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The Insurgent in the Cipher: *Signifyin' the Moro, Empire, and War in Filipino Diasporic Aesthetics*

Mark Villegas

The Opening Salvo: Translating the Moor to Moro to Moreno

Now, it's the opening salvo,
Where po scope the people like Mohammed and Malvo,
A sample of the battle we've waged against an animal
Made to snuff us out like the wick of a candle.¹

In the first lines of the song “Opening Salvo” from the Blue Scholars’ 2008 album *Bayani* (“Hero” in Tagalog), Filipino American emcee Geologic (“Geo”) alludes to the mayhem wrought by John Allen Mohammed and Lee Boyd Malvo, who, in 2002, killed at least ten people in seemingly random sniper attacks in the Washington, D.C. Beltway. Cryptic notes left by Mohammed at crime scenes included rhetoric associated with the Five Percenter Nation of Gods and Earths, a heterodox off-shoot of the Nation of Islam (NOI) whose cosmology regards black men as embodiments of God and black women as representing earth. Five Percenter lingo is also quite popular in U.S. hip hop lyrics.² In referencing Mohammed and Malvo in “Opening Salvo,” Geo defiantly recreates the incident as a moment of resistance, situating the attacks as a “sample” of a bigger battle against an “animal” or the “po” (police). Where Mohammed and Malvo are criminals to the U.S. public, Geo recontextualizes and revalues their actions within a racialized and power-stratified history by redirecting the “scope” and calling attention to police surveillance and violence enacted upon communities of color. In the song, Geo speaks

¹ “Opening Salvo,” Blue Scholars, *Bayani* (2008). This song can be heard in its entirety on the Blue Scholars’ website: <http://shop.bluescholars.com/products/bayani-redux>.

² Tim Molloy, “Five Percent group draws comparisons to writings,” *The Southeast Missourian*, Oct 27, 2002; Anouar Majid, *We Are All Moors: Ending Centuries of Crusades against Muslims and Other Minorities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 45; Felicia M. Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop’s Music, Message, and Black Muslim Mission* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005).

for the weak whose precarious survival is like a flame on the wick of a candle, and as the title intimates, his words are a call to action.

A Filipino American's poetic heroicizing of Mohammed and Malvo may seem puzzling: why would a Filipino American reference Five Percenter? In this paper, I analyze Geo's relation to certain forms of Islam and, concomitantly, to "Moros," a term sometimes used to refer to Philippine Muslims. I examine how for Filipino American hip hop performers, Moros figure within a racialized imagining informed by a historical devalorization of the Filipino body indexed by colonialism and racialization in the Philippines.³ To be sure, this process continues today in the Filipino diaspora's position within a racialized global laboring caste.⁴

The Philippines is burdened with a long history of Western colonization: three centuries with Spain beginning in the mid-1600s and at least half a century with the United States at the end of the 1800s. Therefore, in signaling a threat to the modern, Christian, white, imperial West, the Moro represents an alternative embodiment to a devalorized and colonized Filipino racial status. I propose that this alternative way of being embraces a *moreno* (or dark-skinned) signification, a signification that marks an otherwise abject darkness that is linguistically linked to the term "Moro." In fact, as early as 1734, the Spanish dictionary listed "moreno" as referring to the dark color of "los Moros."⁵ For Filipino Americans, the Moro—seen as much more than a religious Muslim

³ Miyakawa outlines the ideological separation between Five Percenter and other Muslim groups (*Five Percenter Rap*, 4, 30, 31). Although Five Percenter disavow fundamental tenets of orthodox Islam, such as the five pillars of Islamic faith, they still adhere to some major principles, especially those routed through the Nation of Islam. As Miyakawa demonstrates, Five Percenter's self-identification can waver between proclaiming themselves Muslims or disavowing the label. For purposes of this paper, I will refer to Islam in a generic sense, citing it as more of a political and cultural constituency rather than as a term committed to a specific orthodoxy.

⁴ My task is not to demonstrate quantitatively the extent of Filipino American usage of Muslim themes but rather the meanings garnered when they do turn to Islam (in whatever form it is imagined) in order to form their worldviews. Further, my task is not to enumerate Filipino American converts to Islam, a topic which could be further illuminated in a future project. To note, other examples of Filipino American hip hop performers who evoke an Islam-tinged language and aesthetics, especially the Black Muslim rhetoric of "knowledge of self" and "learning lessons," are Son of Ran (who identifies as Catholic), Bambu, Kiwi, Isangmahal, Cookie Jar, Paulskee and other Universal Zulu Nation leaders, the Digital Martyrs, and graphic artist Pres 1, who often includes images of the Muslim crescent in his works. For more on Filipinos as a global laboring class, see: Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁵ This citation can be found in the *Diccionario de autoridades, Real Academia Espanol* (1734), 606-607.

standing for the racialized, non-white “other”⁶—is a potentially transformative resource in constructing a valorized Filipino racial formation. In this context, I argue that for Geo, Islam serves to revalue discursively his racialized and colonized status as a Filipino male.

Muslims have long had a precarious political status in the Philippines. Muslim territories within the Spanish colony were given a certain level of political autonomy. However, when the United States assumed authority over the Philippine archipelago, Muslim autonomy was substantially curbed. Patricio Abinales argues that under U.S. governance, the colonial regime attempted to consolidate the modern Philippine state at the expense of Filipino Muslims’ sovereignty. He traces that insurgency in the predominantly Muslim southern region of Mindanao, an insurgency that continues today and is not wholly one of religion or identity politics. The imperatives of modern Philippine state formation mediated by U.S. colonialism are key to understanding the politics of southern Philippine separatism.⁷ Michael Salman reminds us that Filipino Muslims’ alterity in relation to Filipino national identity emerged during early U.S. rule. As racial “others” according to the colonial census, Muslims and non-Christian Filipinos were denied a national voice. Salman writes, “The ‘special’ provinces populated by Muslims and non-Christians, officially classed as ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilized’ in the census, were not permitted to represent themselves in the [Philippine government] assembly. They were not considered Filipinos.”⁸

The tentative political status of Muslims in the Philippines in light of Philippine state formation resonates with the historical abjection of formerly enslaved blacks within the U.S. body politic. In writing about African Americans’ turn to Islam during the 1950s and 1960s, Melani McAlister connects racialized “others” who were abjected by the nation-state with Islam’s alternative provisions:

[T]he community it [Black Nationalism] envisioned provided an alternative to—and in some sense a fundamental critique of—the nation-state. African American Muslims could claim a

⁶ Majid, *We Are All Moors*, 5.

⁷ Patricio Abinales, *Making Mindanao: Cotabato and Davao in the Formation of the Philippine Nation-State* (Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2000).

⁸ Michael Salman, *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 152.

symbolic countercitizenship, an identity that challenged black incorporation into the dominant discourse of Judeo-Christian Americanness.⁹

Likewise, some Filipino American hip hop performers rehearse a “symbolic countercitizenship” to both the U.S. and the postcolonial Philippine nation-state. For these performers, inflections of Islam provide a language of decolonization and a critique of Western Judeo-Christian hegemony. Like African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s, Filipino American hip hop performers like Geo are re-imagining their place in the world and the universe.

I propose the metaphor of the cipher to describe a complicated web of Filipino diasporic racial significations. In hip hop vernacular, the cipher refers to circles of dance or lyrical improvisation where participants contribute to a fluid space of performance. In Five Percenter vernacular, the cipher refers to a source of complete wisdom. In the Filipino diasporic cipher replete with racial significations, tropes of Islam, blackness, brands of asserted masculinities, Latinidad, and indigeneity circulate to confound clean and linear categorizations that insist on racial essences. Like the cipher of emcees or dancers, the ideological borders of discursive exchange are not clearly defined. Rather, the racial referents and significations circulating in the Filipino diasporic cipher are faithful to no geographic or temporal boundaries. As a non-linear, circulating metaphor, Filipino racial positionality—Asian and Third World, Oriental yet Primitive, American yet tropical, “Hispanicized” but not “Hispanic,” model minority yet insurgent—is full of contradictions that must be negotiated. This slipperiness unpacks the possibilities of Filipino diasporic racial transgression, opens spaces for antiracist and anti-imperial cultural projects, and enacts agency in the pleasure and play of Filipino racial in-betweenness.

Within the Filipino diasporic cipher, Islam represents an identification with a colonized Filipino racial position. For one, Muslims comprise a sizeable demographic in the Philippine nation, establishing a resonant national or ethnic kinship with Filipino Moros who often symbolize an “authentic” and unconquered Filipino body for Filipino

⁹ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 94.

Americans. Secondly, because of the U.S.'s role in global military violence, especially pronounced in its "War on Terror" campaign in the Philippines, Geo and other Filipino American critics have framed the war on Filipino Moros as an extension of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines, thus forging a connection between Filipino Moros and anti-imperial politics. While the Spanish were unable to "conquer" them, Moros eventually came under political control by the Philippine state via U.S. military genocide between 1902 and 1913 during the Philippine-American War. As mentioned above, the Philippine postcolonial state, sponsored by the U.S., continued its campaign to "domesticate" Moros thereafter.¹⁰ Long-term U.S. and Spanish presence in the Philippines presents a kind of double work for the Filipino American decolonizing processes, and Islam thus enters the Filipino American cipher as a resource to re-imagine a Filipino body critical of both Spanish and U.S. colonialism. A third point of congruency for representations of Islam and a Filipino racial position can be located in the Iberian peninsula's Moorish past, which for many represents a glorious moment of Islam in the West. Therefore, postcolonial Spanish subjects imagine a turn to Islam as a return to a Moorish anchor. Finally, Filipino American immersion in hip hop forges an intimacy with forms of U.S.-based Islam, especially hip hop-driven Five Percenter rhetoric. Having become familiar with Five Percenter ideology through hip hop music (and, interestingly, not through Filipino-Moro kinship), Geo exemplifies Filipino diasporic identification with Islam.

Filipino American alignment with the Moro, often bordering on Orientalist fascination, is sometimes rightly critiqued. Barbara Gaerlan outlines Filipino American Orientalist appropriation of the "Moro suite" in Filipino American dance tradition. Highlighting the Filipino American attraction to singkil and other "Moro"-themed performances in college-based Pilipino Culture Nights (PCN), Gaerlan points to an Orientalist characterization of the Muslim "other," a skewing and modifying of a more

¹⁰ The creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 1987 is a testament to the friction between the Muslim region and the rest of the predominantly Catholic Philippines. See "History of ARMM," <http://www.muslimmindanao.ph/armm.html> (last accessed on March 20, 2010) for brief information on Muslim regional separation. See also Abinales, *Making Mindanao*; Barbara Gaerlan, "In the Court of the Sultan: Orientalism, Nationalism, and Modernity in Philippine and Filipino American Dance," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 2, no. 3 (1999); pp. 251-287 offers insight to the politics of the Muslim region, especially page 268.

“authentic” Moro dance tradition for the purpose of illustrating Filipino Moro “exotic” difference from Filipino Christians. As Gaerlan demonstrates, Filipino Americans’ preference for the Moro-themed dance stems from their desire to embody the myth of Moros as regal, proud, civilized, and unconquered by the Spanish.¹¹ The non-linear historical ordering of racial valuation becomes clear in the PCN scenario. During early U.S. colonial occupation of the Philippines, colonial authorities designated Muslims in the archipelago as people of “non-Christian tribes” of “wild” and “uncivilized” extract unfit for representation in the Philippine Assembly.¹² This disavowal from Philippine national membership was echoed by influential Filipino propagandists and nationalists (including Philippine national hero Jose Rizal), who, in their search for a “fit” Filipino racial stock worthy of membership in a modern world of nations, abjected “non-Christian tribes” as essentially not Filipino.¹³ Ironically, in the Filipino diaspora today, especially for the PCN dancers, Filipino Muslimness is being refigured as regal and civilized, and Muslims are repositioned as *the* authentic Filipinos. Although problematic in a number of ways, the PCN’s Moro appropriation offers a useful example of the ways in which Filipino Americans are constructing their worldviews in light of the continuing violence of Western colonialism and global displacement.

Often inserted within a U.S. immigrant assimilationist discourse, Filipino Americans pose an awkward case, because the Philippines, as a former U.S. colony, has been subjected to an “already” Americanized cultural, linguistic, and legal confluence.¹⁴ Therefore, Filipino American hip hop performers like Geo, in evoking Five Percenter speech, threaten the safety of assimilationist incorporation into whiteness, thus resonating with Moro insurgents in the southern Philippines who defy Western and

¹¹ Gaerlan’s main thesis demonstrates how the Philippine state-supported Bayanihan dance troupe was used to prove to the world the Philippine peaceful accords with and domestication of the Muslim regions of the archipelago during a time of extreme state-sponsored violence against Muslims and the subsequent armed resistance of Muslims against Philippine colonization. Therefore, the Bayanihan foregrounding of the Moro suite ideologically “Filipinized” Moros for the world. Gaerlan then shows how Filipino Americans appropriate the Bayanihan Moro suite in their own way, which privileges an “unconquered” Moro divorced of the history of state violence.

¹² Salman, *Embarrassment of Slavery*, 152.

¹³ Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr., “‘Ilustrado’ Nationalism and the Racial Science of Migration Waves”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 3(August 2005):. 605-637; Salman, *Embarrassment of Slavery*, 151-157.

¹⁴ Sarita See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): xv-xvii.

Philippine nation-state domestication. In analyzing Filipino American art and performance, Sarita See demonstrates how Filipino America “contributes to the process and products of an American post/colonial cultural archive” thus heeding Edward Said’s appeal for critics “to inventory the interpellation of culture by empire.”¹⁵ In a similar move, I attempt to make sense of Filipino American hip hop performers’ investment in the Moro in order to investigate modes of cultural insurgency against white hegemony as a particular contribution “to the American post/colonial cultural archive.”

Yo Soy Moreno: From Model Minority to Moreno

Due to the Spanish colonial presence, the Philippines in many ways acts, looks, and sounds like Latin America, yet it is geographically located in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, with U.S. military, legal, and economic control of the archipelago, the Philippines’ political history is similar to Latin American locales such as Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Given this colonial kinship, Islam’s role in Latin America is useful in theorizing Filipino Americans’ engagement with the Moro.

Anouar Majid’s book *We Are All Moors* positions all racialized minorities in the West as ideologically originating from Iberian Moors who were expelled from Spain by Christians in the 15th century. With special attention given to public discourse regarding the Mexican “invasion” of the United States, Majid argues that people of color in the modern West are an ideological reflection of the Moors in Spain whose “othered” status helped define the contours of the modern nation-state. He states,

The modern nation that was emerging in Catholic Iberia both depended on and deliberately punished its Others. This double contradiction, in some ways, has been the defining feature of nations ever since. One simply cannot fully appreciate the precarious position of minorities in the modern world without having some sense of the historic clash between Christianity and Islam, and without seeing modern-day minorities as latter-day Moors—Muslims in disguise, as it were, wearing the masks of different religions and speaking different languages. Ideologically speaking,

¹⁵ Ibid.,xii.

then, all minorities in the modern West can trace their genealogical origins to the Moor in Christian-ruled Spain.¹⁶

Majid's brave contention that today's racialized minorities are "Muslims in disguise" speaks to the broader, non-religious meanings attached to the Moor as an allegory to modern-day threats to the pure, white, secular West, especially exemplified by the contemporary "Hispanic Panic" over U.S. border control.¹⁷ For Majid, the paranoia that compels white Western nations to erect borders—discursively and physically—has precedence in the Iberian expulsion. Thus, the racialized image of the Moor as the absolute "other" to Euro-American identity is quite fitting when the Filipino enters the U.S. domestic public imaginary. Tellingly, one of the main reasons for granting the Philippines independence from the U.S. in 1946 was the "overwhelming" migration of Filipino men to the U.S. who posed a sexual and labor threat to white men.¹⁸

Today, Filipino Americans are generally lumped in with the notion of assimilated, domesticated "model minority" Asian Americans. But where is there space for Filipino Americans to embody a more critical racial identification? In an effort to align with anti-imperial politics, some Filipino Americans signify Moro-ness in order to defy "model minority" identification. Having the highest immigration rate next to Mexicans,¹⁹ Filipinos are surging into the U.S. with demographic might. Such a robust presence can be ideologically framed as void of U.S. imperial implications (as in the model minority discourse), or it can illuminate the role of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines and the subsequent mass migration of postcolonials to the metropole. The latter scenario invites us to recognize the U.S.'s imperial project in the Philippines, which included the "blackening" of Filipinos by the U.S. military and the U.S. reading public in order to demonstrate Filipinos' inferiority and need of "civilization" by the new colonial regime.²⁰

¹⁶ Majid, *We Are All Moors*, 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 22.

¹⁸ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 53.

¹⁹ Aaron Terrazas, "Filipino Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, September 2008. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?id=694>.

²⁰ Abe Ignacio, Enrique de la Cruz, Jorge Emmanuel, and Helen Toribio, eds., *The Forbidden Book: The Philippine-American War in Political Cartoons* (San Francisco: T'Boli Publishing and Distribution, 2004); Scot Ngozi-Brown, "African-American Soldiers and Filipinos: Racial Imperialism, Jim Crow, and Social Relations," *The Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 1 (Winter 1997).

My use of *moreno* as a Filipino racial signifier attempts to generate a race consciousness among Filipinos in the diaspora. *Moreno* illustrates the linguistic haunting of Spain's Moorish past and serves as a vernacular reminder of Islam's racial dimensions in postcolonial Latin America and the Philippines. *Moreno*, then, functions as a signifier for darkness or blackness. Given Filipino American hip hop performers' fluency in black aesthetics and discourse, such as Geo's deployment of Five Percenter rhetoric, embracing one's *moreno* melanin, a theme central to hip hop, is threaded together with revaluing a Spanish Muslim past.

Clearly, Filipino Americans share a kinship with their Latin American "colonial cousins" in many ways, offering models of cultural decolonization that embrace Moorishness. Hisham Aidi's article "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race and 'Connected Histories'" exemplifies the Muslim linkages with Latin Americans' pursuit of decolonization,²¹ linkages relevant to Filipino Americans. For Aidi, Latin American leaders' call to turn to their Moorish origins and to stand in solidarity with the Arab world in their fight against Western imperialism marks the "connected history" forged between the Latin "West" and the Muslim "East." Cuban nationalist José Martí's declaration "Let us be Moors!" in 1893 is just one of a series of calls for Latin Americans to revere and revalue their Spanish Moorish past.²² The rapidly growing conversion of Latin Americans to Islam is indicative of the burgeoning anti-hegemonic culture in the "New World" in light of attacks on Muslims in the U.S. "War on Terror." Aidi notes one Puerto Rican imam's thoughts on Latino conversion to Islam, which he tethers to a haunted Spanish Moorish heritage: "Islamically inspired values were conveyed ever so subtly in the Trojan horse of Spanish heritage throughout the centuries and, after 500 years, Latinos were now ready to return."²³ Here, the "Moor" in "*moreno*" makes a comeback with Latinos.

Referring to marginalized people of color beyond Latin America, Aidi notes the impact Islam has had on groups who are seeking a new language of resistance. He notes,

²¹ Hisham D. Aidi, "Let Us Be Moors: Islam, Race, and 'Connected Histories,'" *Souls* 7, no. 2 (2005): 36-51.

²² *Ibid.*, 36-37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

Over the past two years, Islam has provided an anti-imperial idiom and imaginary community of belonging for many subordinate groups in the West, as Islamic culture and art stream into the West through minority and diasporic communities, and often in fusion with African American art forms, slowly seeping into the cultural mainstream.²⁴

Islamic culture and art's "fusion with African American art forms" is crucial in forming appeal within the hip hop cipher. Relevant to a Filipino American social context, Aidi notes the role hip hop has played for familiarizing non-Muslims with Islam:

For many American youth, Islamic hip-hop is their first encounter with Islam, and often leads them to struggle with issues of race, identity, and Western imperialism...In Europe, many North African youth are rediscovering Islam and becoming race-conscious through Five Percenter and NOI [Nation of Islam] rap lyrics.²⁵

Geo exemplifies a Filipino American engagement with Islam that addresses "race, identity, and Western imperialism" through its "race-conscious" Five Percenter rap lyrics. The Nation of Islam, which is formally separated from the Five Percenter organization but is conjoined in many ways because of the NOI's precedence, appears in hip hop texts especially with its espousing of the "knowledge of self" principle popularized by the lessons of Elijah Mohammed.²⁶ As a Filipino American, Geo labors as a cultural worker for anti-imperialist struggle in the Philippines and in the U.S., where "knowledge of self" is a central principle in his lyrics.

Returning to the Pilipino Culture Night in which Filipino American dancers privilege the "Moro suite," José Martí's declaration, "Let us be Moors!" seems all the more appropriate for the post-Spanish decolonizing subject. Gaerlan notes that for the Filipino American dancers, the "Moro suite" represents a "kind of 'Golden Age' of Philippine independence on which Filipinos everywhere can look back with pride."²⁷ For Aidi, such a pride functions similarly for Westerners who are (re)turning to the Moorish past for an alternative cosmology. He suggests that

²⁴ Ibid., 38.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁶ Joseph D. Eure and James G. Spady, *Nation Conscious Rap: The Hip Hop Vision* (New York: PC International Press, 1991). Elijah Muhammad's lesson is on page 329.

²⁷ Gaerlan, "In the Court of the Sultan," 254.

Islamic Spain has emerged as an anchor for their identity. Moorish Spain was a place where Islam was in and of the West, and inhabited a Golden Age before the rise of the genocidal, imperial West, a historical moment that disenchanting Westerners can share with Muslims.²⁸

For Filipino Americans, who might be considered geographically and culturally “Western,” this “Golden Age” operates on two fronts: it represents a “golden” uncolonized Philippines, as Gaerlan notes, and it connotes the non-imperial “golden” past in the Spanish West, according to Aidi.

“Brothers call me dog. They got the letters backwards”²⁹: Strategies of Critical Pedagogy

John Allen Mohammed’s cryptic notes left at the sites of his sniper killings are not so mysterious to people fluent in Five Percenter lingo. The phrases written on the notes “I am God” and “word is bond”³⁰ would be familiar to Geo and other hip hop performers proficient in Five Percenter language. In the lyrics referenced in the sub-heading above from “No Rest for the Weary,” Geo’s assumption of “God” status (the backwards spelling of dog) signifies his affiliation with Five Percenters. In the same song, Geo continues, “I’m back with a plan of attack to repossess my name, face, and history yall.” Geo’s ascription of blackness onto his body, signified by Five Percenter allegiance, is an extension of a *moreno* racial valuing that is often disavowed by the exigencies of white assimilation. Like his Latin American counterparts, Geo is turning to the Moor in order to form a Filipino diasporic race-consciousness.

Geo’s threading his male Filipino racial status into expressions of Muslim Black Nationalism doesn’t stop with clever words. The hip hop cipher allows him to rearticulate and recreate discourse through play and performance. Geo’s rhymes puncture dominant ideology through a critical pedagogy excavating a Filipino “knowledge of self” that imperialism’s logic seeks to obfuscate. He says in the same song:

²⁸ Aidi, “Let Us Be Moors,” 49.

³⁰ Molloy, “Five Percent group.”

³⁰ Molloy, “Five Percent group.”

Igniting the cipher sessions I'm deciphering life,
Blending both theory into practice.
I write vernacular and actual fact
God, no posturing...

The song "Opening Salvo" further sets the stage for his investments in a discursive battle against imperial violence:

Right now I want to thank God for being me
My soul won't rest until the colony is free
1896 Revolution incomplete
Silence is defeat, my solution is to speak
Resurrect the legacy of martyrs I beseech
Time to choose a side: It's the mighty verse the meek
My big brother Free brought the word from the East.
We're the bullet in the middle of the belly of the beast.

"Free," referenced in the penultimate line above, is a Filipino American cohort of Geo's who studies Five Percenter lessons. In 2006, Free, whose full name is Freedom Allah Siyam (formerly Arthur Gotcho Cupp), was detained and questioned by the FBI for what appeared to be his connections to fundamentalist Muslim groups in the U.S.³¹ Geo references Free's recent trip to the Philippines (the "East") after which Free encouraged Geo to continue transforming the minds and manners of Filipinos in the U.S. who can act as "bullets" of truth in order to combat U.S. hegemony from inside the colonizing metropole, or within "the belly of the beast."

"The True Aziatik" from the "East": Re-Circulating Strategies of Identification

Of course, the "East" carries a host of Orientalist baggage that reifies an "East" and "West" polarity, naturalizing imagined imperial racial binaries. There are distinct

³¹ Sarah Mirk, "Questioning Freedom: FBI Keeps Tabs on Seattle Filipino Activists," *The Stranger: Seattle's Only Newspaper*, March 12, 2006, <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=87909>.

discursive power maneuvers at work, including the exoticizing and “othering” of things seen as “Eastern,” an image rife with sexual connotations that tend to homogenize the “East” into an erotic object.³² Geo and other Filipino Americans, especially the dancers in the Pilipino Culture Nights who turn to the “Moro suite” in order to reclaim an “authentic” and “unconquered” Filipino embodiment, are not immune to Orientalist complicity, and neither are Muslim-oriented Black Nationalists. Five Percenter (and NOI) lingo revering the “original black man from the East” or the “Asiatic black man” should be scrutinized for its putative Orientalism. For example, we must carefully question Orientalist connotations when Nas calls himself the “Afrocentric Asian: half man, half amazing.”³³ Nevertheless, however Orientalizing such anti-hegemonic decolonization projects may be, these projects of racial revaluing must be indexed within a process of strategic re-identification that emerges out of the grammar of a dominating discourse. In this light, my use of “West” and “Western” throughout this analysis is deliberate, given that my framework operates within an imperial field of power: in order to critique the power of the so-called “West,” I must name it.

Philippine hip hop group MastaPlann, influenced by Five Percenter-inspired hip hop of the 1980s, especially Rakim, subvert and reappropriate the notion of the Asiatic black man narrative by assuming “True Aziatik” personae³⁴ in their own strategic identificatory maneuvering. MastaPlann re-circulate the tropes of the “Asiatic” both to reaffirm its vernacular validity and also to elaborate on its invented, fictive currency. What does it mean to be the “truer Asiatic”? In the case of MastaPlann, the Filipino “Asiatic” moves beyond Filipino racial categorization as Asian, joining in conversation with Muslim Black Nationalism through hip hop. Therefore, Filipino hip hop performers’ reclamation of the “Asiatic” involves a complex set of identifications: it is not merely an expression of “Asian pride” (which harbors a whole set of racial tropes including anti-blackness in certain contexts), but a signifying on blackness in hip hop, albeit a blackness that strategically looks “East.”

³² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

³³ Nas, “It Ain’t Hard to Tell,” *Illmatic* (New York: Columbia, 1994).

³⁴ MastaPlann are actually Filipino Americans who started their hip hop careers in the Philippines in the early 1990s. They continue to make music in the U.S. but are more popular in the Philippines because of their influence in forming the hip hop scene there. True Aziatik Productionz is their record label.

As “truer Asiatic” people, Filipinos circulate in the cipher of racial significations as liminal racialized bodies that simultaneously signify race while also confounding the stability of racial categorizations. The abjected Spanish Moor, the Filipino Moro, and the Asiatic black man are resources for new terms of Filipino diasporic racial belonging that intertwine the poetics of hip hop with the politics of race consciousness. Here, the moreno surges into the hip hop cipher to battle with the beast. Geo illustrates this scenario with his appreciation and restyling of lessons from the “East”:

From the East, my brotha, we came.
The lessons might change
But the essence of the message is the same.

Conclusion: The Knowledge Cipher as Weapon

Throughout my analysis, I refer to identification with the Moro from a Filipino diasporic—not Philippine—point of view. This is an important distinction because of the precarious position Moros inhabit in the Philippines. Where Filipino American dancers and hip hop performers border on Orientalism in their admiration for the Moro, in the Philippines, Moros embody a threat to Philippine national identity and are often seen as antagonistic to the coherency of the Philippine nation-state. The mythical “Golden Age” of Islam, therefore, is an anti-hegemonic resource for those Filipinos in the diaspora who inhabit a less proximate space to Philippine state violence against Muslims. The anti-hegemonic narrative that Islam and the Moro symbolize creates ideological weaponry for Filipino American hip hop performers. I have demonstrated a confluence between the Moro and the moreno for Filipino American hip hop performers, a type of cultural insurgency that garners its power through signifying Islam’s supposed threat to the white West’s domesticating, assimilating, and model minority-producing artillery. From the Moor, to the Moro, to moreno, Islam works as an anti-hegemonic racial resource. Majid’s suggestion that all racialized minorities are “Muslims in disguise” adds dimension and meaning to Filipino American racial liminality.

Gaerlan writes that there exists “a popular belief in the United States that ‘Filipinos are a ‘people without culture.’”³⁵ However, Geo and other Filipino American hip hop performers illustrate how Filipinos (including those in the diaspora) create and innovate culture in compelling and complicated ways. The Moro is just one example of a cultural resource from which Filipino Americans draw, and in this process of racial revaluing, they heed Edward Said’s call to take inventory “of the interpellation of culture by empire” and contribute to Sarita See’s search for the “process and products of an American post/colonial cultural archive.” But these cultural ruptures in U.S. exceptionalism remain difficult to manifest in the realm of public knowledge, as Filipino Americans continue to be often associated with a domesticated “model minority” Asian American narrative. For example, in 2005, a conservative Seattle talk radio host criticized Geo for reciting lyrics that condemn the dangers of American capitalism. The radio host accused Geo of shaming his hardworking immigrant Filipino parents who gave up everything to build a better life for his family in America. The radio host’s views are imprinted onto many other Filipino Americans’ lives, erasing the colonial dynamics that prompt Filipino migration in the first place. In “domesticating” the Filipino in the U.S., we are led to forget Taft Avenue, Forbes Park, Camp John Hay, Douglas MacArthur statues, and other everyday metonymies of U.S. occupation of the Philippines and wars waged in order to incorporate the Philippine colony.

For Geo, the opening salvo against imperialism necessitates “igniting” the cipher where knowledge circulates. But, in the process of cultural decolonization within a cipher of anti-imperial modes of identification, the risk of recolonizing the “other” poses a perpetual danger. Even so, Usopay H. Cadar, whom Gaerlan cites as “the only Maranao [a Moro ethnic group in the Philippines] ethnomusicologist teaching and performing in the United States,” offers hope in observing Filipino Americans’ appreciation for Moro dances:

Learning and doing the true Moro music and dances is in itself a journey toward self-knowledge and an effective way of fostering self acceptance and letting the lost souls grow up...

Empowerment begins from individual self-confidence and culminating into collective action,

³⁵ Gaerlan, “In the Court of the Sultan,” 277.

which translates into unity, strength, and power. The powers-that-be seldom ignore or defy collective action...Therefore, if they [Filipino American dancers] do it right by getting away from the Orientalist Bayanihan approach we can realize...the potential for Filipino-American students to negotiate their own cultural identity and empowerment.³⁶

This article has explored how the figure of the Moro fits within a Filipino diasporic cipher of competing racial discourses, such as white incorporation versus moreno valorization. The modes of “fostering self acceptance and letting the lost souls grow up,” so articulated by Cadar, involve recognizing the lives at stake within the process of “self-knowledge.” In Filipino Americans’ cipher of racial revaluing, hip hop performers are “deciphering life” during a time of war over bodies and minds. For artists like Geo, the cipher is a weapon, a tool of war that circulates when the bullets pop and the beat drops.

³⁶ Ibid., 279.

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