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MANIFEST TECHNIQUE



Mark Villegas

In my book, *Manifest Technique: Hip Hop, Empire, and Visionary Filipino American Culture*, whose title is a play on “manifest destiny,” I show the following: Filipino American hip hop expressions in military migratory flows, political and spiritual redemptions with turns toward Islam as well as global Muslim solidarity, funky futuristic worldmaking in what I call Afro-Filipino Futurism, and Filipino Americans’ complex modern postures in dance.

Filipino American hip hop expressions, or what I call a hip hop vernacular, testify to empire’s enacting of colonial/neocolonial migration, racialization, and amnesia. Spanish colonialism had upended the spiritual worldviews of people from the archipelago since the sixteenth century. The U.S. form of colonialism in the Philippines, however, was more pernicious in its amnesia: the U.S. is seen as somehow innocent of military expansion, occupation, and genocide, a problem compounded by the presence of built monuments and tales that perpetuate the white man’s burden and manifest destiny.

In response to this forgetting, Filipino Americans manifest funky techniques. Hip hop has been the most popular cultural form of expression for several generations of Filipino Americans, who have been collaborating in and contributing to Black popular culture even before hip hop existed and before it became solidified as a popular genre. For Filipino Americans, hip hop has provided an everyday cultural space to deconstruct U.S. exceptionalism, reveal buried history, and help us to imagine a better future. Filipino Americans have been reauthoring the terms of their relationship to nation, civilization, and the universe in inventive ways. As supposed beneficiaries of benevolent assimilation, Filipino Americans have been exposing and unsettling vertical axes of U.S. racial hierarchies. My book chapters reveal the creativity and vision involved in crafting these efforts.

The gaps that purportedly make up Filipino American culture can be reimagined as neurological synapses. Within the gaps of knowledge, Filipino American culture flourishes. The supposed lack of Filipino culture and history, a deficiency that has been deemed savage, *enables* memory as a practice, what Juan Flores calls “putting-on-record” or “the gathering and sorting of materials from the past in accordance with the needs and interests of the present.” I argue that hip

hop has been central to Filipino American memory-making, despite the general minimization of the genre's prominence in Filipino American communities. My book is concerned not so much with a cataloging of the contributions of Filipino American artists within hip hop in order to "correct the record." Instead, it is the prevalence of erasure that I find productive and interesting. Cultural practices abound despite a lack of documentation and permanence. The creative expressions emanating from Filipino American culture thrive because of their present-tense nature. In this way, a Filipino American hip hop vernacular works as an agentic mode of expression as much as a project of remembering. The savages are the folklorists, the authors of history.

For Filipino Americans, hip hop has opened a universe of reimagining the self and fostered very real political collaborations for social change. In 2010, the Native Guns released the song "Handcuffs" to honor the memory of 22-year-old Oscar Grant who was killed by a transit police officer in Oakland, California, on New Year's Day. Grant was handcuffed, pinned down, punched, and shot in the back at point-blank range. The execution-style killing was followed by local protests, spurring renewed national attention to police violence against Black people. After chanting the names of African Americans recently taken at the hands of the police, Kiwi raps in the song "Handcuffs":

We sick of just yellin "No justice, no peace"
Déjà vu, 1992, pause and repeat
All the tension been buildin, it's gotten to a peak
It's a Molotov party, and we brought our own drinks.

The Native Guns' musical catalog is part of a broader cultural response to police violence, adding to hip hop's reputation of documenting and communicating the practice of racial profiling. At the time, "Handcuffs" was their latest contribution to seemingly permanent problems in U.S. policing. As if our world is a piece of film caught in a loop, Kiwi intimates that little social progress has been made over decades of police abuse, protest, riots, calls for peace, promises . . . and repeat. The images of rage and revolt in the Native Guns' song "Handcuffs" could apply to any number of episodes of police violence against African Americans before Oscar Grant and after.

In 2012, the *Seattle Times* invited Filipino American emcee Geologic to write a guest column on a rash of gun violence in Seattle. Instead of an essay, Geo wrote "May Day," a song that criticizes society's double standard of attitudes on gun violence and policing, which shifts depending on the race of victims and perpetrators and on the neighborhood where violence occurs. "May Day" pricks at the conscience of Seattle, which prides itself on its supposed cultural liberalism but maintains residential segregation. In the hook of "May Day," Geo reveals a north/south divide in Seattle, with the latter being more Black, brown, and working class, and the former being more white, wealthy, and thus deemed by some to be worthier of protection.

Geo raps:

Shots fired in the South End, nobody cares
Shots fired in the North End, everybody scared
Nothing they can do for us that we can't do ourselves
Point the finger at the mirror instead of somebody else.

It seems that we must be constantly reminded of the tension between American society's inherent violence as seen in earlier episodes of manifest destiny *and* the U.S.'s more acceptable mythologies of freedom and egalitarianism. We must point the finger at the mirror and confess to our own guilt. For the past few decades, hip hop music has articulated this tension between violence and freedom with precision and harrowing clarity. The constant replay to remind us of our own hypocrisy as a society is exhibited in hip hop music, looped over and over, proving that memory is fragile. Memory is not made of stone or steel. Memory takes work, stewardship, and social movement.

We as Filipino Americans have been engaged in protracted wars over memory and meaning. Che, a Black Filipina American vocalist of the hip hop group LOVE Culture in Jacksonville, Florida, was active as an artist-organizer in the successful movement to remove Confederate monuments, symbols that stood for white dominance and permanence. This movement signaled an urgent call for freedom from white supremacy; it was a war over memory and meaning: white supremacy is not invincible. Che and her comrades toppled the monuments. Yet, statues still dot public squares across the United States inscribed with tall tales of the nation "gifting" freedom to the Philippines.

But blocks of granite do not write, dance, or sing. People do.

"No justice, no peace" is not just a protest chant; it is a motto reflecting the painful inevitability of constant replay. Our artists are restless, always at the helm of leading us toward new possibilities. At its best, hip hop offers a space to envision a future that is race conscious, pro-Black, and absolutely beautiful.

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