

# “Upset the Set-Up”

## A path towards self-determination rooted in conscious hip-hop, Pin@y and panethnic communities

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### Cerritos, Consciousness, and Navigating Pan-Ethnicity

My mom is from the city of Qīngdǎo (Tsingtao) in the northern Chinese province of Shandong. After experiencing Japanese imperialist bombings and the start of the Chinese civil war, she moved to Taiwan as an adolescent. Mom visited the U.S. in the mid-1960s on her own, and eventually stayed after marrying my father. My dad's father was Fujianese, while his mother was Cantonese but grew up in Vietnam. Dad was from Xiàmén city (Amoy) in the southern Chinese province of Fujian. Because of the civil war, his family moved to Hong Kong where they lived under British occupation. Later they moved to Dī'àn (Chợ Lớn) in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in Vietnam, where they experienced French and American hegemony. After living in Vietnam, Dad finished high school in Taiwan. After high school, he immigrated to Northern California before the 1965 Immigration Act was initiated. I share this family history to illustrate that I'm sort of a second-generation Chinese mixed breed that doesn't fit well into neatly packaged ethnic categories ordained by nation-state agendas. My upbringing was perhaps not as homogeneous as many of my Chinese peers who claimed stricter identities like being Hong Kongnese or Taiwanese. Dad learned to speak some six languages during his lifetime but conversed with Mom in his third best language of Mandarin, which Mom adapted to speak without her Shandongnese dialect so that Dad could understand her better. Growing up in the suburb of Cerritos in LA County, my parents did not explicitly teach me to speak Chinese as they were advised that this would help me do better in school. Due to the ethnolinguistic diversity of my parents, a de-emphasis on learning Chinese, and the fact that we had no family living around us, I didn't grow up participating in so many Chinese cultural practices. This was reinforced by a lack of Chinese neighbors for half of my childhood, with most of my neighbors being middle and working-class white, Black or Latin@ folks, with one family of Punjabi Sikh friends. At different stages of my schooling I hung around different Asian American groups, as Cerritos at the time was the most diverse city in the U.S. in terms of Asian Americans (Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995).

Midway into ninth grade, my critical consciousness began to have a more functional articulation having read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which complemented the conscious era of hip-hop music that I was listening to. Nation of Islam (NOI)-influenced artists like Paris provided early access to a discourse of resistance, in this case militant Black nationalism, which helped me articulate the frustration and outrage I was experiencing growing up in the context of Reaganomics, the crack epidemic, gang violence, police brutality, and the 1992 Uprisings. Helping to further refine my voice were the more dialectical philosophies of artists from the Nation of Gods and Earths, sometimes called the Five Percenters, such as Poor Righteous Teachers (Daulatzai, 2012). In terms of my identity, I knew that I wasn't Black and didn't try to emulate the aesthetic like other hip-hop heads around me. Instead, I grappled with what popular mottos like "knowledge of self," "no sellout," "history vs. HIS story," and "each one, teach one" meant for someone of my background. Heavily influenced by the NOI, Malcolm, and his Organization of Afro American Unity, I sought out ideas and practices based on non-European religions which took me to study Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Daoism. I also sought out physical spaces for me to realize my developing consciousness. In my majority Asian high school which had few Black or White students, the dominant Korean and Taiwanese American groups tended to be more privileged and performed whiteness (Lew, 2006). I could 'pass' as a member of these groups, but given my parents' less than Model Minority status coming to this country and my burgeoning critical consciousness, I leaned towards peers that had a stronger affinity towards hip-hop, the majority of whom were Pilipin@ American. In ninth grade I shifted from an aspiring b-boy in the 'houser' dance style, to a DJ that practiced mixing and scratching at my friend's house every weekend. Because it allowed me to directly interface with peer groups and be a producer of culture, DJing was my first concrete way to voice myself artistically, culturally and politically. When I spun, I not only tried to demonstrate my individual dexterity on the turntables, but also my overstanding of hip-hop's culture of youth resistance as I moved crowds with music that was a mix of the popular and the political. Via The Teacha, aka KRS-1, I came to see hip-hop DJing as a form of "Edutainment," where I could both entertain and educate toward a higher purpose of social change. Through national coalition efforts like X-Clan's Blackwatch Movement, and local Pilipin@ American circles that we sometimes referred to as "the underground scene," I saw hip-hop as a social movement for change.

To be honest, most prominent Pilipin@ American DJs at the time didn't publicly espouse a social change agenda. But by my senior year, it wasn't uncommon for hip-hop heads to engage in dialog around socioeconomic issues and hip-hop as a movement. Conscious hip-hop was also present when DJ Curse played at a dance, or Icy Ice made a four-track mixtape. In addition, DJs like Rhettmatic adhered to a kung fu-like code of hip-hop practitioners (Prashad, 2001), which emphasized knowing where the elements came from, and the legacies of originators and mentors in our culture. I'll never forget the time Rhettmatic invited me over to his family's home to watch a dubbed Japanese VHS copy of the quintessential hip-hop film, *Wild Style*. At the time, he was the only person in our community that had it and he made sure to 'do the knowledge' on the film, and quiz me about what he taught me through the film and about hip-hop in general. Thus in addition to providing a social context of crews, party goers, dancers, graf writers, and MCs, the Pilipin@ American scene also provided me with mentorship and discipline as I developed my voice and consciousness around art and social change (DeLeon, 2004). This process continued as I became part of a DJ crew conglomerate that was active around LA County, particularly in Glendale/Eagle Rock, West Covina/Walnut, and Cerritos/Long Beach where we threw 'flyer parties' at houses and an occasional 'underground' where we we'd rent a hall (i.e. industrial garage, armory), print up nice flyers, hire security, and charge at the door. And yes, hiring security was even necessary for high school house parties. It was common back then for Asian gangs to pack guns, such as the time we DJed a Wah Ching (WC) party in Hacienda Heights that got rushed by Pinoy Royale (PR) and ended up in several deaths.

Stepping back from parties and other hip-hop spaces in high school, there were other reasons why I felt comfortable in Pilipin@ American communities. In primary school, Japanese Americans (JAs) were the predominant Asian group I was around. While I enjoyed basketball league games, Buddhist church festivals, and the apparent sense of comfort found in a multi-generational and highly 'Americanized' identity, my JA friends' lack of connection to their mother tongue and family in the homeland was strange for me. Later in grade school, Korean Americans were also a dominant ethnic group in school that I hung with. While they had a definite connection to their mother tongue, immigrant families and homeland, it was also made clear to me that although I could 'pass' when I attended my friend's Sunday School, I knew I was not fully welcome when they found out I wasn't Korean. Pilipin@ Americans were the last large Asian ethnic group that I was also around. Aside from facing similar issues like learning the mother tongue, diaspora, and martial law in the homeland, my Pilipin@ friends also tended to act less entitled than peers from the other groups I mentioned. In addition, there was the infamous hospitality of Pilipin@ moms and all the social gatherings that my friends' families would have. Because of my first name, Pilipin@ parents would often assume I was Pin@y. When they found out that I was Chinese, they still welcomed me and would often make sure that I knew they were also part Chinese. At the time I wasn't as aware of the seemingly ubiquitous presence of the Chinese as settlers in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, but I was aware of skin color politics and certain legacies of colonialism when I engaged in conversations about being Chinese, or Ilocano, or skincare products like Eskinol. Over all, through this engagement with Pilipin@ American families and friends, I felt welcomed and could identify a great deal with them. This also seemed to be true for the non-Pilipin@ members of our crew, who were of mixed Indian, Thai, Chinese, Cantonese, Mexican, Vietnamese, White, and Taiwanese background. An outcome of this for me was being able to comfortably navigate diverse Pilipin@ and Asian American spaces by the time I graduated.

## The Industry and the Campus, From San Diego to LA

When I moved to UC San Diego at age 17, the Asian American hip-hop scene, led by Pilipin@ Americans, was gaining momentum. We were beginning to get into the 1000-person capacity nightclubs in LA (i.e. Glam Slam owned by Prince). DJs from our scene were winning the most prestigious national and international battles, while also getting spotlight and regular income as mix DJs for 'urban' format radio stations like Power 106. MCs were also getting some play, such as Key Kool & Rhettmatic who would eventually join others to form the multiracial MC crew, Visionaries. Pilipin@ recording artists connected to our scene, like Jocelyn Enriquez, were also blowing up on the radio. There was a growing number of entrepreneurs involved in industries such as clothing, magazines, and import car shows by promoters like Mainstream, who brought our 'racer' car culture together with hip-hop DJ and dance crew battles (Namkung, 2004). My crew, Icon Events, focused on throwing events with college students, as our members were spread out around Southern California universities like UC Riverside, Cal Poly Pomona, UCLA, and Loyola Marymount. As I still held strongly to my vision of hip-hop and social change, we promoted our events as part of the true school hip-hop scene with skilled DJs that could move the crowd. Although we lacked a feminist analysis, we still felt it wrong when promoters increasingly resorted to stunts like female booty shaking contests to try and attract bigger crowds. Conversely Icon, like a few other promoters, worked with college groups to promote events and help them raise funds. Fundraising was a way I thought we could contribute to our greater community, in addition to bringing different groups to work together, and supporting their events with audio and visual tech. One example was a fundraiser for UC Irvine Kababayan at the Old World Festival Hall, which had held many of the previous generation's megadances organized by the United Kingdom crew (UK). We brought back UK DJs who were becoming even more popular as the Beat Junkies, along with performances by Key Kool & Rhettmatic and

the recently established Kaba Modern dance crew that would go on to fame with MTV's America's Best Dance Crew. In San Diego, Icon was tied to the pioneering college hip-hop radio and TV shows I helped run, as well as guest DJ spots on Jammin Z-90 FM, an internship with Atlantic Records, and writing hip-hop articles for *The Guardian* newspaper. All of these strengthened Icon Events in the industry, and we were able to leverage famous DJs like Babu for even just our mobile DJ gigs, and hip-hop acts like Jurassic 5 for our club events.

None of this would have been possible without mentors and teachers from the Pilipin@ American hip-hop scene (although it should be noted that several of them were not Pilipin@). There were mentors like DJs Melo-D (Modern Musique/Beat Junkies), Pat-Man (Empire DJs) and Havik (Prestige/Beat Junkies, who taught me the flare scratch), that helped me develop as an artist and furthered Rhetmatic's lessons about 'respecting the architects' and knowing where your arts and culture come from. Others like Icy Ice (Legend/Beat Junkies), D-Vine (Fascination/Legend/21XL the eventsco.), and Xcel (Mainstream/Import Showoff), went from being prominent DJs, to leaders within their organizations and our scene, and innovators of where we could go with our people, music, and culture (Alsaybar, 2002). From them I learned to be a more inspiring communicator, entrepreneur and leader, along with realizations about how to always watch my back in the cutthroat 'hustle' that our scene was becoming as it grew increasingly commodified and aligned with the entertainment industry. Aside from D-Vine, two other mentors were more on the creative and business side. Tien Tran (Transit Studios) and Joey "Junk 1" Quarles (Inkworks Press/Mixwell Clothing) took the time out to explain to me the broader visions they had for our work and scene. Tien's visions related more to fashion, the entertainment industry, and the Asian American community. Joey, the 'Original ½ Black and Filipino' as he often called himself, was a master at "flipping the script." He was known for coming up with concepts and designs for events and clothing that spoke to the existing Pilipin@ and Black hip-hop scenes, but pushed them to another level. Along with D-Vine, these two helped me understand the different roles I could play in bringing our communities together, and the level of vision, design, communications, and people power it would take to make it come together. Although it wasn't obvious to me then, these were also valuable lessons for my future social justice work as an educator and organizer. Looking back I realize that my first lessons in ideology, hegemony, panethnicity, and social movements did not come from an ethnic studies course, but in grounded practice within our scene as I sought to fulfill the dreams of hip-hop and social change that I'd been building on since the 9th grade.

After a few years in the hustle, I pulled out of a career in the industry for two reasons. One was that I felt the industry was too shady for me to be effective in my life's goals of social change. It was fun being interviewed in *The Source* magazine, rubbing elbows with celebrities in VIP rooms of Hollywood clubs, and getting shoutouts on radio stations and rap albums. There were also folks that I respected still holding it down like DJs Dwenz and Abel of the Foundation Funkcollective (DeLeon, Mabalon, & Ramos, 2002). But I became very disillusioned when so many I looked up to became wrapped up in the hype, materialism, and co-optation of our culture. Another reason I stepped back from the industry was because things had become too hectic with my family, and I decided to move out on my own and cut ties with them. Without their financial support, I had to drop out of college and work five jobs to pay rent in San Diego. At 19, this was the hardest thing I'd ever done but I was able to transgress it partly due to the support of mentors who offered me work, and friends I'd made through the TV and radio shows at UCSD. With backing from mentors in the scene and UCSD student leaders of color I'd worked with through Icon, I was able to return to school with financial aid after an exhaustive application to prove my financial independence. This difficult process made my life's goals very clear-cut for me, and I vowed to make the most of the chance I had been re-given.

As the Pilipin@ American hip-hop scene continued to grow with developments in film, internet, and the cottage industry of turntablism, I focused on a career where I could make a living but also apply what I learned in the industry and pursue my longstanding goals of social change work through arts, culture and bringing people

together. This steered me towards K-12 teaching, which put me in classes alongside student activists of color with similar goals. Partly due to taking courses with critical professors like Ricardo Stanton-Salazar, and the support of student leaders during my process of independence, I became involved with student of color activism at UCSD. Operating out of the Cross Cultural Center, OASIS Student Services, and the Student Affirmative Action Committee office suite, I threw my energy into building with Asian American student groups, and coalition work with Black, Chican@ and Latin@ student groups. While much of our efforts revolved around identity politics and on-campus representation, more critical work was also being done partly due to the political landscape of that time (i.e. Propositions 209 and 227, University of California Standing Policy 1 and 2). This work solidified for me when I was approached by UCSD APSA president Jonathan Burgos, to run for the presidency of the 300-member organization. A popular student leader on campus, Jonathan explained that although I was a lesser-known member, he felt I had the skills and panethnic leadership experience given my work in the scene. In addition, Jonathan advised me to take the time out to listen to and address the everyday needs of members and potential recruits (i.e. family, financial issues), as that was the best way to retain folks and sustain the organization. He and other APSA board members had put these ideas into practice given that in the early 1990s, APSA's membership was mostly dissolved as Asian student communities continued to create their own ethnic organizations and weren't as invested in the panethnic project of APSA. Jonathan shared that in order to re-build the organization, its leadership had to connect the everyday issues people faced, to the skills and experiences they had, and the broader work of the organization. Other APSA leadership like Jane Yamashiro also schooled me on issues of exclusivity between those with male privilege, decision-making power, and other forms of privilege and capital (Yamashiro & Quero, 2012). Although we didn't know it at the time, our mentors' leadership advice paralleled the humanizing approaches of certain strands of culturally relevant and critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Tintiango-Cubales, Daus-Magbual, & Daus-Magbual, 2010). When I applied these approaches with the skills I learned as a DJ and entrepreneur in the scene, I was better equipped to support the work of an amazing cast of board and general members. Subsequently our organization grew to 400 people and we were able to further expand APSA's work with underrepresented university and high school students.

Although I'd walked away from the music industry and the Pilipin@ American hip-hop scene as my primary vehicle for social change, I did continue to promote events and DJ. In my remaining undergraduate years, D-Vine offered me the helm of Legend Entertainment's presence in San Diego, which evolved into 21XL the eventsco. With this group I incorporated the praxes of vision, design, communications, and people power I had learned in the industry and then student leadership, to a more impactful promotions group that saw itself as a supportive family that pushed the scene to be community-minded. I also encouraged the more privileged UCSD Pilipin@ and Asian American students, to work together on community-based events with eventsco. members who tended to be more working-class, Southeast Asian, or tied to the military. While we can critique the eventsco. as being too rooted in market ideologies, or college groups for not having an anti-imperialist analysis, there is something to be said about having a nuanced understanding about where the masses of our communities are at, in order to better educate and organize them towards social justice movements. I remember once working with a union organizer from a similar background as me, who scoffed when I mentioned that I DJed at a prominent Asian American hip-hop/reggae club because, "that's where the people are at." He thought I meant that I worked in those spaces to get at the sistas, when I was actually referencing being tuned into popular spaces of our communities and their intersections with arts and culture. Several years later at a UCLA release for the book *The Movement and the Moment* (Louie & Omatsu, 2001), I heard similar suggestions from an activist and promoter from the International Groove company (R.I.P. DJ Hideo). He suggested that the small audience of activists look beyond universities and the non-profit industrial complex, and recruit from the night and car scenes that thousands from our communities

regularly attend, including those from the working-class. Well-known historical examples of critically and strategically drawing from these spaces include Malcolm's work, and the emphasis of the Black Panthers on recruiting and training cadre from the lumpen proletariat (Pulido, 2006). Similarly, this essay's title, "Upset the Setup" borrows from a song by revolutionary Pilipin@ MC Bambu, who has long emphasized building our movements by drawing from working-class youth in gangs and crews (Viesca, 2012). The significance of building relationships, educating, and organizing outside of universities and non-profits is even more pronounced when we note the creaming and elitism of UC students after SP-1 and SP-2 in the late 1990s, and how we cannot simply draw from today's campuses with similar strategies to those used with far less privileged Asian American students during the 1968 Ethnic Studies Strike and subsequent campaigns. Instead of privileging formal education and subsequent political lines of thought in organizing, my experiences with the industry and student groups tied to the Pilipin@ American scene taught me to listen more to how people talk about and navigate their everyday challenges and successes. In my years of working with youth, parents, and other members of working-class communities of color, I continue to return to the process of listening and building relationships with constituents that I was first trained in with Icon, the eventsco., and the San Diego groups. The more sustainable and transformative nature of these approaches has been reinforced and nuanced during my later graduate training in critical and sociocultural theory (Buenavista, 2010; Campano, 2007).

## Teaching, Organizing and Sustaining Our Work

In my years since leaving San Diego, much has happened within the Pilipin@ American hip-hop scene that nurtured my identity, politics, and pedagogy. Artists that came out of our scene have enjoyed worldwide respect and success, like the Jabbawockeez dance crew and the World of Dance (WOD) promotions run by the eventsco. Even more famous, but also problematic, are members of the Black Eyed Peas, LMFAO and others that once touted our underground Pilipin@ and hip-hop scenes (Wang, 2006). When I moved back to LA for my teaching credential, I continued with the eventsco. and the recently assembled Cerritos All-Stars, a coalition of the city's most prominent DJ crews in the mid and late 1990s. But as my life's work shifted to decolonizing teaching and grassroots community organizing, I increasingly volunteered my cultural work as a DJ for progressive Pilipin@ community groups like the Pilipin@ Workers Center, Habi Arts, and the Balagtasan Collective, as well as Tuesday Nights at the Café and Projekt Newspeak. As a classroom teacher, DJing was no longer a way to pay the bills, and I increasingly saw spinning as a skill I could contribute to social justice movements. By the time I went back to UCLA for my Ph.D., we had already begun mETHODOLOGY, a monthly nightclub event in Chinatown which was completely volunteer-driven, with all proceeds going to progressive non-profit groups. Now I've had the chance to spin in front of 2,000 person audiences, and share the stage with Outkast, Ice Cube, and Far East Movement. Yet my most meaningful single accomplishment as a hip-hop artist was organizing mETHODOLOGY on a six-year run, where we raised some \$30,000 and showcased Pilipin@ artists like Bambu, Kiwi, J-Natural and Power Struggle, mentors of mine like DJ Icy Ice, and other talented artists like Skim and Dumbfoundead. After focusing my work on organizing and teaching, mETHODOLOGY was a bit of a homecoming as it allowed me to re-connect with some of the unique skills and networks I had developed growing up with the Pilipin@ American scene.

Nowadays when I get asked about how hip-hop has influenced my social justice work, my immediate answers revolve around the politicizing music of the conscious hip-hop era, and how DJing honed much of my pedagogical sense of timing, emotion, and ability to navigate and blend across genres with audiences. I am grateful to this book's editors for their request of me to dig deeper into hip-hop's influence on me, and consider the

largely Pilipin@ American context in which I came to learn about and live hip-hop. Aside from what I've already mentioned about my critical consciousness, social justice work, and educational approaches, one other anecdote speaks to the scene's influence on me. Several years ago I was organizing in Chinatown with a Bay Area comrade. An accomplished organizer, she had experienced significant hardships in continuing to do grassroots feminist and anti-imperialist work after college. She asked me how I was able to maintain positivity and resilience against the relentless dehumanization that we face with communities as we challenge the system. While there were influences I could point to from family and friends, I spoke generally about the positive and nurturing experiences I had in past leadership and organizing spaces. My comrade then talked about how she felt that much of her foundational organizing experiences were tied to anger about injustices, and a moral imperative to do what was just. This prompted me to share about the types of mentorship and teamwork I'd experienced in the scene and in San Diego. Although we made many mistakes, we still had lot of fun laughing and crying while being critical and caring of each other. As I continue to reflect upon those times, I've come to understand that while I hadn't been initially involved in the most critical organizing and formal education spaces, my long engagement with inquiry, leadership, and the Pilipin@ American hip-hop scene gave me a sturdy foundation from which to conceive and practice more transformative efforts at social change. Whether as a questioning adolescent, DJ artist, industry entrepreneur, or student leader, the scene has provided me with a discourse, and more importantly material spaces and people, to challenge and sustain me in what the Blue Scholars have called "the struggle protracted" (Viola, 2006), or the long march for revolutionary change.

*This essay is dedicated to the mentors named above, as well as my sisters and brothers from Icon Events, Legend and 21XL the eventsco. San Diego, and the mETHODOLOGY crew. The love and growth we collectively shared over the years continue to guide me on the daily.*

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