Ethnography as Ambagan, in Our Own Words: Meaning-Making by and for Pinoy Hip-hop Heads (Practitioners, Fans, Learners)

Lara Katrina T. Mendoza
Ateneo de Manila University

ABSTRACT

In the Philippines, the study of popular music is interrogated in literature, criticism, and media studies (e.g., in senior high and freshman college curriculums). Drawing heavily on my ethnography of Pinoy hip-hop, I posit that Pinoy hip-hop culture empowers its practitioners and insiders in exercising their agency with hip-hop's creative and expressive elements to not only resist mainstream (usually neoliberal, capitalist) forces and crushing socio-economic realities but to also use that agency to propagate and promote (*mag-ambag sa eksena at kultura*) the ethos of the culture itself. This is bolstered by the autoethnographies of urban ethnomusicologists (such as yours truly) which exemplify the dialogical interplay among researchers, artists, and fans in the Pinoy hip-hop scene. The national experience of hip-hop as it is explicitly grounded in FlipTop embodies literary elements and critical discourse in its performativity, providing a rich tapestry for the decoding of hidden and sub-texts. This article fortifies the argument that autoethnographies of subcultural, DIY Pinoy hip-hop music cultures contribute to the shaping of meaningful, relevant, critical discourse by scholars, learners, and culture bearers of the Pinoy hip-hop scene.

Keywords: autoethnography, Pinoy Hip-hop, pag-aambag, urban ethnomusicology, popular music

INTRODUCTION

This article casts the study of Pinoy hip-hop as an iterative and empowering enterprise for hip-hop heads – practitioners and fans – who exist on the fringes of mainstream consciousness or the peripheries of musical and cultural awareness. It argues that autoethnography for the urban ethnomusicologist (who, at the very least, is an invested fan or, as in my case, a scholar-researcher-fan) illumines spaces of literary and subcultural critical study, as in Philippine academia, of which I have been part since November 1996. This research has been shaped by the experiences

of hip-hop heads who shared their personal stories of their being-ness in Pinoy hip-hop, i.e., how they fell in love with hip-hop and consciously chose to ***be*** hip-hop.

The study of hip-hop challenges notions of dominant high culture or mainstream music versus low culture or underground music, the latter resonating with a broader swathe of young audiences, fans, and practitioners. An immersive experience in the vibrant Pinoy hip-hop scene is also a transformative and educative one for both the urban (auto) ethnographer and the larger audience with whom the research is shared, parsed, discussed, and essentially broadened and deepened. To be able to see one's stories in a book – i.e., a shelf of the University of the Philippines Main Library or Ateneo Rizal Library – has tickled the fancies of several hip-hop heads who generously shared their stories with me. Watching the documentary that featured their interviews, in a crowded auditorium or university hall, prompted one emcee, who guested as a speaker during the alternative class program of Ateneo (TALAB, or Talakayang Bayan), shared, "Buong buhay ko hindi man ako nakapagtapos sa pag-aaral, pero ngayon masasabi ko sa tatay ko na sa wakas, nakapasok rin ako sa Ateneo (In my entire life, even if I was unable to finish my studies, now I can tell my father that I finally got to enter Ateneo)!"

The methodological contours of this article are unabashedly autoethnographic, hooving to personal narratives, upon which social scientists "take on the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life" (Ellis and Bochner 740). The privileging of personal experience prompts autoethnographers to "speak against, or provide alternatives to, dominant, taken-for-granted, and harmful cultural scripts, stories, and stereotypes, [which can] complement, or fill gaps in, existing research" (Adams et al. 3). In conjunction with this, such methodology impinges on the oughts instilled by my mentor in graduate school: of making sure my writing does not drown out the voices of the people in whose culture I am immersing myself. The drive fuelling my writing on Pinoy hip-hop is to "write against harmful ethnographic accounts made by others – especially cultural 'outsiders' —who try to take advantage of, or irresponsibly regulate, other cultures" (4). Weaving my own experiences engaging in the Pinoy hip-hop scene at different stages of the research journey, from fledgling, floundering noob to a more confident hip-hop head, helped make sense of not only the iterative process but of finding my place in the rich tapestry of underground, subcultural enquiry that animates personal convictions and life philosophies. These entanglements have hopefully shaped my (auto) ethnography into a critical and provocative one (Poulos 6).

Early in my journey towards becoming a full-fledged urban ethnomusicologist, I had yet to fully imbibe the act of doing field research as one necessarily steeped

in a constant quest of the Other and Othered. Bruno Nettl famously describes ethnomusicology as not only about studying music forms and styles but as requiring us to embrace the unfamiliar, transposing the strangeness into a nuanced appreciation of decidedly complex dynamics and contexts. Ethnography "stimulates empathy with the strangeness, but also with the humanity, of another society of people, and with the complexity of the music and musical life in what may from a distance seem a simple situation" (6–7).

By its very nature, ethnomusicology involves lifting veils that shroud the lives of the plenty from the gaze of the disinterested many. Charles Taylor's identity politics is predicated on a fear of the unknown, advocating for a change of mind that unsettles and disturbs in as much as it deconstructs and redefines. He asserts, "Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (25). The mainstream status quo, the discourse of which is controlled by key institutional decision makers, inadvertently sidelines narratives from the peripheries. It is in this space that we can make room for these narratives so that they are properly and correctly recognized for what they are and what they hope to impart.

It is in this vein that the message of Pope Francis, especially early in his papacy, resonates most richly with Nettl and Taylor. The constant entreaty of Pope Francis is for people to turn their gaze to the peripheries and expose the ills of neoliberal capitalism that render blindness to the plight and experiences of the marginalized (Ferrara). In 2015, during mass at Piazza del Plebicito, unironically located in a space for democratic expression, he said, "The Word of Christ is intended to reach out to everyone, in particular those who live in the peripheries of existence, so that they might find in Him the center of their life and the source of hope (Ferrara)." The salvific power of a divine re-interpretation of the peripheries can be seen in KRS One's *The Gospel of Hip-hop: First Testament* (2009), where the rapper speaks of "God" as "love", equating "God's love" to hip-hop. He writes,

> For with this first instrument, we remember GOD and how we were rescued by unseen forces more powerful than any government on Earth. For when all seemed hopeless and oppression seemed permanent, a caring, protective, nurturing creative force independent of all the World's political, business, educational and religious institutions, swept through our hearts and homes and we were rescued from sickness, hatred,

> ignorance and poverty with a behavior that we eventually began to call "Hip-hop." And we must NEVER forget this.With this first instrument written at the time of Hip-hop's cultural beginnings, we remind all future generations of Hip-hop to NEVER FORGET THE LOVE that has saved us from self-destruction. Hip-hop has no other creator, no other savior and no other architect. (KRS One 8–9)

Recently, Christian rapper Lecrae penned heartfelt verses in response to Kendrick Lamar's pained question, "What would Lecrae do [about watching the current state of hip-hop partying be demolished]?" Echoing Lamar's lament that hip-hop culture was rotting from within, he rapped to the idea that what can save hip-hop in 2024 is a return to the Cross and dying to one's worldly self to be restored to a re-new-ed world order.

> Basically what I said is I was government fed
> Bred for doin' time in the feds, but Jesus bled
> Instead of puttin' dents in they head, He turned His
> My cup runneth over with nonsense
> They hearts grow colder, they love to do evil, they burn they conscience…
>
> I deserve death along with these liars and hypocrites
> Fake tough rappers who fabricate their predicaments
> Fake-deep guru pushin' voodoo on the people
> Tellin' folks that my God ain't real, that's real evil
> **Huh, I wonder what Lecrae would do**
> Hopefully seek the hand of God and tell 'em that he's incapable
> But truthfully, I'm nobody to judge
> My good deeds are like some period blood stains on a dirty rug
> All that I can offer them if Jesus' love
> I know it sound foolish to many, like "Really? That's all you got for us?"
> Yeah, the cross is foolish to the perishin'
> The world'll call me weak and the saints'll say I embarrass 'em
> I walk through valleys full of evil, I'm aware of it
> I can't condemn the world and burn all of the heretics
> Love is patient so I'm trustin' in the narrative
> And Christ ain't watch the party die, He died instead of it. ("Die For The Party"; emphasis mine)

The conscious decision to empathize with what is hitherto unfamiliar is also an invitation to push to the forefront personal, musical stories from the underground,

of hip-hop heads whom mainstream consciousness has derided or ignored. To do so lovingly is at the heart of Pope Francis's call to normalize voices from the cracks and shadows of our daily being-ness. While it may seem counter-intuitive and jarring to afford space to a music subculture that literally thumps in your face, it has become the music of choice for many of us in the 21st century with a never-say-die ethos to put forth our empathetic message. And to what end but towards a redemption for what has been ignored, perhaps lost, and decidedly mis-recognised?

Hip-hop saves and its culture bearers will be among those who vociferously embody this (Vaño; Cadiente; Abracosa; Ramirez et al.; Dominguez; Sanchez et al.). In this article, I will be counting the ways by which ethnography in the Pinoy hip-hop world "saved" me – i.e., lifted the veils of self-importance and opened my person to the rich, complex, seeming chaos that is the unfettered pulsating heartbeats of Pinoy hip-hop.

Pinoys and Popular Music

In his interview with Antonio Tiongson, Jr. published in the book *Positively No Filipinos Allowed: Building Communities and Discourse* (2006), Theodore Gonzalves emphasises how Filipinos have developed an affinity for Western music. He lists genres Filipinos gravitate towards, such as jazz, soul, and hip-hop — popular music across America. On the notion that these genres are authentically formed by Black culture alone, Gonzalves argues that

> … if we were to historically situate hip-hop, that is, where and when it enters U.S. culture, we can always think about Puerto Rican break dancers, Greek graf writers like Taki 183, and African American and Jamaican DJs. We could think about hip-hop being a multiracial/multiethnic space. We can think about how it was racialized as an African American space by its innovators and by transnational capital later. But that's the way I want to emphasize hip-hop, in the same way I emphasize jazz music. Jazz music can be seen as authentically a black cultural space, and that's probably what Winton Marsalis would want us to believe—that there's an unbroken line of African Americans from Louis Armstrong to musicians like Marsalis. But I would also emphasize the multiracial character of popular cultural forms like jazz, because New Orleans is not just in the Deep South of African America, it is also at the cusp of the Caribbean and also part of Latin America culturally, with a Haitian, French, Jamaican, African, and even a Filipino presence in southern Louisiana in the eighteenth century. (119–20)

The popularity of Western music among Pinoy audiences is a function of historicising specific genres that resonate with multiracial groups of people. In the shared history of struggle and oppression, communities are able to relate with each other through music. Gonzalves believes there is a "connection between aggrieved communities throughout the twentieth century, Africans and Asians sharing social spaces and workplaces. So you would find a sharing of those recreational and expressive forms of culture as well" (120).

Harsh realities and experiences that are shared through creative expression may be considered "counter-stories," which Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso define as a "method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)… . Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (32). They identify narratives coming from privileged demographics as "majoritarian stories," which include stories that "privilege Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (28). These speak of misrecognized identities subjected to the exclusion of dominant discourse and prod us into examining narratives and experiences from the peripheries.

Fig. 1: Lunas, Marren Rajji.
"Audience Fired up at Calle Con in Green Sun Hotel, Pasay City." 11 May 2019.

From the view of an ethnographer and ethnomusicologist, ambagan in rap music and hip-hop culture demonstrates hybridity and is considered a point of departure. Jose Buenconsejo's essay on mashups in Filipino music history from the 1970s to the present discusses hybrid music practices stemming from distinct musical traditions rooted in orality (by word of mouth and ritual as transmission modes) and aurality (using sifra as a method to produce contrafacta music) (Buenconsejo).

These musickings are emancipated from the constraints of visuality – the music score, the composer's constant presence looking over the performer's shoulder – as might bear upon conventional frames of analyses and perspectives in the traditional confines of the conservatory. The rupturing of the Western train of thought that dates back to the Frankfurt School defining music as part of culture that can be classified as high or low, elevated or kitsch, makes possible the study of music cultures and aesthetics that may be strange and unfamiliar in the academic setting. The more we dig, the more we discover that there are other threads and issues to pursue. Hip-hop heads, deejays, emcees, visual artists, b-boys, and b-girls were approached gingerly at the outset because of how little I had tried to immerse myself in their traditions.

What Buenconsejo calls mashups from videoke machines and borrowings from previously published recordings are cherished compositions by talented musicians who are also fragile and vulnerable in their admissions of having no musical training or background except for their love and desire to create and perform rap music.

Of music amateurs circa 2007 in the Pinoy music-scape, Buenconsejo writes:

> Amateurs who made their own "mash ups" in 2007 were not formally schooled in music. This did not mean, however, that they were "low" in the social hierarchy (contra Bourdieu), particularly in terms of popularity. They simply belonged to the masses. The soundscape that they grew up with was part of the habitus of listening to pop ballads that afforded their way to amateur music making. In the absence of high-end gadgets [provided by] recording companies, their tools were minimal and cheap [which resulted in] crude home-made rap songs, mashing up the familiar melodies from the videoke commodities with newly minted lyrics that were then put on screen [via] YouTube. Overall, these representations were melodious, [spoke about] love relationships, and alternated in delivery with rap… . They were underscored by cheesy cited melodies on electric keyboard and raw loud drum patterns on a machine. Fans continually downloaded them from the internet. They were then heard in makeshift stalls selling pirated discs and played inside driver-owned jeepneys and tricycles. These songs even became a background sound in home parties where often, as in the case of "freestyle rap sessions," they were further layered with new improvised rap lyrics. (38-39)

Buenconsejo cited an example mashup of Sharon Cuneta's hit, "High School Love," by Repablikan Syndicate, one of hip-hop's seminal love rap groups and whose main

heads (*ulo*) contributed heavily to my research. Repablikan's members share that mashing familiar lyrics or melodies with their original lyrics was all the vogue in the early 2000s (Repablikan Syndicate). Yumi chose her artist name following the trend of using Japanese names for better fan recall. Repablikan often melded popular English songs and Japanese hits into their discography which entrenched their reputation as a hip-hop collective who sang about love and heartbreak, at the time a distinct contra-style from the gangsta, gun bar rap often essayed by other hip-hop artists and collectives (Repablikan Syndicate).

Youth Impetus Drawn From Its Historical Core

The origins of hip-hop are well established: Black youth from the fractious boroughs of New York's inner cities and projects in the 1970s unwittingly subverted the disco rhythms of the time into unique beats that embodied resistance, protest, and Black identity. When Grandmaster Flash and DJ Herc dropped the needle during the first block parties, they started a wave that spread from east to west over the next few decades. It did not take long for the DJs in the Bay Area, mostly Filipino-Americans (abbreviated thereafter as Fil-Ams), to take the breakdance rhythms to new levels. Fil-Am DJs in the 1980s and 1990s were world-class, winning at international DJ competitions. Hip-hop music, when it reached the Philippines, was mediated over radio waves and TV as well as Fil-Ams visiting the homeland of their parents. The American bases – Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base – were ports of entry for more than Air Force and Navy personnel; the bars in Clark and Olongapo were packed with musical acts catering to American forces stationed there.

The racist turn in US hip-hop was a lived disenfranchisement and oppression brought about by economic, social, and unequal power relationships. This disenfranchisement is arguably embodied by Pinoy fans and practitioners in their own experiences of cultural and emotional oppression and marginalization. It was in the innate pulse of hip-hop that Pinoy hip-hop heads found their own rhythms and voices, creating an ethos that articulated their unique identities and what they wanted to bring forth in a musical landscape awash with the mainstream melodies of balladeers and rock bands.

Pinoy hip-hop heads are driven by the maxim of *pag-aambag* (to contribute). Those who self-identify as hip-hop are challenged thus: *Ano na ang naiambag mo sa kultura"* ("What have you contributed to the culture?"). *Eksena* (scene) refers to the community of hip-hop heads and enthusiasts. Will Straw defines scene as a "cultural space in which various musical scenes interact with each other" (25). Similarly, Bennett and Peterson expound on three types of scenes – i.e., local, trans-local, and virtual. The Pinoy hip-hop scene is decidedly "trans-local, widespread

and possessing a unique style of music and lifestyle; and virtual, where its groups are spread out in larger cultural spaces and interact [not through] fanzines… [but explicitly] over the internet," specifically *YouTube*, as FlipTop's site of its immense worldwide popularity (Daryana et al. 153).

While hip-hop heads are cognisant of the impetus to grow the culture locally, the fodder that drives the art is universally borne by all hip-hop heads, defined by oppression and spurred by the need to be given due recognition. There is the argument, then, of listening to the narratives of Pinoy hip-hop artists as articulated by them, told in their own words. The music and words of hip-hop heads are often deemed inferior or guttural, literally of and from the streets. The bias of the learned, conditioned by centuries of a decidedly European education philosophy, can be a factor as to why the manner and style of delivery of hip-hop heads are dismissed, save for instances when a benevolent academic or patron of the arts deigns to intervene on their behalf.

It behooves the question of what it means to make a contribution from a decidedly Filipino – ergo, Pinoy – perspective. How are the cultural politics of hip-hop manifested in the distinct sub-genres of hip-hop that Pinoy hip-hop heads choose such as novelty rap, love rap, conscious rap, and battle rap? These sub-genres are brought to the fore because these are the sites of performativity and music that a study of hip-hop subculture can map and describe. This area is rich in possibility, pointing out areas and scenes of the field that can be mined, explored, and developed as far as local, Filipino/Pinoy popular music and culture are concerned.

Education can be one means to wield the power card and carve out hegemony in the name of intellectualism. My contribution as a scholar is not only to help frame the narratives of hip-hop heads often overlooked, but to gently rub away the self-effacement of an urban (auto)ethnographer with this modest *pag-aambag* to the social sciences and humanities in Philippine popular music and culture studies. As with hip-hop heads, my legacy as a scholar is in doing hip-hop in as much as I had been gifted the opportunities to do so, as well as responding to the clarion call of Taylor and Pope Francis to rectify a misapprehension of Pinoy hip-hop and carry to the page the stories of what constitutes the musical peripheries or the underground, which hip-hop heads fiercely embrace and champion.

Fig. 2. Cortez, Fredric, et al.
"Kjah with Young Hip-Hop Heads and High School Students at Ateneo de Manila Junior High School." 22 July 2019.

We can take into consideration Pinoy hip-hop as defined by the hip-hop heads themselves. The documentary, *Usapang Hip-Hop: Ambagan sa Eksena at Kultura* (*Hip-Hop Speak: To Make A Contribution to the Scene and Culture*) (2019), is based on the interviews of more than forty informants, all hip-hop insiders. The words *Usapang Hip-Hop* were spoken, verbatim, by producer-rapper-beatmaker Klumcee (Vaño). The film was premised on letting the hip-hop heads share their stories in their own words. Curating the narratives – the research process, the script writing, the directorial and editing decisions, the production phase, the post-production refinements, and polishing – was film-making as ethnography (Caffé and Hikiji). As part of a government project funded by the National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and the Commission for Higher Education (CHED), one of its main objectives was to introduce the documentary as a learning resource for young pre- and early adolescents and as reference material for ethnomusicologists interested in urban ethnographic fieldwork. This underscores the case that this article advances: this documentary and other similar research outputs on street youth cultures can become mainstays on library shelves and digital archives, easily accessible to learners and researchers. This tacit inclusion would also ensconce urban ethnography as a viable qualitative research methodology expressed in varying means of autoethnography to which popular music and subcultural studies lend themselves readily.

The Pinoy Ethnographer and *Ambagan*: One Perspective

The study of Pinoy subcultural music as autoethnography is tied with the collective concepts of *ambagan*, *pag-aambag*, and *ambag* (literally the act of contributing, making a contribution, and contribution, respectively). As a case in point, the study of Pinoy hip-hop was inextricably tied with my journey as ethnomusicologist, teacher, humanities and literature major, social scientist, writer, woman, learner,

musician, and Pinoy. These multiple positionalities were wrapped in a rich web of dynamic relationships, intertextuality, hybridity, and ontology, a web deeply meshed with the fascination for hip-hop culture, its culture bearers, and its musical and stylistic expressions.

To do ethnography is a messy affair and can take many months and years. As all journeys begin and end, answers are never fully given nor questions adequately asked. The complexities of my urban autoethnographic journey reflected the methods and means by which I gained acceptance and entry into the world of Pinoy hip-hop. I am also an amateur fan whose aurality is derived from decades of transcribing oral music practices – particularly in the local parishes and dioceses as a chorister, choir conductor, and instrumentalist – into the visuality of performance as a dancer and theatre performer. My attraction towards the prevalent bass rhythms of hip-hop music is informed by my own love for the bass line and inordinate attachment to inversions and diminished/augmented chords in live band performances in and around Metro Manila over three decades. Being an avid spectator and commentator of live sport such as basketball established an instant, acceptable, and intuitive credibility among my interviewees, who themselves were NBA aficionados, in apprehending and thereafter describing the dynamics and nuances in battle rap. Hence, my *ambag* as an ethnographer is also my *ambag* as a humanities graduate – and more – leaning on the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, critical literary analysis, and live action sports.

These contributions are underscored by Taylor's assertion: the mis-recognition and mis-apprehension of identity politics expressed in specific musical styles and cultural mores demand vigilance from scholars to suspend all disbelief and previous (mis)conceptions of what music and style ought to be. We are not only restored to ourselves in the discovery of ignored cultural identities but we also come to a new way of perceiving and apprehending their world with fresh eyes. Hans-Georg Gadamer's fusion of horizons requires putting aside preconceived, entrenched notions of aesthetical, theoretical mores in order to grasp a new horizon of rich, new experiences, something that is possible only if and when we lay ourselves open to the possibilities of the Other, revealing to us not necessarily what is new and innovative but what has always been there, hitherto unnoticed.

If only for the infinite rewards of conducting autoethnographic research on the rich subcultural ethos of Pinoy hip-hop, the case is compelling for its conscious, deliberate inclusion in literary studies and cultural research curriculums in the country.

When I wrote the script for the documentary, my primary target audience were junior high school students. This was a deliberate attempt on my part to capture the

personal stories that hip-hop heads had shared, many of which had as their nexus the start of their hip-hop journey when they were 12 years of age. I truly wanted my work to resonate with my son, who was then a 7th grader in junior high, and show him that the popular rap music he enjoyed at the time had its seeds in the hearts and minds of his "lodis" (slang for "idols") who started doing and being hip-hop at the same age he was then. In fact, he was the main child actor who embodied an amalgam of the myriad points of view embedded in the stories. While the film was funded by a higher education institution, the educational resource that I envisioned had a grander scope, and I remain ever hopeful that such work can reveal insights on the personal stories of local artists from the underground who have much to impart to the world. This now begs the question: why choose hip-hop?

Why Hip-hop?

Hip-hop music as a cultural weapon of the streets can be reframed within academic discourse as literary objects with powerful impact. M Zhayt emphatically declares that hip-hop is not only street culture; hip-hop **is** the underground (Gabriola; my emphasis). Gimenez-Maceda's entreaty to wield cultural weapons in factories, town centres, and picket lines is a truistic premise in hip-hop subculture: such spaces are inhabited by people who *are* street, who *are* underground (see Gimenez-Maceda).

Hip-hop culture is embraced, almost intuitively, by those with a searing drive to be heard. Pinoy emcees come from a place of lack, material or social capital, and often feel ignored and maligned. As a sensibility, hip-hop possesses its own pulse. The heartbeat is pronounced and explicit in its speaker-busting boom bap and trap percussions. In hip-hop, the entire body is engaged. The body bounces, the head bobs, the chest heaves, the knees bend, the feet move. When hip-hop music plays, one can close one's eyes and be immersed in its lyrical metaphors or seductive rhythms. One engages in hip-hop culture with eyes wide shut, fully knowledgeable and conscious, and a half-hearted foray is pushed towards an awareness of what to expect. Hip-hop exists unto itself and makes no apologies for what it is, what it was, and what it will still become.

Fig. 3. Garduque, RJ, et al. "1-Kiao Collective at Ateneo de Manila University Brick Walk." 2 June 2019.

Hip-hop is in your face: it confronts and compels; you consume it whole, the good and the bad. It is literary. It is vulgar. It is visceral. It is multisyllabic. It is rhythmic. It is figurative. It is literal. It is deceptively simple. And it is one that involves human acts in unique, inimitable ways. The case for a hitherto understudied area of subcultural studies is one of inclusion: the strong appeal for young hip-hop heads in urban centres around the world is a lodestone that cobbles their passion for the cultural ethos with its poetic literary elements and cultural mores that define the art itself.

How are aural aesthetics cultural artifacts borne by its culture bearers? In Pinoy hip-hop, nothing animates the underground ethos more than the concept of *ambagan*.

Ambagan as Cultural Legacy Making

Pag-aambag is best exemplified by a drinking session in any of Manila's street corners or *tambayan*. *Tambay*, a play on the words "stand by," refers to people who idle away time as jobless burnouts or out-of-school youth in a neighbor's cramped garage or a small alleyway (*eskinita*) drinking cheap gin (gin *bilog*, literally "round-shaped gin," or *lapad*, "wide-shaped") and eating street food such as pig's ear (*sisig*) or chicken innards (*isaw*). One must offer a modest contribution of a few pesos to spawn such a feast.

In Pinoy hip-hop, a culture considered relatively young compared to rock, disco, and pop, all insiders are considered knowledgeable about the main players and their contributions to the local scene. To walk the path that the forebears have forged means to pay homage to their pioneering efforts to forge a unique Pinoy hip-hop ethos, and anyone wanting to "make it" must consciously grow the legacy or pay it forward as others have before them. This code of the underground is fiercely championed. If you carve out a name for yourself in hip-hop and fail to look back from whence you came, you are considered "wack," ungrateful, fake, a poser, in spite of any prodigious talent and perceived popularity you may possess (oliveagay). The producers, artists, organisers, emcees, dancers, graffiti artists, and deejays who recognize the *pag-aambag* of their predecessors and other colleagues in the scene are considered genuine and authentic culture bearers. They will thank their collectives with a "shout-out" and entreat fans to support the collective's million and one entrepreneurial efforts in ventures such as clothing lines, vape supplies, and recording studio deals (Sharon). One who does not tip his hardboard cap is an ingrate.

Pinoy hip-hop culture empowers its practitioners and insiders in exercising their agency with hip-hop's creative and expressive elements to not only resist mainstream (usually neoliberal, capitalist) forces and crushing socio-economic realities but to also use that agency to propagate and promote (*mag-ambag sa*

eksena at kultura) the ethos of the culture itself. In broad strokes, the tales of *pag-aambag* are tales of affect, performance, and power.

The notion of *pag-aambag* is also a paying-it-forward out of a deep sense of gratitude. This is tied up in the linguistic form of *pag-aambag* as a verb in its past tense, *umambag* (to have contributed), with implications for the next generation of young hip-hop artists such as Shanti Dope, Because, Alex B (a young femmecee), and Hev Abi who enjoy mainstream success. Many male emcees I interviewed laud the next generation of hip-hop artists, expressing degrees of relief and pride (Dominguez; Peroramas and Henley; Abracosa; Metrio; Rivera; Dionisio and Armamento).

There is also the imperative form of *pag-aambag*: "mag-ambag ka" ("you must contribute"), couched as a moral ought by the likes of K-Leb and J-Slim, who are mindful that their longevity in the scene is constantly negotiated. They find themselves with clout and influence that insider fans recognize and lavishly praise as their "'dol," "idol," or "lodi" (Ramirez et al.; Ortigas).

Ambag as a noun can also be attributed to concrete contributions and legacy in the relatively young history of hip-hop in the country. Of note is FlipTop, arguably Anygma's unwitting legacy to the world (*handog ng Pilipino sa mundo*) (Mendoza, "Pinoys and Battle Rap: Handog Ng Pilipino Sa Mundo"). In an interview with Red Bull, Anygma empathetically declares that he is here to promote what he believes hip-hop culture is and to instill the same reverence and respect for the art form, its aesthetic expressions, and respect from fans and outsiders, i.e. not hip-hop heads (Adre).

Rolando Tolentino mulls the concept of *ambagan* as "a kind of different, distinct concept… . Everyone contributes to the pot… It's not *ayuda* in as much as *ayuda* ***refers merely to dole outs***. It is not constitutive of a being, but ***of… an imagined social being in which everyone participates*** regardless of whether they're antagonistic through battle rap or they do not agree with the minority position of some political rappers… but ***everyone contributes to the development of this genre as it has been taken on in the country***" (Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation of Ms. Lara Mendoza (Edited); my emphasis).

In fact, regardless of one's participation in the different sites of performance, aesthetics, and musicking of hip-hop, distinct typologies arise around *pag-aambag* and what constitutes the "youth." Older generations of hip-hop heads, in their late twenties to mid-thirties, refer to themselves as *titos* (uncles) or *kuyas* (older brothers), referencing themselves as *tanders* (old). There is constant acknowledgment of the prior generation of godfathers who are even more *tanders*, hip-hop heads in their mid- to late forties, such as Francis M and Gloc-9. The discussion surrounding

the godfathers of Pinoy hip-hop – *haligi ng kultura,* as Numerhus (Maranan) and K-Leb call them — are overlaid with intricate generational stratification that make for interesting conversations that students and teachers can unpack. The future generation of hip-hop culture is "the millennials" as described by Loonie, Abra, and KJah (who, in spite of being a millennial, self-identifies as a veteran owing to his decade of exposure and experience in FlipTop). They are also the generation who have benefited and are benefiting from the *pag-aambag* of previous hip-hop heads.

Fig 4. Garduque, RJ, et al. "Documenting Stories onto Film: Director, Producer, Actor in the Project 4 Barangay Hall." 29 May 2019.

The intricacies and complexities of *ambagan* are, to be sure, universal tropes in subcultural studies, emerging in studies of subaltern genres such as metal and hip-hop. Such studies are well-established areas outside of the Philippines; I cannot emphasize enough the rich potential for this in the Philippine context, and how this connects intuitively with hip-hop sensibilities around the world in all its myriad complexities and differences of specific milieus.

One cannot fully appreciate such intricacies without considering the dialogical, interlocutory nature of *pag-ambag* hinted by Tolentino above, and it is to this discussion I turn.

Ethnography as Dialogical *Pag-aambag*: Carnivalesque vis-à-vis Public and Hidden Transcripts

In my ethnography, as relationships with the participants evolved into deep and lasting friendships, I was afforded a glimpse into their world of musicking. While it was an initial objective to gain a foothold in the scene, the value of hindsight was *pag-aambag* in as much as it forced me to confront the biases and limitations of my inquiry.

Autoethnography reveals gaps in scholarship as in the field of popular music studies with its conventional approach that favors literary criticism or viewing musicking and music performances as *text* (Scott 2). Framing the signification and meaning-formation of hip-hop heads via the lyricism of their music can very well hold one back in the insistence to extrapolate inferences and conclusions about their *pag-aambag* – to make a difference, leave a mark, gift a legacy – based solely on the analysis of songs as text. This would have privileged the verbal agility of rappers but neglected the performative impulses that distinguish emcees from "mere" rappers.

Mikhail Bakhtin's focus on the exciting interlocution of linguistic texts and the dialogical negotiations that emcees activate in their dexterous showcase of wordplay, metaphor, and rhyming help in interrogating dialogical dynamics at work (Holquist; Bakhtin; Lachmann et al.; Morris; Robinson). This interlocutory dynamic is emblematic of the dialogical process by which the stories of hip-hop heads are woven with the stance of researchers into the local hip-hop scene as participant, fan, and scholar. Bakhtin envisaged humorous twists in the medieval clown's role as a means to unsettle and to disturb what had become a centralized and normalized societal language controlled (and owned) by those in power such as priests and royalty. Similar to how a carnival clown distracts and entertains the audience, so do linguistic forces that simultaneously harmonize and disunite. This complex dialogue is also *pag-aambag*, involving the act of engaging, reimaging, reimagining, and musicking.

In decoding practices of power interplay, one needs to take into account what is public and what remains hidden. James Scott's concept of hidden transcripts in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990) focuses on the dynamics and interactions between the dominant and the subordinate. Scott's framework makes use of two social transcripts – public and hidden – in order to highlight the differences between these interactions. Scott explains the "public transcript" as a "shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate. The public transcript, where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations. It is frequently in the interest of both parties to tacitly conspire in misrepresentation" (2).

On the other hand, "hidden transcript" refers to "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders." This may be in the form of offstage speeches, actions, and practices that "confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (Scott 4-5).

This power dynamic is further analysed by Tricia Rose in *Black Noise* (1994). Rose argues that the dominant group maintains their power by

> attempting to dictate the staging of public celebrations, by feigning unanimity among groups of powerholders to make such social relations seem inevitable, by strategically concealing subversive or challenging discourses, by preventing access to the public stage, by policing language and using stigma and euphemism to set the terms of public debate or perception. (100)

It is through hidden transcripts that the subordinate group may undermine the oppressive acts of the dominant. Rose explains that the subordinate may "create alternative codes that invert stigmas, direct our attention to offstage cultures of the class or group within which they originated, and validate the perceptions of the less powerful" (100).

Despite these distinctions, however, Scott believes that power relations are not as straightforward that one may immediately consider "what is said in power-laden contexts false and what is said offstage true. Nor can we simplistically describe the former as a realm of necessity and the latter as a realm of freedom" (5). What Scott is certain of is that hidden transcripts, compared to the public transcript, have an entirely different audience and work under different constraints of power.

Rap Music and FlipTop as Dialogical Hidden Transcript

One of the points that Rose emphasizes is how rap music manifests as hidden transcript. Rappers employ "cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities" (100). Rose also tackles the idea that rap music may be treated as a stage for the performance of the powerless, where they act out and present stories of alternative power dynamics and hierarchies.

In FlipTop, as other battle rap leagues in the world, emcees showcase talent and wit through three rounds of rapping and rebuttal. More than the entertainment and thrill that it provides to both participants and audiences, FlipTop emcees also produce hidden transcripts to manifest resistance to the systems, groups, and individuals that have continually oppressed them. Battle ascendancy can be evidenced in the ability to spit lines and verses. The tacit code by which the emcees adhere in tackling themes for battle can be seen as one way of resisting corruption and injustices, poverty and brutality, or societal prejudice against hip-hop culture. It may not be the most explicit or direct form of protest against the very same systems that dominate them, but it is, nonetheless, a form of fighting back. The emcees' freedom to rap and diss anyone and anything while on stage celebrates the carnivalesque,

a way for them to use their voices and be heard in dialogical insistence, away from the dominant groups that would normally police their words and actions. Parodying a prominent celebrity or self-important politician, for example, can elicit explosions of laughter or audible hums of approval from the audience. This cathartic release would be otherwise frowned upon in more formal settings (where hip-hop is not taken seriously nor deemed as respectable).

In a sense, the academe can be accused of playing the role of the dominant party, perhaps reinforcing if not encouraging, discourse that marginalises hip-hop music, dance, and graffiti. The dynamics between dominant and oppressed can be subverted in the classroom by immersive study and appreciation of subcultural norms and practices, especially in the world of Pinoy hip-hop. I recall an instance when the Literary Society of Ateneo de Manila invited me to judge their version of FlipTop-inspired battling during their organization's anniversary week. Introducing the experience of verbal tussling that FlipTop celebrates can bridge the extra-curricular and the academic. The possible entanglements of academic and extracurricular with popular culture are endless dialogical encounters that tease forth hidden texts and empower the battle emcee cum young learner in robust writing bars that question the dominant discourse of their particular milieu.

What is not hidden among emcees and other hip-hop heads is a fierce pride in one's kinship ties with other hip-hop heads. In the urban Metro Manila setting, this can be determined by geographical space. Those from the south (e.g., Parañaque, Muntinlupa, or Cavite) would not form any strong bonds with those from the north (e.g., Novaliches, Quezon City, or Bulacan). Beyond spatial kinship ties, there is the fierce self-identification of hip-hop heads, notably battle emcees, with strength and the glory of potential violence or destruction, which we consider in the next section.

Distinct Hip-Hop Performativities in Battle Rap

The importance of fierce self-identification is discussed by Mark Katz in his ethnographic study of Bay Area deejays in turntablism competitions, which are closely similar to rap battles. Katz poses this question of deejays which can apply to emcees preparing for live battle rap: "Why [even] battle?" The answer of DJ Immortal from Miami is echoed by other deejays and resonates among Pinoy hip-hop heads: "to destroy someone… [as if in] a real sport" (Katz 175).

As part of their battle rap arsenal, emcees choose handles that celebrate violent dispensations, be they entities (e.g., nouns) or acts (e.g., verbs), which Katz describes as "noms de guerre that hint at menace or extraordinary abilities" (175-76). A few examples culled from my research demonstrate the proverbial flexing of battle chops in the Pinoy battlefield of hip-hop.

1) Names of rappers and groups from the 1990s: 187 Mobstaz, a hip-hop collective from Tondo which is considered the heartland of Pinoy hip-hop, promotes the threatening aura of a group that means business and is unafraid to take out anything that gets in their way; Death Threat, a hip-hop group of which Gloc-9 was part; Gloc-9, who established his reputation early on as the fastest rapper in the Philippines, takes his name from the Glock pistol (McCarthy); Conflick, another member of Death Threat; and OG Whun, one of the oldest rappers still active in the local hip-hop scene today, whose handle alludes to being an Original Gangster, the first (or among the first), and the best (number 1).

2) The names of known local battle leagues such as Bahay Katay (Butcher House or Slaughterhouse) and Sunugan (Burning) call forth graphic images of death and suffering. Uprising, the production and management arm of Anygma, also suggests a surging, violent movement (Yuson). The uprising is meant to refer to an electric, volatile surge of musical quality as projected and envisioned by the producer. The energy is passive-aggressive in the sense that it makes itself felt in a ludic confrontational manner, and as its name suggests that there will be a reckoning, no matter what the intentions of the unwitting revolutionaries; change is a guarantee and marked on the horizon.

3) Some handles of battle emcees from FlipTop Rap Battle League include BLKD, a redaction of *balakid*, literally obstacle or barrier to prevent the opponent from gaining victory or achieving success; Lanzeta, from *lanseta*, a foldable pocket knife that cuts the opponent in a sudden, vicious, and lethal motion; Aklas, literally meaning a strike or labour strike; Sixth Threat, an ominous harbinger of things to come, not just once or twice, but six times over; Batas, Filipino word for "law," wherein the emcee establishes his reputation as being the standard (The Law) for all emcees in the league; and Sak Maestro, where Sak is the shortened version of *saksak*, which means to knife or lunge with a sharp instrument, and maestro, the Hispanic word for teacher, resulting in the image of someone who bequeaths timeless wisdom in a swift, emphatic, and violent motion.

Fig. 5. Mendoza, Lara. "This Urban Ethnographer's War Zone, Pre-COVID Lockdown, in the Development Studies Program Office." 14 March 2020.

The performance of menacing behavior or the threat of unleashing menace on others can, again, be traced to the age-old ritual of battling. In the 21st century urban setting, allusions to facing a dangerous opponent resonates with contact sports such as professional wrestling and basketball. The medieval image of jousters on steeds and gladiators in the ring herald strength often associated with power and masculinity. Ironically yet not surprisingly, many hip-hop heads are diminutive in stature (i.e., height not exceeding 5'5, not much more than my 5'1) or are self-confessed nerds, as in the case of BLKD (who touts himself as an activist from the University of the Philippines) and Abra (who was part of a high school organization, Lyrically Deranged Poets). Citing these observations is not meant to undermine the reputation or credibility of hip-hop heads in essaying skill and performing destructive, intimidating power on the stage; rather, these echo Katz' observation that juxtaposes the superhero and the nerd. "Taking on a heroic identity appeals to male DJs because, as they often admit, many fall into a category that is hardly heroic: the nerd" (176).

Hence, the case here can be made for the study of the nerdic sensibilities in Pinoy hip-hop; a culture of performative violence helps the underdog express dominance with the tools by which that culture is rendered powerful. In the culture of Filipinos, reticence and passive-aggressiveness finds in hip-hop releases the overt assertiveness of lyricism in rhythmic violence. In an academic setting, the ascendance of the nerd is neither out-of-place nor strange; in fact, it is in such a space of discourse that the study of the nerd's powers can be celebrated, contested, and recast.

Fig. 6. Garduque, RJ. "Waiting to Enter Daungan Bar in Pasay, Manila." May 2019.

Certainly, these are interesting issues that can be fodder for critical debates framed by culture studies scholars and educators to further nuance other conversations on issues such as race, class conflict, and government corruption. It is not part of this article's scope to delve into these matters, as these are discussed in detail elsewhere.

Conclusion

Writing ethnography is truly a "messy" affair; it is not chaotic in as much as it is an edifying and illuminating, autoethnographic journey. The process involved faithfully transcribing interviews and personal correspondence; problematising and thematising the issues; choosing narratives and experiences that would exemplify, highlight, and underscore concepts, debates, and possible contentious or understudied issues; smoothing, editing, proofreading for clarity, comprehensibility, and veracity; accruing varied multimedia samples (music videos, scores, recordings, articles, books); balancing the accounts and narratives, or attempting to give the multiplicity of voices space to breathe and hopefully, be heard; questioning the curation of the narratives; challenging my apprehensions, fears, insecurities, and prejudices; trying to achieve gravitas and confident aplomb in my subjectivity and positionality; and ultimately choosing a definitive stance that I felt was the most stable, sound, and indicative of my convictions as a scholar, artist, learner, and person. I was of the initial belief that foregrounding urban Metro Manila experiences would entail setting aside, momentarily, experiences from the periphery, and the regrettable exclusion of certain voices and frames of interrogation (i.e., transphobia, misogyny, regionalism, linguistics, ethnoscience, to name only some of many others).

The distilling of these apprehensions was wrapped in serendipitous wonder of the familiar and the unknown. Immersing myself in a new world, described in my post-graduate musings as subcultural spaces, invited me to temper the instant judgments formed and voices ideating non-stop in my head. The phenomenological wonder of bracketing previously held beliefs was not automatic, much as I prided myself in being an open-minded, liberal, progressive thinker (some may tease this as being woke; again, this discussion is explored more richly elsewhere).

To embody Nettl's reflective treatise to embrace the unfamiliar, transposing the strangeness into a nuanced appreciation of decidedly complex dynamics and contexts was to thoughtfully slow-cook the tough ask of Taylor, predicated on a fear of the unknown yet advocating for a change of mind that unsettles and disturbs in as much as it deconstructs and redefines. The notion of radical love is entrenched in Pope Francis' encyclicals that call for a new way to view human relationships and principles, i.e., to value the shadows and shades of gray, to see the unfamiliar, and to listen (without interrupting) closely to the words of those who truly live in the peripheries. As a Pinoy, urban ethnomusicologist, mother, teacher, and perennial learner, the world of hip-hop represented the amalgamation of this tripartite challenge to radically shift the locus of discourse that I had been conditioned and trained to propagate from mainstream, musicological concerns to the underground gems of the teeming subcultural world of Pinoy hip-hop. As the years-long entanglements changed me, so, too, can it be edifying and illuminating for others, especially those of us who find ourselves in positions of power and influence, who can reframe narratives and ways of appreciating unknown, unfamiliar, and intriguing musical, subcultural experiences.

NOTES

1. For those who cannot understand Filipino, M Zhayt employs word play with *nakapasok*, which literally means "to have entered." In Filipino, this word is used to connote gaining entry or acceptance into higher education. It thrilled Zhayt to be able to declare that he was finally able to enter (nakapasok) Ateneo, which would then imply that he is a bona fide student of this prestigious university.

2. The full quote from Pope Francis' homily was, "The Word of Christ is intended to reach out to everyone, in particular those who live in the peripheries of existence, so that they might find in Him the center of their life and the source of hope. And we, who have had the race of receiving this Word of Life, are called upon to go, to leave our confines and with zeal bring forth all the mercy, the tenderness, the friendship of God. Go and welcome: in this way the heart of the mother Church and all of her children is able to beat. When hearts open up to the Gospel, the world starts to change and humanity is resurrected. If we welcome and live the Word of Jesus every day, we will rise again with Him."

3. Scenes are expounded upon as a) Local: where groups focus on a particular geographical area; b) trans-local: local scenes that are widespread and have a unique style of music and lifestyle; and c) virtual: groups that are spread out in larger cultural spaces and interact through fanzines and the internet (Daryana et al. 153).

4. In the Pinoy sense, however, I do *ouido,* a term that refers to aurality of the heart and intuition.

5. The history of rock, pop, and disco can be traced to the 1950s, predating hip-hop in the Philippines by at least two decades.

6. According to the *Urban Dictionary*, an online dictionary for the everyday, ephemeral, constantly evolving street slang and expressions, wack means "something that really sucks."

7. There is a Filipino adage that goes, "Ang hindi lumingon sa pinagmulan ay hindi makararating sa pinaroroonan." Literally, this translates to "whosoever does not look behind (at their origins) will not reach their destination (future)." This plays heavily into this sentiment.

8. Another slang expression defined in the *Urban Dictionary* as "A public expression of thanks or gratitude."

9. As of this writing (August 2024), an enterprising Fil-Am emcee, Ez Mil, has made waves in the US hip-hop scene when he was signed onto Dr. Dre's and Eminem's labels. His songs feature lyrics rendered in Filipino (Tagalog and Bisaya languages) and speak of places in the Philippines, all to show love for his Filipino cultural heritage.

10. These are evidenced in threads and comment sections on *Facebook* and *YouTube*.

11. These are loose examples that do not mean to exclude the western (e.g., Pasay, Tondo) and eastern (e.g., Marikina, Pasig) parts of the metropolis. It is also noteworthy that the borders of Metro Manila are porous in the sense that the South Boys can include those reppin' Cavite (technically outside of the National Capital Region, or NCR) while reppin' from the north can connote contiguity, as with the outlying city of Valenzuela and the bordering province of Bulacan (also no longer a part of the NCR).

12. Of particular interest is how the Glock is described as having "no external trigger safety… That was marketed as an innovation, but it was also a reason that the gun design has been heavily criticized by gun-control advocates because it is true that there is no way to put it on safety. The gun is always on."

13. Anygma clarifies that he was not consciously thinking in terms of violent upheaval in the naming of his artist management business but rather more along the lines of stirring waves of awareness and respect from the kind of hip-hop music that he would be producing.

14. In the past two years, a new league has entered the battle scene, Pangil sa Pangil (PSP). This literally translates to "jaw for jaw," suggesting the posturing of combatants jutting out their jaws to challenge the other to physical brawling. In a forthcoming essay, I delve into the insidious preying of its founder and supporters on the hip-hop battle scene. Anygma referred to culture vultures in our interview in June of 2019. I argue that PSP are "culture vulturing" on this currently lucrative scene merely for profit and marketing posturing. The respect for the culture and its artists is degraded and tainted by the unchecked lust for money and fame. "The money, power, respect; the last one is better." – Kendrick Lamar in "Like That"

15. "Handle" is lingo for a chosen name, applying to other practices employed in social media, video games, and, in this case, performance identity.

16. This usage is particular to Bisayas as I personally experienced as a high school teacher in Northeast Mindanao in the 1990s.

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Lara Katrina T. Mendoza (lkmendoza@ateneo.edu) is an ethnomusicologist whose expertise and research interests are in Pinoy hip-hop, live sports commentary, and literary analysis. Her educational degrees are in the Humanities (AB), Literature (MA), Cognitive and Functional Linguistics (MaNaMa), and Music (PhD). She started her Ateneo de Manila teaching journey at the Department of English in 1996 where she taught courses on basic English, essay, short story, and her favorite, poetry and drama. She joined the Department of Development Studies in 2019 to helm initiatives in Popular Culture and Development. Lara works closely with the International Association for the Study of Popular Music – Southeast Asia (IASPM-SEA) whose members are scholars from across the globe and experts on musicology, culture studies, and their cognates. In her capacity as a member of the Executive Committee from 2022 to the present, she has consistently guided students in exploring their research interests in subcultural, media, and popular music studies, organising scholarly and creative forums that provide discoursal space for (very) young scholars and amateur fans from around the world to share their work in engaging formats.