Mark Villegas- Moreno in the Hip Hop Cipher:
Signifyin' Filipino American Racial Positionality

In an August 2007 L.A. Weekly article entitled "The Fil-Am Invasion", which portrays Fil Ams as somehow "taking over" the Hollywood hip hop club scene, author Sam Slovick writes, "These Fil-Am kids are serious about having a good time, and that's about it. It's cultural. It came from the islands. The celebratory communal music and dance go way back to tribal roots. The DJ is spinning hip-hop, of course." Slovick's depiction of Fil Am kids' "tribal communality" resonates with longstanding representations of Filipino bodies, most notably U.S. white gazing of Filipino primitiveness through film, photography, and Worlds Fairs. Today, instead of communing with tribal drums, Filipinos are apparently communing with hip hop. Slovick has effectively replaced a Filipino primitivism with a black primitivism. For Slovick hip hop has become code for a blackened racial position.

For Filipino Americans since the 1980s, fluency in hip hop forms has become a rite of passage, especially for young Filipino American males. It has even propelled many Filipino Americans into mainstream as well as niche hip hop celebrity. Hip hop has defined the sensibilities and expressive culture of Filipino Americans for almost three decades, a phenomenon that I locate within a larger Filipino history.

I argue that a Filipino American fluency in hip hop vernacular signifies a grammar with which to unpack a historical and global Filipino racial positionality. In my bigger project, I am interested in focusing on spaces and sociality created among Filipino Americans—such as everyday performativity, spectacles, alternative community-building (such as crews, troupes, or gangs), and cosmology especially brands of Islam and Kemetism. If hip hop indexes what Sohail Daulatzai calls a "violence of geography"

located in the U.S. black ghetto, then I propose that a Filipino American hip hop vernacular offers a resource with which to explore how the U.S. has perpetrated violence in the Philippines and the U.S.

I highlight the making of Filipinos as "people of color" *prior* to their migration to the U.S. When it comes to hip hop, I emphasize Filipinos' intimate link with racism via the subjugation and displacement of the browned and blackened Filipino body. I argue that Filipino Americans negotiate a "moreno" (Spanish and Filipino for dark-skinned person) valuation in their engagement with hip hop's blackness. I use "moreno" to map the Philippines alongside a Caribbean geography in order to illuminate racial stratification, violence, and dislocation due to U.S. colonial conquest in the Pacific and Caribbean, what Allan Isaac calls the "American Tropics." In effect, given Filipinos' intimacy with U.S. racism, I hold suspect their supposed uniform membership in the ideological regime of U.S. multiculturalism. Instead of using a "lack of racial discourse" analytic that often describes Filipino American seemless congruency in various cultural spaces, I foreground Filipinos' relationship to "blackness" as a descriptor to a hip hop vernacular, a similar move by scholars intervening in Puerto Rican performance and race.

My analysis of Filipino American hip hop vernacular extends from "raise your fist" Pinoy and Pinay activistas to moments where race seems less central in hip hop expressions; I address both Filipina American emcee Rocky Rivera cradling an insurgent's rifle and Rocky Rivera rocking gold grills and stunna shades. So I ask, how did hip hop become a central mode of expression for Filipino Americans on a national scale ranging from hubs of cosmopolitan left-leaning communities like San Francisco to sparsely populated and politically conservative towns like Jacksonville, Florida? My

investigation digs deeper than so-called tribal roots.

In describing the complicated web of Filipino diasporic racial significations, I propose the metaphor of the "cipher," which in hip hop vernacular refers to circles of dance or lyrical improvisation where participants contribute to a fluid space of performance. In the cipher of Filipino American racial significations, racial and ethnic tropes circulate to confound those clean and linear categorizations that insist on racial essences. Like the cipher of emcees or dancers, the borders of discursive exchange in an ideological cipher are not clearly defined. As such, I underscore the slipperiness of Filipino global positionality: Asian and Third World, Oriental yet Primitive, American yet tropical, and "Hispanicized" but not "Hispanic". I suggest, moreover, that even when the cipher enables Filipinos' performative agency because of their supposed racial illegibility, their circulation must always be archived within a history of "darkness": the racial ontology of the colonized and laboring Filipino body.

Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns's article on the "splendid" dancing Filipino body during the 1920s and 30s in U.S. taxi dancehalls provides an early example of U.S. cultural vernacularization among the empire's "Little Brown Brothers." Burns reminds us that the "exceptionality" so hailed by white observers of Filipino migrant workers' spectacular dance moves presents "corporeal evidence" of the "success" of the turn of the century U.S. program of "Benevolent Assimilation" of Filipino natives. The "kinesthetic knowledge" of the dancing Filipino body travels across time to inform the brilliance of Filipino hip hop dancers (in the U.S. and in the Philippines). Recently gaining international attention through MTV and other mainstream outlets, the natives prove they can still thrill with their skills.

As aesthetically pleasurable the results of "Benevolent Assimilation" may be, the process was still an arm to the genocide and racism needed to discipline Filipinos, ultimately aborting nation-building after Filipinos' successful insurgency against Spain. U.S. whites would iterate the Filipino "moreno" with a "blacker" register. As in the South after the failure of Reconstruction, social institutions in the Philippines during the time of U.S. occupation resembled the spatial and social segregation of African Americans in the South. From separate jail cells for coloreds and whites to the condoned ritualized practice of lynching, whites applied to Filipinos racist ideologies that had been simultaneously applied to blacks. Scot Ngozi-Brown reveals the point of view of African American soldiers in the Philippines regarding segregation and abuse of Filipinos by white soldiers: "One black soldier contended that the very reason for Filipino resistance to American occupation was that white soldiers '…began to apply home treatment for colored peoples: cursed them as damned niggers, steal [from] and ravish them… burning, robbing the graves.'" Another African American soldier wrote, "The whites have begun to establish their diabolical race hatred in all its home rancor in Manila… The future of the Filipino, I fear, is that of the Negro in the South." Victor Bascara writes of the intertwining of the ideology of whites and their management of both "The Negro Problem" and "Our Philippine Problem," showing that the ideological connections between treatment of African Americans and Filipinos functioned as a dialectic relationship.

The 1904 St. Louis World's Fair provides another example of how Filipinos were "blackened," Filipinos were classified by fair anthropologists as a subhuman racial class. The World's Fair served as a visual device for a war-entrenched U.S. public, where

nearly 1,200 inhabitants of the new colony were exhibited for mass spectatorship. Called "niggers" by fairgoers, the racial climate in the U.S. spilled back-and-forth between Post-Reconstruction in the United States and empire-building in the Philippines.

In addition to Spanish and U.S. versions of racial conceit, my concerns with Filipino racial position extend to their corporeal abjection globally. I situate a Filipino American ciphering in hip hop within the racial conceit of global modernity, whether Euro or Asian. A Filipino American identification with the Global South is crucial as Filipino Americans are often racialized uniformly within an Asian American nationality and subjectivity. However, a hip hop vernacular "stands in" for Filipino Americans' questionable relationship to subject-making qualities of the nation and modernity. Influential Filipino American hip hop performers such as the Blue Scholars, the Native Guns, Filipino American members of the Universal Zulu Nation and the Philippine-based dance crew the Philippine Allstars routinely emphasize their affiliation with the "darker" people of the Global South.

As with other African American musical forms, hip hop tells the story of the U.S. black ghetto as a space geographically within a nation but without nationality. As a post/neocolony, the Philippine geography in the diasporic consciousness represents an injured nationality. Similar to African Americans, hip hop among Filipino Americans imagines a poetically-rich alternative, funky and futuristic geography.

Filipino corporeal devalorization finds its sequel in the representation of the Philippines as naturally servile to richer nations. Neferti Tadiar describes the ways in which since the 1970s the Philippines became a symbol of prostitution within the context of global neoliberal structuring. Robyn Rodriguez also notes the feminization of the

Philippine state relative to the masculinized Asian "Tigers" and the disparaging of the Philippines by Asian leaders as Asia's perennial failure, Asia's "stray cat." Whether Filipina women or Filipino men, the laboring Filipino body is disavowed from supposed Asian co-racials who may render them "lesser than" authentic Asians, a gesture paralleling justification of Japanese imperial occupation of the U.S.'s pacific colony during World War II. Rodriguez also notes that the Philippines' neoliberal program of "warm-body export", which has resulted in $1/10^{th}$ of the Philippine population working overseas as contracted labor, originates from U.S. colonial legacy in recruiting Philippine labor. This legacy demonstrates the sequelization of U.S. racial subjection.

The 2007 LA Weekly article gets it wrong in the most ironic ways. Fil Ams are not just about having a good time, "and that's about it." Contrary to the article's title, they aren't "invading" anything. Instead they were *invaded*. Hip hop does not go back to their communal tribal roots. Rather, hip hop has been a critical part in building *community*. And this community is not an accident of history. Already fluent in U.S. culture—including African American vernacular forms—Filipinos in the diaspora circulate in the cipher of multiple racial significations, a metaphor that Sarita See likens to a "wild heterogeneity," a metaphor that references primitivism and racial mixture. My intervention foregrounds a Filipino "moreno" racial status in this "wild heterogeneity."

Significations of a Filipino American moreno ontology and its iterations of blackness defies the turn of the century U.S. project of "Benevolent Assimilation" and the current sociology of linear incorporation into the white nation. Bascara describes a scene from Carlos Bulosan's autobiography in which Bulosan becomes fascinated with Abraham Lincoln. But when Bulosan begins to understand the fictions of social and

economic justice in America, he aligns himself with the black author Richard Wright. Bulosan reflects, "I was beginning to understand what was going on around me, and the darkness that had covered my present life was lifting." I suggest that W.E.B. DuBois's "veil" metaphor, which he applied to African Americans, functions similarly for Filipinos who are fluent in American ways of life but are devalued as "little brown people" who can never grow to be "big white Americans."

In this presentation, I have attempted to imagine an alternative epistemology of Filipino American racial discourse; that is, imagining hip hop vernacularization as congruent with Filipino history. A Filipino American hip hop vernacular can be traced through the colonization that veiled Bulosan. My analysis finds productive inquiry signified by the veil and the darkness.

For Filipino Americans, the hip hop cipher is not a historical aberration but a well of intelligence, a window to knowledge-production, and an archive to memory. The cipher—this "wild heterogeity"—is conditioned by imperial subjection and should not be viewed as floating postracial postmodern pastiche. The cipher not only provides creative pleasure and community, but also unpacks knowledge of Filipino racial positioning in history and in the world. In the cipher of racial significations, Filipino Americans defiantly don the funky imperial veil. However "wild" the cipher may be, it is most illuminating when we know that it always circulates in the dark.