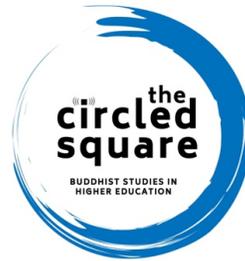


Episode 15: **Marcus Evans, Teaching Buddhist Studies with Hip Hop**
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Speakers
Sarah Richardson
Marcus Evans



00:00:01:10 - 00:00:14:25

Marcus: In terms of pedagogy, I just think about what are the voices that I actually can bring into the course to kind of challenge just the standard way that we do it. And I think that has effectiveness in itself, and maybe even in just the people that we attract to the courses.

00:00:19:21 - 00:00:29:23

Sarah: Hello and welcome to this episode of The Circled Square, the podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhist studies in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson and I teach at the University of Toronto.

00:00:30:14 - 00:01:08:05

Sarah: In this episode, I sat down with Marcus Evans, a PhD candidate in religious studies at McMaster University here in Canada, where he's completing his dissertation research on Afro-Asian religions and aesthetics. Marcus was in Kentucky at the time and we talked to him in early December of 2020. The topic of our conversation was how he taught two courses at McMaster University, both in the online format about Asian religions and the so-called great books of Asia. In each of these cases he used examples from modern hip hop like the Dead Prez RZA and the Wu-Tang Clan, which he labels as Afro-Asian texts.

00:01:08:26 - 00:01:30:28

Sarah: In the classroom, he invites students to compare these contemporary texts with traditional texts from Buddhism and other Asian religions, like excerpts from the Ramayana or the Lotus Sutra. Be sure, also, to listen for his comments on anti-racism and teaching: how the choices of texts we use in the classroom impact our students, our analysis, and the knowledge we create.

00:01:31:27 - 00:01:38:03

Sarah: We're so excited about his work and his teaching. So please listen, subscribe and share this with your friends and colleagues.

00:01:39:28 - 00:01:40:20

Sarah: Hi, Marcus.

00:01:41:06 - 00:01:41:25

Marcus: Hi, Sarah.

00:01:42:28 - 00:01:44:17

Sarah: Thanks so much for speaking with us today.

00:01:44:24 - 00:01:46:08

Marcus: Thank you for having me today.

00:01:46:13 - 00:01:49:18

Sarah: Can you start by introducing yourself for our listeners?

00:01:49:20 - 00:02:59:27

Marcus: Yes. So, I'm Marcus Evans. I'm a PhD candidate at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, where I specialize in religion and the social sciences with a minor in East Asian religions. My current research interests are in Afro-Asian studies and religions, or Afro-Asian aesthetics and religion, and black American culture and history. And I'm currently working on a project regarding the hip hop group called the Wu-Tang Clan, looking specifically at Afro-Asian aesthetics, symbols, religious discourses in their music, films, and other associated cultural productions. And so I am again a PhD student at McMaster and currently I'm in the process of writing my dissertation. But while at McMaster over the last year, especially since the winter term, I believe beginning in January, I taught a course on Asian religions called The Great Books of Asia.

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Sarah: Also one other question. So you study at McMaster, but you're currently not in Hamilton, not in cold Canada, actually, at all, right? Where are you right now?

00:03:11:01 - 00:03:25:28

Marcus: So I'm currently in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where I did my Masters, actually, and this is my second home. So I'm here in the American Midwest, or South, depending on how you look at it. Yes, writing my dissertation.

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Sarah: And you're there in this weird, you know, ongoing Covid-19 pandemic time where even if you wanted to come back and see your supervisor, you probably couldn't so easily, right?

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Marcus: No, no, no. I don't think I can even cross the border at the moment.

00:03:41:05 - 00:03:59:10

Sarah: Right. Oh, my gosh. I still can remember myself a year ago thinking, well, there's no way, like, we don't close the U.S.-Canada border. There's no way. But here we are. I have a follow-up question also about how you defined yourself. So are you're a PhD candidate, right? You've passed your exams, your comprehensive exams?

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Marcus: Yes, I have.

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Sarah: Right. And then you teach or you're interested, especially in Afro-Asian studies. So can you tell us in a sentence or two what Afro-Asian studies means?

00:04:10:24 - 00:04:43:13

Marcus: So Afro-Asian Studies just refers to a broad field that looks at, you know, black American or either African encounters with Asia. Some people in the field focus on, you know, maybe intercontinental relations between Africa and China, while others, such as myself, look at African-Americans, you know, across history and the 20th century, looking at how they've encountered and imagine Asia and efforts to make, you know, solidarities, intimacies, collaboration. So just, you know, cross-cultural exchanges.

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Marcus: It's not really a specific discipline, you know, but it's a field of study, you know, with people working in literary studies, media studies, political studies, looking at various aspects of, you know, Afro-Asian, black and Asian encounters. Some people frame it in terms of black transnationalism, black internationalism, and there are some people as well who look, you know, in the opposite direction, looking from the perspective of Asians in relation to black Americans. Right. So it's a very broad field.

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Sarah: And I'm curious, how would you describe your trajectory to getting there, like to getting there in terms of your study? What did you study in your undergraduate and where? and then how did you become interested in this at the PhD level?

00:05:28:23 - 00:05:59:00

Marcus: At the PhD level, actually, it started in a course with James A. Benn, professor of Chinese Buddhism. I took a course with him on Taoism, the Taoist Canon, and at the time when I came to McMaster, you know, I was planning to work on Japanese religions in America. I was very much interested in the transmission of East Asian religions abroad and in North America. And I wanted to work on Japanese Shinto in America.

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Marcus: And as a part of my class prerequisites, I took James Benn's course on Taoism. I didn't know what to write about, and Benn recommended that I write on the Wu-Tang Clan. And so it really started there. I wrote a paper on the Wu-Tang because the Wu-Tang Clan, you know, some of their, the founder of that group, you know, he has written quite a bit of literature on Taoism and Buddhism and so on. And I think and I think in James Robson's texts, the Norton Anthology of Religion, you actually find an excerpt of the founder of Wu-Tang Clan's material in a book on Taoism and so on. So it was that was really kind of the the launching pad there. And eventually I started to learn about this whole thing of Afro-Asia, to contextualize what I was doing

00:06:46:20 - 00:06:50:26

Sarah: And just for our listeners who may not know, the Wu-Tang Clan is a rap group, right?

00:06:51:02 - 00:07:09:09

Marcus: Right. So it's a hip hop group that was that was founded in 1993 or that released the first album debut called The 36 Chambers in 1993. And, you know, they still are around today creating very much having an impact on North American culture.

00:07:09:29 - 00:07:13:28

Sarah: And the founder that you referred to is... What's the founder's name?

00:07:14:06 - 00:07:47:19

Marcus: His name is RZA. R-Z-A is the acronym for Ruler Zig-Zag-Zig Allah. His real name is Robert F. Diggs. He was the founder of the group. The group consists of nine members, are originally consisted of eight to nine members, and since then has developed into kind of like an expanded network of hip hop artists. But yeah, RZA, he was the founder of the group. Mostly my study kind of focuses on him and looking at his encounter with Buddhism, Asian religions and so on.

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Sarah: Does he self describe as a Buddhist or Taoist?

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Marcus: Sometimes he does, sometimes he does. It just depends on the context. And it's really, you know, a little bit more complicated because he's also by tradition or by, how can I describe it by... He was originally something called a Five-Percenter, a part of a tradition associated with the black American Nation of Islam. So he is by, I guess, culture and heritage, a Five-Percenter, and he still self-identifies as a Five-Percenter. And we can talk about what that means. But he also, you know, you find him exploring, you know, Eastern philosophy, which he really encountered by films, Chinese, Hong Kong, films, which is something else we can talk about later as well.

00:08:47:16 - 00:08:51:13

Sarah: Right. So initially, Kung Fu films were an exposure right?

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Marcus: Right, through the 1970s and 80s. So specifically those films that were being circulated in America, right.

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Sarah: Yeah, great. Well, let's come back to that. That's really interesting. So you've had even though you're still a PHD candidate, you've also started teaching and you taught, I think, last winter for the first time. Was it your first time teaching?

00:09:12:15 - 00:09:47:24

Marcus: No, that wasn't my first time teaching. I actually taught in 2015 at Western Kentucky University, the place where, you know, I'm located right now. At that time, I was just finished working on my Masters, and I taught a course on intro to Asian religions, at that moment, which I taught totally differently. It was much more just a kind of a, you know, a philosophical survey of each of these religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. But that's where my teaching experience begins, right.

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Sarah: Yeah. Like so many of us then you started with what you thought you were supposed to do, right? Like supposed to teach this course that's just, you know, the basic textbook. That's what I did the first time, too, when I taught... I think I'm supposed to just teach the things. But yeah, you did something really different than when you taught last year at McMaster. Right.

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Marcus: Right, right, right, right.

00:10:07:25 - 00:10:16:22

Sarah: So first, let's talk about this course. You taught a 100-level religions course called What on Earth Is Religion?

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Marcus: No. So What on Earth Is Religion was a course, that I taught in the summer of 2020. So around May to June, and that was the second course that I taught at McMaster following the course on Asian religions.

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Sarah: OK. And Asian Religions course was last winter then, right.

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Marcus: Right. It was last winter.

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Marcus: But the course on intro to religious studies or What on Earth Is Religion was a course that dealt specifically just with the question of, you know, what is religion and having students, you know, kind of, think about that on the one hand, religion is something that has to do, you know, fundamentally with meaning, but also looking at religion critically as something that's very much cultural. And in the process of teaching, that course I also drew on the work that I am currently doing insofar as it pertains to black American hip hop, because hip hop has been, the study of hip hop has kind of been a growing field in academia or in religious studies since the early 2000s and I was taking a lot from that kind of literature. The literature of Anthony B. Penn or Monica R. Miller, and looking at hip hop to really explore the question of what is religion.

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Sarah: How did you use hip hop in that course? Can you tell us a bit more about how you applied it?

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Marcus: Right. So, first of all, I use a lot of the work of Anthony B Penn and Monica R Miller, whose own explorations of religion and hip hop has been dealing with these kind of tensions about what exactly is religion. On the one hand, you have this very much phenomenological tradition that looks at religion as something that has to do with a kind of inner experience or inner instinct, right, and is really this kind of ultimate quest for meaning or ultimate concern. But then you also have this kind of tradition when looking at Hip Hop, this tradition of looking at it not necessarily for the, you know, meaning or ultimate concern, but rather, you know, as a kind of cultural formation, looking at hip hop artists and how they use religion within their cultural production. That's a kind of rhetorical strategy to maybe, you know, signify their identity or try to communicate something to its listeners or to their listeners about who or what they are.

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Marcus: And so it was really kind of like working betwixt and between for me. You know, what these, you know, what is religion as a kind of, this inner impulse, so to speak, but then versus this kind of, you know, kind of cultural formation. And so what I would do, like with each week, you know, we would talk about a different topic, maybe one topic we'll talk about one week, is race. The next topic would be gender. The next topic would be, you know, maybe economy or class.

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Marcus: And, you know, with each week, I would have like some kind of resource or video source of a hip hop artist, you know, maybe who's focusing in on gender. I think in the week we worked on gender we dealt with some of Nicki Minaj's stuff. And, you know, with whatever sources that I, you know, issued my students, I just asked them to think about, you know, what is what is going on here? How she is negotiating meaning, how, on the one hand, you know what she's doing, what it reflects, you know, in terms of meaning in terms of what Anthony B Penn describes as this complex, this quest for meaning or complex subjectivity in black American culture.

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Marcus: But then on the other hand, while looking at Nicki Minaj we ask, you know, why is what she's doing culturally important, how is she challenging, how does her performance challenge, you know, kind of gendered norms or sexual norm standards, right?

00:14:16:23 - 00:14:37:01

Sarah: Yeah. She's challenging assumptions then with her choices. And that course sounds really interesting. It's definitely not like it was a world religions approach, right, you're doing this really difficult, more difficult task of grappling with, what is religion, how do we study it and what are big themes there.

00:14:37:27 - 00:15:39:08

Marcus: Right, right. Yeah. And that's very interesting that you say that, because the course originally before I had come to McMaster, it was actually a world religions course and eventually they changed it to What on Earth Is Religion, trying to get away from that kind of categorizing approach to religion, the Eastern religions, Western religions. But at the time that I was teaching it as well, that was a very special moment because, you know, currently or now it has changed, but at that time, we were religious studies, right? So the undergraduate courses were listed as religious, R E L I G I O U S, but we were changing, or we changed the following year to society, culture and religion. Right. So we kind of shifted the whole perspective of what is religious studies, looking at it instead of religious studies for undergraduates, looking at it as Society, Culture and Religion.

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Marcus: And so the approach that I was taking in that course was a very much a kind of cultural studies kind of approach, or at least I thought it was as I was using Anthony B Penn, Miller, as well as Mallory Nye's approach to religion.

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Sarah: Oh, yeah, yeah, I've taught with the Mallory Nye textbook as well, in U of T Mississauga. It's a it's a nice short, he does nice short chapters. Right.

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Marcus: Right, right. And they're very useful, especially for me, a person who is trying to bring popular culture into the classroom and using that a lot more because, you know, Mallory Nye's text really focuses on, you know, it kind of challenges these cultural paradigms of, you know, what is high and low culture. And you see that he himself pays attention at least in a new edition of his text, which came out a few years ago, and I think he has another edition on the way. This text is Religion: The Basics, by the way, if you're wondering and you know, he puts, you know, hip hop culture in some places at front and center in his discussions and discusses issues around gender, culture, and I think the new issue will deal

with race itself. So it just really worked out really well for me. And it was a very good moment since we were making that transition to this kind of new approach.

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Sarah: And for you, can you say a little bit more about this transition and kind of the title of the field of study that you're teaching in? So from religious studies to Society, Culture and Religion, what changes for you and are you happy with that shift, when we when we describe it, instead of religious studies as this new title of Society, Culture and Religion?

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Marcus: For me personally, yes, I love that change. You know, with religious studies, you know when I'm telling people that I study religion or that I'm in religious studies, what does that mean for someone who's not associated with the field? Does it mean that I'm doing anything religious? Does it mean that I'm practicing theology? And obviously, no. I think that Society, Culture and Religion pretty much reflects more accurately, you know, what what we're doing right. At least in my department, where we have a strong kind of anthropological tradition and people that are, you know, dealing specifically with culture and religion, it reflects, you know, the concerns or our concerns with how religion is actually functioning in the social and cultural world as opposed to, you know, religion, indeed, a sort of inner theological, spiritual, undertaking, so to speak. Right. So at this point, it sounds good. And hopefully for the students, you know, when they have to tell their parents that, hey, you know, we're studying a religious studies, I'm in a religious studies course, you know, Society, Culture and Religion has a you know, a more kind of pertinent ring to it, I believe.

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Sarah: Right, it's like kind of a shift maybe between the expectation that we'd be teaching, here are all the things you need to know, you know, the facts about religion, to a question of like, how does religion work in the world? What does it do? How does it create communities? How does it shift over time? So it's identifying like a different focus and what the questions are maybe.

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Marcus: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Right. Right, right. Right. Yes.

00:19:21:26 - 00:19:33:00

Sarah: So this religion, 100-level religion course that you were teaching last winter, what was the best part of teaching this course for you? What did you like about it the most?

00:19:34:17 - 00:19:42:29

Marcus: So this is the 100-course, the What on Earth Is Religion course?

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Sarah: Oh sorry, I am confusing our terms.

00:19:45:25 - 00:20:43:24

Marcus: No, no, I meant OK. But I think that the best thing about the course that I taught in the summer, What on Earth Is Religion, well, first of all, let me say that it was a very kind of tough course to teach, because by this time I was already scheduled that winter to teach the course. But by this time the Covid situation had happened and university shut down and we actually didn't know what we were going to do with our courses through the summer, whether we were going to actually have in class courses

because the course was originally supposed to be in class. We weren't sure about that. And so I didn't know what to expect. And it was kind of like a last minute thing when I was proposed to teach it online. So it was really kind of tough. And I was going through kind of a learning experience. But the thing that was really fascinating about that course was that at the time that I was teaching, and this is really unfortunate, but, you know, we had the whole George Floyd incident and we had the protests that were taking place in America.

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Marcus: And strangely enough, it was just the timing. You know, me teaching this course about religion and looking specifically at racialized, looking specifically at black American traditions and popular culture, examining race, gender, it just kind of felt in sync with what was going on at the time and what was mattering, you know, in the world. And for some students, I think it worked for them because, you know, the material that we were teaching then mattered in a different way.

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Marcus: I think at the time that I was teaching specifically the section on race and dealing with kind of racialized violence. And I was looking at the Nation of Islam and so on. That was around the time that we started to sort of see those protests that were taking place in America and students were, you know, contacting me just wanting to express for themselves how they felt that, you know, what they were studying mattered in a different way for them. So that was very unfortunate. But that was one of the most interesting things about teaching.

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Sarah: Yeah. What an amazing moment to be there with that content already and then have it apply so much more vividly, probably for your students.

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Marcus: Yes. Yes.

00:22:04:18 - 00:22:19:23

Sarah: And how did you feel navigating that? I mean, you're a black man yourself and teaching them. So were they, did you feel comfort or discomfort in the kinds of questions or emotions they were bringing to you in this in this moment from your students?

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Marcus: You know, it's hard to kind of like recall what I felt other than that, you know, I didn't know how to do it. I think one of the things I was thinking about at that time was, you know, what is my responsibility as a teacher? On the one hand, I'm supposed to help my students, I think, you know, become critically aware of what's going on and more now than ever, looking at how popular culture relates to, you know, other political, social and systemic issues in our society. But at the same time, I didn't want them to feel in any way that I was trying to politicize them or anything. And I think that was, you know, a really big concern for me as well.

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Marcus: How do I make you critical? How do I help you become critically aware of what is taking place and how popular culture relates to it? But, you know, I know some students can be very sensitive and think that I have a certain kind of agenda. So I really wanted to take an approach that I could make it work for everybody, for those who are very much, you know, concerned with what was going on at that time.

But but for those who maybe did not want this to be, you know, they didn't want any kind of, you know, agenda, you know, forced upon them through their teaching, through my teaching.

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Sarah: But I mean, of course, you're not, you weren't forcing an agenda, right? I mean, something changed for a lot of people at the end of May, with the murder of George Floyd, right, and then with I mean, still ongoing now. Right. The bigger, wider conversation that's long overdue about ongoing police brutality and murder of black men and women.

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Sarah: You're using these examples from popular culture, so let's dive into an example. What do you find to be an example that works really well with your students to use in a course, use maybe from this course, or the other one we can talk about as well in a moment, to approach this. Let's stay with this one, the really difficult question of race and racialized violence.

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Marcus: An artist by the name of T.I. I'm not, this is a hip hop artist, I'm not necessarily a fan of T.I., but he's...

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Sarah: OK. We don't have to be fans of everybody we teach.

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Marcus: He's an artist that, you know, has been within the last few years... He's an artist from Atlanta known for a certain kind of hip hop style called trap, called trap music. And I don't care to really get into what that is right now, but it's a certain kind of hip hop style.

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Marcus: But as of recently, within the past five years or so T.I. Has been very vocal, you know, and very active in the public sphere about political issues and stuff. Right. He's been kind of out there along with other people, you know, such as Killer Mike. Some of you guys can look up another Atlanta artist, you know, out in the public making political commentary. And one of the videos that I found of his and for those of you listening, you can find it on YouTube, was a video called Belief, What is Belief.

00:26:00:10 - 00:26:19:15

Marcus: Now, this was a very important video because at the same time, Mallory Nye had a chapter on belief, right. Where, you know, in dealing with what is religion, what is this question of belief and, you know, and is religion about fundamentally belief, and, you know, how do we kind of deconstruct that and went on blah, blah, blah?

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Marcus: But T.I.'s video Belief is very interesting, right. Because, you know, he's using this concept of, you know, belief, the video in itself is addressing police brutality of black kids. Right. So you start off, you know, looking at this video, you see T.I. on the one hand he's one T.I. hanging out in the neighborhood in Atlanta, talking with his friends on the stoop or the porch of their house about, you know, what police are doing to people.

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Marcus: And then you see another image of T.I. Within the same video who was represented as a kind of preacher. And so what you have in this video is like two TIs, kind of confronting each other over the same issue, one that represents the T.I. In the streets of Atlanta and the other T.I. Who's supposed to be kind of an archetype or participates in this kind of archetype of Dr. King or Malcolm X, who we see images of also throughout this video. And what's taking place in this video is TI is saying,

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Marcus: Hey, you want to talk about belief and this is the street T.I. Talking to the preacher to King, the conservative Dr. King T.I. Saying, hey, you want to talk about belief and what do I believe in? You think belief is going to change the world? I tell you what I believe in, and I believe that if I'm driving by myself and I see a police and a police pull me over, I believe that I will get, you know, killed. Right. So he says this and many other examples. And forgive me because I don't recall the lyrics in detail, but he's, you know, making this kind of ironic, you know. Looking at this irony of belief, all within the context of black racialized violence against black people, and it was so fascinating because the students are seeing on the one hand, they're seeing what Anthony B Penn calls complex subjectivity.

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Marcus: Right. You see you see a young gentleman, a black gentleman trying to deal with the racialized issues that he has to encounter in America and trying to find meaning out of that. He's in tension with, you know, these ideals of the Civil Rights era, but also trying to face today's generations, trying to confront issues in light of how they see things, and at the same time, he's questioning, you know, what is it that belief means, right? What is it that we really believe in? And so I recommend my viewers to check it out, or your viewers to check it out.

00:28:55:19 - 00:28:58:04

Sarah: Betsy just looked it up. We think it's called I Believe.

00:28:58:06 - 00:29:01:10

Marcus: I Believe. Right, I Believe.

00:29:01:12 - 00:29:31:07

Sarah: He's sort of highlighting then also this disjuncture, that belief is not just this like positive thing of believing in gods or redemption, but also believing in... belief is also the witnessing of, you know, participating and being subjected to things in this world that are deeply unfair, right. Like belief is also the here and now the construction of this, the construction of the space that's wildly unjust too. Right?

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Marcus: Right. Right. And I think that it's also, you know, and I'm glad that you brought it up the title was, I Believe, because, you know, one of the things that I ask my students, you know, in like one of the small responses is what does TI mean by I Believe? I Believe, when, you know, when he says this does belief have that connotation? Does it have the connotation of, you know, you know, a strong sense of belief, you know, so to speak, you know, like I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or I believe or is it, you know, a kind of weaker sense that's very much critical of a belief, as we may understand it.

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Marcus: And so. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Anyway, so that was one of the most fascinating, one of the more interesting, I think, examples that I use. And I got a lot of responses. It was one of the optional, I think,

writings or medias that my students could write on and quite a few of them wrote on that and they were able to really connect it well to both Mallory Nye's, you know, deconstruction of this notion of belief, as well as to what Anthony Penn discussed as complex subjectivity. Right. So bridging the kind of phenomenological and cultural aspects of Religion.

00:30:51:13 - 00:31:21:20

Sarah: And then how was your transition to online? I mean, I know that May and June, you were still very much like many of us in the, you know, emergency scramble to online. Right. Where we sort of, you know, the world changed in mid-March, and then, yeah, for teaching in that first summer university term of May and June, we were figuring out as we go, how to do this, and with some difficulties, of course. So what was your transition to online teaching like?

00:31:21:22 - 00:32:32:23

Marcus: It was a kind of tough transition at the time. You know, I had never taught online. The course that I had taught right before the summer had, you know, just at the very tail-end of the course and at the end of March, it shifted to online. So it was, there was a lot going on at the moment, me trying to learn new technologies as well as trying to decide, you know, exactly how to deliver the content. I chose to do pre-recorded lectures instead of live lectures hoping that would, you know, accommodate students more, because I had students that went back home some were in China and other places in Europe. So we were all on different schedules. So just, you know, I didn't have an idea yet of how to work out a kind of live teaching. So I did pre-recorded lectures, and that was tough as well, because, you know, for the first few sessions I spent, you know, nights, at least two nights or two days sometimes trying to record or to develop a lecture. And, you know, so that was really, really tough for me.

00:32:34:17 - 00:32:37:23

Sarah: Did you like rerecord things? Did you do it once and say that's not good enough?

00:32:37:25 - 00:32:49:00

Marcus: Yes, I rerecorded it over and over, just the way I feel about this podcast, the way that I feel about this podcast right now, I want to go back and do everything over and over.

00:32:49:03 - 00:32:57:17

Sarah: Oh, no, don't be too hard on yourself. But no, no, I hear you. I hear you. The first few times of watching yourself is pretty brutal.

00:32:57:23 - 00:33:22:00

Marcus: Right. And so that was the whole question like, oh, do I want to have my, you know, image on the screen or do I just want to be audio because I have TAed for online courses where, you know, that was just audio and slides, so do I want that, you know, and do I want to, like, write out my lectures and read it, no that's bogus, I've got to be me and have personality.

00:33:22:02 - 00:33:41:25

Marcus: So by the time, you know, we were halfway through the course, I started to become comfortable and I was able to do things in a shorter period of time. I was able to plan out my lecture notes and record maybe two or three times in a day at most. But yeah, at first it was like over and over and over. Yeah.

00:33:42:27 - 00:33:50:12

Sarah: Absolutely. And then where you conceiving, like were you recording an hour long lecture at a time or were you breaking it up or how were you doing those.

00:33:50:22 - 00:34:15:21

Marcus: I was breaking it up into trying to do no more than about 20 minute pieces. So maybe like two parts. Twenty minutes sometimes I went a little over. Yeah, sometimes I went over, but I try to maintain consistently like 20 minutes, part A, 20 minutes, part B,

00:34:16:00 - 00:34:32:20

Sarah: There's a lot of evidence, though, that, like asynchronous teaching is way more equitable and a lot of our students prefer it because they can then watch the lectures, you know, with the time that they have available. But did you feel like if you had to do this again, you would want to do it differently?

00:34:34:00 - 00:34:54:27

Marcus: I think, I would do it the same. I'm a little bit more comfortable now with recording, I think I would do it the same. Maybe I would try to allow for more space, for time for students to interact with me, you know, like a live session Zoom, like in terms of hours and scheduling something or scheduling time to actually meet with the students.

00:34:55:17 - 00:35:29:04

Marcus: But, you know, I guess my concern with the live format is how do students, you know, for students with maybe certain kind of hearing or, you know, disabilities and stuff, the issue with kind of, you know, making the material accessible to all of my students. So the cool thing about recording is that I can manipulate the captions as well, you know, on a platform on which I upload it so students have that option, they can go back and, you know, watch the material as much as they want.

00:35:30:03 - 00:36:02:22

Sarah: Right, right. Yeah, yeah, and are we really then providing the same experience to the people who can come in real time versus those who will catch it later because they were at work or in a different time zone? Yeah, it's a good question. I mean, I think there's no, we don't have good answers yet either. Right. We're still debating as we now are entering a prolonged year of online teaching in many institutions. We're still debating what the right answer is. And I think it seems to me, though, it also depends sometimes on the size of class, the institution, who the students are.

00:36:03:18 - 00:36:13:05

Sarah: So, I didn't ask you this, how many students were in this class? The May, June 100- level What on Earth Is Religion course? How many students did you have?

00:36:14:02 - 00:36:21:07

Marcus: 99 to 116. 99 students to 116, as well as the course that taught...

00:36:21:09 - 00:36:21:24

Sarah: That's big.

00:36:22:03 - 00:36:34:26

Marcus: Yeah, the course that I taught, you know, the Asian religions course as well was that same size of about 99 to I think I had 107 max out there. Yeah. So it's a pretty big course.

00:36:34:28 - 00:36:49:06

Sarah: Let's switch to talk about that Asian religions, great books of Asia course. So it looks at the Asian traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. My first question is what are these great books and who decides what these great books are?

00:36:50:19 - 00:36:58:16

Marcus: Well, one thing is that I definitely don't decide, I think it's already predetermined before me when I get in, you know, and this also has to do with, you know...

00:37:00:16 - 00:37:01:02

Sarah: The canon!

00:37:01:04 - 00:37:15:07

Marcus: The canon, and, you know, it's just those titles, right, that's how we title courses to hopefully be provocative. What on Earth Is Religion? We all know that religion is a complicated concept, but what on earth is it... Let's talk about what is a great book

00:37:16:08 - 00:37:20:18

Sarah: It's called The Hook! We're trying to hook them.

00:37:20:20 - 00:37:51:17

Marcus: Yeah. So, you know, we look at, you know, the Bhagavad Gita, the story of Rama, you know, the Dhammapada, Lotus Sutra. Right. So we do have a selection. I have, you know, a selection of books that I looked at and there were somethings that I just wasn't sure about. What should I be looking at? It was one of those courses that when I signed on to teach it, I really didn't know what was really expected of me, and I really had to think about, like, how much can I play with it?

00:37:52:11 - 00:38:33:18

Marcus: The person who taught the course before me when TAed it, Joseph LaRose, right, he taught the course. And Joseph LaRose was, by the way, was a student of Shayne Clark's at McMaster. He was a Sanskrit guy and he taught that course for a while. And what he did was not really focus on books per se, but focus on stories, what are so-called great stories. And he really focused in on, you know, two stories, the story of Rama and also the story of Buddha. And he looked you know, he spent, you know, the first half of the course looking at the story of Rama, its traditional tellings and also looking at how it's been retold by different groups of people.

00:38:33:25 - 00:39:07:12

Marcus: You know, how has it been told by Buddhists? How has it been told by Jains? How has it been told in popular culture? Right, so he was kind of working his way up with this great story that has supposedly, you know, influence, a major influence in Asian culture or Indian culture, so to speak. And in looking at how it's been retold and then working with the story of the Buddha, you know, this kind of academic telling of the Buddha and then other kind of tellings of the Buddha, you know, through popular culture and so on.

00:39:07:14 - 00:39:28:25

Marcus: Right. So it was really kind of a focused approach like that. When Mark Rowe taught the course, he went through the basic, you know, from book to book, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Lotus

Sutra, but he focused on the meanings. He just kind of, you know, a course more so about the meaning of life and what these books tell us about the meaning of life.

00:39:30:00 - 00:39:49:04

Marcus: When I taught the course, what I really wanted to focus on were books and transmission, looking at how people in the world over in North America, so to speak, how they received and accepted these books and also gave these books their own kind of meanings.

00:39:49:08 - 00:40:31:09

Marcus: It wasn't so much that I wanted my students, you know, to know that these books were great because other people accepted them, but I wanted my students to see specifically how was it that people outside of the cultures in which these books emerged, how did people outside of those cultures accept these books? And let's look specifically not at Beatles or Alan Watts and Suzuki transmitting the books over, you know books on Asian Buddhism or what have you, but let's look specifically at how black American cultural producers accepted these.

00:40:31:13 - 00:41:00:29

Marcus: So what I started to do in that course was take the things that I was learning in my research on Afro-Asia and, you know, taking all that I've learned there, you know, about people like John Coltrane, about people like the Wu Tang Clan, about people like Dead Prez, Tina Turner and their encounters with Asian traditions, cultures, philosophies and books and seeing if I can work this into the course as I was going to teach it.

00:41:01:01 - 00:41:18:16

Sarah: Yeah, very cool. So basically every week you were also presenting books, but in combination with these foils or I don't know if we should call them contrasts, but you're kind of contrasting them with examples from modern black American culture and popular culture.

00:41:19:04 - 00:41:25:18

Marcus: Yeah, I wouldn't say that I was contrasting. I guess. Yeah. Yeah, that was a contrast.

00:41:25:20 - 00:41:35:18

Sarah: Or how they coproduced. Let's go into an example and maybe you can explain it, explain to us what what you did with it. So one of the contrasts I saw in your syllabus was from Krishna to KRS-One.

00:41:36:06 - 00:41:38:04

Marcus: Right. Right. Great.

00:41:38:21 - 00:41:40:14

Sarah: So what did you do with that?

00:41:40:27 - 00:42:01:11

Marcus: So Krishna to KRS-One, that was one of the first examples that I used. And this came after our discussion of the Bhagavad Gita. We had went through the Vedas, the Upanishads, and we worked our way up to the Bhagavad Gita. And so the students already kind of had a foundation on some of these kind of basic Indian, foundational Indian texts.

00:42:02:12 - 00:42:53:14

Marcus: Now, for viewers who don't know, KRS-One is a hip hop artist, one of the early hip hop artists from the 1980s. He's still around today making music, and he also kind of presents himself as kind of a priest of hip hop culture, one who's taken hip hop to academia, to the philosophers, and shown how hip hop is in and of itself a culture with its own kind of systems and ways of being in addition to this kind of philosophy. And so, KRS-One, he's been very pivotal in things such as the Stop the Violence movement in the 90s, he also created this kind of temple of hip hop, this organization that, you know, that that looked at hip hop as a kind of culture and of religion in itself.

00:42:53:21 - 00:43:40:25

Marcus: And he's published books such as Ruminations: A Philosophical Outlook on Urban Hip-Hop in early 2000s. And he's since then, he's also published another text called the Gospel of Hip-Hop. So which is kind of like a Bible in itself of hip hop culture. Right. So he's a very important person for the culture in its early beginnings up until now, he's he's very, very active. So KRS- One acronym for Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone has a very interesting backstory as well as it relates to the Bhagavad Gita. One thing that students learn is that KRS-One, as he describes it, actually came from Krishna itself. Right.

00:43:40:27 - 00:44:05:29

Marcus: So KRS-One tells the story often of him being homeless in the Bronx, New York, and working at a homeless shelter or living there and encountering a group of Hare Krishnas. And according to him, these Hare Krishnas one day approach him in the homeless shelter and say, hey, if you help us distribute food to people, then we will give you a book of the Bhagavad Gita.

00:44:06:07 - 00:44:52:23

Marcus: And KRS-One says that he took up the offer and he said that the Bhagavad Gita really became his first spiritual experience. Now, this is when he was about 16 or 15, again in the Bronx, New York, as a homeless kid. So there's footage out there that I showed my students of KRS-One in the UK at the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, a location, one of the locations in the UK, right, and he's there and he's talking to the people just visiting the place and they are recording that, and, you know, he's telling them all about his experience of the Bhagavad Gita. He tells them how he gets his names and he tells them what the Bhagavad Gita means to him.

00:44:53:13 - 00:45:43:12

Marcus: And there are at least three things that we find. One, that KRS-One is short for Krishna itself. You know, the God and the Bhagavad Gita text, two the Bhagavad Gita text resonated with KRS-One because it was a story about the war. You know, it was in the larger context of the Mahabharata and it was a story about the war. And for him, that paralleled so well with his own experience in the Bronx, New York in the 80s in which, you know, the Bronx was a really terrible place to live then. Right. He was homeless, there was a lot of gang turf wars and stuff. So he was like, yo, you know, telling these people that that resonated with me. He also says the book in itself, if you look at the name of the Krishna in itself, it means the black one. And so, wow, that resonates even with me more.

00:45:44:11 - 00:46:42:18

Marcus: Oh, and not only that, guess what the Bhagavad Gita means the song of the Lord. These brothers, way back in the ancient days, they were rhyming. They were kicking raps. Right. This resonates with me. I'm an emcee. I'm Emcee Krishna means black, and, you know, this is about war. And I'm in the Bronx. Oh, man. This is me. This is me. This is my first spiritual experience. Now, KRS one, doesn't mean

by that that he's actually, you know, a Hare Krishna in any kind of sense. But what I would have my students look at and looking at what he's doing, I would ask, like on the one hand, how was KRS-One's interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, how does it reflect kind of standard accounts of what the Bhagavad Gita is and what it means? And there's evidence of him talking about, you know, setting aside while this text is about this, you know, this it has to do with like a kind of Krishna consciousness and that transcends what is about Dharma duties.

00:46:42:23 - 00:47:10:02

Marcus: So that's there. But I will also ask my students to look at what are the kind of non-standard ways that he interprets to text. What additional is he bringing to the text that comes from his own experience? So while I have my students look at this content, look at this media and observe what he's doing, it's a very short piece and it's two videos. And if you want it, I can find it online to send it to you later.

00:47:10:18 - 00:47:12:14

Sarah: I would love to put a link on our show notes.

00:47:12:16 - 00:47:46:25

Marcus: Yeah, right. And I would say, you know, what else is he bringing to it? And many of my students and the assignment that they had for that project, they were able to, you know, listen to KRS-One and see what he was adding to it. Well, he obviously sees, he thinks that Krishna is blackness, even though that culturally, you know, that the color of Krishna may have some kind of other significance that has not the racialized significance that we may attribute to it today. But for KRS-One, that's very important. Obviously, he sees a connection between rap and a song of God that's very important.

00:47:47:03 - 00:48:30:24

Marcus: Obviously, he sees a connection between the war that's taking place in the Bhagavad Gita or in this larger, you know, corpus of the Mahabharata and he sees that as a connection with this, you know, growing up on the streets in Brooklyn, New York. So in that sense, what I was having my students do was to look at how people were appropriating these texts, looking at the ways that they interpret these texts. By standard, I guess we can say just for now, standard interpretations versus, you know, the stuff that they bring to it. And so I guess there you do have that kind of contrast. There is a kind of contrast going on.

00:48:31:28 - 00:48:57:00

Sarah: Yeah, what is the difference between, like, calling something appropriation, because also, I mean, appropriation in our own present is also often a negative thing, right? Cultural appropriation can be negative, especially when there's a hierarchy between that appropriation, between those positions of power. So is it appropriation or is it an interpretation? What's, what were you trying to show your students with this?

00:48:57:02 - 00:49:40:16

Marcus: Yeah, well, one of the things that's a really good question, because one of the things is that I allow my students to struggle over that. You know, what do we call it? Is this some form of cultural appropriation or, you know, what do you call it? How do you think about that? How do you feel about that? And it was really fascinating because, you know, I had a T.A that was working for me who were doing the tutorials, and she would come and give me feedback on how the students were responding to this media, because it was often in tutorials where they were able to look at the media and talk about it

among their friends, their peers. Whereas in a class, I would just give them the background information about KRS-One and the artist that we were discussing for that week.

00:49:40:29 - 00:50:44:16

Marcus: And, you know, some of the responses that I got specifically with KRS-One or later on, like with Tina Turner or the Black Panther and so on, was that, you know, some students were saying, hey, you know, I come from this kind of culture that's this background in India. But, you know, when white people do this, when I see white people kind of appropriating my culture or using the culture and, you know, taking Buddhism or Indian texts, doing yoga and stuff, sometimes I feel a little uneasy about it. But for some reason, it really doesn't bother me that much. You know, when I see, you know, a black person doing it when I see someone like KRS-One, you know, talking about his encounter with these texts, because there seems to be yeah, it's it's kind of appropriation, but there's a little bit more to it. You can see the sincerity, you know, with it. And I'm not trying to say that that's necessarily true. But but that's how students were kind of reacting to it.

00:50:44:18 - 00:51:08:15

Marcus: And so I found a lot of feedback where students were appreciating, just seeing, you know, for the first time looking at how, you know, these texts in China, in India, you know, get received by a black artist and used in creative ways. So it was just something novel to do that just opened up a different world.

00:51:09:24 - 00:52:26:18

Sarah: And there's another really great example that you showed us of an assignment that you used that I wanted to go into some depth with you about in here. So you gave students an assignment where they were going to write about the Buddhist undertones of song by the Dead Prez. So Learning, Growing, Changing, a song from their from their LP Information Age. Right. I didn't know this song at all before, but I looked it up and listened because you sent the link and it was so cool and so Buddhist. Right. So, yeah. I mean, they quote the Eightfold Path in the song. Right. So, and then you asked in this assignment, though, you told them this is not a research paper, instead, I'm asking you to think about how the great books are, in this case, the great book is the Buddhist text of the Eightfold Path, I guess, how they're appropriated or thought about or used outside of their traditional context. And you asked them, what's the purpose? What's going on here? So I wanted to ask you, in reflecting on this assignment, like, first of all, I mean, describe a little bit more for our listeners what this Learning, Growing, Changing song is about to you, but then what's the purpose of teaching them about this adaptation?

00:52:27:00 - 00:52:47:03

Marcus: OK, so first thing I should say, you know, about Dead Prez itself, this is a hip hop group that came out in the late 90s, about '99, and their music had a very kind of revolutionary Marxist, socialist, Pan-Africanist tone to it. No, it didn't have a tone to it, that's what it actually was.

00:52:48:13 - 00:52:50:20

Sarah: These guys, this is what they're passionate about still, right?

00:52:50:27 - 00:53:54:02

Marcus: This is what they're passionate about still, even though I would say that now their music has kind of changed over the years, it's still that, but they've kind of gotten away from a lot of the revolutionary rhetoric to start to focusing on this kind of self-development, self-help that you can't really

change. You know, the best way, the best revolution is the revolution of the inner self, as opposed to trying to change the world. But that has kind of, we see that in our music now. A lot of their music, for an example, know one of the artists by the name of Stic has started, he's made two albums called The Workout, you can find this online. I don't think there are actually disc copies out there. But, you know, it's basically conceptual albums about exercise, meditation, yoga and so on. Right, and this becomes a kind of a revolutionary practice in itself. But yeah, they're still very committed to the cause, I would say, but just kind of in a different style, at least for one of those artists, stic.man.

00:53:55:09 - 00:54:51:03

Marcus: But yeah, they came out in the late 90s with Let's Get Free, their first debut album, which was very revolutionary and very anti-religion in some respects, at least in terms of Christianity. They weren't fond of Christianity. You know, that's the slave man's religion and its used in a sense, in a Marxist sense to them, you know, is the opium of the masses, and so we don't need that. But later on, they would be very become susceptible to Asian religious traditions, even, you know, their symbols that they use for the group back then, you know, the hexagram from the I Ching was a sign of kind of, you know, military formation. So they were already appropriating Asian stuff in their early text that was very much critical of religion. But there was kind of an acceptance of Asian material. So anyway, that's the back story.

00:54:51:09 - 00:54:58:28

Sarah: So, like, they were consciously choosing like Asian symbolism, so as an alternative to Christian symbolism?

00:55:00:18 - 00:55:20:21

Marcus: Yes. So yeah, they were choosing it as an alternative. I think there was, you know, one song Psychology, one of the artists on that song. He says, "My mother's praying. I listen close to what she's saying. When she speaks of Jesus, I ignore, but when is practical, I'm all for".

00:55:21:02 - 00:56:09:03

Marcus: And another verse says in a song called Assassination on Let's Get Free, and you can find the song again on YouTube, You know, they're talking about assassinating, you know, I guess the government officials or the president. It's a very violent undertoned song. But the artist says, one of the artists says at first, "Screw the Bible, get on your knees and praise my rifle". And then in a later verse on that same song about the other artist stic.man, he says something to the effect "I read the artist Tsung Tzu in a couple of f-ing days used to practice Kung Fu this brother thats just like double my age". And he says it more or less kind of harsh terms or derogatory terms we would think of.

00:56:09:21 - 00:56:33:07

Marcus: But in this case, you have this juxtaposition of an outright refusal of the Christian tradition, but at the same time a kind of acceptance of these kind of East Asian discourses of, you know, Tsung Tzu's Art of War, or morals of martial arts, which are going to be very important for them and for many other blacks.

00:56:34:25 - 00:57:07:25

Marcus: When we get to Learning, Growing, Changing, this is an album that came out, this was a song that came out on an album, Information Age, which I think was released in about 2013. And what's really interesting, you know, setting the song aside for right now, if you look at the artwork and of the album on which that song is located, you see the image of the Buddha on the front of that album cover, an image of the Buddha from Kamakura, in Kamakura, Japan, a big statue of the Buddha.

00:57:08:09 - 00:57:11:05

Sarah: Right. The famous large stone Kamakura Buddha.

00:57:11:19 - 00:57:38:18

Marcus: You see that. You see images of Uncle Sam in the background. You see all of this stuff that's supposed to be signifying on the fact that we're living in the kind of information age and the government conspiracy or whatever. And just below that Buddha statue, you see fists that are coming up out of the ground like black fists pumped up, you know, signifying kind of the black radical tradition or the revolutionary tradition.

00:57:38:27 - 00:58:46:27

Marcus: You open the artwork of that of that CD case as well, you look at the cover art inside and you see a Pyramid of Giza flanked by two images of very important people in the Afro-Asian tradition, Malcolm X on one side of the pyramid, right, the Nation of Islam's Malcolm X, the black internationalist, Malcolm X. You also see an image of Bruce Lee, right. Which signifies on this tradition of the black connection with kung fu and not just black Americans fascination with kung fu because Bruce Lee himself represents, for many black Americans, or for some black Americans, so to speak, in this tradition as a kind of revolutionary figure himself, a person against anti-racism, colonialism and so on that's represented in his movies Fist of Fury, Chinese Connection and so on. And, you know, that resonates with black people on a level, you know, of the post civil rights generation that resonates with these people on the level that's anti-racist, anti-colonial as well it's just freaking cool, the martial artists.

00:58:47:21 - 00:59:15:29

Marcus: So there's a lot of signifying going on that works there with this kind of whole black Afro-Asian moment that's going on that we can work on, and when I look at that album cover, it's not just about Buddhism, but it's about the kind of larger intercultural connections between black and Asia. Now in the song called Learning, Growing and Changing, it is a song that is explicitly about Buddhism in some sense

00:59:16:05 - 01:00:02:29

Marcus: Yes, you're right it quotes The Eightfold Path at the end, and the song in itself is talking about, you know, the fact that we cannot live, we cannot carry on living, you know, or we going to be stagnant if we cannot adapt to change, right. What I wanted my students to get from that was on the one hand that, you know, I wanted them to recognize of course, he's citing the Eightfold Path, they're citing that, but I wanted to know how exactly was the song a Buddhist song, and could they find content in the lyrics or suggestions there that tied into things that we had been learning over the course, you know, over the course of talking about the Dhammapada and so on, you know, about the Four Noble Truths and all of that.

01:00:03:09 - 01:00:21:15

Marcus: I wanted them to see if they can pick up on this notion of change in itself and how change and impermanence was imported Buddhist concepts, because that was something that was very subtle in the lyrics. It wasn't made explicitly clear that this has to do with Buddhism, but that's where I wanted them to pick up on an allusion to.

01:00:23:20 - 01:00:52:18

Marcus: One of the artists, M-1's reference to cycles and cycles and this notion of kind of Samsara, right, because we had already talked about that and I just wanted them to like, look at this song on the one

hand to see if they could, you know, get not only the obvious Buddhist allusions, but to see if they could take what they've learned about Buddhism already in the class and see how this song is more or less indeed a Buddhist song by drawing on some of the concepts that these artists are kind of referring to.

01:00:52:24 - 01:01:41:15

Marcus: And, of course, what they would have also gained from this project as well, because we have spent some time alluding to Dead Prez, you know, since the beginning of the course, I started out the course in the very beginning, on the first day talking about Dead Prez so I wanted to introduce them to these guys early to give them a kind of taste of what the course was. But they would have also been prepared to kind of understand those things that I just, you know, share with you preceding my talk about the song specifically. Right, to understand what's going on with the song as a Buddhist song, but also to understand how it is culturally significant too in this other context, this black connection to Asia, to Bruce Lee and, you know, this kind of radical Buddhism, so to speak. So I don't know if I answered your question there.

01:01:41:29 - 01:02:36:06

Sarah: No, absolutely you did. Your descriptions are really, really helpful to me. And I'm sure to go to our audience, too. And I love how you put that, that you wanted them to see that the song is not just about Buddhism, but also about this cultural exchange or this, you know, this kind of a construction of these pieces that then add up to a sort of different results. Right. Like they're making an argument through the selection of images, through the selection of words and the way they're recontextualizing then this idea of, you know, the right action, right thought, the right path, on the Eightfold Path, but they're positioning that in terms of, you know, a different argument is being constructed with that. And it's an argument about black empowerment, and their own emancipation. Right. Liberation in the mind, I guess.

01:02:36:08 - 01:03:17:01

Marcus: Right. Right. And if you wanted it and if you wanted to push it, you know, this ties back in to like the black Asian solidarity movements of the late 60s and the 70s with the Black Panthers, you know, the Black Panthers connecting with Mao, with Chairman Mao, you know, in their fight against Euro American imperialism. All of that, the images, and all of that stuff that you see there on that on that cover, on that disk, that, CD, you know, harkens back to these kind of Afro-Asian revolutionary moments of the late 60s and early 70s and, you know. Yeah. So yeah, it's really great.

01:03:18:03 - 01:03:40:08

Sarah: Oh, and sorry I misspoke that the Kamakura Buddha is bronze not stone. I'm a Buddhist art historian so I get really hung up on the technical details. I had to look him up for a second. He's a 13th century Japanese, but large bronze, monumental Buddha, a beautiful, beautiful statue. Have you ever visited it in real life?

01:03:40:10 - 01:03:43:18

Marcus: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I have an image there.

01:03:43:26 - 01:04:16:05

Sarah: You also contextualized this... We haven't we haven't said this yet, but you gave your students a reading. So it's Ellie Hisama and she has an article. She's a musicologist. Right? And you gave them an article called "We're All Asian Really: Hip Hop's Afro-Asian Crossings." And I read this article preparing

for the interview today. Really interesting. Really cool. Do you want to give our listeners a synopsis of what her arguments are and how this was useful, why you gave it to your students?

01:04:16:21 - 01:04:50:24

Marcus: So I guess there's about two to three things I can say. One, if you look at this article, and the reason why I gave it to you, especially, is because what she's trying to say is that basically if we look at hip hop culture, hip hop music, we see a lot of Orientalists or representations, a lot of Asian representations throughout the course of hip hop music. And she's writing, I think she's published this article in about 2005. So, you know, she's talking about hip hop, you know, from the 90s up until about 2005, that era.

01:04:51:09 - 01:05:01:09

Sarah: Yeah. Her examples were Wu Tang Clan, Afu-Ra, Jeru the Damaja, Foxy Brown, Dead Prez, and then some Asian-American rappers.

01:05:02:04 - 01:05:46:23

Marcus: Right. And so what she's trying to say there, her real argument aside from the Asian rapper that she discusses at the end, insofar as it relates to black Americans, she's touching on a point that we talked about earlier. She's trying to say that if we look at these Asian representations, how Asian culture is appropriated through hip hop, we will notice that there is a kind of orientalism that's present there. There is indeed a kind of appropriating Asia romanticizing Asia, and in some ways, you know, this appropriation participates in what we may think of as mainstream orientalism associated with colonialism and white orientalism.

01:05:48:04 - 01:06:53:02

Marcus: And what she wants to say is that. Despite that, the Orientalism is slightly different, right? That, yes, Orientalism and it is problematic, but at the same time it's a way of black Americans in each case, whether it's through the Wu Tang Clan, whether it's Afu-Ra, Jeru the Damaja, or Dead Prez or Foxy Brown, you know, it's a way of blacks re-signifying on their identities. And in some ways and sometimes this orientalism is more or less progressive than others. So I think with the Wu Tang Clan, for instance, she talks about how, you know, the Orientalist outlook on Asian males has kind of feminized males, Asian males in kind of mainstream discourse sometimes, but Wu Tang Clan, what they do is kind of, you know, reinforce this notion of Asian male masculinity, especially during an encounter with the whole kung fu genre and stuff.

01:06:53:04 - 01:07:30:05

Marcus: Right. So there's this kind of masculine, masculinity association with the East Asian cultures as opposed to this kind of feminization of the Asian male in the case of Foxy Brown and, you know, women appropriating, you know, Orientalist representations. This has to do with black women re-signifying, you know, themselves as sexual beings, which is in some ways is embraced, but it kind of alters derogatory representations of black women and how they are a sex. So it's a really a kind of a complicated story...

01:07:30:29 - 01:07:35:17

Sarah: Like, reassert that as a space of power rather than a space of disempowerment.

01:07:35:19 - 01:08:13:08

Marcus: Right. And you find other people, you know, like let's say like Bill V Mullen, who wrote a book called Afro-Orientalism, dealing with the history, mainly with the history of, you know, the black

connections to Asia through Marxism in the in the life of W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright and some other African-American intellectuals and activists. But you see him too take in this Orientalism concept and signifying it as Afro-Orientalism, to try to get at the uniqueness of Orientalism as it relates to the black political history and culture.

01:08:13:14 - 01:08:56:06

Marcus: How the Orientalism has been, on the one hand, has something very romantic, but also a way of identifying with the East as its political other in solidarity against an imperial, Imperialist and capitalist west, so to speak. And there are other people too, such as Deborah Whaley in her article Black Bodies/Yellow Mask and Orientalists, Authenticity and Hip Hop and Black Visual Culture. She deals with these kind of, you know, the sketches of Orientalism and so on. And what exactly do we mean by Orientalism, black Orientalism, as opposed to Oriental as a mainstream persay?

01:08:56:26 - 01:09:28:15

Marcus: So anyway, the point is, is that that's what Hisama is doing in that article. However, my intentions weren't that in depth when I gave my article to the students. When I gave that article to the students, I gave it to them in advance prior to the course, because I knew that if they read that article, they would have, you know, a chance to encounter some of the people that we were going to be talking about, you know, throughout the course.

01:09:28:17 - 01:09:56:02

Marcus: So it was just really kind of a preparation for them to prepare them to see, you know, where we're at, a kind of cultural context. But I wasn't really focusing on the Orientalists aspect of it. And then by the time when we got to Dead Prez and they had their assignment on Dead Prez, when I gave them the assignment instructions, I told them specifically in what pages in that article they could read to get a kind of sense of who Dead Prez is, and I would talk about them as well in the class.

01:09:56:08 - 01:10:34:24

Marcus: And I found that Hisama's article, you know, there is something very subtle about her argument, but at the same time, I think is very accessible, is just a kind of a survey of the Afro Asian confluences or cultural exchanges in popular culture. So that's how I was really using it for that course. And I think I could do so much more with it if I had framed it the course a little differently, if I really wanted to make the course an Afro-Asian course, I could have maybe manipulated it or used it a lot more. But it was more so a kind of survey point for the students.

01:10:35:03 - 01:10:57:07

Sarah: So I have a question. I mean, you clearly are also teaching anti-racism really through content, right. Through centering really other voices and other examples, right. But have you also thought about like antiracist teaching, in terms of pedagogy?

01:10:58:03 - 01:12:10:18

Marcus: You know, I think that, you know, just a very... How can I put this... When I was teaching that course, the course on the great books of Asian religions, and I decided to incorporate, you know, black American voices into this. I found it, I was thinking about it in a way of decentering whiteness, you know, so to speak, and looking at the narrative of, you know, transmission, you know, the transmission of Asian texts to, you know, to North America, you know, by decentering kind of, the white gaze, so to speak. And just thinking about, you know, what other kind of voices can I include. Right. So to include these black cultural producers and stuff in there does a lot of work, you know, in the classroom in itself.

And hopefully, you know, it inspires, you know, students of different backgrounds, you know, just to encounter the person next to them, I don't know or an other, so to speak.

01:12:12:01 - 01:13:05:14

Marcus: I mean, even in hip hop studies right now, hip hop and religion, you have like Monica Miller and Christopher R Driscoll at Lehigh University, you know, who just wrote a book called Method and Identity: Manufacturing, Critical Distance in the Field of Religion. And what they're doing is, you know, kind of being critical of our so-called critical perspective in religion. Right. This notion that we can be objectively critical. Right. You know, we can take this non phenomenological approach in criticism, but yet we have to step out and look at the critical, be critical of the critical itself and its kind of colorblindness, so to speak. And so they can ask questions like, well, why are we not using you know, we talk about Eliade and, you know, and these other these other, you know, intellectual giants.

01:13:05:16 - 01:13:23:23

Marcus: Why are we not looking at Charles Long? Charles H. Long, the late African-American scholar who was also a scholar at the University of Chicago, along with Eliade, Kitagawa, Joseph Kitagawa and so on. Right. You know, why are we not looking at his theoretical material in our theory courses?

01:13:23:25 - 01:13:38:07

Marcus: In terms of pedagogy I just think about what are the voices that I actually can bring into the course to kind of challenge just a standard way that we do it. And I think that has effectiveness in itself, maybe even in just the people that we attract to the courses.

01:13:38:15 - 01:14:12:13

Marcus: You know, when I taught my course the Great Books of Asian Religions, it was so fascinating because when I looked into the audience of, like, you know, anywhere 90 to 100 students, maybe like 80 or 70 something actually came to class, but it was the first time that I saw a lot of black, I'm assuming people, you know, black students or students of color, maybe black Canadian or having some other ethnic background. But in the audience, I had never really seen that in a religious studies course.

01:14:12:16 - 01:14:52:18

Marcus: Usually when I'm in my religious studies courses, yes, I see the white, the brown. And then there's always me, the oddball from Kentucky Black American and Kentuckian guy. But, you know, I'm there, you know, I'm alone. So when I taught that course, I was so thrilled that I had this really kind of diverse audience and I don't know what to attribute that to. Was it the syllabus that I presented, you know, did that appeal to them? You know, I don't know. Was it because of me, the color, the racialized person that was teaching? But I saw what I was doing as in some ways anti-racist in some sense by opening this up to diversity.

01:14:52:23 - 01:15:16:15

Sarah: And I'm sure it was both right. I'm sure both you and the syllabus, right. You really created something, a different possibility that then brought in more students for whom that conversation wasn't possible before. So kudos. That's awesome. We need a lot more. I mean, there's a lot more work to be done in the academy, right, and in universities, I mean, in our wider society. Right.

01:15:17:02 - 01:15:53:17

Marcus: There's a lot more to be done. And I think that, you know, just including different voices, just being, you know, part of it is pedagogical, but also part of it is just related to our research and looking

for sources that we can use, you know, sorting through archival sources that we can use, you know, for teaching. You know, I think somebody who works on something in a similar vein as me, but it's much more Buddhist studies focussed, a colleague named Adeana McNicholl. Yeah, Adeana McNicholl, you know, she published an article not too long ago Being Buddha, Staying Woke: Racial Formations in Black Buddhist Writings.

01:15:53:19 - 01:16:10:00

Marcus: You know, so I'm looking at what she's doing and what her and Ann Gleig are doing in Toronto, like, you know, archiving, bringing together these diverse sources on black Buddhists. You know, that's a really good starting point, right.

01:16:10:14 - 01:16:43:23

Sarah: Yeah. We're looking forward to seeing what they're what they're going to do this year with with that project. We're working with them to build a kind of database or something where more of that material can be brought into into conversation and into people's awareness for teaching and other reasons. Exactly. For research, right. We don't have to keep asking the same same questions and looking at the same voices exclusively. There's been a lot more production and exchange as you've as you've shown today too, so you can hopefully work with them as well.

01:16:44:15 - 01:17:04:21

Sarah: Well, thank you so much for talking with us so honestly and openly about your teaching today and your choices. I think you're making a really fantastic intervention in the two classes that you've taught so far. And hey, I'm excited, I mean, you've already brought some change into people's lives, surely, and I'm excited for all the teaching you'll get to do in the future, too.

01:17:04:26 - 01:17:05:27

Marcus: Thank you. Thank you.

01:17:07:11 - 01:17:56:07

Sarah: You can find more information about Marcus and the program at McMaster on the department's website. We'll post a link in the show notes. Notes and a full transcript can be found on our website, TeachingBuddhism.net. We invite you to subscribe to this podcast through Apple, or, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. We would especially like to hear from you about what you think about today's episode. Please get in touch with us however you prefer. Send us an email or a message on Facebook where we're The Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Thanks to our multitalented creative director, Dr. Betsy Moss for managing the technical details and our contributing producer, Dr. Francis Garrett. This podcast is supported by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. Thanks for listening and be well.