this open up ways not only to understand Coltrane’s Indian and Afro-diasporic recordings as co-constitutive, but also to gesture toward a music-based vision of queer Black internationalism?

Moving from John Coltrane to one of his former mentors and band leaders, the second chapter examines the Afro–South Asian music of Miles Davis during the 1970s. Unlike Coltrane, Davis’s use of Indian sound is less studied, and as a quick intervention, this chapter works to address this paucity in scholarship. Nevertheless, this chapter examines the place of queer Black masculinity and South Asian instrumentation in and on Davis’s 1972 album *On the Corner*. Davis envisioned it as a record that would attract politically active African American youth. For Davis, the rise of R&B and funk in the 1960s as cultural signifiers of Black Power politics diminished jazz’s popularity among young Black people in the United States, and severed jazz’s previous ties to African American political ideologies. Unwilling to allow his music and politics to be relegated to the past, Davis mixed funk, R&B, and jazz on *On the Corner*. Yet, as stated above, South Asian performers and sounds also played a central role, as did representations of queer Black masculinity. Thus, this chapter asks: In an era where many Black teens are listening to the politically charged albums and songs by hetero-masculinist artists like James Brown (“Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud”), what does it mean for Miles Davis to use South Asian music and queer Black masculinity to reach these same teens and to tap into dominant Black Power ideologies? This chapter addresses this question by deploying a framework that I call “corner politics,” which bridges queerness and South Asian culture as central formations that animate and organize Blackness in general and Black political consciousness in particular. Corner politics illumines how Davis’s *On the Corner* album broadened dominant articulations of Black Power and Black identity to include queerness and South Asian culture as formations that inform and shape Black political identity.

The third chapter moves from Black jazz and jazz-fusion musicians’ 1970s work with and interest in South Asian cultural production and producers to the realm of 1980s and 1990s funk and hip-hop. Popular music scholars generally contend that the 1980s and early to mid-1990s witnessed increased
politically charged musical cross-currents between Black and South Asian sounds and musicians in the United Kingdom and the Caribbean, but not in the United States. Such an approach ignores the ways in which African American artists continued the history of Afro–South Asian musical crossing. In particular, such scholarship elides the work of Rick James and hip-hop duo OutKast. This chapter examines Rick James’s 1986 album *The Flag* and OutKast’s 1996 album *ATLiens* to think through the place and political potential of South Asian music and culture in shaping these albums and artists. Further, such influence of South Asian culture on these artists and albums are also tied to their articulations of Blackness and masculinity. Rick James pushed the parameters of Black male masculinity and sexuality, and he continued such endeavors on his 1986 concept album, but with an explicit political charge: James’s interest in Reaganomics and the Cold War. Much like Davis’s *On the Corner*, *The Flag* owes a debt to South Asian instrumentation, utilizing sitars and tablas, and as a result foregrounds the complexities of Black politics and masculinity at a moment in the United States when South Asian immigrants were being hailed as a model minority, as a means of disciplining African Americans. Such a cultural and political intersection continued into the 1990s, as did the influence of James on hip-hop groups like the Atlanta-based duo OutKast. *ATLiens*, the group’s second album, witnessed member André “André 3000” Benjamin donning an Indian turban, a move that popular music critics and rappers saw as a break from southern Black masculine forms of expression. Such sartorial choices dually aligned Benjamin with Indian customs as well as an older tradition in Black southern women’s head-wrapping. These deviations from dominant forms of southern male Black masculinity provide an opportunity to think through the multiple “Souths” in a space like Georgia during the 1990s: the increased immigration of South Asians from the global South to the U.S. South. In all, this chapter examines how, despite efforts to distance African American and South Asian (diasporic) communities in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, African American funk and rap artists maintained such bonds to create anti-imperial, anti-racist, and anti-masculinist Black politics.

For many popular music studies scholars, U.S.-based hip-hop’s sampling of South Asian music at the turn of the twenty-first century represented a musical extension of post-9/11 U.S. imperialist endeavors and Orientalist fantasies. Scholars note the increasing popularity of South Asian music and mixing of South Asian– and Middle Eastern–style commodities in rap videos in
2002 and 2003, and subsequently label African American rap musicians engaging in such practices as cultural imperialists who dangerously reproduced the conflations of South Asia and the Middle East within the post-9/11 U.S. racial imaginary. These scholars further argued that such rap videos and songs were usually produced by men and relied on Orientalist tropes that musically and visually represented South Asia as feminine and sexually as objects made available to and consumed by the Western male heteronormative gaze. Yet, chapter 4 asks: What does it mean to argue that these African American musicians, who come from a historically marginalized group whose oppression was and is a necessity in order to fulfill U.S. nation-building and imperial interests, are complicit in U.S. empire? And further, how can this scholarship’s reliance on male-centered musical examples account for African American women musicians whose work also drew on South Asian sound and culture at this time? This chapter addresses these questions through an examination of the 2002 hit song “Addictive” by African American R&B / hop-hop female singer Truth Hurts. Many scholars and journalists have studied “Addictive” since its release, but most of their analyses operate from a linear temporal logic that always already binds “Addictive” to post-9/11 U.S. empire and Orientalism and elides Truth Hurts’s Black female subjectivity—“Addictive” is released after 9/11 and therefore must be Orientalist, imperial, and shore up norms of race, gender, and sexuality. This chapter resists such normative approaches, and instead draws specifically on the queer and feminist of color impulse of “Addictive.” I use interviews, music analysis, and close-reading practices in order to illustrate how “Addictive” makes audible the other side of things. “Addictive” advances the kinds of alternative formations, relations, and political possibilities of post-9/11 Afro–South Asian hip-hop and R&B that are rendered unimaginable within dominant analyses. It makes possible those that are anti-Orientalist and anti-imperial, that are Black feminist and queer, and that are invested in Afro–South Asian political solidarity.

The final chapter addresses a particular issue within scholarly and journalist approaches to Afro–South Asian hip-hop in the United States. One school of thought reads African American hip-hop practitioners’ encounters with South Asian culture and people solely as a site of commodification of South Asian culture. The other school of thought articulates how South Asian American participation in rap music has informed South Asian American identity formations, but this school of thought fails to adequately consider
what such encounters mean to and for Black rap musicians. That is, both sides are stuck in a theoretical problematic of representation. Thus, this chapter asks: What happens when we move from the representational to the agential, to collaborations between African American and South Asian American artists in rap? Using the partnership between African American rap producer Timbaland and South Asian American singer Rajé Shwari, I explore how their collaborative work transgresses constructed boundaries of race, gender, and nation in order to cultivate feminist and transnational Afro–South Asian bonds. Timbaland and Shwari, as I argue in the chapter, think cross-racial collaborations differently, reading it through the other side of things, in ways that imagine new expressions of transnational coalition building and of making audible the political struggles and possibilities of creating music and forming alliances between and across the margins.
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