

I'VE GOT A BIRD'S EYE VIEW: PORTRAITS OF  
ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN EDUCATORS  
PRACTICING HIP-HOP PEDAGOGY

by

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## ABSTRACT

Existing research on Asian American educators is typically limited to a few select areas of inquiry including the absence of Asian American educators, Asian Americans as honorary “Whites” and model minorities, and racial microaggressions experienced by Asian American teachers and faculty. In the last decade, Asian American educational research has begun emerging and expanding into different areas of inquiry including the potential and proficiency of Asian American teachers and educational leaders. While this is notable and exciting, there is still very little research that richly documents the practices (and ultimately, the potential and proficiency) of Asian American women educators.

Moved by the urgency to expand and deepen research on Asian American women educators, this study centers four Asian American women educators who practice hip-hop pedagogy because they are a present, active, and dynamic part of transformative education and hip-hop culture. As a pedagogical, theoretical, and methodological tool, hip-hop pedagogy is a practice of opposition that disrupts traditional schooling methods of assessment and discipline while reflecting the cultural values and needs of learners. As such, the participants in this study either identified themselves as hip-hop pedagogues, have been identified by others as hip-hop pedagogues, and/or have embraced the interpretation of their pedagogies as hip-hop.

This study employs portraiture as methodology to trace the participants’ hip-hop

origin stories and the influence that hip-hop has had on their pedagogical practices. Data drawn from in-depth interviews and observations present detailed, artful illustrations of who these educators are, how they teach, why they teach, and the benefits of their hip-hop pedagogical practices. Careful examination of the educators' individual and collective stories calls attention to the value of hip-hop pedagogy as employed by Asian American women and the possibilities of an emerging thread of hip-hop pedagogy: Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy.

To Hip-Hop  
Thank you for being my teacher.

To Dad  
The cornerstone to every song is the beat. The cornerstone to me, is you.  
You are the loudest, illest, most unforgettable beat in my heart.  
I miss you every day.

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## TRACK 1<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

*I got a bird's eye view...  
Hip-hop,  
there's so many things you can say about it,  
you feel me like,  
on the real like,  
hip-hop is just beautiful,  
hip-hop is life.*

—Zion-I, Bird's Eye View

Hip-hop was birthed in August of 1973 in the northernmost borough of New York City. Its first living moments were at a neighborhood party in a West Bronx apartment recreation center hosted by siblings Cindy and Clive Campbell. Clive, better known as DJ Kool Herc, was reciting rhymes and presiding over the turntables when he decided to extend an instrumental break-beat to keep partygoers dancing. They all responded enthusiastically. As legend has it, Herc's decision that summer evening became the genesis for hip-hop. Over the next few years, neighborhood parties and recreational gatherings featuring DJs, emcees, dancers, and artists erupted across New York City and in the late 1970s, hip-hop would emerge out of the inner city and into mainstream

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation's chapters are presented as tracks.

consciousness. Now over 40 years old, hip-hop has since matured from grassroots street culture into a global movement, commercial industry, and phenomenon that originated from the imagination, amusement, restlessness, and defiance of Black and Brown communities enduring social, political, and economic disorder. As Chang (2005) notes, hip-hop's fusion of social, musical, and political influence is one of the big ideas of the generation it grew out of—a grand expression of dynamic creative energies and resistance. Hip-hop was and is a heartfelt representation of complex, intersectional narratives.

At first glance, hip-hop's origin story differs greatly from my own. I was birthed in Des Moines, Iowa, by two Vietnam War refugees on the second day of summer in 1985—2 years, 3 months, and 8 days after my *chi*.<sup>2</sup> My parents' journey to the United States was not easy. They fled their homeland of South Vietnam by boat and plane after the Fall of Saigon because they refused to live under communist rule, mandatory reeducation camps, and political persecution. My parents' separate and harrowing escape forced them to spend years apart in different refugee camps before they were reunited and resettled in 1982.

Like many other refugees, my parents rebuilt their lives from scratch. They were confronted daily with racism and social, political, economic, and linguistic barriers, but their spirits never wavered. Instead, they held on firmly to their cultural traditions and practices and built a spirited community around other resettled Vietnam War refugees. Our home was our community's home. It was a safe haven to gather around food, music,

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<sup>2</sup> Vietnamese for “older sister.”

memory, prayer, language, laughter, and love. Even though my parents longed for their family and home, these were the moments they dreamt about and worked for—moments of true humanization.

The big idea behind why my parents fled Vietnam was human rights. Their survival, insistence to care for their kinfolk, and parenting was the grand expression of that big idea. My parents worked tirelessly at instilling lessons of independence, resolve, accountability, and community through their actions. They served as foster parents, sponsors, translators, and driving instructors to recent Vietnamese migrants; employed numerous community members of color at the Chinese restaurant they owned; and helped to build a vibrant, established ethnic enclave in the middle of one of the Whitest states in the nation. Like hip-hop, my parents were determined, intentional, and defiant, but always with purpose. Everything they did was pedagogical. They were dedicated parents, community workers, and teachers cultivating joy, possibility, and—in their own way—justice. This is the homeplace<sup>3</sup> they built for my *chi* and me. This is the genesis for my relationship with hip-hop.

*I met him when I was a,  
a little girl,  
he gave me,  
he gave me poetry,  
he was my first...<sup>4</sup>*

As a kid, I grew up very cognizant that hip-hop did not look, sound, or live near me. I knew that it flourished on coasts hundreds of miles away from my birthplace. To

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<sup>3</sup> See hooks, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> See Badu, E. and Common, *Love of my Life (An Ode to Hip-Hop)*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNk3R23Tgw> (accessed March 24, 2017).

the outside world, hip-hop and I were opposites. But, its energy, origin, message, and purpose always felt familiar and necessary. I do not remember the exact moment that I was introduced to hip-hop, but I have always believed that the subsurface parallels of our stories are what bond us and kept us in constant dialogue. I love hip-hop and have for a very long time.

As an adolescent, I used to rush to the television to catch music videos and live performances from my favorite artists like The Fugees, Puff Daddy, and MC Lyte. My first cassette single purchase was Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's *Crossroads*. My first full-length album purchase was the *All That Soundtrack* featuring TLC, Coolio, and Naughty by Nature. I studied lyrics, counted beats, stuffed my Adidas Shelltoes, and rolled up my pant leg like Cool James. In middle school, I proudly adopted the nickname B-Girl Buffy in my breakdancing crew Wildstyle because I was "buff" enough to piggyback all of the boys but one. I attended breakdancing battles at the local skating rink, practiced my knee glide in my cousin's basement during summer breaks, and even battled boys at school dances. They were never really good but neither was I.

The older I got, the more hip-hop and I traversed places, phases, and moments. At 16, hip-hop softened—ever-so-slightly—the immeasurable grief that I felt when I witnessed my dad take his last breath after a 4-year struggle with cancer. Hip-hop also comforted me on my long journey across the world to Vietnam to meet my *bá ngôai*,<sup>5</sup> 1 year later, to fulfill my dad's dying wish. Hip-hop started college with me and studied with me, as I studied it in my *Hip-Hop in Urban America* course and then gave me the

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<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese for "paternal grandmother."

courage and vocabulary to write and perform poetry that disrupted the sexualization and racialization of my Asian American female body. Hip-hop affirmed my burgeoning indignation and helped to ground my identity as a Vietnamese American woman. Hip-hop gave me a complex, nuanced, and detailed understanding of the world and my place in it. Hip-hop gave me a bird's eye view.

After college, my consciousness and passions continued to shift and transform. Over time I would realize that my purpose, vision, and desires paralleled my parents'—I was meant to serve my community. At 22, I began leading workshops that sought to empower and cultivate solidarity among young women of color around my local community. I developed activities like graffiti writing that tapped into these young women's creativity and facilitated circular dialogue about navigating cultural tensions, disrupting sexism, and pursuing higher education. My workshops relied upon movement, voice, and collaboration. I wanted my young attendees to learn but also have fun. I also wanted them to see themselves in me, which often prompted my defiant choice of wearing Jordans and white tees over uncomfortable business attire. My experiences, ambitions, and intentions during this time only deepened my love and commitment for service. Eventually I made the decision to pursue graduate school to further my learning and make critical education my career and life's work.

It has taken me years to realize that hip-hop has always had a presence and place—subtle or pronounced—in my journey. Hip-hop has been vital in how I embrace my work, the world, and others. It has brought me back from the deepest depths of grief and frustration—keeping me present, intact, and alive. Hip-hop is embedded in the fabric of everything that I do, especially as a scholar and educator. I know that I am not alone in

this sentiment.

The longevity and popularity of hip-hop means that my relationship to it is not unprecedented. There are so many others that love hip-hop the same way that I do. However, what is known and visible is not necessarily written. Asian American women are creators, purveyors, and practitioners of hip-hop. We are influenced by it as much as we influence it. Hip-hop is part of our sensibilities, too. Yet, as it stands, there is no work that richly documents the hip-hop origin stories and the hip-hop pedagogies and praxes of Asian American women educators despite the overwhelming belief that these narratives deserve to appear (Chang, 2014). Asian American women are here and they are a present, active, dynamic part of transformative education and hip-hop culture.

### **Background of Study**

Existing research on Asian American educators is typically limited to a few select areas of inquiry including the absence of Asian American educators (Gordon, 1994; Rong & Preissle, 1997; Sheets & Chew, 2002); Asian American educators as honorary “Whites” and model minorities (Chun, 1995; Kao, 1995; Lee, 1994, 2009; Sue & Okazaki, 1995; Suzuki, 1995); and racial microaggressions experienced by Asian American teachers<sup>6</sup> and faculty (Ramanathan, 2006; Valverde, 2013). In the last decade, Asian American educational research has begun emerging and expanding into different areas of inquiry, including the potential and proficiency of Asian American teachers and educational leaders (Daus-Magbual, 2010; Daus-Magbual, 2011; Delacruz, 2009; Ehara,

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<sup>6</sup> I use “teachers” and “educators” interchangeably throughout this study.

2010; Tintiango-Cubales & Sacramento, 2009). While this is notable and exciting, there is still very little research available on the practices (and ultimately, the potential and proficiency) of Asian American women educators. Sheets and Chew (2002) suggest that the absence of research on Asian American teachers correlates with the “unobstructed invisibility” of Asian Americans in education (p. 128). The overwhelming narrative is that Asian Americans are at the frontlines of high academic achievement but usually as performers, not pedagogues.

Although Asian American educators constitute a small percentage of the workforce within K–12 schools and colleges, Asian Americans are the fastest growing and most-educated population in the United States (Endo, 2015; Pew Research Center Report, 2013). The potential to increase the percentage of Asian American educators is there. However, the lack of comprehensive data about who Asian American educators are, their professional development and needs, and the value of their educational presence and work hinders recruitment and retention efforts. Consequently, narratives about Asian American educators remain homogenous and sparse.

Similarly, literature that explores Asian American women as creators of hip-hop is comparatively limited. As Chang (2014) notes, the presence of Asian Americans in hip-hop has always been there, it just lacks documentation. I am eager to enrich as well as disrupt narratives about Asian Americans in education and hip-hop. I marry these two aspirations by centering the work of Asian American women educators that teach and learn through and with hip-hop because we should know more about who Asian American women educators are, why they teach, how they teach, and what emotional, intellectual, and experiential places they teach from. While not exact, similar work that

richly documents the experiences of Asian American women educators and faculty is slowly coming through the pipeline (Nievera-Lozano, 2016; Valverde & Dariotis, 2017) indicating that there is an urgency to tell *and* know. I position this work as a response to that urgency.

Four Asian American women educators who practice hip-hop pedagogy is the subject of my inquiry. The participants of this study either identify themselves as hip-hop pedagogues, have been identified as hip-hop pedagogues, and/or have embraced my interpretation of their pedagogy. I present a “bird’s eye view”—a rich, wide, and nuanced representation—of their work as Asian American women educators who bring hip-hop into the classroom theoretically, conceptually, and methodologically. As such, this study is guided by the following research questions and subquestions:

1. What are the hip-hop origin stories of these Asian American women educators?
2. How has hip-hop influenced and inspired their teaching practices?
  - a. How do they define hip-hop pedagogy?
  - b. What are specific hip-hop inspired practices that they use to teach?
  - c. What are the educational benefits of hip-hop pedagogy?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is guided by two theoretical perspectives, the first being womanism. Womanism is a woman- and social justice-centered framework that grew out of Black feminist traditions to examine the ways interlocking systems of oppression affect *all* people individually and collectively with emphasis placed upon the experiences of Black women and other women of color (Hill Collins, 1990, 1996, 2006; Phillips, 2006;

Walker, 1990). In addition to emphasizing these experiences, womanism also prioritizes and normalizes them. Womanism is not just another form of feminism that is confined to racialized and gendered concerns (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Fischer, 2012; Hill Collins, 1990, 1996; Jain & Turner, 2012; Phillips, 2006) but is all encompassing and invested in the well-being of all humanity (Fischer, 2012; Phillips, 2006). According to Phillips (2006) womanism can be defined as:

“...a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life and with spiritual dimension. I take the perspective that womanism is not feminism. Its relationships to feminism (including Black feminism) are important, but its relationships to other critical theories and social-justice movements are equally important, despite being less frequently discussed or acknowledged. Unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sex; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action.” (p. xx)

In addition to being concerned with race, sex, gender, culture, nationality, class, and spirituality, womanism understands identity not as separate, static fractions of each other but as intersecting, in process, and operating simultaneously. Womanism offers a vision on how we use our holistic selves including our spirituality, political power, emotional reflexivity, connection, and intersectionality to build and create change (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1983, 1984; Phillips, 2006; Walker, 1990); values creative and collaborative pedagogies cultivated from our homes, schools, and communities (Anzaldúa, 1995 Delgado Bernal, 2006; hooks, 1990, 1994); prioritizes our knowledge as women (and youth) of color (Brown, 2008; Brown & Kwakye, 2012; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2005); and makes visible the narratives and abilities that have long been invisible (Anzaldúa, 2002).

The second theoretical perspective that grounds and guides this study is Pinayism. As an extension of womanism and other feminist and critical theories and philosophies, Pinayism is an operational framework that engages “the complexity of the intersections where race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality/religion, educational status, age, place of birth, diasporic migration, citizenship, and love cross” (Tintiangco-Cubales, 2005, p. 145). Pinayism is about honoring multiple epistemologies and rejecting single definitions and renditions (Tintiangco-Cubales, 2005).

The operative word for Pinayism is Pinayist. A Pinayist is specifically a Filipina American woman but more generally, a person of racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, spiritual, religious, and educational intersections who is committed to the struggles of pain, love, and growth within one’s self, family, and community. Although I am not Filipina, I identify as a Pinayist because it means acting and responding critically and culturally to a multitude of issues, opportunities, and experiences. Being Pinayist requires constant rearticulating and combating of racist, sexist, and oppressive social structures that continue to affect our communities intimately and publicly.

To position one’s work within a Pinayist framework signifies a commitment to creating a place outside of existing continuums. Pinayism reconstructs how we think and what we know by contextualizing U.S. imperialism and colonialism—encouraging us to think differently about things like immigration patterns, educational opportunities, familial relationships, love, and self-care. Pinayism also contextualizes imperial violence that continues to manifest itself systemically and individually. Pinayism challenges simplistic and hierarchal constructions of allyship, sisterhood, and downness by developing transformative discourses in a multitude of spaces that affirms the everyday

work put forth to develop relationships and consciousness. This affirmation also includes the everyday work we put forth for ourselves, which is not mutually separate from the work that goes into our communities.

The theoretical perspectives of womanism and Pinayism acknowledge how interrelated identity and experience are to developing and practicing transformative action particularly for women of color. Both frameworks contextualize historical and current interlocking systems of oppression, offer critique and analysis about how these systems continue to affect everyone especially minoritized communities, and ultimately promote a holistic call and response for social transformation. Additionally, when applied to educational research, womanism and Pinayism assist in how to effectively engage the significance and meaning of our actions and activism—whether they are concrete or abstract, public or private. Taken together, these models are born out of a direct response to the exclusion of the voices of women of color from various discourses—including education.

### **Rhythm, Rhyme, and Reason**

This dissertation is presented in nine tracks. Track 2 reviews existing literature on Asian Americans in education, teaching for social justice, and hip-hop based education. Track 3 describes my methodology of portraiture and the research protocols I followed to develop this study, recruit and select participants, and collect data, as well as analyze data. Tracks 4, 5, 6, and 7 are my presentation of Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko's stories of teaching and learning through and with hip-hop. Collectively these four tracks offer detailed, artful illustrations on who they are, how they teach, why they teach,

and the benefits of their pedagogical practices. Track 8 is an application of my theoretical framework to bridge shared experiences, insights, and lessons located across the four portraits. Finally, track 9 is where I come full circle. I share a brief update on the participants and reflect upon my journey as a researcher, educator, and portraitist. I also discuss the limitations and possibilities of this study and look forward by naming an Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy and expounding why we need it now, more than ever.

## TRACK 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Sampling in hip-hop originated from turntablism. Turntablists would mix and scratch existing records to create new, collaborative sounds. It started first with just drumbeats and horn hits and then transpired into the sampling of vocals, instruments, lyrics, and full-length records. In the documentary *Copyright Criminals*, author Jeff Chang discusses sampling as a building block to creating something new and fresh through the snatch of a record or sound. Record label CEO Tom Silverman adds that sampling is like audio archaeology. One record has layers of history embedded throughout that takes you back to seminal moments in music. B-Boy Bobbito Garcia from the legendary Rock Steady Crew suggests that sampling—a practice of borrow and take—is inherent to hip-hop because it was founded on a lack of resources. Sampling is a tribute to the work that comes before us—a practice of extension, but also possibility.

In this chapter I participate in sampling. I mix, scratch, and weave together existing bodies of literature to set the foundation for something new—a study about Asian American women educators that practice hip-hop pedagogy. I begin by reviewing literature on Asian Americans in education, specifically research on Asian American educators. I focus on studies around preparing Asian American teachers for culturally responsive teaching, racialized experiences of Asian American classroom and preservice

teachers, and the impact Asian American teachers have on curricula and academic experiences. Next, I cover the extensive literature on teaching for social justice. Lastly, I conclude this track by looking at the intersections of education and hip-hop including literature around hip-hop's unique presence and transformative possibility in the classroom.

### **Asian Americans in Education**

In 2013, the Pew Research Center published a report, *The Rise of Asian Americans*, that sought to offer a comprehensive portrait of the Asian American experience in a rapidly changing United States. The report explored numerous areas of Asian American life like demographic characteristics; social, political, and family values; economic circumstances; attitudes about work and employment; marriage and parenting norms; and education and career. Across the expansive findings, the report highlights social assimilation and economic and educational success by stating from the beginning that Asian Americans are “the highest-income, best-educated, and fastest-growing racial group in the United States” (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 1). The report offers important data and insight into different components of Asian American life, but it also contributes to the prevailing and persistent narrative that Asian Americans are high achieving, status oriented, and seldom economically and educationally disadvantaged (Barringer, Takeuchi, & Xenos, 1995; Chun, 1995; Kao, 1995; Lee, 1994, 2009; Nakanishi, 1995; Suzuki, 1995; Zhang, 2003). This narrative has had, and continues to have, numerous unintended consequences for educational research.

The monolithic, simplistic view of Asian Americans as model minorities,

especially academically, has limited the urgency to research, analyze, and document Asian American educational experiences at every level (Hirabayashi, 1998; Nakanishi, 1995). Traditionally, research on Asian Americans in education has been centered around student admissions, representation, and performance (Lee, 1994, 2009; Nakanishi, 1995; Sue & Okazaki, 1995; Suzuki, 1995, 2002; Zhang, 2003); higher education concerns, trends, and experiences (Chen & Hune, 2011; Escueta & O'Brien, 1995; Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1995; Hune, 2006; Minami, 1995; Valverde, 2013); and teaching and theorizing about Asian American Studies (Hune, 1995; Kang, 1998; Lawsin, 1998). Although these areas have firmly established and contributed to conversations about Asian Americans in education, research about Asian American teachers—particularly Asian American women teachers—is not nearly prioritized as other areas of inquiry. This study puts Asian American women teachers at the forefront.

Asian Americans only represent about 2% of the K–12 teaching workforce and 10% of faculty appointments despite swift demographic growth and stable educational presence (Endo, 2015). The limited number of Asian American educators has consequently resulted in limited literature that often share similar points of discussion: (a) there is a shortage and/or decline of Asian American teachers and faculty; (b) there is a lack and insufficiency of institutionalized support, professional development, and career persistence for Asian American teachers; and (c) there is a need for more comprehensive research on Asian American teachers. As such, Asian American teachers are situated as an “unobstructed invisibility” (Sheets & Chew, 2002).

Scholars have overwhelmingly noted that the invisibility of Asian American teachers has hindered the successful recruitment and retention of Asian American

teachers (Ramanathan, 2006; Rong & Preissle, 1997; Sheets & Chew, 2002). When they are recruited, they are described more often as competent academic instructors rather than creative, thoughtful, and transformative educators (Gordon, 1994; Newton, 2003; Rong & Preissle, 1997). In their study on the decline of Asian American teachers, Rong and Preissle (1997) found that Asian Americans are not pursuing teaching as a career due to an amalgamation of factors including workplace discrimination, parental influence, and institutional characteristics like opportunity advancement and economic prosperity. They also note that teacher-training programs lack multidimensional strategies to recruit minority teachers—especially Asian Americans. Gordon (1994) and Nguyen (2008) add that feelings of personal inadequacy and cultural, familial tensions also impact the Asian American teaching workforce. Rong and Preissle stress the importance of recruiting and retaining Asian American teachers as they often bring unique cultural competence, bilingualism, and expertise in core subjects.

Other external factors that contribute to the shortage of Asian American teachers includes the lack of an Asian American focus in multicultural and diversity foundation courses within teacher-training programs. Sheets and Chew's (2002) research on preparing culturally responsive Asian American teachers concluded that teacher-training programs "routinely excluded [Chinese Americans] in every facet of the teaching-learning process" (p. 138). The curriculum of preservice teacher programs was clearly designed for white women, which is the dominant population of pre- and current-service teachers. Chinese American preservice teachers felt frustrated, unsupported, and unconfident about their ability to make sufficient impact within the classroom.

Concerns regarding the lack of diverse, multicultural curricula was also expressed

by the Asian American teachers studied by Ramanathan (2006) in “Asian American Teachers: Do They Impact the Curriculum? Are There Support Systems for Them?” The study’s participants expressed that they felt accepted by their peers and students but institutionally minimized, particularly regarding mandated curricula. Any content regarding Asia—historically, geographically, and experientially—was restricted to less than 2 weeks (p. 34). The teachers did not feel as though they had enough agency in revising the curricula either. Ramanathan also found that their study’s participants felt pressured to assimilate their professional identities to dominant ideals because of the limited understanding of diversity across Asian American identities and experiences. Other troubling experiences that Asian American teachers confirmed include benign racism, persistent stereotyping, and silencing (Newton, 2003). In “Racialized Experiences of Asian American Student Teachers,” Newton (2003) argues that Asian American preservice teachers experience programmatic subordination that is stubborn, exhausting, and frustrating because race (i.e., Eurocentrism) and racism is so deeply embedded in every aspect of education.

Similar to Ramanathan and Newton, Endo (2015) focused on the racialized experiences of Asian American female teachers. Their study recruited ten Asian American female classroom teachers to interview about their experiences with racial microaggressions from teacher-training programs to professional careers in the classroom. Endo found that the participants dealt with the “invisible but salient reality that White cultures, experiences, histories, and identities permeate educational structures from the curriculum, instructional practices, and within everyday interactions” (p. 610). These accepted norms prompted a range of gendered, racialized, and sexualized

microaggressions that positioned them as foreign, exotic, and representative of all Asians and Asian Americans. Endo concluded that the needs of teachers of color, including Asian American teachers, remain unaddressed and recommended “direct conversations about how and why racial microaggressions are damaging and problematic” to improve workplace climate and administrative leadership (p. 622).

The majority of scholarship available on Asian American teachers, specifically Asian American women teachers, is centered around racialized experiences in schools, classrooms, and teacher education programs. However, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge other threads of research that have emerged and enriched narratives about Asian American educators and educational leaders. Among them include the power and possibility of critical pedagogies employed by Pinoy educators among Pinoy students (Delacruz, 2009); the philosophy and practice of nurturing Pinay and Pinoy educational leaders to combat social injustice, educational inequities, and colonial trauma (Daus-Magbual, 2011); the critical appropriation of history, curriculum, and pedagogy by a Filipina/o American service learning program to renew and liberate Filipina/o American Studies and students (Daus-Magbual, 2010); and the translation of hip-hop culture and masculinity by Asian American Pacific Islander male hip-hoppers into critical educational practice and curriculum (Ehara, 2010). Collectively, these four studies put Asian Americans educators and students at the front line of revolutionary teaching and learning. They also serve as a necessary reminder that Asian Americans are exposed to oppressive educational practices as much as they are responsive, resistant, and resilient to them.

The selective scope of research on Asian American women teachers has also

prompted me to look towards other areas of research that engage the proficiency and influence of teachers of color. There are many studies that discuss the value of teachers from various cultural, ethnic, and gendered backgrounds (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Delgado Bernal, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2007, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Love, 2012; Quiocho & Rios, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999).

One study by Quiocho and Rios (2000) found that teachers of color broaden and enrich teaching and learning in ways that differ from White teachers. They write:

Many minority group teachers, in comparison with their European-American counterparts, are more likely to bring a critical, social justice orientation and consciousness that stems from their real, lived experiences and inequality. In a related way, they are often more willing to work actively to dismantle the personal and institutional biases that they find in schools as well as to move toward culturally responsive school-based reform. Minority group teachers tend to have a greater sense of how to develop (and therefore enact) culturally relevant curriculums and to understand the human, social, and communal nature of teaching and learning. (p. 522)

Critical, social justice orientation and consciousness is immensely valuable in disrupting cultural and social reproduction that transmits models of inequality and inequity. Quiocho and Rios stress that simply being part of a minority group does not guarantee effective teaching, but the experiences of being minoritized can.

Similarly, Duncan-Andrade's (2007) study "Gangstas, Wankstas, and Ridas: Defining, Developing, and Supporting Effective Teachers in Urban Schools" examined the effective practices of four teachers—three of whom were teachers of color and of those three, two were women. Duncan-Andrade found five core pillars of effective practice across the teachers including "a level of commitment to their teaching that reflected the fact that they saw themselves as members of the communities where they taught" (p. 628). The three teachers of color indicated acute awareness of how their

experiences as racially, culturally, and economically marginalized peoples has influenced their duty to humanize students, build strong relationships, and take pedagogical and curricular risks that challenge traditional methods of schooling.

It is important to reiterate once more that being a teacher of color—and in this instance an Asian American woman teacher—does not guarantee pedagogical expertise or success. However, it is clear that an intersectional consciousness proves advantageous within education. The scarcity of research on Asian American women teachers offers unique opportunities to broaden *and* deepen what we know about Asian American women teachers. I do not seek to create grand narratives about experience—I seek to uncover more experiences.

In the next section, I probe literature on teaching for social justice. This body of literature builds upon this section by engaging the function of education. I describe in further detail how educators teach in opposition to oppressive structures, cultivate and affirm lived experience as knowledge, and locate education as a means towards liberation.

### **Teaching for Social Justice**

In his essay, “Teaching as an Ethical Enterprise,” William Ayers (2004) writes that education exists within a complicated paradox. “Education is about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities. School is about sorting and punishing, grading and ranking and certifying” (p. 9). For Ayers (2004) and numerous other critical scholars, education is grounded in the premise of freedom but schooling is not (Darder, 1991; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 2007). Schooling has distinct boundaries and limitations.

It demands objectivity, obedience, and conformity (Ayers, 2004, p. 9). It governs the mind, body, and spirit.

Discerning the difference between education and schooling offers keen insight into the role and responsibility teachers have. They can challenge and transform the confines of schooling. What they teach and how they teach matters (Ayers, 2004; Freire, 2007; Freire, 2008). As previously mentioned, numerous critical scholars have discussed the possibilities of education, especially when the teacher is guided by a critique of oppressive systems and “an unshakable commitment to helping human beings reach the full measure of their humanity, and a willingness to reach a future fit for all—a place of peace and justice” (Ayers, 2004, p. 5).

One of the most influential critical scholars to recognize the transformative possibilities of education, particularly through the agency of the teacher, was Paulo Freire. In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire critiques the function of schooling including the narrative nature of the teacher-student relationship and argues that schools maintain oppressive structures, relationships, and outcomes largely through rigid transferals of information.

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (p. 72)

Teaching and learning becomes prescribed. Students are rewarded for their stillness and regurgitation of information rather than for their agency and critical inquiry. As such, passivity is accepted as the human condition.

McLaren (2009) and Giroux (2016) build upon Freire by interrogating how

education is distorted and manipulated by systems of power and privilege including capitalism. Giroux writes that schools have become “dead zones of the imagination” that de-skill teachers and disempower students to become disposable populations to fuel commercialism and profits for mega industries (pp. 351–352). Similar to the banking concept of education, Giroux conceptualizes a pedagogy of repression, which conditions students to “unlearn any respect for democracy, justice, and what it might mean to connect learning to social change. [Students] are told they have no rights and that rights are limited only to those who have power” (p. 355).

The antithesis to the banking concept of education is what Freire (2007) calls problem-posing. Problem-posing disrupts the narration of education by adopting the concept that people are conscious and “in the process of becoming” (Freire, 2007, p. 65). Central to this pedagogical practice is a reciprocal teacher-student relationship. The teacher “listens to students, gives them a voice and role in their own learning, and recognizes that teachers not only educate students but also learn from them” (Giroux, 2016, p. 357). They collectively guide each other to confront social, historical, and ideological forces that reproduce and reinforce oppression. Problem-posing provides valuable educational opportunities to understand individual and collective context, interrogate power structures, and participate in fundamental social change through deliberate, embodied action.

Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was followed by an extensive amount of scholarship that expanded upon his analysis and conceptualization of education as a practice of freedom (Darder, 1991; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Johnson, 1995; Tintiangco-Cubales & Sacramento, 2009). In *Teaching to*

*Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) reiterates Freire's argument that schooling projects and protects ignorance. She argues that "most of us were taught in classrooms where styles of teachings reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which we were encouraged to believe was universal" (p. 35). These single norms of thought and experiences are usually only reflective of White, middle class society (Anyon, 1997). Other scholars also articulate the detriment of centering White, middle-class norms within schools and the need to do away with these practices while asserting the need for relevant, responsive pedagogy when teaching for social justice (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Tintiango-Cubales, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999).

Another conception that is guided by theories of critical pedagogy is culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1994) explains this as "a pedagogy of opposition" specifically committed to "collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (p. 160). In her study, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings studied successful teachers and students from underresourced, urban public schools and found that pedagogical strategies centering students and their experiences were the most effective in disrupting master narratives, humanizing experiences, and transforming schooling outcomes. Ladson-Billings explains that culturally relevant pedagogy is grounded in the following three key criteria: "(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). These three key criteria work in collaboration with five instructional tenets. She explains these as:

1) When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence; 2) when teachers provide instructional ‘scaffolding,’ students can move from what they know to what they need to know; 3) the focus of the classroom must be instructional—a place where serious work is communicated clearly to everyone; 4) real education is about extending students’ thinking and abilities; and 5) effective teaching involves in-depth knowledge of both the students and the subject matter. (p. 123–125)

Through meaningful instructional practices, students are able to develop academic, technological, literacy, social, and political skillsets that are clearly articulated for their lives.

Guided by Ladson-Billings, Tintiango-Cubales (2007) discusses the value of integrating students’ identities and experiences into curricula. In her research, Tintiango-Cubales found that students in her undergraduate Asian American Studies course critically thought about their lives and connected them to larger sociopolitical issues when they saw themselves prioritized in the curriculum. She also found that service-learning projects benefitted students considerably because they “provide students a space to be critical of their own identities, an ownership in the realm of service, and the encouragement to give back to their ‘own’ communities” (Tintiango-Cubales, 2007, p. 27). Likewise, Tintiango-Cubales, Daus-Magbual, Desai, Sabac, and Von Torres (2016) discovered that students are eager for participatory learning opportunities that disrupt the high-stakes achievement culture of schooling. When students are given opportunities to imagine, perform, and collaborate, “the outcomes are the growth of their critical consciousness, their transformative agency, and the belonging to a community bonded through collective action” (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2016, p. 1323). Centering students in learning committed to cultural relevance, intellectual rigor, collective participation, and the acquisition of academic skills supports them in navigating traditional societal

demands and fulfilling their potential as human beings.

Valenzuela's (1999) study on the educational experiences of Mexican American youth found that schooling often devalued immigrant students—forcing them to assimilate and reject their cultural capital resulting in further disenfranchisement. Appropriately titled, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, Valenzuela articulated that immigrant students only found validation and academic achievement through culturally relevant practices she calls *Educación*. Premised upon an authentic ethic of care and respect, *Educación* is the practice of “sustained reciprocal relationships between teachers and students as a basis for all learning” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61). These relationships built upon students' cultural, linguistic, and community-based knowledge and were accepted as an asset to the classroom.

Care and connectedness in teaching and learning is also present in scholarship centered around exemplary Black women teachers committed to social justice (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Hill Collins, 1990; Phillips, 2006; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) study “A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers”, traced the pedagogical practices of exemplary Black women teachers directly to womanist roots. She found that exemplary Black women teachers drew deeply upon their sensibilities as mothers, emotional strength, and parenting structure to educate and shelter students from adversity and argued that these characteristics could not be considered weaknesses or in relation to patriarchy. Instead, womanist teaching and caring was an instinctual response to “the human struggle for freedom and justice” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 84).

Further studies on womanist pedagogy add that womanist teaching requires meeting students where they are (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995), investing action without any guarantee of success (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005), and understanding systemic injustices as simultaneously social *and* educational problems (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Each of these studies are indebted to Gilkes (1980) and Hill Collins (1990) who discuss the powerful Black women practice of “othermothering”—caring for children who are not biologically your own—as community activism and creative resistance to domination. Othermothering serves as a survival mechanism and a vehicle for educational and cultural transmission within Black communities.

Womanist teaching and caring are placed among a wealth of literature available on womanist and feminist pedagogies that emphasizes tenets of agency, accessibility, empowerment, community, context, collaboration, and democracy (Villaverde, 2008). Feminist and womanist pedagogies correspond in “the centrality of political knowledge production, a literacy of power and agency, and the social construction and (in)stability of identity” (Villaverde, 2008, p. 121). A pedagogical model and practice that has significantly influenced my own teaching and learning has been Pinayist pedagogy. Drawing from the experiences of Pinays to inform a critical intervention in and out of the classroom, Pinayist pedagogy is “transformative and transgressive agency that combines theory, practice, and personal reflection” (Tintiangco-Cubales & Sacramento, 2009, p. 179). Further defined, Pinayist pedagogy is:

a process, place, and production that aims to connect the global and local to the personal issues and stories of Pinay struggle, survival, service, sisterhood, and strength. It is an individual and communal process of decolonization, humanization, self-determination, and relationship building, ultimately moving toward liberation. (Tintiangco-Cubales & Sacramento, 2009, p. 180)

Pinayist pedagogy draws upon numerous critical feminist pedagogies by teaching and learning through Pinay narratives, standpoints, and experiences both historical and contemporary. The combined goals and context works towards cultivating Pinay Studies, creating a community of critical Pinayists, and bettering the lives of Pinays and others through “plans of action that pursue social change” (Tintiangco-Cubales & Sacramento, 2009, p. 180).

Teaching for social justice is a complex, political task. It is not neutral because it is grounded in a sharp critique of oppression. It demands humanization, revolutionary love, audacious hope, reciprocity, and passionate energy to (re)produce agents of social change (Ayers, 2004; Daus-Magbual, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 2007; Tintiangco-Cubales & Sacramento, 2009). Returning to Ayers (2004) once more, he reminds us that teaching is extraordinary work of ordinary people—it can change the world when it is done righteously and deliberately:

To teach consciously for ethical action adds an essential element to that fundamental message, making it more layered, more dense, more excruciatingly difficult to enact, and at the same time sturdier, more engaging, more powerful and joyful much of the time. (p. 13)

The four educators in this study are deeply committed to social justice. Their pedagogical practices emerge from their identities, sensibilities, experiences, and passions. They also celebrate, honor, and merge hip-hop into every part of their service as educators.

Combined, their efforts humanize and liberate them as well as their students. In the final section of this literature review, I illuminate how teaching for social justice can also be done through and with hip-hop. In this, I remind that hip-hop is not merely a tool to educate but a radical commitment to disrupting school norms that reinforce self-hate, invisibility, conformity, and marginalization.

### Hip-Hop Based Education

Hip-Hop Based Education (HHBE)<sup>7</sup> is guided by the premise that hip-hop is the dominant language of urban youth culture, rendering its place in education as defiant, resistant, and responsive to the inequities of mainstream schooling (Akom, 2009; Kelly, 2013; Low, Tan, & Celemencki, 2013; Powell, 1992). The once-limited historical and descriptive use of hip-hop within education has since expanded into different academic insights and inquiries that produce more equitable approaches and outcomes, particularly for urban youth (Akom, 2009; Bridges, 2011; Lamont Hill & Petchauer, 2013; Love, 2012; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). In the introduction to *Schooling Hip-Hop: Expanding Hip-Hop Based Education Across the Curriculum*, Lamont Hill and Petchauer (2013) explain that HHBE has been guided by principles of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching to become more substantial curricular and pedagogical strategies (p. 1).

As a descriptive and historical tool, hip-hop has been used to support students at every level of the academic trajectory in mastering skills including oral and written communication, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning (Akom, 2009; Love, 2012; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Stovall, 2006). In a study based out of an urban high school in Northern California, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) found that hip-hop music and culture had an undeniable influence on all of their students. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade decided to introduce hip-hop music and culture into the curriculum to “forge a common and critical discourse that was centered upon the lives of the students

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<sup>7</sup> Hip-Hop Based Education is intended as an umbrella term for Hip-Hop Education and Hip-Hop Pedagogy.

(p. 88). In doing so, they found that students were not only more engaged in the classroom, they were able to master historical knowledge, practice college-level expository writing, and generate powerful connections between their lives and canonical texts.

Comparably, Stovall (2006) integrates hip-hop into a secondary classroom as an effort to develop relevant, thoughtful curriculum. Stovall brought in the music of hip-hop artists Black Star, Outkast, Reflection Eternal, and Mystikal and paired them with the work of authors James Baldwin and Howard Zinn. Together, he used these different figures to develop lessons on perception versus reality, language as a construction, and schooling as deception to enhance participation, accountability, and performance among his students. Stovall found that the inclusion of hip-hop sparked learning, but also unlearning—important in addressing change in the lives of the young people he served. The idea that hip-hop can empower young people to powerfully think, act, and respond is also present in Love's (2012) ethnography on six Black middle and high school girls. Love interviewed and observed how these young women navigated their relationships with hip-hop music, culture, and context to inform their ideas about race, body, sexuality, relationships, and urban life. Love learned that hip-hop nurtured these young women's intellectual prowess on social issues in ways formal schooling had failed to do.

Kelly's (2013) study of hip-hop's power in an English classroom demonstrates that hip-hop is not merely a bridge to traditional methods of learning but worthy of study and treatment, particularly as a stand-alone literary tradition. Kelly makes clear two points. Firstly, she argues that hip-hop provides a reason for students to reinvest in education by showing them that they do not have to shed their true selves to be

academically successful (p. 52). Hip-hop is a mechanism for students to see themselves in the curriculum and fill the cultural gap between themselves and formal education (Alim, 2007; Emdin, 2011; Kelly, 2013). Secondly, Kelly suggests that hip-hop offers valuable pathways to English language arts content and skills including literary devices, language, storytelling, and social critique (p. 54). She concludes by reiterating hip-hop's effectiveness in motivating and engaging students by stating:

The presence of hip-hop literature in the classroom offers a counternarrative that can aid students in working through their identity development as both students and individuals. The creation of this space through hip-hop literature is especially helpful for teachers in urban areas who come from cultures or communities that are different from those of their students, and who struggle with finding spaces for honest conversation surrounding identity development. (p. 53)

Thus, it seems that hip-hop as a stand-alone literary tradition provides students and teachers with many opportunities and favorable outcomes when they take ownership over educational materials and experiences.

The common and widely accepted use of hip-hop as a descriptive and historical tool has challenged critical scholars and educators to consider and conceptualize hip-hop as a pedagogical, theoretical, and methodological tool. For Akom (2009), conceptualizing Critical Hip-Hop Pedagogy (CHHP) was inevitable as hip-hop has always had a distinctive and significant presence in the classroom, particularly for those from the hip-hop and post-hip-hop generation (p. 53). Akom introduces CHHP as a response to deep rooted ideologies and social inequities including racism, classism, and sexism. Akom identifies five elements of CHHP, which has grown out of critical race theory, problem-posing education, and youth participatory action research. The basic core of CHHP is:

- 1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of oppression;

- 2) challenging traditional paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color;
- 3) the centrality of experiential knowledge of students of color;
- 4) the commitment to social justice; and finally,
- 5) a transdisciplinary approach. (p. 52)

Akom believes that these elements create opportunities for youth to further understand, contextualize, and respond to issues and institutions that shape their day-to-day lives. Hip-hop pedagogy is a “restructuring of the learning environment to reflect the totality of young people’s cultural intelligences and values” (Banks, 2015, p. 250). The mere addition of hip-hop music, dance, and art into curricula does not qualify as hip-hop pedagogy. The learning environment must disrupt traditional methods of assessment and discipline whilst reflecting the cultural values and needs of learners.

Bridges (2011) also works towards a pedagogy of hip-hop, but within urban teacher education. His study of 10 Black male K–12 teachers saw three organizing principles—a call to service, commitment to self-awareness, and resistance to social injustice—influence their pedagogical orientations and teaching identities. While Bridges does not overgeneralize the experiences of Black male teachers, he acknowledges that these principles created teaching and learning environments that were “supportive for Black male teachers and increase the capacity of all teachers to effectively teach diverse student populations” (p. 325). Bridges believes that hip-hop serves as a critical epistemology and framework to critique the repressive, dehumanizing, and depleting nature of institutions like public education and housing especially for Black communities (p. 334). Hip-hop pedagogy becomes a pathway to attracting more Black men into the

teaching profession, developing more meaningful connections specifically within urban classrooms, and most of all, healing racial, gender, and class-based traumas.

Hall and Martin (2013) broaden the realities of hip-hop pedagogy by turning to higher education for their study, “Engagement of African-American College Students Through the Use of Hip-Hop Pedagogy.” They question whether elements of hip-hop are effective tools to educate and retain African-American college students, who are frequently tasked with navigating racial microaggressions, contentious campus climates, and irrelevant curricula (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007). Hall and Martin’s data show that hip-hop pedagogy “impacts African-American student engagement when the content is culturally, socially relevant, designed in an interdisciplinary fashion, while infused with academic rigor” (p. 102). They also saw that hip-hop pedagogy fostered critical and complimentary commentary between historical events and current sociopolitical contexts, invited African-American students to participate in new ways of learning, and catalyzed African-American student voices.

Like critical pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy has been taken up by feminist and womanist standpoints as a “redress to pedagogy, because much like hip-hop, pedagogy has relegated the voices of women, particularly women of color, to be only on the receiving end of instruction” (Brown & Kwakye, 2012, p. 4). A more expansive, courageous, and intentional hip-hop pedagogy is one that is feminist and womanist (Brown, 2009; Fischer, 2012; Gaunt, 2012; Phillips, Reddick-Morgan, & Stephens, 2005).

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy uses the ubiquity of hip-hop and turns theory into

action by offering diverse and defiant pedagogical approaches and applications to teach and create empowered communities for Black women and girls and other intersectional standpoints (Brown, 2008). Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is one that:

(1) appreciates creative production expressed through language, art, or activism, (2) privileges the in-betweenness of black girl epistemology or a black feminist standpoint, (3) values and cares about the shared knowledge produced by black women's and girls' presence, (4) interrogates the limitations and possibilities of hip-hop, feminism, and pedagogy and is, therefore, self-adjusting, (5) stages the political through performance-based cultural criticism, (6) and is located and interpreted through the community (or communities) in which it is immersed. (Brown & Kwakye, 2012, p. 4)

Acknowledging that hip-hop has a powerful influence on today's urban youth means that hip-hop can and does serve as a bridge to connect people to a multitude of spaces (Pough, 2004). As Love (2012) shares, hip-hop feminist pedagogy “recognizes and celebrates how youth move, speak, think, create, and relate to the world” and fosters a “classroom that is filled with movement, love, and freedom of expression” (p. 109).

Invoking hooks (1990), Isoke (2012) includes that classrooms grounded in hip-hop feminist praxes are “transformed into a combustible cipher—a ‘counter-hegemonic space,’ in which we all examine our vices and vulnerabilities, our failures and disappointments, and our pasts, our presents, and our futures” (p. 35). Hip-hop's potential within learning means that a mixture of voices and experiences are being seen, heard, and humanized (Brown & Kwakye, 2012). Although hip-hop is a cultural space that is deeply contested and defended, hip-hop supports students in thinking beyond diametric oppositions. Students are encouraged to think through a variety of voices and experiences they identify with and through. As such, hip-hop feminist pedagogy teaches students to “interrogate, subvert, and transform socially mediated practices and ways of seeing that contain, dehumanize, and exploit hip-hop culture, politics, and bodies—especially Black

bodies (Isoke, 2012, p. 37). Transforming hip-hop pedagogy into hip-hop feminist pedagogy means that we,

operate from the standpoint that feminists must continually question the narratives in which they are embedded, including but not limiting ourselves to the master narratives of mainstream feminism and that hip-hop at its essence is the voice of people and a generation who have not had access to institutional forms of power and voice. (Brown & Kwakye, 2012, p. 6)

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is about creative, critical, and cultural exchanges within spaces of learning. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is also in opposition to hegemonic ideologies and combines theory, agency, and personal subjectivity to create social change (Gaunt, 2012; Isoke, 2012).

Much more work, beyond what I have already cited, makes up a rich, emerging legacy of scholarship that passionately establishes the promise of HHBE. Other areas of HHBE scholarship includes urban science education (Emdin, 2013); hip-hop leadership in schools (Khalifa, 2013; Wilson, 2013) moving beyond teacher-researcher perspectives and empirical case studies of student engagement (Irby & Hall, 2013); and hip-hop as queer feminist pedagogy (Pabón & Smalls, 2014). I should also note that the vast majority of the scholars that I have cited are effective in challenging hip-hop as much as they champion it. It is not perfect and these scholars, as well as myself and the four educators in this study, make no efforts to romanticize it. Hip-hop, in all of its forms, has numerous possibilities. At times those possibilities are not progressive, positive, or productive (Banks, 2015). The best work we can do, exemplified by Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko, is to make space for hip-hop in all types of teaching and learning because there is much to gain from something that is intricate, multilayered, and multifaceted.

This chapter reviews important literature that grounds how we think about teaching for social justice as racialized, sexualized, gendered, and classed peoples through a pedagogical practice that restructures learning spaces and prioritizes students relegated to the margins. In the next chapter I outline my methodology and research methods that were used to complete this study.

## TRACK 3

### METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Studies that focus on the meaning-making process between hip-hop and people who create, encounter, and practice it is valuable because it “derives from local participants and creators of hip-hop rather than from products or texts” (Petchauer, 2009, p. 951). Research in hip-hop, particularly in education, remains focused on the relationships between hip-hop texts and youth in and out of schools (p. 960). Although vital in understanding hip-hop’s power as an educational intervention, Petchauer (2009) contends that hip-hop scholarship must continue to expand into other threads of research. One such way is by considering how habits of the body and mind—contextualized through identities, experiences, and standpoints—support (and/or harm) educational processes and goals (p. 965). Petchauer also adds that new directions in research require applying different theoretical, epistemological, and/or methodological perspectives. As such, this qualitative study seeks to center Asian American women educators and their practice of hip-hop pedagogy by drawing upon portraiture as a methodology to capture and explore these educators’ origin stories, experiences, inspirations, commitments, and teaching practices. As outlined in Track 2, hip-hop pedagogy is a powerful and effective educational tool and exchange. Expanding into new threads of hip-hop research means drawing from underrepresented and underresearched communities while engaging hip-

hop from the multiple perspectives and contexts of the culture's everyday creators and producers (Petchauer, 2009; Brown & Kwakye, 2012). This track discusses fundamental research components that moved this study forward.

### Methodology

#### *Portraiture*

When I first picked up Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture* (1983), I was engulfed and overwhelmed by how poetic and vivid was her writing. She begins the book by sharing a story about having been the subject for a portraitist. She posed twice a week, for several weeks, attempting to mirror the commitment, patience, and meticulousness of the very artist that painted her. Posing, she writes, was natural and rousing as much as it was laborious and troublesome. Yet, no matter the difficulty, she sought to produce a look that conveyed "goodness, nurturance, care, and understanding" (p. 3).

When Lawrence-Lightfoot received the portrait months after its completion, she explains that she was "shocked, disappointed, and awed all in the same moment" (p. 4). It did not look like her yet somehow captured her true spirit. She continues by stating that:

"portraits reflect a compelling paradox, of a moment in time and timelessness. That portraits make the subject feel 'seen' in a way they have never felt seen before, fully attended to, wrapped up in an empathetic gaze. That an essential ingredient of creating a portrait is the process of human interaction. Artists must not view the subject as objects but as a person of myriad dimensions." (pp. 5–6)

Portraiture as a methodology lives at the intersection of art and science. It traverses traditional disciplines, approaches, and perspectives and carefully merges ethnography and fine literature to artfully capture human experience. Portraiture bridges aesthetics and

empiricism, draws upon intellect and emotion, seeks to inform and influence, and joins together documentation, interpretation, and intervention to develop narratives and analyses (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The principal feature of portraiture is the search for goodness. Portraiture intentionally resists pathologization to discourage cynicism, complacency, and failure. Instead, portraiture is intentionally generous—vigilantly seeking virtue and health within given settings and experiences. Although documenting failure informs *some* strategy and action, it also comes with numerous implications. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) advise that the relentless scrutiny of failure (a) reinforces what is wrong, (b) denies the possibility of transformation, (c) participates in victim blaming especially of those most victimized, and (d) encourages simplistic, binary inquiries (p. 9). The process of asking “what is good here?” is vital to portraiture because it brings about nuance. It captures contradictions and disrupts romanticization—highlighting imperfections, vulnerabilities, and the strength, weakness, and complexity of character (p. 9). The responsibility of the portraitist is to balance their understanding of goodness with their subject’s understanding.

Portraiture’s principal feature is also catalyzed by five others. They are context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Firstly, context is “the setting—physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, and aesthetic—within which the action takes place” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41). Context is crucial to a portraitist as it offers insight into circumstances, experiences, and re/actions. It is a map to “examining and interpreting behavior, thought, and feeling” and proves informative rather than burdensome when observing and

recording human experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41).

Regarding context, the portraitist is responsible for vividly and thoughtfully documenting the physical setting. They must transport the reader into the “contours and dimensions of the terrain” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 45). The reader must feel as though they are *there*. The portraitist is also responsible for including herself within the physical setting because her presence informs context, which consequently informs behavior, interaction, and standpoint. In addition to illustrating present time, portraitists must also scrutinize historical and ideological contexts as they, too, shape current events. The use of aesthetic features, like metaphors and symbols, work to further support contextual frames as they “capture the reader’s attention, call up powerful associations, and resonate through the rest of the piece” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 55). Metaphors and symbols are evidence of emerging, analytic themes. Finally, in considering context, the portraitist “must remember that context is not static and that the actors are not only shaped by the context, but they also give it shape” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 57). Movement, interruptions, evolution, and shifts of perception happen because context is dynamic and abundant, worthy of deep evaluation and description.

Unlike other traditions of qualitative research, the role of the researcher in portraiture is fully present, alert, and highly visible but with caution and care. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) reiterate, “The voice of the portraitist is poignant with paradox: it is everywhere and it is judiciously placed; it is central and it is peripheral” (p. 86). Voice can be used in a myriad of ways throughout portraiture. Most pertinent to this study is the use of voice as witness, interpretation, autobiography, and

dialogue. Voice as witness places reliance upon the portraitist as a keen observer and outsider. She pays close attention to movement and life in the background, narrating what is often inconspicuous and ignored. The small, rich, and thoughtful selection of details, phrases, and words make voice as witness. Next, voice as interpretation is the process of explicating data. To Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) this is asking, “What is the meaning of this action, gesture or communication to the actors in this setting?” as well as, “What is the meaning to me?” (p. 91). Important to voice as interpretation is the balance of consideration between sparse, rich, and preestablished details. Voice as autobiography is the mindful inclusion and probing of the portraitist’s history including the “familial, cultural, ideological, and educational” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 95).

However, the portraitist’s history should not overwhelm or occupy the portrait; it should become a resource for understanding, connection, and identification with the subjects, who, at all times, remain at the forefront of the narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 95). Lastly, voice as dialogue is attention to the collaborative exchange between the portraitist and subject.

With voice in dialogue, the portraitist purposefully places herself in the middle of action (in the field and in the text). She feels the symmetry of voice—hers and the actor’s—as they both express their views and together define meaning-making.” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 103)

In Lawrence-Lightfoot’s *I’ve Known Rivers* (1994), voice in dialogue paints into existence the evolution of her relationship with a subject—represented through compassionate, intentional, and often reciprocal exchanges.

Relationships are inherent to the construction of a portrait as “all processes of portraiture require that we build productive and benign relationships” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135). To create a portrait requires consistent access to each

other. Returning to my brief summary of Lawrence-Lightfoot's experience as a subject for a portraitist, it seemed natural that she and the portraitist would establish a relationship during the months they worked together. The portraitist learned the nuances of Lawrence-Lightfoot's expressions and character—her discomfort, irritations, triumphs, and joy—initiating and displaying parts of the portraitist's character of patience, thoughtfulness, and discipline. Relationships will shift and are dictated by an array of factors and contexts but what is clear for portraiture is that they are there and grounded in compassion and goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The emergence of themes “reflects the portraitist's first efforts to bring interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order to the collection of data” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 185). It is the task of the portraitist to prioritize, organize, and weave data together through different threads, metaphors, and symbols. Although the development of themes is present in other qualitative methodologies, portraiture uses themes as an aesthetic practice to truly construct written art (Catone, 2014). I have presented my emergent themes in Track 8.

The final feature of portraiture is the aesthetic whole, which combines context, voice, relationships, and emergent themes. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state that the aesthetic whole is the stitching and weaving of empirical data, to create something that is complete and full—something that embraces and ignites human emotion (p. 243). When shaping the story, the portraitist is tasked with (a) finding an overarching vision; (b) arranging and organizing; (c) integrating movement, color, codes, and examples; and (d) creating a coherent and corresponding piece (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983, 2005) likens portraiture to quilt making, puzzle making, and tapestry weaving. It is an intricate, delicate balance of creativity and practicality, challenge and ease. It is a different way of viewing the world. Portraiture, however, is not without shortcomings. I particularly acknowledge English's (2000) criticism that portraiture fails to engage truth as unstable and nontotalizing. He argues that portraiture produces grand narratives. I do not agree.

Portraiture afforded me the unique opportunity to engage the stories of four Asian American women educators that practiced hip-hop pedagogy in a way that was not essentializing but curious and generous. I intentionally and carefully captured their stories “from an outsider’s purview and an insider’s understanding of the scene” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 25). In each of their portraits, I represented them in a way that “exceeds levels of literal depiction” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 25). Instead, I constructed their stories through a partnership of our voices. I was faithfully guided by theirs to interpret and rewrite their stories in my own (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp. 36–37). As such, the portraits in this study are not the only story or analysis available of these four women. They are one interpretation nurtured by diverse truths, contexts, and people. Additionally, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) remind, portraits are about discovery. The participants in this study were on a process of discovery, just as I was. Any receiver—or reader—of the portraits also participates in discovery with what is in front of them.

In what follows, I will describe my research methods and logistics. I explain in detail how I selected participants, collected data, and analyzed data through the guidance of portraiture. I will also reflect and share the research concerns, ethical risks, and

limitations that I encountered throughout the research process.

### **Research Methods and Logistics**

#### *Participant Selection*

The participants needed for this study were very specific. I used a criterion-based snowball sampling method to select participants. With criterion-based sampling, Merriam (1998) states that the researcher must “create a list of attributes essential to your study and then proceed to locate a unit matching the list” (p. 61). Because the list of criteria was limited, I also coupled my participant selection process with snowball sampling because I needed referrals to assist in securing participants that matched the needs of the study.

To develop criteria for participants, I drew from literature on hip-hop pedagogy (Akom, 2009; Banks, 2015; Bridges, 2011; Love, 2012) to guide my understanding of this pedagogical practice and locate educators that employ it. My criteria for selecting participants was:

- a) Educators who identify as Asian American and woman;
- b) Educators residing in the San Francisco Bay Area;
- c) Educators who teach and support students (i.e., developing curricula, mentoring students, facilitating learning sessions, organizing within the community) in formal and informal education settings; and
- d) Asian American women educators who have strong ties to hip-hop culture and hip-hop cultural production.

In addition to the above, I also included these specifics:

- e) Educators involved and invested in academic literacy, rigor, and achievement;
- f) Educators who foster critical knowledge of self, community, and each other;
- g) Educators who implement the elements and aesthetic of hip-hop into the classroom including music, dance, art, and sociohistorical and sociopolitical analysis; and
- h) Educators who emphasize relationship and community building.

My four participants met all of the first half of the criteria as those were considered nonnegotiable attitudes to the study. For the latter half, they met most, if not all, of the criteria. As a note, my participants had to reside in the San Francisco Bay Area out of convenience. My city of residence is in the South Bay Area and I had limited funding and time to travel to and from my research participants. However, I should also note that being bound to the San Francisco Bay Area for this study is still highly favorable because it has a rich hip-hop legacy and community, especially with existing events and organizations like Rock the School Bells and the People's Education Movement Bay Area.

I narrowed my list of referrals down to four participants who came highly recommended from my trusted personal contacts or with whom I had established a brief, but existing, rapport. I also sought participants who reflected diversity in Asian American ethnic identity and educational experience (i.e., teaching tenure, grade level, and institutional location). These educators range in ethnic identity, age, professional experience, and personal milestones (i.e., relationship status, kinship building, and education). Two of the educators identify as Filipina, one as Chinese American, and the other as multiracial—Japanese and Mexican American, respectively. They each teach and

support students in different settings, including secondary education, higher education, afterschool programming, and community education and activism.

I sent emails, text messages, and direct messages on social media platforms to reach out to each of the participants explaining my study, requesting their participation, and if applicable, noting who referred me to them. When I received confirmed agreement, I followed up by emailing participant consent forms and arranged a convenient time and place to meet, based upon their schedules and area of residence.

### *Data Collection*

I collected data in two phases. Person-to-person interviews were my primary source of data. The first round of interviews I did were semistructured, one-on-one interviews that focused on hip-hop origin stories and personal and professional life stories, including how the participants became educators. The second round of interviews were also semistructured and one-on-one. These interviews focused on the participants' pedagogical practices and philosophies, the intersections of culture and identity with their pedagogical practices, and educational benefits that are born out of their pedagogical practices and institutional contexts. Before I interviewed every participant, I sent them the list of interview questions over email. Each interview I conducted lasted between 1.5-3 hours and took place at, or within, close range of each participant's home or workplace. If it was needed after the second interview, I followed up through email, text message, or a phone call to clarify an idea, story, or response. All of the interviews began in spring of 2015 and were completed by fall of 2015.

I met and checked in with my participants more than once over a period of time

for various reasons. First, I sought to develop a productive relationship with each. The process of becoming acquainted multiple times supported me in “navigating lines of intimacy, trust, reciprocity, and boundary setting” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135). Additionally, it helped in developing “a level of comfort, balance, honesty, and authenticity in [our] communication” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135). The multiple meetings also encouraged me to engage in self-reflection and self-understanding that comes from partaking in any relationship (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I was able to live in the data collection process with more clarity and affection, which helps art resonate with several audiences.

I recorded all of the interviews using two forms of high quality technology, which included my phone and tablet. I used two different forms for accuracy and reinforcement. I was very cautious about not losing any recorded information. I stored all interviews directly onto a hard drive that did not require compression or transferal. A passcode was always required to enter the program and application where the interview files were stored.

I submitted three of the four first-round interviews for verbatim transcription and transcribed verbatim the fourth using online transcription and dictation software. Two of the three first-round interviews I submitted for transcription did not yield clear, reliable results. As such, I went back and retranscribed each of them. For the second round of interviews, I submitted one of the four for verbatim transcription and transcribed verbatim the remaining using the same online transcription and dictation software.

I chose to transcribe the majority of the interviews because it allowed me to deeply engage and reengage the data, but the constraints of time kept me from

transcribing all. Pillow (2002) advises that researchers must immerse themselves in their data. They must “listen to it, read it, touch it, play with it, copy it, write on it, color code it, over and over again” (Pillow, 2002, p. 396). Transcribing the majority of the interviews was how I immersed myself into the data, which greatly guided the construction of the portraits. Finally, while I did not transcribe every interview, I did listen to each recording several times and read along using the transcripts.

In addition to interviews, I also collected data through observations. According to Merriam (1998), observations are an innate characteristic of the human existence. “Being alive renders us natural observers of our everyday world and our behavior in it. What we learn helps us make sense of our world and guides our future actions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 94). My role as an educator, researcher, and student has also made observation a learned and refined behavior of mine. Observation as a secondary source of data served as a valuable research tool because it helped me “find aspects of the subject not often included in more traditional research accounts such as attitudes, feelings, colors, pace, and ambiance” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 28).

Upon beginning the data collection process, I did not have a specific criteria or pattern in place for how I observed, what I observed, and when I observed. However, I was “open and receptive to all stimuli” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 187).

I observed numerous elements during my interviews, including the physical environment, participant, activities and interactions, my behavior, and various subtle factors including nonverbal behaviors like physical movement and facial expressions, and unplanned exchanges (Merriam, 1998). My stance as an observer was well known to my participants because the interviews were solely person-to-person. I evolved from a quiet

watchfulness, which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain as taking in stimuli and listening carefully, to purposeful activities like cultivating a relationship, developing an agenda for our interaction and dialogue, and scheduling future meetings (p. 187).

I brought along a notebook to mechanically record notes and organize my thoughts at every interview. The field notes for my observations included key words, brief sentences, and sketches that summarized and helped me make sense of what I witnessed and experienced each time. The words I wrote and the images I drew served a similar purpose as the colors a portraitist chooses. They captured my reflections and emotions, supported my memory, and served as an important resource to incite and sustain my writing.

### *Data Analysis*

For a portraitist, the data analysis process is persistent and repetitious. When I finished collecting, organizing, and scrutinizing my data, I began searching for emergent themes. I went through this process several times before I began constructing the portraits, during the construction, as well as after, during the editing stages. The emergent themes that I found were in conversation with my experiential knowledge (cultural, familial, educational, and developmental) and my research questions, theoretical framework, and relevant literature (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As such, the emerging themes that I identified were: (a) relationships to hip-hop, hip-hop culture, and hip-hop cultural production; (b) cultural, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities; (c) pedagogical practices and philosophies; and (d) educational benefits of pedagogical practices and philosophies.

I did not use a program to code my data. During my process of listening to each interview recording and reading along with the transcripts, I used colored markers and pens to manually code. I was guided by Creswell (2008) in my lean coding process (p. 252). I divided my data into segments of information, labeled the segments with codes, reduced overlap and redundancy of codes, and collapsed codes into themes (p. 251). In partnership with lean coding, I also participated in flexible and ongoing coding.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) note that flexibility in portraiture is paramount because it “[allows] the researcher to shift gears and change directions as she moves from fieldwork to analysis and back to data collection” (p. 188). Constantly moving back and forth helped me analyze data from numerous angles, stances, and contexts. I was able to honor the complexity and goodness of lived experience and create portraits that were intricate, vivid, and refined (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 214).

### *Research Concerns*

As someone who also fulfills other roles and responsibilities as a sister, daughter, partner, educator, friend, and community member, I was very concerned with taking up my participants’ time, energy, and space. Bloom articulates this concern well:

One of the biggest personal challenges for me in doing narrative research is the feeling that the interview process often feels like I am invading a respondent’s privacy. I find it difficult to ask probing questions to get beyond superficial self-stories and I am uncomfortable when my questions open wounds through seemingly innocent questions.” (2002, p. 312)

To mitigate this, I expressed my concerns to the participants and remained flexible in time and space. I also took the advice of Riessman (2008) and did my best to include the participants in every phase of the research process including some of design,

interpretation, and publication of the results (p. 196). I gave each participant the option of reading their portraits at every juncture of its development. One of the four participants accepted this option and read through her portrait's first and second draft.

### *Ethical Risks*

This study posed no serious ethical risk. There was a risk of loss of privacy because real names were used and personal experiences were shared. I gave each participant the option of using a pseudonym but they all declined and consented to the use of their real names. There was a slight risk of regret or embarrassment when sharing personal life stories and professional challenges but, as part of the consent process, participants knew that they had the liberty to retract or adjust any statement at any moment of the research process.

### *Limitations of the Study*

This study does fill a gap within existing research but it is still limited. It is not definitive; it is explorative. It is not a master narrative, nor is it static. This study is also not intended to be generalizable.

The participant sample was limited. I should also note that three of the women knew each other well and have collaborated on various projects and endeavors throughout the years. All of the women were informally connected through acquaintances and/or community organizations. As such, this study was very particular to the San Francisco Bay Area and its community of Asian American scholars, educators, and activists.

The process of dialoguing, building, and collaborating with these four women was deeply rewarding and meaningful. I took great care and pride in shaping each portrait. It is my hope that the following four tracks capture Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko's experiences, sensibilities, prowess, and spirit in a way that moves, inspires, and delights.

## TRACK 4

### MISS MANDY

*“I am the voice of warrior,  
I am the voice of a warrior.*

*Today I will use the tools I’ve learned to empower myself and my people,  
I have the power to love what I do, and do what I love,  
To believe in my community and to believe in myself,  
the possibilities are endless.”*

*Soy la voz de un guerrero,  
Soy la voz de un guerrero.*

*Hoy usaré las habilidades que he aprendido para empoderarme y mi gente,  
Tengo el poder de amar lo quehago, y hacer lo que amo,  
De creer en mi comunidad y de creer en mí mismo,  
Las posibilidades son infinitas.*

—Miss Mandy’s Daily Classroom Chant

I call her “Miss Mandy” as a term of endearment. It is out of sisterhood, love, and years of secret admiration. It makes her sound a lot older than me despite being just 1 year my elder but I think it is really fitting. I have wanted her to be my teacher for a long time and now she is. “Miss Mandy” sounds just right.

I thought about Miss Mandy long before she would ever know. When I was going through the darkest moments of my doctoral program, Miss Mandy was in the back of my mind. I was a 4th-year student on the verge of dropping out. I was deeply exhausted and

unfulfilled by my doctoral experience. I had little direction despite successfully passing my qualifying exams and was years into writing and researching about a topic that I was emotionally and intellectually disconnected from. The competitive and grueling pace of the academy also took its toll on my body and my health deteriorated as quickly as my motivation did. I knew that something had to give otherwise I would never survive my program but I just was not sure what that would be. Then late one evening on a cold fall day as the seasons began to shift, that “something” finally came to me.

I was lying in the middle of my living room floor, staring off into my popcorn ceiling while Zion-I’s *Bird’s Eye View* quietly played on repeat in the background. I did this often when I needed to do some deep reflection and centering—when I needed to do a better job of trusting myself. In that time, I repeatedly asked what I needed. I literally asked until it came to me. When it did, I made it a point to verbalize it. *I need to change my dissertation topic and I really need to go home.* That moment of reflection, and then clarity, sparked a series of difficult decisions, actions, and events over the course of nearly 2 years that would lead me back home to the San Francisco Bay Area. As the dust of my move home settled, I would finally get a chance to meet up with Miss Mandy.

\* \* \*

On a breezy, warm spring day, I make the drive over to Miss Mandy’s condo which is tucked away in San Jose’s historic Japantown. As I park, I receive a text from her that she’s almost home—she had to meet up with a few students and it took longer than she expected. After just a few minutes of waiting I see her green compact sport utility vehicle whip the corner and pull into her complex’s driveway. I wave and gather my things as I cross the street to greet her. She’s a little flustered and apologizes to me

for being late. I tell her it is not a problem at all. Then she stops, takes a breath, and opens her arms to hug me. “Hi baby, it’s good to see you,” she says.

She invites me into her condo and shares with me that she and her partner Joe are in the middle of home renovations *and* planning a wedding. As I curiously look around, I notice a big whiteboard near their kitchen with a long wedding checklist of things to do. It looks intense. She asks if I want a tour of the condo and I excitedly oblige. I love looking at homes and home improvement shows. As we walk around she lays out all that they have completed and what is left to do. Walls have been removed and the kitchen has been completely redone but the old carpet still has to go and a big hole in the guest bedroom really needs to be patched up. She says things have been really hectic lately but they plan to finish everything after their wedding in July. After she wraps up the tour she asks if we can walk around the corner to the locally-owned café to sit down and talk. I agree.

As we make the short walk over to the café, Miss Mandy greets and smiles at everyone she walks by whether she knows them or not. I am comforted and warmed by her gesture. You can tell that she loves her neighborhood and is invested in the people who call it home, too. I tell Miss Mandy about how I miss living in Japantown a lot. I lived with my ex-boyfriend just a few blocks over from where she is now when I was in my master’s program at San Francisco State University. I laugh and say that my ex-boyfriend actually still lives in that same apartment we shared and how I really hope we don’t run into him. She chuckles and tells me that she and Joe fell in love with Japantown when they were renting an apartment in the neighborhood and jumped at the chance to buy when they saw the listing for the condo. “We knew this is where we wanted to be.”

As we reach the café, we decide to sit outside on the patio. Miss Mandy chooses not to sit across from me but next to me and settles into her seat the same way I do—with her feet up on the chair. I am again comforted and warmed by her gesture. I set up my two recorders and push them across the table closer to her. I take a deep breath and start our conversation by telling her why I asked her to be part of this work and how this very moment was years in the making. She is a bit taken aback by all of this and tells me that when I first reached out to her about participating she thought, “Whoa! Am I qualified for that?” This first meeting turns into an extended conversation over the course of a few more meetings where we spend time together talking about such diverse topics as hip-hop, youth, graduate school, home remodeling, weddings and marriage, community work, love, relationships, and teaching. She is not merely qualified—to me she embodies the need for this work.

### **An Inspired Soul**

Mandy Lau Manluco is an urban high school educator with roots in San Jose, California. She grew up on the west side, teaches on the east, and calls downtown her home. When I ask Miss Mandy to identify herself she replies instantly with, “Oh wow, that’s hard.” She laughs, states her full name, specifies her ethnicity as Chinese, her cultural roots as Filipino American, and finishes with, “If that makes sense... Is that good enough?” I tell her that that’s perfect. Miss Mandy touches briefly about her identity noting that she is influenced and inspired by the community that immediately surrounds her. Many of those community members, including her partner, are Filipino American.

If I had to summarize Miss Mandy, I would say that she is an inspired soul on a

mission. You get an immediate sense that she has a big heart and is deeply caring but also tough and gritty, never one to “back down” or “go without a fight,” as she says. These characteristics are her edge and serve as sturdy foundation to be able to commit her mind, body, and spirit to all that she does and loves. In addition to being a full-time 11<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Latino College Prep Academy (LCPA)—a charter high school in San Jose’s Eastside Union School District that predominately serves Latina/o youth and English language learners—Miss Mandy is also a longstanding volunteer conference coordinator for Northern California’s Rock the School Bells (RTSB), a fiancée, dedicated daughter and sister, first-time homeowner, and “Mama Lau”—an *othermother* to her school community. Her days at LCPA are easily 10–12 hours and when she comes home, she transitions into wedding planning, wedding crafting, and home improvement projects. When asked, Miss Mandy speaks passionately and fervently about the life she leads and the work she does. But, she also acknowledges that it is a lot. “I think the reason why I haven’t burnt out yet is because I am learning to balance a little bit more in my life.” It’s clear that she believes in everything she gives her time to, that everything has a purpose.

One of the first things I am eager to talk to Miss Mandy about is her journey into becoming an educator because I have admired her work from a distance. I have always wondered where she learned to teach the way that she does and how she arrived at that pedagogical place. My admiration began through a degree of separation. I did not know Miss Mandy directly but I knew her partner Joe because we were friends when we were undergraduates at UC Davis. Joe and I kept in touch sporadically after graduation—mostly through social media, where he often spoke and posted about Miss Mandy’s work with RTSB and ambition to become an educator. Through a call for RTSB volunteers in

2013, I was finally able to see Miss Mandy in her element as an educator and coordinator. Her command and presence was undeniable. There was an ease about her. As such, I was certain that becoming an educator was natural and expected. When I ask her how and why she is an educator, she stops for a moment to think and responds that it is not necessarily something she intended to do but rather something she “fell” into. I am actually really surprised by this.

I always knew I liked teaching people. I would play library and school teacher with my little brother and yell at him if he didn't do his math the right way. I just remember wanting to be a teacher when I was in kindergarten. I never remembered that I actually wanted to do that until maybe after college. I started off tutoring. I was bartending for quite some time, maybe 3–5 years and then my mom said, “Okay, you have spent a year douching around, it's time for you to come back home and figure out what you want to do.” So, I took up a tutoring job at an after school program and then I realized that I loved it so much. Working with kids was such a passionate thing for me. I ran an afterschool program for 5 years, with 88 kids and 4–5 staff members. It reignited this instinct in me because I am very motherly. I grew up without a father so I became mom and my mom became dad.

After running the afterschool program for a few years, Miss Mandy found herself at a crossroads. She had to decide what she wanted to do next. She considered selling her artwork and crafts of hand sewn boom box and turntable pillows full-time but online marketplaces that allowed artists to independently sell their work weren't nearly as popular then as they are now. The other option she considered was a teaching credential. On a leap of faith and because she “had little money,” she chose to apply solely to UCLA's Teach LA, Teach Compton program. I asked her why Teach LA and the city of Compton felt like a fit to her and she replied that she wanted a program that allowed her to earn her credential while interning. She also recognized the need for dedicated and committed educators in underresourced communities based upon her experience running the afterschool program.

After completing the 1-year program, she began her teaching career in Compton. She had intentions to continue serving the community there but ultimately made the decision to come back to San Jose for Joe, who had already been settled into a full-time teaching position in the Alum Rock School District. Upon her return, she applied to a few different schools and it was LCPA that hired her to teach English to freshmen. At the time of our conversation it was her third year at LCPA, but she was teaching juniors. In what I imagine is her “Mama Lau” tone, she affectionately said, “I get my same kids again.”

### **“Jurassic Park? No, Jurassic 5”**

For some of us who came of age in the early 2000s, the phrase “So when did you fall in love with hip-hop?” is as nostalgic as it is cliché. For so many, myself included, “falling in love” with hip-hop wasn’t one moment—it was many moments. It often came with time, experience, and exposure. When I probe Miss Mandy about significant moments that introduced her to hip-hop, she is quick to note that she was not an instant hip-hop head because she was an “R&B cat.” Love songs were her “thing” and it wasn’t until a college boyfriend introduced her to more than what she had heard on the radio that she began to grow an affinity and passion for hip-hop.

When I was 17, I actually had a 21-year-old boyfriend and he put me onto Jurassic 5. I was like, “Jurassic Park?” and he was like, “No, Jurassic 5.” It just kinda heightened my curiosity about it and I kept going from there. At Cal Poly Pomona we had an event called Session A and it was 400 students coming to watch like a visionaries concert. It was things like that.

Hip-hop didn’t immediately resonate with Miss Mandy either because she says she just wasn’t “living that life.” She was a Chinese American girl growing up on the west side of

San Jose. Hip-hop was not something she felt like she could be involved in because it was “counterintuitive” to her ethnic identity and what her immigrant parents represented. While she did like the hip-hop music she heard on the radio, she didn’t always have access to it. “I remember one time I asked my mom to buy me a Snoop Doggy Dogg album. I’m like, “oohh!” and my mom was like, “Hell no! Put that shit back—that is not going to happen!” I laugh at this and tell her that I can relate because that is exactly how my dad felt when I asked him to buy me Foxy Brown’s album Ill Na Na. Hip-hop is not an art widely practiced in Chinese culture. Conversely, Chinese culture is not widely represented in hip-hop. The cultural differences didn’t keep Miss Mandy from developing a connection and passion for hip-hop, though. She continues to reminisce and detail other significant moments that strengthened and affirmed her love for hip-hop. She tells me brief stories about dancing to Richie Rich with her brother, joyfully observing her student mouth lyrics to Ahmad’s Back in the Day, watching Chuy Gomez on the California Music Channel, and recording hip-hop songs from the radio onto a cassette tape. She says through a giggle, “The first part of the song is cut off but the rest of the song is there!” I laugh loudly because I know all too well about that.

We continue to talk about how our love for hip-hop developed through moments and I share with Miss Mandy my own stories—many closely relating to hers. On the surface, hip-hop also felt counterintuitive to my Midwestern Vietnamese American upbringing. My parents were also puzzled by the aesthetic and sound of hip-hop. It seemed abrasive and boastful to them—almost rebellious. I tell Miss Mandy that people often inquire about how I arrived at loving hip-hop the way that I do when it *seems* so polarized from who I am and some of my lived experiences. She nods in

acknowledgement and replies that some of where that comes from is the rigidity in perception of what being an Asian American woman is and is not. She says her love for hip-hop goes beyond her identity as much as it intersects with it. She offers this example to explain further:

I think maybe it is also because, well, for me, I grew up in a single parent household. I think a lot of the music represents some sort of struggle or overcoming of struggle. I think that is maybe what I had to do as a child—become this person and step up to be this person that nobody else in my neighborhood was being, you know? I could relate to some sort of struggle and no other music had struggle. I wasn't into drugs. You know? But, it was like I had to be this person I shouldn't have had to be at that age.

For Miss Mandy, this very connection was vital in cementing her understanding and passion for hip-hop because it has the unique ability to speak and affirm various truths. As she notes to me, hip-hop could and did represent her ethics and experiences—that was meaningful. She used hip-hop as a tool to empower and bridge her experiences, which then offered her the opportunity to explore it differently and complexly. Over time she would realize that hip-hop could also become a tool for her to empower the experiences of youth. This has been vital to thriving as an educator at an urban charter school where burnout is likely and turnover rates are high.

### **Each One, Teach One**

When we get around to talking about Miss Mandy's classroom practices and teaching philosophy, it is apparent that the presence of hip-hop in her work has always been organic. Hip-hop is like her teaching assistant. It has a physical, intellectual, spiritual, and energetic presence—just not in the shape or form of a human being. The way she relates, engages, and bonds with her students, how she organizes her classroom,

the books she reads, and the people she keeps close to her is both consciously and subconsciously influenced by hip-hop. Hip-hop informs her, her classroom, and her curriculum holistically—in a way that is creative but also practical. When I ask her about practicing hip-hop in the classroom, she returns back to her comment of not being qualified enough to be considered a practitioner of hip-hop but with some clarity.

When I think about somebody like me, we're so in love with what hip-hop embodies that I don't necessarily think consciously about the fact that we embed it in the things that we do, in daily curriculum. When you told me about this [study] I was thinking, "Whoa, am I qualified for that?" What do I do that... then I thought, "OMG! I do this, and OMG, I do that, and I didn't realize I do that, too!"

When I ask her to expand on what some of that might be and how she thinks about hip-hop pedagogically, she continues with:

It was interesting because my understanding of hip-hop pedagogy prior to the afterschool program was that we had a hip-hop club, hip-hop chant, "I am the voice of hip-hop" type thing. Prior to reading Marc Lamont Hill, I was kinda of like, hip-hop is a way for voices to be heard, for voices that are normally unheard to be heard. And I think, as I had started reading Marc Lamont Hill, Tricia Rose, KRS-One—my idea of hip-hop began to expand. It is not necessarily teaching lyrics. It's hard to define "well what do I do in my class is hip-hop" but I think now it has come to the point where, for example, I use ciphers. I don't call it Socratic seminars because they aren't Socratic seminars to me, they're ciphers. Everyone participates in a cipher. Respect another person when they're MCing, or b-boying and b-girling. You wait, you respond. You listen, and you nod to what that person is doing and then you respond. The definition of hip-hop is definitely evolving for me consistently. I even think about books—the analyzing of books is the same as the analyzing of lyrics because I am a lyrics person. I know a lot of people that listen to beats but I am a lyrics person. Where the beat is a like a setting, "so it was like muggy and grey" that is the same thing for me. I can hear it in a beat. So it transcends so many different definitions of what it really is and I think it grows all the time for me. But those are a few examples. The cipher in my class—I call it a cipher. I tell them, "let's get into a cipher" and my kids are like "what's that?" and I say, "it's a circle, where y'all talk!"

Just as Miss Mandy's definition of hip-hop and hip-hop pedagogy continues to evolve, I learned that her classroom is also a constant place of evolution. If students are not

dialoguing, they are creating individually or in small groups. They're reflecting often and challenging their biases. They're also reading passages instead of full books to open their minds to a variety of literature, voices, and writing styles. Miss Mandy notes that sometimes they love what they're reading so much that they steal books from her classroom. She says every year she ends up missing copies of The RZA's *The Tao of Wu*. She laughs and is quick to say that she doesn't mind it because she understands that they are aching to know more. Some days in Miss Mandy's classroom are livelier than others but there is always an intention of growth. The active style of how her students learn is just as important as what they learn.

At LCPA teachers are responsible for developing their own curriculum. Miss Mandy took this up as an opportunity to create units that are culturally and socially relevant to her students' lives. The academic skills she seeks to sharpen must be practical and applicable to where her students are and where they hope to be. She has six different units.

The first one is about migration experiences. They learn the history of their family and how they migrated. They learn about Latina/o and Chicana/o civil rights. They also talk about education as a weapon of choice. We discuss the school-to-prison pipeline, Latina/os in education, and the dropout rate. Then we talk about, well, the fourth unit is one that I just changed to preparing job portfolios, resumes, cover letters, things like that. Interview preparation. The fifth unit is preparing them for college. Thinking about majors, universities they are interested in, and cost of tuition. Then the last unit is, 'what is your legacy?' We think about who they are at their best and also the other sides of us that are a little mad, a little crazy, a little sad. How we can isolate ourselves in those moments. So, understanding those different sides of them and then looking at the things that truly make them happy that is not based off of other people.

Miss Mandy notes that her classroom is as much about college and career readiness as it is about affirming her students' values and fostering a supportive and cohesive community that they can all depend upon. This doesn't come easily though as she

expresses that junior year is often the hardest for many of her students. It is when the workload increases as well as the pressure to prepare for life after high school. She says that many students depart LCPA in their junior year and attributes it to the numerous systemic and individual challenges that come with growing up on the East Side of San Jose—a community that is predominately working class, immigrant, and underresourced. Motivation for school also becomes elusive as some of her students openly share with her that they are struggling with depression, anxiety, drug addiction, alcoholism, sexual abuse, self-harm, and/or the loss of family members. Her tone shifts and her eyebrows begin to frown, “[students] start dropping off like flies.” Much of what Miss Mandy shares with me mirrors a lot of existing urban education literature and research (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kelly, 2013; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). For many students in urban high schools, getting to graduation is no easy task. For urban educators, getting their students to high school graduation is not any easier. It’s complicated and taxing and Miss Mandy knows and understands this all too well. But, she’s insistent. Defiant, if you will.

At the core of Miss Mandy’s pedagogical practices is the development of meaningful partnerships built upon trust, respect, and hip-hop. For Miss Mandy, this is key not only to her students’ success, but also to her own. She shares with me that the activities she runs and the content she teaches is important but that it is also the subtler, everyday exchanges and interactions that help her foster meaningful partnerships. In turn, these partnerships encourage her students to stay and find their own sense of purpose and empowerment. When I ask Miss Mandy about these exchanges, she tells me that, for her, it is as simple as stopping to tell a kid that she thinks it is dope that they are mouthing

Kendrick Lamar songs, happily staying after class for a student to play her a beat they made, or acutely noticing the artistic ability in one student and offering up graffiti pieces for them to emulate and refine their skillset and interests. She also tells me about how she has a lot of students that drum on their desks all day long. Instead of seeing it as a disruption, she uses it as a moment of affirmation and recognition. “I say to them, ‘you’d be a great beat maker,’ or ‘I can’t wait until you go into production.’ It’s easy to validate them and you have to start somewhere.” I notice the presence of hip-hop again. Miss Mandy uses her own love and knowledge of hip-hop but also its theoretical and conceptual possibility as an entryway to establishing these partnerships. She’s well aware that hip-hop is a language for urban youth. As such, hip-hop becomes a point of connection and a way to humanize her to her students.

It is clear to me that Miss Mandy has a strong pedagogical foundation to work with. She acknowledges that she is continually working on strengthening it, as well. I ask Miss Mandy what that means, how she continues to grow and transform as an educator and hip-hop practitioner. She tells me that it is just about the desire to learn more. She is disciplined and continues to educate herself on issues regarding educational equity and systems of oppression as a means to better serve her students. She continues on by saying:

To be a good practitioner of hip-hop, to be a good b-boy or b-girl, you can’t just know power poses. You can’t just know a windmill, or a flare. You have to know things like salsa so you can incorporate it, or like poppin’ and lockin’ so you can incorporate that. There’s so many different aspects and that’s part of the knowledge. It’s wanting more, it’s becoming more, evolving with more. Hip-hop is never stagnant and I think that is where that knowledge piece comes in because no matter what element you practice it is never stagnant. You always have to have more knowledge in order to be the best or in order to continue to grow.

In the spirit of wanting more, becoming more, and evolving more, Miss Mandy shares

that she has been thinking a lot lately about pursuing a master's degree in the near future. She is considering counseling or education. If she goes into the latter, she hopes to explore more about hip-hop based education. I inquire if she is interested in going into administration down the road and she adamantly says no. She enjoys working one-on-one with students too much. She also doesn't plan on balancing teaching and pursuing a master's degree at the same time either because she thinks it undermines the work. "I feel like because there is such a responsibility when you are teaching, that it would be a cop out to my students. I wouldn't be able to fulfill the duties that I need to in order to be an effective teacher." I nod in agreement.

### **A Work of HeART**

The end of the summer is nearing and I am hanging out in the backyard of my partner's parents' home. All his family are over to celebrate his mom's 61<sup>st</sup> birthday. His dad is firing up the teppanyaki grill as he does for every family party and is getting ready to put on a show featuring fiery onion volcanos and flying shrimp (that you catch with your mouth). I'm trying not to eat too much because I am getting ready to go see Miss Mandy and Joe.

Miss Mandy and Joe got married a couple weeks ago and, although invited, my partner Ken and I were unable to make it. A week after their wedding, she texted me a picture of a flier with the message, "We decided to do this last minute. I would love if you could make it. You'll be able to meet some of my kids." I open the picture up in my phone and see that it is an invitation to her "Student Wedding." Miss Mandy and Joe are putting on another ceremony at LCPA for their students to celebrate their union.

As 7 p.m. nears, I ask Ken to come inside the house as I get ready to change. I put on a bright yellow dress I borrowed from my sister and he helps me zip it up. I pull out a pair of strappy, beige summer sandals from my bag to change into and stare at them. I don't want to be too informal for the event, but I'm also notorious for wearing sneakers with dresses. I line my silver Nike Air Max 90s next to my sandals and look up at Ken. "Do you think it's a bad look if I wear my sneakers instead of my sandals?" He smiles because he knows how I am and says, "I think it's a good look. Plus, it's Mandy and Joe. You know it'll fit their vibe." I nod in agreement, give him a kiss as he stays behind to continue celebrating his mom, and head to LCPA.

When I get to LCPA, I run into Joe at the door and greet him with a hug. He smiles and says, "What up, Cin! Thanks for coming!" I ask him where Miss Mandy is and he tells me that she is outside setting up in the courtyard. I go to the back of LCPA where I see a community of people setting up a screen, projector, speakers, tables, chairs, and food. I run to give Miss Mandy a hug and ask if she needs help with anything. She points to the right and tells me that her homegirl is setting up the food spread and that she could use an extra set of hands. As I make my way to that table, I notice another table with their wedding favors, hip-hop themed activity books, and ceremony pamphlets. As students surround it I run over to grab myself two pencils—their wedding favor—that are engraved with "Manseph 2015." I keep one as a memento for myself and save the other to give to Ken. After I finish setting up the food, I head upstairs to Miss Mandy's classroom where she is getting ready. I introduce myself to the handful of students that have been keeping her company and take a look around her classroom since I have never been there before. She has various artwork, graffiti pieces, and signs around her

classroom, including one that says “Hope Dealers.” Her desk has papers and various trinkets around it. Her classroom is what I imagined it to be: colorful, creative, welcoming, and a bit unorganized—more than appropriate for a bustling, active learning space.

We hang out upstairs for a few more minutes until Miss Mandy is ready to head downstairs to begin the ceremony. Everyone shuttles out of her classroom as she locks the door behind us. Before she gets to the first step of the stairs, she grabs the front of her wedding dress while a few of her students assist her with the back of it. I look down and notice her shoes—baby blue Nike Blazers with zebra print Nike checks. I smile. As we make our way down the stairs a few of her students ask her to stop midway so they can take pictures of her in the stairwell. She obliges, looks over her shoulder, and smiles for a few pictures until she sternly says in a familiar teacher tone, “Let’s hurry, we need to get outside.” When I make it downstairs to the courtyard, I rush to take a seat as the ceremony begins.

The audience quiets as Miss Mandy walks down the aisle arm in arm with her mom and stepdad. Both she and Joe are glowing. I look around the courtyard and see adolescent, teen, and adult faces. Everyone else is smiling, too. The energy is full of gratitude and excitement as Miss Mandy and Joe tearfully exchange the same vows they spoke to each other on their wedding day, take off and put back on their wedding rings, and kiss to seal the deal as their students collectively gush and squeal in delight. When the ceremony portion concludes, Miss Mandy and Joe get on the microphone to give a short speech. They thank their community of students—past and present—for coming out to celebrate such a special moment and time with them. They acknowledge all the

different students they see from the various schools and grade levels they have taught and remind each of them of how significant they are to their lives. As Miss Mandy and Joe's speech concludes, they share their wedding slideshow, encourage everyone to eat as much as they can, and ask all the various groups of students to come up and take pictures with them one by one. I'm emotional and overwhelmed by this display of love. I've never been to a student wedding; nor have I ever heard of one. This event beautifully captured Miss Mandy and Joe's commitment to each other as well as their students, work, community, and purpose. It was an honor to bear witness to it.

I've learned that at the core of Miss Mandy's pedagogical practices is not just a mutual trust and respect. There's also a mutual love and humanization. Miss Mandy opens herself as well as her world to her students. She is honest and vulnerable with them and they wholeheartedly reciprocate. While this particular evening is dedicated to celebrating this significant moment in her and Joe's lives, Miss Mandy eagerly shares with me that she has also had the privilege of celebrating many significant moments in her students' lives. More recently she has been celebrating college acceptance letters but has also gotten to be part of quinceañeras, proms, baby showers, baptisms of her students' children, and graduations. She doesn't take any of this for granted.

As the student wedding begins to wind down and I prepare to take off, I am reminded of a conversation Miss Mandy and I had a few weeks prior. She told me that she wanted to flip the script and ask me a question instead. I happily obliged and told her to spit. "Are you looking for anything in particular?" she asks. "I know you're trying to tell these stories and I am guessing this is close to your heart because of who you are." I paused for a moment and then shook my head no. I told her that I really don't know what

I am looking for but that I trust that that's the beauty of the process. Based on experience, that "something" will come to me and lead me to places I've been needing—and wanting—to be.

## TRACK 5

### KUTTIN' KANDI

It is a foggy, chilly day in the Bay Area. I am visiting home from Salt Lake City for the annual Association for Asian American Studies conference. It has been 3 full days of presentations, chairing, mentoring, and networking. I am worn out. I am looking forward to stepping out of the conference scene to head to an event in Oakland with my partner Ken and homegirl Christina. The editors and contributors of *Empire of Funk: Hip Hop Representation in Filipina/o America* are hosting a book release and speak-out. I am in need of some good community energy because I have been going through a lot lately.

When I arrive at the event the energy is exactly what I hoped it would be—electric. Hip-hop records are spinning and folks are gathered around the catered egg rolls, pad thai, and ube cupcakes. The smell and sight is comforting. Everyone there is breaking bread—meeting, greeting, and building. I am present for the first time in a long time. I walk around and greet familiar faces with hugs and smiles. I have not seen a lot of these people in over a year. I have missed them. I introduce many of them to Ken and Christina before the event emcee asks us to take a seat and focus our attention on the front of the venue.

The event kicks off with spoken word by Filipina American poets Caroline Calderon, Janice Sapigao, and Lily Prijoles. In each of their introductions you hear shared

experiences, “educator, student, community organizer, engaged citizen... hip-hop lover.” Their poetry and accompanying performances are stirring. As I look around, I notice that the stories of falling in and out of love, becoming politicized, and growing up with hip-hop while Filipina/o American are stirring for others too. I can feel the vibrations of Ken and Christina’s clapping and snapping. Beneath all of the noise, I am also able to hear Ken’s breath. I put my hand on his leg because I want him to know that I can feel his energy. He acknowledges my touch and whispers, “This is so... dope.”

After the spoken word performances, the event transitions into the book panel. *Empire of Funk’s* editors, Dr. Mark R. Villegas, DJ Kuttin’ Kandi, and Dr. Roderick N. Labrador, are all present alongside a few contributors including DJ Deeandroid, Leo Docuyanán, and my mentor, Dr. Allyson Tintiángco-Cubales. The editors discuss the book as a grassroots effort—one that came together out of necessity and love. There has always been a Filipina/o American presence in hip-hop, yet those stories and experiences have often been omitted. The editors each express that they wanted to rectify this absence.

The panel continues with the editors and contributors sharing how hip-hop has played a part in each of their lives as Filipina/o Americans. Hip-hop was a reason to come together—a mode of expression, something to belong to, something to create, and a vital method of organizing (Kandi, 2014, p. xxiii). I find each of their stories relatable and entertaining. I’m laughing, cheering, and snapping my fingers—doing my best to take it all in. Truthfully, I don’t want this event to end because when it does, I am that much closer to going back to school—back to a semester that has been full of mental, physical, and emotional anguish.

After a fruitful dialogue with the editors and contributors, the panel transitions into the question and comment portion. The emcee welcomes members of the audience to speak their piece. I want to say something but I am really nervous. I am worried that I will not be able to articulate myself clearly. I raise my hand anyway. When I am called upon I immediately introduce myself. I tell the panel I am a doctoral student struggling through the dissertation phase. I share that I want to write about Asian American women educators and hip-hop pedagogy but that I have been feeling unsure and unsupported. “It has been a very difficult process,” I say. I start getting choked up and my eyes begin to well. When I blink, my tears fall. Ken and Christina embrace me quickly and rest their hands on my back and shoulders. I take a deep breath and tell the panel that tonight’s event and energy has reinvigorated me. It has reminded me that the research I want to do matters even if the support and excitement for it is underwhelming. “I really just wanted to express my gratitude to each of you,” I say.

After a few more questions and comments, the panel concludes and the event continues with live DJing and dancing. It is getting late out and Ken and I still have an hour drive ahead of us to get home so we decide to get going. As I make my way around to say goodbye to folks, I am stopped midway by DJ Kuttin’ Kandi. She puts her hand out to shake mine. I introduce myself again and reiterate my appreciation for her, the event, and the book. She smiles warmly, looks me in my eyes, and tells me that she believes my work is important. She continues by telling me that she knows a lot of people that could help support my dissertation. “If you ever need a connection to someone, please let me know how I can help. I mean that.” I smile and nod. I am overwhelmed and overjoyed by her gesture. I leave the event holding onto her words closely.

### **“A People’s DJ Scholar”**

*Food? Check. Drinks? Check. Full tank of gas and good tire pressure? Check and check. Tablet, phone, and notebook? Check, check, and check!* I review the directions from my house in the South Bay to Kuttin’ Kandi’s house in the East Bay. Just under an hour, door to door.

It has been a little over a year since I first met Kuttin’ Kandi and a lot has changed for the both of us since then. A few months after the book release and speak-out, I moved out of Salt Lake City and back home because I needed more support through the dissertation process. In addition to moving home, I also revived my dissertation committee, settled on a research topic, transitioned from doctoral student to doctoral candidate, and began the data collection process. For Kuttin’ Kandi, she has since settled into her new adopted city of Pleasant Hill from San Diego, left on maternity leave from her student services position at Diablo Valley College, and celebrated the birth of her first child, Miracle. Although there is a lot of moving and shaking happening between the both of us, I am really excited that we are able to come together and share time.

I arrive at Kuttin’ Kandi’s apartment 10 minutes before our agreed meeting time. As I park, she walks out to greet me with Miracle cradled in her arms. I kiss them both on their cheeks and notice Kuttin’ Kandi’s door knocker earrings, liquid eyeliner, and signature red lipstick. “It’s baby central in my house,” Kuttin’ Kandi warns. I tell her that’s no problem. I can only imagine the items you need when you have a child. When we get inside, I walk by Miracle’s napping bassinet for the dining table and place the drink carrier and two bags of food down. “Mmmm, it smells so good!”

Kuttin’ Kandi encourages me to begin eating because she has to log a few notes in

Miracle's notebook before she can eat. I set up my recorders with one hand, while I pierce into my chicken apple walnut salad with the other. I take a quick glimpse at my research notes and questions even though I already know what I am going to ask.

Candice Custodio-Tan, better known as Kuttin' Kandi, identifies as Pinay, hip-hop DJ, feminist, peminist, womanist, and revolutionary. "My identity is a combination of all kinds of politics," she says. In addition to these identities, Kuttin' Kandi is also a poet, educator, activist, turntabalist, and mother-scholar.<sup>8</sup> She has been actively organizing, outreaching, and teaching for over 2 decades. She is also widely regarded as a pioneer and legend in hip-hop—arguably one of the most established and well-respected DJs in the world, regardless of gender.<sup>9</sup> "I don't have any degrees, I don't have a Ph.D., but I am a doctor. I am a doctor of hip-hop." Kuttin' Kandi is the People's DJ Scholar.

Miracle begins to doze off on her boppy as Kuttin' Kandi and I settle into our conversation about her hip-hop origin story. "It is definitely multiple moments—a journey. I have hints of memories as a child." Her journey with hip-hop goes back over 3 decades and involves a number of elements that came together to foster her identity as well as her affinity for urban art, music, and culture. As she shares with me these multiple moments, I begin to realize that her introduction and relationship to hip-hop cannot be separated from her identity as a Filipina American girl and woman. They both inform each other. The first memory she shares is about her younger sister being educated and inspired by her teacher—a Black woman—in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. This particular teacher deeply

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<sup>8</sup> See Tintiangco-Cubales (2017) for an insightful discussion about being a mother-scholar.

<sup>9</sup> See the biography from <http://www.kuttinkandi.net>.

influenced her younger sister's thinking and voice, which taught Kuttin' Kandi by proxy.

I remember that her teacher influenced a different way of thinking for her. My sister was like, 'I am a Democrat,' which was a big statement to our [Filipino American] family full of Republicans. That was the influence of her teacher. Her teacher talked about Major Dukakis and a Black mayor running for office at the time. My sister was educating me then and had friends that introduced her, and then me, to Public Enemy.

In addition to her sister's influence, it was also her schoolmates, Johanna and Jeannette, that taught her about hip-hop. She recalls this moment fondly, but briefly, in our conversation and encourages me to read more about it in the introduction of *Empire of Funk*.

In the auditorium, the seats were all filled and the aisles were jam-packed with parents, grandparents, and uncles. They fanned their programs, hoping that the little air that it provided would keep them from sweating from the overly crowded room. The front rows sat the students of 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> graders of P.S. 154 all excited to see some of their classmates perform for the yearly talent show "Encore."

"Fresh" by Kool & the Gang burst from the speakers. The crowd, young and old, started screaming as soon as two Pilipina<sup>10</sup> American girls dressed in red hooded sweatshirts and swishy pants came from behind the curtains and started poppin' to the beat of the song. They moonwalked across the stage, busted waves, and locked on rhythm. The audience stood from their seats, and jumped wildly as they cheered them on, for they were amazed that the two sisters could dance with the confidence of seasoned professional dancers.

Then it happened. The most ultimate dance move ever was experienced right before everyone's eyes. It was the move that only a few were lucky to see live if they were given the chance. The girls simultaneously flipped onto the floor and spun on their backs continuously. Each turn of their spin caused loud cries and cheers, creating the most exhilarating encounter for those who had just witnessed what b-boys and b-girls (breakdancers) from all around the world called the backspin. (Kandi, 2014, p. xvi)

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<sup>10</sup> Pilipino/a refers to a person of Filipino and Filipino-American descent. Pilipino/a is often used as a decolonizing practice because most Filipino languages do not have the letter "f."

Despite being only 9 years old, Kuttin' Kandi explains that this moment and experience impacted her for a lifetime. It made her more aware of herself—less confused about being Filipina American in a school that was predominately Black and Latino. In fact, it made her really proud to be “a brown shaded Pinay.” The genesis of Kuttin' Kandi's first hip-hop experience, paralleled with an early sense of her Filipina identity, would firmly ground her passion for hip-hop.

### **Hey DJ!**

As a teenager, Kuttin' Kandi became heavily involved in New York City's party scene—first as an attendee and then as a promoter and organizer. At 17, she and her best friend organized a party at an apartment and hired 3DS, a local DJ crew, to spin. At the time, she did not know who 3DS was but that hiring would prove serendipitous.

A lot of my friends in high school were DJs. They would make mixtapes—stuff like that. Then I met Filipino American DJs. I remembered they DJ'd a house party that me and one of my best friends threw at an apartment. We hired 3DS and little did we know who they were. At the time, though, they were younger DJs. One of the DJs was 13. They were brothers—the four of them were brothers. The youngest one Sonny, who was 13, was the one that taught me how to DJ. He was my first DJ teacher. I was already 17 or 18 and he was only 13. I remember going to their house all the time to learn because I didn't own turntables.

The development of Kuttin' Kandi's DJing skills opened her world to a community of Filipino Americans that also loved hip-hop. This was a welcome surprise. She was eager to meet more people who shared her ethnic identity because she believed that it would help her understand more about herself. Over time, her Filipino American community would eventually snowball.

Kuttin' Kandi remained active in New York City's party scene while she quietly honed her DJing skills. “I laid low for 2 years. It was very hard not to come and show,

because I wanted to show off.” As her talent and confidence grew, so did the opportunities to display her skills to audiences at parties, nightclubs, and competitions. It has now been well over two decades since Kuttin’ Kandi first learned how to DJ, something she reflects upon with me.

There was something about the DJ and every time I saw the DJ and I saw the turntables... I loved dancing at the time so it's funny that I never became a dancer. I don't know why I didn't become a dancer. Something about the turntables mesmerized me that I'd stand there just watching the DJs. I so curious about it. I don't think I ever intended and said, “I'm going to be a DJ.” I said, “I just want to learn.” Then next thing you know I became a DJ. I refused for a long time to call myself a DJ until I felt like I really deserved the term. I took DJing and that label very seriously. I loved the way the DJ was behind the scene but be able to create a whole masterpiece and tell a story in a room full of people and lift peoples' spirits up. Something about that leadership quality, that was behind the scenes where you didn't have to be up front, was beautiful to me. When I was younger, I was always a quiet, shy person. DJing gave you the opportunity to step into a role but not necessarily have to be front and center. I kind of liked that a lot, and there was something powerful about it. I was trying to find some kind of empowerment. Little did I know that DJing kind of put me front and center many times and it helped me develop my voice that I never knew I always had.

I am struck when Kuttin’ Kandi shares how she developed and empowered her voice. I can only imagine the courage it took to willingly insert herself as a young Filipina American woman into a culture and craft that was dominated by men. I pause quickly to write and underline the word ‘voice’ in my notebook before I look up. I am not sure of the significance, but I want to remind myself of it when I get home. For now, I will just plant that seed in my mind.

### **Growing Beneath the Surface**

As far back as Kuttin’ Kandi’s passion and talent for hip-hop goes, so does her work as a youth advocate, community organizer, and critical educator. She began organizing and outreaching to communities when she was only 18, starting first by

writing a zine called *Beneath the Surface* that focused on Filipina/o and Filipina/o American identities and experiences. In addition to writing her own reflections and thoughts, she interviewed Filipino American DJs and Filipina/o American youth and included their narratives as part of her publication.

Kuttin' Kandi shares that she was incredibly eager to distribute *Beneath the Surface*, which prompted her to use \$300 of her own money to print out 1,000 copies to share with the 50,000 attendees at the Filipino Independence Day parade. "What was the reception like?" I ask. "People were astonished that someone took their time to make a zine and print it out." That astonishment resulted in monetary donations to encourage Kuttin' Kandi to continue writing about the experiences of Filipina/o Americans.

I never asked [for money] but people said, "We believe in what you're doing. We think it is important to continue doing the newsletter." I wrote the newsletter on a word processor because back then there were no computers and went to a print company to get it printed.

Her hunger for knowledge turned her into a knowledge producer. In the process, she learned that she was not alone in her desire to learn more about Filipina/o Americans. "It felt empowering for me and I didn't realize it would be empowering for other people." She laughs and says, "It's so funny. My writing was so horrible."

The response to *Beneath the Surface* would lead Kuttin' Kandi into numerous other opportunities around the community. Shortly after the Filipino Independence Day parade, she joined a local youth group and began organizing fundraisers, conferences, poetry workshops, and DJ clinics. She was also active in rallies and protests. She was everywhere, she says, and her active response to community needs would then lead her to El Puente, a school grounded in social justice in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

I was the membership administrator, so I worked full time as a membership

administrator of the afterschool program and then I taught two classes. When you're involved in a school like El Puente... I don't know if you ever heard of El Puente, but it's the very first social justice school in the nation. It has been around since 1980s, and it started off as a performing arts center. Every social justice school is modeled after El Puente. That includes Vanderbilt high school, I think in New York. I think that includes even some teachers who tried to start social justice school out in Oakland at one point, also modeled after El Puente. El Puente started off as a performing arts center in a church. They took an old, abandoned church and turned it into a school. Then it became its own leadership center. They have about four-something centers. They have theater program; they have a community garden—they do all kinds of wonderful enriched programs out there. I went to El Puente to teach a DJ class and next thing you know it became more than just that. It became the work I believed in. When you work in a place like El Puente you're more than just working in the area that you're working. Although I was working after school, I was very involved with the teachers—very involved. I was organizing some of the rallies and protests that we'd go to. They had me very involved in the school. I loved that school. It's very, very interesting how I came from a world of DJing to finding a passion. I think that's always been my passion.

Like her zine, El Puente would also lead her into other endeavors and opportunities. This time, though, she would leave her home of New York City for the west coast and to advocate, advise, and teach through UC San Diego's Cross Cultural Center. She spent 7 years at UC San Diego, a time she refers to as a “beautiful learning experience,” to deepen her understanding of and work towards social justice.

When Kuttin' Kandi finishes talking about her learning experiences, I suggest that we should wrap up our conversation for the day because I know that Miracle has to be fed and monitored often, and that they both need rest. Kuttin' Kandi smiles and agrees but notes that it is always nice to have company because she feels lonely at times. *Company*. I appreciate that she sees me as company. I ask her what she is planning to do the rest of the day because it is beautiful and mild out. She tells me she hopes to go on a walk with Miracle and her partner Rob as soon as he gets home from work. I love walks; I tell her that that sounds lovely. I gather my things and let Kuttin' Kandi know that I will reach out again soon for us to continue our conversation. I thank her, give her and

Miracle another kiss, and quietly close their front door behind me as I make my way to my car.

### **This Revolutionary Love**

I am back on the road today, except this time I am heading to Black Bear Diner in Walnut Creek. I am on my way to visit Kuttin’ Kandi and Miracle again. It has been over 6 weeks since I last saw them and I am really excited to see how much Miracle has changed and what they both have been up to since summer officially began.

I get to the diner before Kuttin’ Kandi and Miracle arrive and secure a spacious forest-themed booth for the three of us. The diner is bustling with its morning traffic and I notice that the diner serves a much older crowd. Kuttin’ Kandi and Miracle arrive a few minutes after I am seated and I walk to the front to find them. I embrace Kuttin’ Kandi and look down to see Miracle comfortably resting in their car seat. We walk back to our booth and slide into the seats. “They have really good food here,” Kuttin’ Kandi says excitedly. As I am fumbling with my tablet and phone recording apps, I ask Kuttin’ Kandi how she has been. She goes right into it about a keynote address she just gave recently at a graduation ceremony for an organization called Public Allies. She tells me it is a cool organization—although not without its issues—that trains young people of color to go into nonprofit and public service work. I ask her to tell me more about it. She nods.

It is a good program that teaches hands-on work, especially regarding community building and organizing. Students get training out in the field and they meet and network with different organizations. It is a risky program, though. You get paid training but you are never guaranteed a job. “I was kinda nervous about my speech because I get pretty

radical but they all liked it...I guess.” I ask Kuttin’ Kandi what her speech was about and she tells me it was about revolutionary love: what it means, what it looks like, what it feels like. I ask her if that is the foundation to her teaching and learning—her life’s work. She lifts her eyebrow and says, “everything must be based on revolutionary love.” I pause for a second and take in what she is suggesting.

For years, I have been thinking more and more about love—what it means, how it functions, where it lives, what it does. I used to tell my students at the University of Utah, the majority of whom were White, that I loved them. I thought that I loved them and I thought that they needed my love, but I learned in the most difficult ways that that was not true. I know that I love in ways that are painful but deeply powerful. I know that media, culture, and contexts have manipulated how I give, receive, and make love. I know that I am loved in ways that have transformed how I see myself and see the world. I know that love is really, really complicated. I must know more. I ask Kuttin’ Kandi if she can explain revolutionary love further.

People know that in a practical way, you have someone like Che Guevera talking about, the real revolution is guided with the feelings of love. And then you have, revolutionary love, people say that. But what does that really mean? And especially in a time when Charleston [shooting] happened, people are wanting to be forgiving and all of these things. “Love wins! Be forgiving.” In a time and a place where, and I went through this too, when I went through my healing journey because after I almost died four years ago, I really was coming to a place of getting more in touch with healing and inwardly. I have been working on inner healing for like literally 15 years. But it wasn't until four years ago when I was really trying to articulate what that means and really practice that. Not just, on hearsay which, I feel I was doing but you come into different pivotal moments in your life. So, four years ago was a very defining moment for me. When I was going through this process of “How do I forgive myself?” and “How do I forgive others?” but then still enact social justice within that.

It is a growth. It is a journey. We need to understand the journey. So, I come to terms with what that means for me so when you actually understand revolutionary love, it doesn't mean that just because you can't forgive someone like Dylann

Roof, that doesn't mean you don't have the capacity to forgive. But it means that you are enacting, rather a more compassion for yourself and for the people around you—to protect yourself and to protect others. Someone like Dylann Roof in his own time, is already going through his own demons. But I am not here for his white supremacy and for healing his white supremacy. I am here for healing my own white supremacy. I am here for healing all of ours. We come first before the actual enactor of a very intentional white supremacy. It is a practice to practice kindness so when it comes to people who are intentional about their white supremacy, these are two different things. Two very, very different things who are inherently racist, inherently enacting that. Yeah it harms them. It kills them. It hurts them. And I, as a human, can find compassion towards that. However my first compassion is for the people that we are currently, in those conditions, are constantly oppressed every day. So, when I say revolutionary love, it doesn't mean that we don't have capacity, the capability to love and forgive. It means that we know that revolutionary love means self comes first. Self-love, just as Audre Lorde says, is a revolutionary act. Self-care is a revolutionary act. Loving ourselves is a revolutionary act. We need to enact that and our rage. We need to understand our rage and not be afraid of that.

I ask Kuttin' Kandi how she practices revolutionary love and if there is a tangible way to do so. She tells me that there is and believes that it is not, nor does it need to be, one grandiose gesture or affair. It is and must be an everyday practice and involved in all the things we do and care for. She clarifies:

[Revolutionary love] takes place in my community, home, with the people I love, how I raise Miracle, how I treat my partner. When you practice it, that's when you have a little more patience for people in your life. Preserve your breath, your energy and then find better ways of communicating. That's how I have been trying to work what revolutionary love means...going back to that.

I then ask Kuttin' Kandi where revolutionary love, hip-hop, and her work on campus, in the classroom, and the community intersect. She pauses and looks around. She then looks down at the table, looks back at me, and asks if I have a pen she can borrow. I do. I reach into my backpack and grab a pen from my red robot pencil pouch to give to her. She readjusts the hand that is feeding Miracle and flips over the diner's paper placemat with the other. To my surprise, she begins drawing and writing. "I'm a visual person," she says.

She starts by writing *hip-hop*, *social justice*, and *revolutionary love*. She puts boxes around each of these. “This! This is right here. The theoretical framework!” She begins to write the four elements under hip-hop—*graffiti*, *break dancing*, *DJing*, and *MCing*. She stops and then adds the fifth element of knowledge, “the knowledge of consciousness, right?” After she completes hip-hop, she moves onto social justice. She notes that intersectionality and an understanding of white supremacy are key. “I would include Andrea Smith’s shit! The three pillars of white supremacy.” She also writes down *anticapitalist* and *decolonization* underneath. I feel a rush of energy coming from her. My eyes get big. This is major!

She moves onto revolutionary love next and writes beneath *honoring feelings*, *spirituality*, *health and wellness*, *practicing kindness*, *accountability*, *understanding rage*, *self-care*, and Audre Lorde’s *the erotic as power*. She leans back, looks at the placemat and begins writing and drawing again. She draws an arrow from social justice and writes *Pinayism*. She circles it and then adds *colonialism*, *patriarchy*, *intersectionality*, and *Catholicism*. She returns back to each box and circles them multiple times to symbolize that it is circular. “It’s a circular thing. It goes like this and it goes like that...” She pauses and reiterates, “It is a circular thing” (see Figure 1).

I am trying to take this all in. I am a bit in shock. I just watched some master theoretical freestyling unfold before my eyes in a matter of minutes. On the back of a Black Bear Diner placemat. I tell Kuttin’ Kandi, “Oh my goodness! You’re theorizing while feeding, while eating, while mothering.” I am still in shock when Kuttin’ Kandi stops and says, “Can you do me a favor? Can you feed Miracle while I go to the restroom?” Then it hits me. This People’s DJ Scholar just conceptualized her pedagogy,

while feeding her child, while needing to go to the restroom. Revolutionary love can happen anywhere, even in a forest-themed booth.

### **Moments of Teaching and Learning**

In late June 2015, a nearly 3-minute video of actor Shia LaBeouf surfaced online showing him freestyle somewhere in a random park to an impromptu audience made up of fans and onlookers. At the 2:22 mark of the video he spits the line, “rare commodity/the quality is what it’s got to be/and my philosophy/is much farther than what your eyes can see” and the audience explodes in cheers. They’re clearly marveling in LaBeouf’s so-called ability to freestyle effortlessly. One man in the video can be heard excitedly shouting in the background, “Rip it! Rip it!” The video quickly went viral on social media sites including Facebook and Twitter with headlines touting, *Shia LeBeouf wows the internet with his freestyling rapping skills* and *Shia LeBeouf’s freestyle rapping is unbelievable*. Dazed Digital, an online website that features fashion, music, photography, and art and culture wrote, “Actor, artist, and metmodernist Shia LaBeouf may be on a crusade to add one more entry to his CV: the next heavy threat in hip-hop.” When the viral video came across Kuttin’ Kandi, she wasn’t wowed by LaBeouf’s freestyling skills. She didn’t think it was ridiculous nor does she see him as the next heavy threat in hip-hop. What she does see him as is a plagiarizer and opportunist.

The line that LaBeouf spits comes directly from the song *Perfectionist*, written and performed by the Anomalies, a legendary hip-hop rap collective Kuttin’ Kandi cofounded in 1995. When Kuttin’ Kandi and another member of Anomalies, Pri the Honeydark, learned about LaBeouf’s plagiarism, they acted quickly—calling him out

across their social media accounts and networks. “You can’t rip songs from my ANOMALIES crew, recite them in a freestyle as your own, get credit for it, and then not expect to be called out by ACTUAL MCs!” wrote Pri the Honeydark on her Instagram account. Despite their artistry being stolen, Kuttin’ Kandi says that LaBeouf’s fans have been directly attacking and threatening the members of the collective. Fans have gotten a hold of private and business phone numbers and emails. They have also harassed them with countless mean-spirited messages. The Anomolies’ YouTube videos are also littered with horrible, demeaning messages. “They are saying things like, ‘Oh, look at these old ass bitches. They just want to be relevant again’ and calling us ‘hoes’ and ‘whore,’” Kuttin’ Kandi says in a bewildered, exhausted tone. One LaBeouf fan even told Kuttin’ Kandi to “grow the fuck up” because she is a mother now. She doesn’t even know how fans know that she is a mother because her social media accounts are private. She tells me that she feels really unsafe.

When I ask her how she is going to move forward in this, she says she desires to hold him accountable and to use this opportunity as a teaching moment. She needs people to recognize that hip-hop continues to be co-opted and many people, including women of color, remain at the margins. Kuttin’ Kandi says the response from her hip-hop and critical community has not been as swift as she was hoping it would be but she also understands that there are many more “pressing issues.”

I wanna use this opportunity to hold him accountable for some shit. Call him out on shit. We [the Anomolies] had a whole meeting about that. We were on the phone for 2 hours, “How should we respond? What are we doing?” All these people are trying to interview us. But then I could see why I am glad we didn’t because, if it is meant to be for us to be out there again, with our work, and we have always done our work and none of us have ever stopped doing our work we love in hip-hop, but if it is meant for us to be out there again in public, doing our thing then that will come. But it doesn’t have to be through this guy’s name.

Kuttin' Kandi tells me that she is planning to write a critical think piece regarding the whole situation. It is an important teaching and learning moment. To make it known that she and the Anomolies are being attacked in very racialized and gendered ways. She is aware that writing is difficult, especially for her, and acknowledges that writing is an exhausting process. "There's so much in your head to get out. I don't want to write something but I am enraged. I need to heal from it." Even with an infant to care for and mothering to do, even when she is exhausted, hurt, and overwhelmed, she finds a way to stand firmly with the community she emerges from. To speak her piece and continue her work educating, organizing, and advocating for others and herself.

### **Coming Full Circle**

It is almost a year after our conversation and I check back online to reread Kuttin' Kandi's statement regarding Shia LaBeouf's plagiarism. I am brought right back to our conversation. I remember hearing her say that there are more pressing issues to discuss and heal from. Perhaps that is true to others but just rereading Kuttin' Kandi's statement I am reminded that all that has transpired from this incident of theft is not mutually exclusive from the pressing issues she referred to in our prior conversations. A paragraph from her statement reads:

Because we are the marginalized, underrepresented, and the oppressed; we know that many will never know what it feels like to have been around for more than 2 decades to then have a few of our lyrics [written] and recorded in 1999 to be used in a cypher by a famous white cisgender-male privileged famous actor like Shia LaBeouf as though he "freestyled" it himself. We know that many will not even care to understand what it's like to be attacked by random people defending his "freestyle" by calling us "b\*tches" and to tell us that he was doing us a favor by biting our verses. We know that many will tell us it was only a few bars and that we should move on but yet only true Hip Hop heads will know this is disrespect.

We know that many will not know what it feels like to now have white amerikkka watching over us and reaching out to our personal lives just to attack us with misogynist threats and even our children just because we were trying to speak up for ourselves.

I think back to her theoretical map she created on that placemat—back to her feeding Miracle with one hand, drawing with the second hand, and theorizing with all of her. I think back to when I first met her and how she affirmed and validated what I thought and how I felt about my academic experiences and research endeavors. Even when they didn't mean much to others, she saw how much it meant to me and thus, it meant something to her. To that, I come full circle and say, *Kuttin' Kandi, I think your work is important. I think your work is revolutionary.*

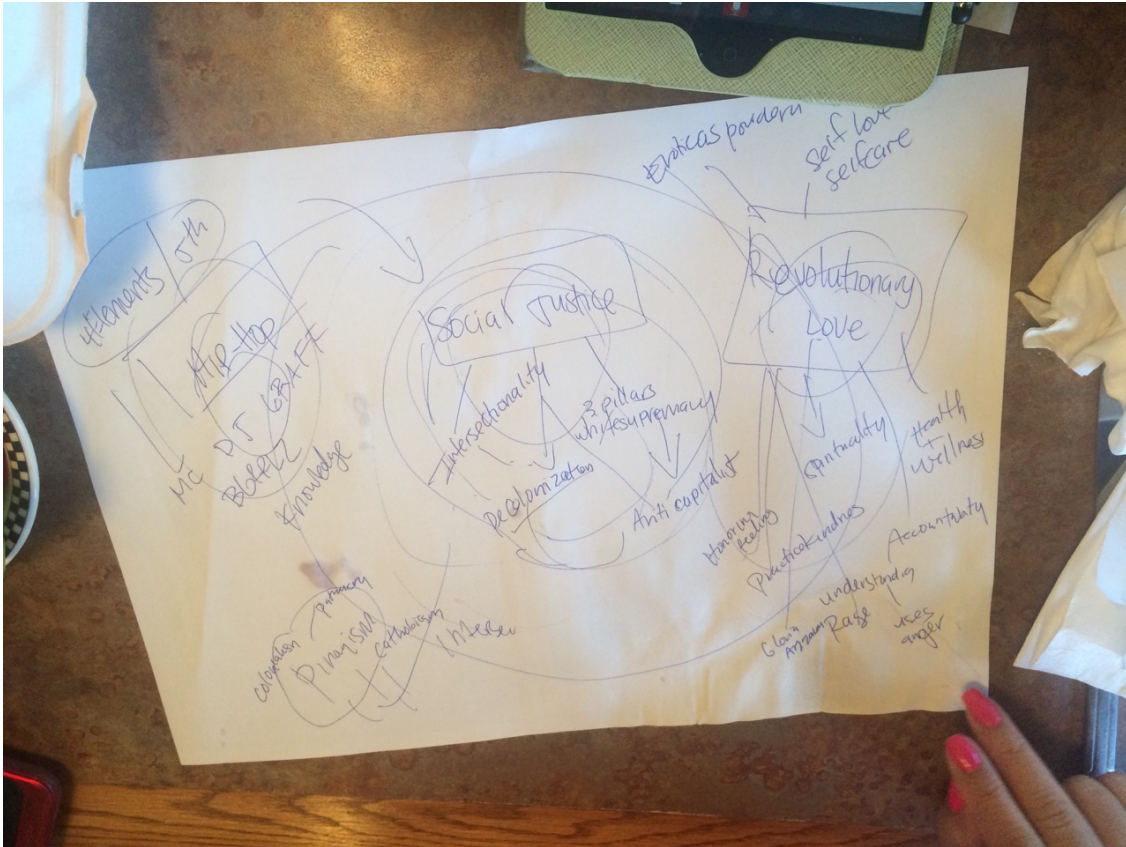


Figure 1. Drawing by Kuttin' Kandi.

## TRACK 6

IRENE DULLER

On the last day of classes for spring semester at San Francisco State University (SFSU), I reflected how it had been a really challenging semester of teaching. Less than a week before the semester began, I was offered an upper division course on community organizing and building that ran on Thursday evenings from 7–10 p.m. I have organized in various communities before but I have never learned or taught about community organizing from a theoretical standpoint. I accepted the appointment despite my lack of experience, a 7-hour gap in between the other class that I taught, the miserably late time slot, and my hour-long commute. I was desperate. I had to teach two classes to afford my rent and receive health insurance as an adjunct lecturer.

In addition to teaching part-time, I was also balancing dissertation research, community work, and personal responsibilities and relationships. The weight of my commitments wore on me quickly and my teaching suffered. I was sure that my teaching evaluations would reflect this, a heavy burden to bear when you are part of higher education's most contingent workforce. Challenges aside, though, I reminded myself that it was the last day of classes. *Finish strong*. I was looking forward to celebrating my students and sending them—and myself—off into summer vacation. To close out the semester, I wrote a letter to my students offering my reflections on the teaching and

learning moments we shared, insight on what I believed was my role as an educator and their facilitator, as well as my well wishes for them as they moved on in their college careers. A piece from my letter:

This is my 5<sup>th</sup> year teaching in higher education—my 1<sup>st</sup> year at San Francisco State University. I have taught lower division, upper division, and master's students before. In my community work, I have also taught elementary and high school students. This year was my first time teaching a class solely made up of first year undergraduates. Without a doubt, this has been my most challenging and rewarding teaching experience. You each bring in a very vibrant energy as first year undergraduates. I felt that my role as your teacher was to expand the perspective and understanding that you have of the world. I am not here to tell you what to do or think; rather just spark a curiosity and inquiry to guide you through any endeavor you have. I hope that I have been successful at this.

As our semester comes to a close, I leave you all with one of my favorite quotes from Paulo Freire: "Hope is something shared between teachers and students. The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that prevent the following of our joy." You are about to finish your first year of college! Be proud of all the work you accomplished this year. It has been a joy being a small part of your journey.

In the spirit of reciprocity, I asked students to write me a letter in return, offering their own reflections on the teaching and learning moments we shared, ways they hoped to continue growing as a student, as well as constructive feedback on how I could improve the course for future students. This letter writing tradition is something I adopted from a colleague who practiced this with the youth she worked alongside. The outcomes she received inspired my own adaptation.

I always appreciated the opportunity to exchange ideas with my students and hear from them in a variety of ways. I understood the possibilities that came with this practice and opportunity, though. I knew that my students came into the classroom with different contexts and experiences. Their bad day or semester could easily be misdirected at me. I also knew that it opened me up to feedback and critique that could be triggering, baseless,

or unproductive. However, I trusted in my students and the community space we collectively created. I also believed that I was mentally and emotionally sound enough to handle any feedback. Besides, the letters I have received throughout the years—even when I taught at a predominately White institution—had been overwhelmingly fair and thoughtful.

Once class ended and the letters were collected, I headed back to my office. I had that 7-hour gap ahead of me. I did not have any grading or prep work to do, so I scheduled my first interview for my dissertation research and was planning to take off to the café we were meeting at in 30 minutes. Since I had a little bit of time I began reading through the stack of letters I had just collected. Just as I had anticipated, the feedback was helpful. Students mostly suggested other topics to include in the curriculum and encouraged that I assign less reading and more group work. Many students offered their appreciation for my creativity and approachability in and out of class. A few students said that my course was their favorite. Before I took off I decided to read one more letter at the top of my stack. It was from a student—a man of color—that I felt that I had a particularly strong rapport with. I was excited to read his letter because I remembered that he stayed to the very end of the class period writing.

This class was a waste of my time.

You're a shit teacher.

I don't pay thousands of dollars to go to school here to take a class like this.

I didn't really enjoy anything about our class.

I have seen better writing activities in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes.

I squinted and read the letter again. I thought that I had read it wrong. My heart was beating out of my chest and I felt a shortness of breath. My body temperature spiked. I was shaking. The words wounded me so quickly.

I forgot for a moment where I was, what I was doing, and what I had to do. I was desperate to forget what I had just read. It hurt so much. I needed a neuralyzer—the device from the movie *Men in Black* that erases the memories of the past hours, days, weeks, or months, depending on the chosen setting. I sat back in my chair and closed my eyes. I needed to settle myself. I then opened my eyes slowly and checked the time. It was time to go. I was still shaking when I shoved the letter at the bottom of the stack, grabbed my belongings, and headed to meet Irene Duller.

I got to the café a few minutes before 1 p.m. I used that time to meditate in my car and calm down. I texted my sister and partner about the letter from my student and also mentioned that I was at the café to conduct my first interview. Their responses were the same. It was just *one* letter. They reminded me to set my eyes on the task and accomplishment ahead. They both knew that I had been waiting a long time to get to this phase in my program. I was also going to meet and dialogue with someone that came highly recommended by many of my trusted sister-scholars and mentors. “[Irene] is dope. She’ll be great for your dissertation research.”

### **Shortyrocell**

I scope the tea menu when I look up and see Irene walking into Hollow, a pint-sized café located in the Inner Sunset District of San Francisco. She has on a gray sweater dress, white sneakers, long hair, and a gold hoop nose piercing. I know it is Irene because it is 1:03 p.m. and I am the only other person inside of the café besides the barista. I turn around and say, “Irene?” She smiles and says, “Yes!” I put my hand out to shake hers and thank her for meeting with me. As I place my order for a hot green tea, I turn to Irene and

ask if I can get her anything. She looks at the menu, walks towards the cold case, and grabs a bottled drink. “Are you sure?” she asks.

We make our way to the back of Hollow, where there is additional seating. It feels cold back there. Everything is steel and aluminum, very industrial. The seating is awkward with thin benches lined against the wall. Irene sits down and I join her but on the next bench over. I put one leg up and turn to her. We start chatting about random things. I mention that I work closely with her longtime friend, Mark, and then start talking about the big, but small, community circle we run in. I feel like I have known Irene forever even though this is my first time meeting her. Before we get any further into the conversation, I stop and tell her that I want to set up my recorders. I grab my phone and tablet and mention that I am using two forms of recorders because one of our mutual sister-scholars recently lost a couple interview recordings for her dissertation. I learned through her unfortunate mishap and came prepared. I press record and move my phone and tablet closer to Irene. I ask her to introduce herself. “Mic check one, two! Shortyrocell in the house!” I chuckle. Irene pauses, changes her expression, and leans closer to my devices. In a serious tone she says, “Um, Irene Faye Duller.”

When I was reaching out to my community for suggestions on potential participants for my research project, Irene’s name came up a few times. My sister-scholars suggested that I reach out to her because she has a rich story and relationship with hip-hop. She is a longtime spoken word artist, emcee, and performer. She is also from my same lineage of mentorship. Irene graduated from SFSU’s Asian American Studies master’s program a few years ahead of me. She has been teaching Asian American Studies at SFSU since 2008 and teaches in Dance and Asian American Studies

at the University of San Francisco (USF). She also dedicates her time to organizing and advocating within the Filipino American community. She is a Pinayista, she says. The artistic embodiment of a Pinayist—one that uses art as a tool of resistance, liberation, and education.

### **Akin to Hip-Hop**

My favorite question on my list is, “What is your hip-hop origin story?” It leads to sentimentality and, oftentimes, bliss. When I think about my own, it brings me right back to my childhood. My body vividly remembers the youthful curiosity and wonder that hip-hop’s movement, imagery, and sound brought. When I pose that question to Irene she tells me that her origin story involves numerous entry points. There is not one moment. “How could there be?” She stares across Hollow and begins giggling because my question reminds her of a skit from the sketch comedy show, *Portlandia*.

There is this skit where Jay-Z asks Fred Armisen. He points out to audience and there is a light over Fred Armisen and he is like, “What is your favorite hip-hop moment in history?” And [Fred Armisen] was like... he didn't have an answer. Then he went back and studied. Then he went back to the moment. “If I could go back to the moment...” It replayed and it was like, “What is your favorite hip-hop moment in history?” and he goes, “Bronx, 1977!” He had one entry looking at it historically but for every person you always say like, “When did you first fall in love with hip-hop?” Damn that movie because everyone... it is such a moment now!

Irene prefers to call her entry points with hip-hop “reaffirming moments.” It has always been a constant in her life, something she likens to a soundtrack constantly playing in the background. “It is a verbal vernacular,” she says. “Sometimes you notice it, sometimes you don’t.”

She continues recalling other reaffirming moments with hip-hop that date back to

her elementary years. She used to emulate hip-hop dance moves with her brother in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. He would beat box and she would head spin. “Dude that was bad. Thank goodness it didn’t leave me paralyzed,” she says through laughter. I nod in agreement. We are certainly a lot braver and bolder when we are children. Irene shares that she and her brother were always trying to emulate sounds and movement. She would recreate and reimagine things with the skills and tools she had, and with the people she had around.

Eventually, Irene would move onto investing in the sounds she was emulating. The first cassette tape Irene ever purchased was from The Fat Boys. She bought it from a guy that was selling only two artists: Ozzy Osborne and The Fat Boys. “I picked The Fat Boys! That is always a funny story,” she remarks. She pauses for a second and adds, “You don’t ever know it is hip-hop until you’re... you don’t know to name it until you are asked to prove it.” As Irene matured from adolescent to young adult, she transitioned from emulating hip-hop to producing and performing her own brand of it. Songs about growing up broke, hungry, and Black were an invitation to use her voice. “A lot of narratives of strife and grit, how we interpreted at a simplistic level as kids... that resonated with me.” As such, she wrote about her experiences as a young, immigrant, and racialized girl. She wrote about being Filipina American, growing up in an immigrant household, and the uprooting of her parents from their homeland. Hip-hop felt akin to her, and artists like Ursula Rucker, who performed on The Roots’s timeless album *Illadelph Halflife*, ignited her passion to explore and create her own brand of artistry.

When Irene got to college her life changed drastically. She notes two significant reasons: she became pregnant *and* politicized. College introduced her to numerous opportunities, experiences, and people that she did not have or know before. It also

fostered her self-awareness, which empowered her agency. “College is when you are really identifying your shit” she adds. She got involved in campus events and took on a role as the Cultural Events Coordinator at California State University Fullerton. She was responsible for planning and leading cultural activities and history segments. She also coordinated events including one that featured a performance by the hip-hop group Jurassic 5.

We rolled deep, I think thirty folks. We get there and it was all people of color. I don’t think I realized hip-hop brought so many people of color together... and Jurassic 5 was skilled. They were skilled emcees but they are also fun and conscious, you know? That party became something bigger because we ended up joining this mass group of people of color that loved hip-hop.

I just remember feeling like I was part of a cultural community. Resistance became real to me because when you look around it's like, “Okay, I'm talking about resistance on a Filipino level week to week,” but then you see Black folks and you know what that struggle is, you see Chicano folks and you know what that struggle is... you know what I mean? We were all kind of wooly-wearing bohemians. No matter what we have all united in that moment. That's funny how I said united. [The event] was called Unity.

In college, everything was hip-hop. It was abundant with reaffirming moments. Hip-hop was her platform and place to not only participate, but also belong. She tells me that she was never chastised for being a young, single mother despite that being a normative, mainstream response. Instead she was embraced and cared for by a community that was overwhelmingly made up of women of color, whom she lovingly refers to as “outliers, dissidents, and subversives.” Hip-hop was her village.

When Irene moved on from college, hip-hop remained in her life. She experienced many other reaffirming moments including dancing with Team Millenia; coestablishing 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder, a Pilipina/o poetry collection; forming Rhapsodistas, an all women hip-hop interdisciplinary group; serving on the board of directors for the popular

hip-hop dance group, Funkonometry SF; and teaching hip-hop dance and culture at USF. Her love, knowledge, and experiences with hip-hop would set the tone for how she moved forward in her career, particularly in teaching. From childhood, to college, to her role now as an educator—hip-hop is everywhere.

### **The Kinesthetic Practitioner Emerges**

Irene's experience as an educator dates back over a decade. She started as a community and cultural educator before she transitioned into an adjunct lecturer in 2008. She has not been teaching consistently in higher education, though. She is called to teach when tenure track faculty leave on sabbatical or when the yearly budget can accommodate high enrollment and programmatic needs. She goes through gaps of unemployment in higher education—returning, then leaving, then returning again. She stays busy and committed to community projects and efforts whether she is teaching or not.

I am far too acquainted with the temporality of being an adjunct lecturer so I curiously ask Irene if it is a difficult position to be in, especially as a mother of two. To my surprise she says no. She is proud to be an adjunct lecturer. “The worst thing you want to feel is vulnerable but then, sometimes, it is the best thing.” I understand this concept, but only to some degree. My vulnerabilities have encouraged me to do a lot of inner work—work that has strengthened, matured, and calmed my spirit. Still, the financial instability is nerve-racking. Irene says that she appreciates vulnerability because she feels like she is at the height of her choice. “I thrive in my vulnerability now... which is funny because I am married.”

Irene believes that adjunct lecturers bring a lot to spaces of learning. They are not just theorists of the field but practitioners. I ask her to explain this further. “If I am not active outside of the classroom then what do I think I am bringing to the classroom?” she asks rhetorically. She continues by providing examples about tenure track faculty. Tenure track faculty are expected to be well-researched, and they are. Conversely, adjunct lecturers are expected to be well-practiced and for Irene, she is. “I hope to become a reference for students to not just know of their teacher as someone who is well published and went to an Ivy League.” It makes a great deal of sense that Irene thrives in her vulnerability because her reputation at SFSU is one that is thriving. She is known as being a creative, energetic, and thoughtful educator. Students review her passionately.

*She was the MOST AMAZING teacher I've ever had in college.*

*Love being in her class.*

*ONE OF THE BEST PROFESSORS HERE.*

Irene's classes rely heavily on active participation. They are hands on and collaborative. In one of her courses, Asian American Studies 218: Asian American Culture, students complete two major projects: Iron Chef and POP! Producing Our Power, Performing Asian American Culture. For Iron Chef, students are tasked with learning the migration story of an Asian ethnic group, staple flavors and dishes from that country, and creating their own dish that marries the Asian American diasporic experience. Students bring in their dish to share with the class and a roundtable of judges taste and provide feedback on their project just as they do in the popular television competition. POP! Producing our Power, Performing Asian American Culture is the final, culminating community show for Asian American Studies 218. Students are tasked with sharing and performing their embodied knowledge as Asian Americans. Students create and perform a wide-range of

art including skits, dances, spoken word, and visual pieces. This show is open to the entire university community. Irene believes that projects like Iron Chef and POP! nurture a wide range of skills, including creativity. She is eager to have students step away from their learning comfort zones because she believes it transforms their sense of self and their sense of what is possible.

I do performative community projects. As a performer myself, I feel like when you are put in that space and you have already broken open intellectually, where you have to perform... there is transformation there. [Students] are scared to death. Students don't ever get that space. They don't even get to assert their presence that way in the institution. I feel like those are things for me that have undeniable benefits for that individual. Whatever they got out of it—when they put themselves out there.

Irene's teaching style and curriculum is met every semester with emphatic responses of, "I don't usually do stuff like this" and "Why can't you just tell us what to do?" These responses encourage her to continue cultivating a space where participation, collaboration, and expression is central. She is intentionally challenging traditional methods of learning.

Irene is clearly an effective, unique educator, which leads me to ask, where did her teaching philosophy come from? Who or what is it inspired by? She explains that she is grounded deeply in Pinayism. It supports her in connecting the global and local with the personal. Through Pinayism she is able to understand how economic and political systems like capitalism operate to impact various communities including Filipina Americans and Asian Pacific Islander (API) students. "[Pinayism] helps me to be a more politically-minded person," she says. Irene couples her theoretical upbringing of Pinayism with a pedagogical upbringing grounded by Paulo Freire. She enacts critical, coconstructed learning spaces and encourages students to draw from their experience as

expertise. Everything they learn together must have social, political, and personal relevance. Knowledge must be accessible. Irene also welcomes students to insert their voices and help develop the course, or “flight plans,” at the start of the semester because she wants them to get the most out of their time together.

In the first or second week, I ask [my students], “What is missing? Where are you curious? Where are you going to challenge me?” They get to create the syllabus. It usually ends up the same way but I let them co-op and develop what they want to learn throughout the semester.

In addition to employing collaborative strategies, Irene’s pedagogy also measures students’ learning and success beyond traditional, often quantifiable, methods. She explains:

You have to come with devices. Teaching devices that are not measured in the same traditional ways like tests, even though there is a place for that. I wouldn’t build a school just on this. I am not saying fuck that entirely. I want you to write to me in your voice. That doesn’t excuse you from misspelling words or writing incomplete sentences. I want to hear your voice. I know how academic has to become a part of our thinking process but that is for another audience. That is a skill. That is a skill they need to learn and refine. Early on teaching, I decided for myself, I had papers the first year that I taught. I said, as awesome as this is, I am the only one benefitting from this paper. I mean, and the student. But, I did away with the papers entirely. Whether or not I am looked down for it. My whole this is, let’s process it together and then put it on social media. That has been good and bad. The students are now an authority on this. But, social media gives them the freedom to talk about anything. If they are willing to talk about it on social media and then they are getting engagement from their family, that is a lot better than me reading it at 2 a.m. and being excited about where they are going.

Out of my own curiosity, I ask Irene if she thinks critical pedagogy is any different from hip-hop pedagogy. She pauses. It is clear to me that she is thinking deeply. Irene wonders if there is a separation, or if it even matters how we name it because they emerge from each other. She continues:

[As educators] we have to create that classroom—that kinesthetic, equitable classroom. It is funny because in a way you think that hip-hop pedagogy would defy that. But circumstances, class circumstances, create narratives. I have

[students] investigate “where is your moment of strife” you know? Then they come out like Eminem with, “well my girlfriend left me” or “my mom was a single mom and was never home.” That is fine but I need them to go deeper. Find your moment oppression. Definitely looking at systems of oppression and relating that to music. But also aesthetically, how does music tell a story from where it once was and how the sounds are? How the sounds could be tribal... How the sounds could be urban. And then, using that as aesthetic elements and using that as an entry point to understand the roots of which hip-hop came from. But, ok, so pedagogically, being aware of... I think... creating the hip-hop classroom so that everyone in essence could be an orator and everyone's story has and should be told. Then also, all of the elements now would be seven, examination of a topic, or the production of thought. That's folded into an approach. This is a good question because I am working backwards from it. Checking myself. Is my pedagogy hip-hop? As much as it is hip-hop as it is Freirian?

Those questions don't have answers yet, she quips. She does believe that Paulo Freire's work is a vestige of something modern like hip-hop pedagogy. She jokes and says that she is making it harder for me, providing me with more to think about. No kidding. I log her comment into my notebook and memory. I remind myself not to fear a thoughtful challenge.

I ask Irene about tangible examples regarding hip-hop pedagogy. She explains that it is kinesthetic and draws from hip-hop's numerous elements but not in a way that is prescriptive. It is not about making students emcees or graffiti artists. For Irene, it is about implementing visual arts, spoken word, music, and other “sensual, sensorial elements melodically.” Hip-hop is grounded in the narrative of the people. It comes from the ground. She adds that everyone finds their power in hip-hop without permission. As such, practicing hip-hop pedagogy means that you cannot give a student permission to be something. They will arrive there on their own. Irene is mindful that students' learning comes from places they're grounded in. They must also be able to choose their trajectory of purpose. Hip-hop pedagogy is when everyone comes to the table and works together to create an equitable space no matter how ambitious. “In hip-hop people learn and then

become. People do. And then they learn.” I ask Irene if this then is the benefit of hip-hop pedagogy. She replies that there are so many more benefits.

Irene’s teaching method allows her to invest in her students’ movement—physically, intellectually, and emotionally. She acknowledges that the work and commitment can feel like a thankless job, though. But like any investment, the benefits are seen over a course of time. “It is unrealistic to depend on receiving thanks or seeing the benefits all the time, though, because the process also involves how much you have grown and invested in yourself through the process, too,” she says. “You invested it. That is its own return.” She also contends that the benefit of her teaching practice is learning how to commit to love. Love is imperfect and involves imperfect people but it is a process, nonetheless.

Sometimes we engage in love with aspiration. And a promise of it being better. Same with our students, same with mothering. You’re imperfect, I’m imperfect. We could be better. If that aligns us—here we are.

In addition to love, Irene sees self-awareness—whether developed or matured—as one of the greatest benefits of hip-hop pedagogy. Irene begins to share a story about one of her White women students who was raised middle-to-upper class with a father who is currently serving in the police force. On that day, her class was discussing the Baltimore uprising in response to the unjust death of Freddie Gray. Irene tells me that she quickly acknowledged the discomfort of her White students and used that discomfort as an invitation for them to explore their points of view and narratives—to put themselves in the context of everything that was happening. “I could see that the struggle was real there. How does she locate herself in the dialogue of Baltimore?” I reply that that is heavy and a lot to think about especially on the spot. It is even a lot to think about for

myself as a woman of color whose privileges look different than hers but are privileges nonetheless. Irene nods and replies that that is also the benefit, though. “The benefit is the struggle to examine, to continue being critical, to remain participatory. In this learning space, she is allowed to examine that.” Even in this conversation, Irene has created a space for me to examine a lot, too.

Hip-hop is a way to produce power and Irene suggests that it is a way to translate our own social responsibility. Hip-hop and hip-hop pedagogy have provided Irene a language and method to teach and criticize systems like white supremacy and patriarchy despite not always specifically naming them. For Irene, when students engage a lyric or a rhyme, that means that they are also engaging systems of oppression. That is the possibility of hip-hop. “Hip-hop is a place where we feel strong and in the center of the classroom. We don’t choose to be in the center—we create a center so we can step out of it. It’s a place where we can access strength.”

### **The Soundtrack of Life**

At the pillar of Irene’s pedagogy is her mothering. Each of the times we met, she shared with me how she has mothered through and with hip-hop. Her adult son and toddler daughter have and are growing up in a home filled with hip-hop. While I enjoyed all of the stories she shared, my favorite was when she talked about her children, especially her son. Her eyes sparkle when she talks about their relationship, one that I imagine is deeply special because they grew up alongside each other.

“We both love hip-hop,” Irene says, but that was not always the case. Irene watched her son go through various phases and aesthetics with music. Her son did not

want to listen to hip-hop. In seventh grade, he was a Beatles fanatic and in eighth grade, he loved the Smiths. When her son was in middle school, Irene was going through a separation with his father and she used hip-hop to cope. It was always playing the background even though her son would not acknowledge or engage it. “It was the soundtrack of the moment,” she expresses. She gave him the space to depart however he chose but when he got to high school, Irene began to notice a shift. “He was listening to hip-hop a lot more.” Eventually he wanted to hit the street with a Krylon can and learned how to cipher. Again, she gave him the space to experiment, develop his own point of view, create his art, and find his own power without permission. Now a sophomore in college, her son is the director and DJ for his campus hip-hop radio station. Irene pauses and tells me that she did not know or think hip-hop would become a critical academic engagement for him but it has been, so much so that he now challenges her old school to his new school.

He knows the history because I am his mom. He knows the history, he knows the roots, he even knows a lot of discography better than I do. He knows politics between labels. He knows labels and all of the artists they have signed. He knows hip-hop videos because he is a film student. He knows hip-hop filmmakers. When I told him I was teaching this class [at USF] he says, “Okay, but are you going to be able to get past 1999?” He said, “Name four hip-hop practitioners today.” And I said, “D’Angelo.” He said, “D’Angelo?” It is all so new. You consider yourself a hip-hop head but then you consider yourself a newbie. I am newbie in my son's eyes which is completely hilarious. He said, “Let me make them a mixtape.” He is trying to get me to take it to a new place. A place that he sees now.

Ironically though, if you catch her son’s shows, he mostly plays hip-hop from the early 2000s. He may play music from today but he scaffolds it with old Nas, Biggie, and Del. She will complain to him about how hip-hop is “fucking up” and he will gently remind her that it is not going to be perfect. “I am blessed by this because it could be some other musical path, folk rock or something. We wouldn't have this platform.” When Irene looks

up, you can tell that she is reminded that things are coming full circle. And that soundtrack of the moment she was referring to earlier? I think it is fair to say that it is a looping soundtrack for life.

## TRACK 7

### AIKO SHIRAKAWA

Everyone knows Aiko—at least it really seems that way. When I was in the recruiting phase for my dissertation research I reached out across my community seeking a connection or advice for one more contributor. Every person I asked, from my mentors to my colleagues, and even my three existing dissertation participants—they all suggested Aiko. “You should ask Aiko Shirakawa!” “What about Aiko Shirakawa? She would be great.” “Have you checked with Aiko yet?” “Definitely Aiko Shirakawa—she’s bad ass!” The flurry of suggestions for the same person got me thinking, *Who is Aiko Shirakawa and why don’t I know her?* On a warm late spring evening in San Jose, the city that birthed her, I finally got a chance to learn who is Aiko Shirakawa.

Aiko Shirakawa is an OG.<sup>11</sup> She is a pioneer, legend, and active teacher in the international hip-hop scene, a scene she has been a part of for longer than I have been alive. You wouldn’t sense this by just looking at her, though. She is petite in stature and understated in clothing. She’s different from what many of us have been taught to perceive as aesthetically “hip-hop.” She has a youthful energy about her, too. She isn’t shy but comes off as reserved and observant. I wonder if this is because she doesn’t know

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<sup>11</sup> Short for “original gangster,” which is slang for pioneer or trailblazer.

exactly who I am and what I am doing beyond the few email and text messages we've exchanged. As I am setting up for our conversation and fumbling through my notes, I notice that I am feeling a bit intimidated. Maybe I am star struck. That happens easily. I'm just having a hard time processing that there is a hip-hop legend in front of me and that she has agreed to be part of my journey and research.

Aiko and I agree to meet across the street from San Jose's main library at an açai bowl café. It is a cute and bright space, with a lot of great snack options and seating. We both stand in line to read the menu when I ask Aiko if she would like to order something. "I always walk by this place but I have never stopped by. I'll just have what you are having." I order us each the most popular item on the menu and rave to Aiko about why I love açai while the barista blends and tops our bowls. When we settle into a table towards the back of the café, I pull out my questions, notebook, phone, and tablet from my backpack and put them all on the table while Aiko observes intently. I unlock my tablet and thumb around for my recorder app. Right when I find it, Aiko starts to giggle. "That is so cute!" She's talking about the interface of my recorder app. It looks like an old-school tape recorder from the 1980s, the ones you used to see on crime television shows during interrogation scenes. She laughs and tells me she had a recorder just like that as a kid and that it brings back good memories of when she used to record herself rapping. That makes me feel at ease. Her energy is warm and nurturing; she reminds me of my aunties. When I start our conversation, I say, "I'm here with..." and then I pause. I don't want to say her name incorrectly. I ask Aiko how to properly pronounce her name before I proceed. "Eye-Ko or Eye-E-Ko if you're Latin. Latin people always pronounce it with a third syllable." She explains to me that it was her Japanese grandfather that named her.

Her father is Japanese and Mexican; her mother, Mexican. Her last name is inherited from her grandfather. She mentions that growing up she used to confuse people all the time because she had a “completely Japanese name,” but was raised by a single mother who was Mexican.

I am eager to ask Aiko about her introduction to hip-hop because all the extensive research I did prior to meeting her tells a story about a woman that lived and breathed hip-hop during some of its most burgeoning, golden moments. She remembers seeing hip-hop come to life when she was in elementary school. She saw people performing music and dance in ways she had not seen before. Aiko started dancing as early as 11 and joined her first dance group, Quick Style, that opened up on one of Ice-T’s tours, when she was just 15. When she reflects, she tells me that there is not exactly a specific moment or introduction to hip-hop that she can pinpoint. Instead, it is just inherent to who she is.

I am 46, about to be 47, so hip-hop kinda grew up when I was growing up. We kinda grew up together. I don’t think there was that one moment where I said this is hip-hop because it didn’t have a name when I was growing up. It was just this rapper—that’s what rapping is. Oh, that was graffiti. It was all kinda separate, at least on the west coast. As I got older I started seeing it come together—the DJ, the dancer, the MC, the graffiti. Throughout elementary school the music started to change. We had Rappin’ Duke, we had Kurtis Blow, we had Sugar Hill Gang, late 1970s artists and so on and so forth. I was roller-skating so I loved music. I was a dancer but I was roller-skating to this music and bike riding and just dancing around—whatever. It wasn’t... I don’t know, it was a part of me. It wasn’t even just falling in love or a moment. It was just how it was, what we did, and how we were.

Hip-hop was coming of age when Aiko was, like siblings close in age and bond. This makes me wonder, though. Was hip-hop just something Aiko did or were others around her into it as well? She tells me that her family enjoyed the music and scene. They were always dancing and having fun. She and her friends would walk around the neighborhood

saying raps together and emulating the “rhymes, scratch, and chorus.” They wrote down lyrics so they knew exactly how the raps went. When I ask her about the artists she loves, she tells me not to let her get started. “Run DMC, LL Cool J, Grandmaster Flash, and Melly Mel are some of my favorites.” Bright eyed and grinning she says, “It was just so fun!”

As Aiko and I become acquainted and familiar with each other, I begin to really process the magnitude of meeting her. This experience was not just any interview or conversation—I was about to be schooled firsthand on lived hip-hop history. My knowledge of hip-hop history has come from multiple places but never straight from the source or in the flesh. As a kid growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, I watched various television specials, documentaries, and miniseries like MTV’s *And You Don’t Stop: 30 Years of Hip-Hop* and VH1’s *Hip-Hop Honors*. As I got older and started college, I took a few courses about hip-hop, read books on its history, and watched seminal documentaries like *Style Wars*. I wasn’t a historian by any means but I knew about the origins of hip-hop from various, but also typical, standpoints—male and Black. Never have I heard it straight from the source let alone from someone that intersected with some of my own identities and sensibilities.

### **Girl on Fire**

In the hip-hop community, Aiko is most known for her street dancing. Her expertise is popping and locking. I ask her how she got into street dancing and she tells me that it goes all the way back to when she was in elementary school. She was really interested in learning but there wasn’t anyone around that was teaching it. She says, “No

one was going to show you anything—I had to learn little bits and pieces at a time.” By the time she got to junior high, some kids in her neighborhood formed a dance group and she would watch and study them. From 11 to 14, Aiko refined her street dancing skills and eventually joined her first popping and locking group, Quick Style.

It was never Aiko’s intention to get into street dancing—it was just something that interested and intrigued her. She mentions to me that she was studying dance forms that are seen as traditionally feminine like jazz, ballet, and modern and had plans to teach those styles when she went off to college, but her plans changed. She realized she was really good at street dancing, too. She says, “The music called me, dance called me.” She opted against going to college and began competing with Quick Style. At the time the only place to compete locally was high school talent shows, which Quick Style dominated. Eventually they moved onto festivals and beauty pageants. “We were performing all around Southern California, Northern California, and everywhere in between.”

Aiko tells me that when she joined Quick Style she was the only girl. Another girl had tried out successfully as well but wasn’t able to stay in the group because she was pregnant. I ask Aiko what it was like being the only girl in an art form and culture that was (and still is) male dominated. She’s frank and unapologetic in her response.

You know to be honest with you, I always hung around mostly guys when it came to dancing because they were dominant and I considered myself a very dominant dancer in that scene. Hip-hop in general is male dominated. So, when it comes to that I don’t have fear of them. They’re my friends and they can be people I compete against. It didn’t matter to me. But I didn’t see myself as a girl. I was kinda like “I am not the girl, I am the dancer.” I didn’t like that title because it meant that I was weak... then. I like being one of the guys. I put my hair back, hat on, glasses on. I am dressed just like them. I am small so you can’t really tell. It is kinda cool. I like that. They have no idea until I take stuff off and they’re like “oooooh she’s a girl!” And then it’s like “yeah, you shouldn’t underestimate us.”

That's my point—don't underestimate us. Back then there were very few females compared to now. Back then there was just a handful here and there. Most of them were being taught by dancers in other groups who wanted there to be a girl group or a girl in their group. I was always dancing so it wasn't about how they needed a girl. No, I was a good dancer so they wanted me.

I feel Aiko's fire. That fire is part of what made being the first and only girl in Quick Style possible. That fire and confidence in her abilities is what affirms her in framing herself not just as a girl dancer but, above all, a dominant and talented one. Three decades later, that fire is part of what keeps her as a force within hip-hop and why so many people are quick to recommend her to those of us who don't know her. Without Aiko knowing, I am drawing connections from her experience and learning to my own. I am feeling inspired by her fire because I know that I need to work on taking ownership of my abilities.

My fire has been feeling more like a flickering flame lately. As a woman of color in academia, more specifically a Southeast Asian American woman, I am constantly feeling underestimated and devalued. Sometimes, when I get in my own head, I feel like those that underestimate me have every right to. I've been told that my writing is unorthodox and my work not rigorous. I continue to carry those wounding words with me. Growing up, I never felt like I got the training I needed to be "great" academically. I learned how to read and write from my *chi* and have always taken it upon myself to practice and hone my skills independently, even as an adult. I get anxious asking for help. When I ask for help, I sometimes psych myself into believing that that is a sign of weakness. I also never intended to become an academic, scholar, or educator; like Aiko, I have always felt like the work called me. When I finished my M.A. thesis I finally felt empowered to acknowledge that I was good at what I did. I also felt prepared for the next

step and started a doctoral program immediately after. Along the way, my vision of what my doctoral experience would be drastically shifted. I felt drained by the competition and politics. I felt pressured to research and write on topics I wasn't invested in. I felt tokenized. I often felt like I was only accepted to the program because there was such a lack of representation of Asian American students across my college. Yet, hearing Aiko's ownership and confidence in her skillset, knowledge, and unorthodox training was a reminder that I needed to speak more kindly to myself. My self-affirmation was just as important as someone else's affirmation of me. She's right—we shouldn't be underestimated and we are good at the many things we do.

Aiko's confidence in being the only girl in a male dominated movement and culture sparked my curiosity about ways her ethnic and cultural identity have also intersected with her relationship and practice of hip-hop. I ask her about being a Mexican and Japanese American woman in hip-hop. She pauses and tells me that that is a good question. It is a question she has not thought much about.

In the Bay Area, in San Jose specifically, it was a Mexican and Black thing. So it was mostly Black people. It came from Black culture. Mexicans started to do it and then there were some Asians—Filipinos. And a very few White—here in San Jose. And then the Asian community was very small. It was mainly Filipinos. I was one of the only Japanese females doing this. I was probably THE only. Culturally it was an issue because I wasn't Black but it wasn't an issue for me, it was an issue for everybody else who was Black. It was, “who is she and why does she think...” It's like, either you like it or you don't. I don't care. I come from a Black neighborhood so I already knew the attitude that came with it. It wasn't an issue. I enjoyed it. I loved to dance. I loved to teach too but I love to dance. Back then I didn't care what anybody said. Ok, whatever, I am still gonna do this. You know? It didn't matter. As far as being Asian, I don't know if it really played a part except people in the community not accepting me because of my culture. That was it. But I didn't let it stop me.

There goes that fire again. Although she hasn't spent much time consciously thinking about how her cultural, ethnic, and gender identity has influenced and impacted her

relationship with hip-hop, I gather that she has learned to embrace and find pride in the uniqueness of her identity. She knows that she is a rare presence and talent—that has been part of her motivation but also integral to her success and longevity. I make a mental note to return to this part of our conversation later because I feel like she is speaking to me and for me. Maybe her words will encourage me to shed the wounding words I still carry. Maybe my flickering flame is actually a fire because I am still moving ahead with my work even when I am unsure of its place and my place. Maybe it is because I find great comfort in hearing her say, “either you like it or you don’t. I don’t care.” Those are fighting words to me.

### **Youth in Focus**

I know that Aiko has traveled the world to compete but know very little about her background in teaching. Her range of teaching experience is vast, going back over 20 years and across all age groups. She began teaching in afterschool programs and community centers in the 1990s. Her first teaching position was with the Catholic Charities and then she moved onto programming for the YMCA and City of San Jose Parks and Recreation. I ask Aiko why she got into teaching and she replies rather simply: She wanted to support youth. She knew that a lot of great opportunities came from teaching, including having fun, transforming lives, and working closely with youth that shared a similar upbringing and experience.

I just realized that [students] came from my same situation. Struggling parents, not a whole lot in the home, not a whole lot of guidance... probably really bad examples on the outside and maybe even on the inside of the home. If I could be of any hope or any relief then that's what I would want to do—guide them in a way that is harmful to no one.

Aiko's connection to her students came organically. She grew close to many because of the length of time they spent together throughout academic years and summers. She was their teacher but also mentor and confidant. "We would share a lot of things," she says. "Whatever they would feel comfortable talking to me about, I listened." Students divulged to Aiko about their boyfriends and girlfriends, disagreements with friends, challenges at home, and even emotional and physical abuse at the hands of partners, parents, and relatives. Aiko never took for granted learning about the intimate details of her students' lives even when the magnitude of information was deeply painful. She sighs when she says:

[Learning about trauma] is shocking but [youth] just want to be heard. They just want to know that someone cares. I'd tell them, "It's going to be okay. I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be here tomorrow. I'll be here the next day. If you need me, I'll be here. Look for me."

In addition to Aiko's consistent support, she also found programmatic ways to care for her students. She kept the doors to her programs open as late as she could, often to 9 p.m., and created different spaces for students to simultaneously have fun and feel safe. She also tapped into her passion and talent as a street dancer and incorporated elements of hip-hop into the curriculum. No matter what program she taught for, she found that students always enjoyed having the opportunity to learn, practice, and create with hip-hop. Students thrived in the creative environment. It was a physical release and joyful experience for them just as it was and is for her.

Aiko's journey into teaching has led her to many other opportunities including teaching street dancing all over the country. I ask her where some of those places are. "New York and Miami. I taught in different places throughout L.A. I can't remember. Shoot. Chicago and everywhere in between." After over a decade of teaching for the

county and various nonprofit organizations, Aiko decided recently to shift her focus. She now teaches master classes and workshops for conferences, universities, junior colleges, and community events. When I ask her why her focus has shifted, she replies rather simply again: Women like her are still relatively invisible in those spaces. She knows those spaces have a place for her. If not, she'll make a place for her. During our time together she shares mostly about her efforts, approaches, and intentions in the aforementioned spaces.

### **Master Teacher**

As a community educator, Aiko's sole focus is street dance—popping, locking, and breaking. Street dancing is her expertise and legacy; one that she wants to continue sharing with others—especially young people. It is a disservice to think that all she teaches is street dancing, though. She tells me that she teaches to inspire and give people hope through dance and movement. She also wants to “pass the torch on so [street dancing] continues to live.” Another reason she is eager to teach dance is because she doesn't know where she would be without it. Dance has always been her outlet—a way of physical and emotional release. She says being part of dance groups gave her something to do and somewhere to be. She pauses for a second and says, “If I didn't have dance, I don't know what I would be doing to be honest with you.”

I am often curious about how other educators “leave their mark” because I am constantly trying to do that. My students are adults by the time they reach my classroom and come into higher education balancing different emotions, endeavors, dreams, and hopes. All of them are there to get that college degree but each of their journeys are

different. In the thick of the semester, 16 weeks feels like an eternity but I am often reminded of how little time that actually is when I am developing my syllabi, having to cut short certain conversations to move onto other ones, and pleading to my students to keep in touch because our time together has already concluded. If I have 16 weeks and that feels like too little of time, then how does Aiko inspire others in just a few hours? “You have to be deliberate,” she says. I ponder what that means.

Aiko tells me to come prepared—come in with a plan on paper. “I know it is dance but it can be put on paper as well.” She tells me that the foundation of her teaching practice is staying open to a variety of methods and techniques. She also always considers context including age, location, event, gender, and motor skills like balance. Most of all, she says, “reflect.” Aiko openly acknowledges that she has failed many times at teaching something but she is constantly reflecting about what she could have done better and how she will do it better the next time she gets the opportunity to do so. “I do feel defeated at times and will think, ‘Wow, I wish that worked but I’ll move on past that point. It’s fine.’” Aiko is about trying. She will always be the effort put forth when something isn’t working because, as she notes, she is unafraid to evolve.

She also treats learning just as she does choreography—step by step in your thoughts as well as in your actions. She tells me that she always teaches the background and history of each dance style. That is of the utmost importance to her because she is an “elitist” with history. You have to know the music and understand where it comes from in order to embody its power and legacy.

Once you understand the music that was out during the time because during the time is when these moves were made. You can hear the movement because the music sounds like the movement. It came from that versus playing something up to date and trying to teach an old popping foundation. You know what I mean?

You might be able to teach a couple of moves, but not everything's going to fit because it didn't come from that music.

Aiko also teaches her students about the effort and commitment it takes to physically embody and execute them—what she calls, “the rhythms and such.” She also clearly outlines the connection each dance style has to hip-hop and tries to leave each of her students with the ability to answer, “what is the style, what does it mean, and where did it come from?” She is really adamant on making everything approachable and accessible. Everything she breaks down has to be “real basic and simple.” I ask her to expand upon what that pedagogical guidance may look like. She says that she talks and walks them through each movement and offers the space for them to do it repetitively, together. She also believes strongly in shifting space, noting that she rotates her students from front to back and side to side for them to get different views, perspectives, and energies. “I teach elementary school kids the same way I teach high school kids and adults. A lot of teachers get too complex and you lose your crowd, which I’ve done before.” She is reflective and self-corrective. She also adjusts accordingly. She tells me that it is really about having fun, supporting others that maybe struggling along, and ensuring that everyone feels comfortable because they are all learning collectively in that space and time. That is when learning is powerful and effective. She also uses the internet as a tool. She encourages students to become hip-hop historians and researchers for them to forge their own relationship with hip-hop and stay connected. When they are connected to hip-hop, they are connected to each other.

I ask Aiko if she ever gets intimidated by teaching, feeling as though she doesn’t belong in some of the spaces she teaches. She doesn’t feel intimidated but remains mindful that she is an invited guest. She tells me that she has personal mantras and

affirms herself before she begins teaching. I ask her what those are. “You have done this for years.” “This is like walking.” “This is not a difficult situation to be in.” Although Aiko is not intimidated, she does share that she teaches with a sense of vulnerability. It is not because she lacks confidence in her abilities but it is because she is sharing the deepest part of herself with people that will, for the most part, only be in her life for a few hours. “[I] want to reach everyone. I hope they get it. I hope they enjoy it.” Aiko’s vulnerability derives from the honesty she teaches with, and her recognition that she is imperfect, in process, but so eager to share herself with others.

### **Teaching and Learning as a Joyful Exchange**

Over the weekend, Aiko just finished teaching at a hip-hop event in Oakland. The organizers tapped her to be part of a dance program for youth that they were hoping to revamp and revitalize. She tells me that she really enjoyed her time; I tell her that I can tell based upon the expression that is currently on her face. She laughs at my comment and says, “Yeah, I am still floating!” Everything about the workshop went really well—from the pace to the movement. “Everyone came out being very grateful and happy. It was really nice. Yay!”

It is more than obvious that Aiko loves what she does. When she talks about teaching, the cadence of her tone changes. Her eyes light up, her smile grows, and her body jolts. She breathes deeply. Her joy is uncontainable; it is as if she doesn’t have a choice but to be adrenalized. Everything about this is contagious to me. When I probe her about her joy, she tells me that she believes that teaching and learning about hip-hop is an exchange and a connection of energy, emotion, souls, and spirits. She continues by

saying:

When I leave a class, I'm still kind of with them so we're all in this happy place where we spent some spiritual time together and we supported each other. It's like uplifting each other. That's how I felt going home. When I talk about it I feel the same way. It's just an awesome feeling. It's almost like, to be really honest with you it's like going to church. It's like leaving with that high. A natural, spiritually connected, joyful high.

That joyful, spiritual connection has many benefits to her, but also to her students. Aiko says when she teaches about and through hip-hop, she always sees a “beautiful light” in her students. She says students get excited and inquisitive. She sees them humming the music and humming with their peers. She also sees them humming when they leave class. “There’s so much joy... and love.”

Aiko believes when she teaches, her students walk away with more questions than answers. To her this does not mean that they have not learned anything, though. Instead this means she has sparked a new inquiry and experience for them to explore further and deeper. Another benefit Aiko sees in teaching hip-hop pedagogy is simply that she is teaching it. Who she is, what she embodies, all of her identities matter when teaching hip-hop pedagogy. She feels as though it allows her to connect in a magnitude of ways with her students. How Aiko sees her presence as an educator reminds me of the roots of ethnic studies. Ethnic studies emphasized the importance of having representation in who taught us our various histories. Aiko sees value in others teaching it, but no value more than her doing the teaching and nurturing. She is a hip-hop pioneer, scholar, and teacher. She takes none of those roles—or identities—lightly.

I ask Aiko if being one of the few Asian American women hip-hop pioneers feels like a heavy burden or responsibility. She doesn’t hesitate when she says no. In fact, she feels the opposite.

It makes me feel really, really good because there wasn't a lot of girls [to look up to]. I had to admire guys because there weren't older women that I saw doing anything. I saw the same age group, but no older women. Just knowing that they have the opportunity to see someone that they can look up to, that's older, that means a lot. I feel happy that I'm able to be there. Give them a different perspective.

To Aiko it is really important that she promotes a message of support and collaboration, especially with women and girls. “We have to support each other. It has nothing to do with not supporting men.” Instead, Aiko believes that supporting one another is how we honor our collective presence, knowledge, and power. And what about reconciling the hip-hop that attempts to strip women of their agency and self-worth? Aiko says that hip-hop is how she represents, produces, and defines it—no matter what some person or market attempts to project. The cadence of her voice shifts again when she tells me that there is no way that she can turn her back, downplay, or put hip-hop aside. “It is a part of who I am.”

For Aiko, hip-hop is all about exchange. She understands this as a pioneer, but also as an educator, advocate, and staple of the culture. She's been a strong woman in the scene for many years and hopes that no matter where she goes and no matter who she meets, that she leaves with them a genuine piece of her. When I ask her if there is anything else she would like to add she concludes with, “It's fun giving a part of you. You're giving your energy—you're giving a part of you.” If only Aiko knew how thankful I am to exchange with her.

## TRACK 8

### ANALYSIS

*Pain + Love = Growth.*

—Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales

When I started this research journey, my intentions were simple and straightforward: I wanted to learn more about and from educators who shared my similar identity, ideology, and pedagogy. This sounds selfish and self-indulgent but I had just come from doing 4 years of coursework, examinations, and research on a topic from which I was disconnected. I was eager to find and see myself in my work again.

I moved onto a different trajectory knowing that very little research exists about Asian American educators, especially Asian American women educators. I became very deliberate in the construction of my study. I did not want to research about the lack of Asian American educators or the cultural tensions that came with going into any teaching profession. I did not want to emphasize the silencing of Asian American teachers either. Instead, I wanted to know more about Asian American women educators—their everyday work, their philosophies, their commitments. Who are some these women? Why do they teach? How do they teach? What inspires their teaching?

My own desires, curiosities, and questions led me into thinking more about my

current context and learning journey as well. I was reading and learning more about hip-hop pedagogy and had witnessed time and time again the power and possibilities of it in learning spaces. Hip-hop is the language of urban youth and an important bridge across communities, peoples, places, and generations. I, myself, also had an enduring relationship with hip-hop. Beyond my bond with hip-hop as a young person, I was in the midst of teaching a gender studies course that explored hip-hop feminism as praxis, had recently spent some time volunteering at one of the largest youth hip-hop conferences in the Bay Area, and just attended an event that was centered around Filipina/o American experiences in hip-hop. My world was always filled with hip-hop, which lead me into thinking more about hip-hop in education. What are the benefits of bringing hip-hop into spaces of learning? What does it look like? What does it mean when the educator employing hip-hop pedagogy is an Asian American woman? It was settled. I was going to research Asian American women educators that practiced hip-hop pedagogy. This was fairly simple and straightforward, or so I thought.

I made my research transition at a time when the Black Lives Matter movement was in its infancy. The murder of Trayvon Martin and the trial of his murderer, George Zimmerman, had passed from social media mentions but not memory. The social concern was dire, but the precedence and presence of Black Lives Matter was still growing. I dreamed about and developed my research trajectory and intentions over 3 years ago when our sociopolitical realities were different. The viral and deeply painful documentation of numerous lost Black lives at the hands of longstanding racial inequity and police genocide began changing how I lived, loved, and grew with my project. As Black Lives Matter began to shift into popular discourse, explicit conversations around

race and racism, particularly from a systemic standpoint, became part of the national consciousness. These conversations were not new or unfamiliar to oppressed peoples, but they were becoming far more expansive and accessible. They moved between and connected historical context, institutions, policies, laws, data, and community and individual bias. They also painfully, awkwardly, *and* imperatively invited many others into the conversation.

At the center of the discussion around biases was anti-Blackness, including how Asian Americans contribute and benefit from it. Asian American writers and activists called upon Asian American communities to confront anti-Blackness and acknowledge that dismantling systems of oppression is not possible when we use anti-Blackness to navigate white supremacy (Pham, 2015; pham, 2016). As a Vietnamese American woman, I was forced into thinking about my complicity in the Black struggle and appropriation of Black culture. This was terrifying as much as it was necessary. Soon enough I began realizing that my fairly simple and straightforward intention regarding my research project was actually never that.

To further complicate things I began realizing that the key theoretical framework guiding this project was derived directly from Black women's thinking and living. Although womanism was developed as a response to White feminism and encompasses collective perspectives of women at the margins, at its core it is still rooted in the racial and gender-based oppression of Black women. Black women scholars caution against the convenient application and appropriation of womanism beyond its origins, cultural context, and social reality (Tsuruta, 2012). The same caution is also applied to hip-hop. What does this mean as I analyze and locate themes across my data? How do I navigate

the tension? Critical research is hard.

The complexities and tension of my work bring about a unique, fruitful, and timely discussion across multiple disciplines. Womanism, Pinayism, and portraiture have guided me in presenting and navigating the pedagogical practices and everyday work of these four Asian American women educators without co-opting hip-hop in the process. Their place within hip-hop is one of courage and coevolution and their practices of hip-hop pedagogy are maternal, defiant, and cumulative. In this track, I apply my theoretical perspectives and present four common themes that emerged throughout the portraits of Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko. The themes are: hip-hop as a sacred space for Asian American women, mothering and othermothering as a foundational element of hip-hop pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy as confronting anti-Blackness and cultivating Asian American praxis in racial and educational justice, and hip-hop as vehicle of possibility and exchange.

### **Hip-Hop as a Sacred Space for Asian American Women**

It is well-documented that hip-hop's creation story comes from the Black, diasporic experience in the United States, but as Chang (2014) notes, "[hip-hop] has always been open to the presence of multiraciality and polyculturalism" (p. xiii). Work documenting the presence and impact of hip-hop in Asian American lives is limited but available. A collection that has lead the way in sharing Asian American experiences in hip-hop is *Empire of Funk: Hip Hop and Representation in Filipina/o America*. The editors and contributors came together as a means to tell their stories before anyone else could (Villegas, Kandi, & Labrador, 2014). This sentiment is reiterated by Kuttin' Kandi,

as she writes firmly in the introduction of the anthology:

I knew this book was important and I knew our stories needed to be told. I learned from my mentors that it is important to document our story, to tell our own stories, or someone else was going to do it for us. Sadly, Hip Hop is often co-opted by large corporations and the stories of our hip-hop legends are often made “Hollywood” and at times not as genuine and authentic as it is when coming from legends themselves who actually lived the Hip Hop experience. (p. xxiii)

What *Empire of Funk* does is important—it locates and centers Asian American experiences within hip-hop while asserting it as a pivotal space of living, being, and creating. It also calls for expansive conversations about the role hip-hop has played in the lives of Filipina/o Americans and, broadly, Asian Americans. The stories are eclectic as they are familiar—traversing through tales of creative labor (Chang, 2014), self-discovery (Custodio, 2014; Sapigao, 2014), ethnic identity formation (Kandi, 2014; Nadal, 2014); finding and organizing community (Kandi, 2014); self-care and self-empowerment (Rivera, 2014), critical teaching and learning (Nevado, 2014), and showing and proving talent (Kandi, 2014; Nevado, 2014). The impact hip-hop has had on Miss Mandy, Kuttin’ Kandi, Irene, and Aiko’s lives reflect many of the same themes that are present in *Empire of Funk*. They also add depth to the narratives about Asian Americans in hip-hop.

When applying womanism, the stories of Miss Mandy, Kuttin’ Kandi, Irene, and Aiko do more than tell; they demonstrate the possibilities of hip-hop for Asian American women. According to Phillips (2006), womanism is invested in the holistic well-being of humanity. It is grounded in the premise that mental, emotional, and spiritual fulfillment is central in ending all forms of oppression and restoring balance across communities (Phillips, 2006, p. xx). Womanism encourages the identification and preservation of space that enlightens, honors, and heals the mindbodyspirit (Anzaldúa, 2002; Phillips,

2006). Across the four portraits in this study, we learn that hip-hop is where Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko experiment, problem solve, resist oppression, and restore and affirm their humanity. Guided by discussions on safe and brave spaces, I assert that hip-hop is a sacred space for them and other Asian American women.

The idea of a brave space was developed as an effort to build upon and stretch the safe space paradigm that many critical educators and social justice classrooms adopt (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Safe spaces are environments that give students the space to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues. Safe spaces also insist that students are able to grapple with their complex identities and experiences without worrying about their welfare among their peers and teachers (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Although safe spaces are valuable when engaging identity, power, and oppression, scholars have challenged this idea by arguing that it is impossible to learn, engage, and transform social issues without difficulty, risk, or discomfort (Cook-Sather, 2016; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Safety is not always tangible because our existence and experience, particularly as people of color, derive from violence and trauma (Anzaldúa, 2002; Fierros, 2017; Gumbs, 2012). Likewise, hip-hop emerged decades ago out of political and social strife.

Brave spaces were founded on the idea that learning entails courage, humility, and hope (Abbott, 2016; Arao & Clemens, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2016; Perez-Putnam, 2016). Authentic engagement of urgent social issues and intersecting lived realities requires willing and active engagement, expectations of discomfort, and persistent reflection (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Singleton & Hays, 2008). Brave spaces are grounded in context: the roots of oppression, experience, triggers, intentions,

and impact. When those are visible and centered, participants are able to become more mindful, self-aware, and diligent in their actions to transform social norms (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Brave spaces also acknowledge that learning is a destabilizing and unpredictable process of exchange where participants should be supported, not protected, from experimenting, exploring, and asserting knowledge (Abbott, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2016; Perez-Putnam, 2016). The successes and gains of a community are intertwined. In Clara Abbott's "Leaping and Landing in Brave Spaces" (2016), she discusses the necessity of them through her personal experiences working alongside a faculty mentor:

I feel lucky to have been in surroundings for most of my life that have affirmed and supported me when I have exposed my ideas and poured myself into them. I have learned to trust others when I open myself up or feel uncomfortable, when I raise my hand or read something I have written. I trust that even though it may feel uncomfortable or strange to break the boundary between my mind and the minds of others, that this breakage might ultimately result in growth, not harm. It is like the strengthening of a muscle, with microfibers that break and mend themselves stronger. I leap and land stronger as I share myself and my peers.

This is the essence of what it means to experience brave space, driven by the knowledge that when we open ourselves up, give a part of ourselves to the world around us, that our discomfort will somehow leave us stronger and greater instead of damaged and embarrassed. Leaping into a brave space does not keep us from experiencing moments of rupture or discomfort. Instead, brave spaces facilitate regeneration and growth after these moments happen (p. 1).

Across the snapshots of Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko we are introduced to their vulnerabilities and wounding as young Asian American women. Miss Mandy struggled with growing up in a single parent household. Kuttin' Kandi lacked a strong sense of cultural and ethnic identity because she was racially different from the majority of her classmates at her elementary school in Queens, New York. Irene was confronted with her parents' trauma of being forcefully dislocated from their homeland while

negotiating the contradictions of her identity as a Pinay. Aiko grew up in a home and neighborhood that had limited resources. Like Miss Mandy, her mother was also a single parent. She had little guidance and few role models. Each of these four women found their way into hip-hop on their own, but collectively understand that it acknowledged their wounds, challenged their comfort zones, and tapped into their sources of strength all while guiding, protecting, and supporting them to be critical, courageous thinkers, actors, and educators who are still learning, growing, and transforming. Hip-hop was a space unlike any other for them and that made it sacred.

When I think about hip-hop as a sacred space for Asian American women, I am drawn to Aiko's stories about being the only biracial, Japanese American woman street dancer in her neighborhood. She was not widely welcomed or accepted by her neighborhood peers at first, but would not be denied the possibility to learn and assert herself. Aiko spoke candidly about how challenging it was to put herself into spaces not always intended for her but that part of becoming a talented street dancer meant taking risks. The rewards of her risks remain abundant, including seeing "lightbulbs" spark in her students.

Hip-hop taught Aiko about her various talents, but more importantly it taught her the strengths and resolve of character. She has built a strong community and comradery through it. Hip-hop has guided her in understanding the construction and politics of race and gender. She often downplayed her gender, rarely discussed her biracial background, and ignored inquiries about both. She rejected labels like "girl dancer" and despised comments like "you're good for a girl." Her rejection of these identities also made her hyperaware of them. As Aiko transitioned into her role as an educator and became a

mother, she began utilizing particular components of her identity and background to reach and mentor students. She takes very seriously when young girls of color relay their aspirations to dance and perform like her, and revels when she witnesses a kid's confidence growing through hip-hop.

In Kuttin' Kandi's story, we see how her hip-hop nurtured her early sense of ethnic and cultural identity. Bearing witness to the young Pinay sisters performance at her elementary school's showcase sparked a burgeoning self-awareness. This moment also sparked a willing and courageous engagement with her different identities. She transitioned from denying that she was Pinay to seeking her own Filipino American community because she felt affirmed to do so. Hip-hop guided and grounded her evolving identities and offered her clarity to learn, exist, and lead as she needed. As she notes, hip-hop empowered her and broke her open. Through hip-hop she has grappled with trauma, explored her passions, and expressed herself, including her creativity, while surrounded by substantive community.

The courage to "risk, explore, experiment, assert, learn, and change" (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 1) is also present in Irene's and Miss Mandy's journeys within hip-hop. As a kid, Irene boldly attempted head spins. When she reached adolescence, she put her thoughts, feelings, and experiences as a young Pinay on paper. Irene's writing reflected similar themes of strife and grit, just like the hip-hop songs she cherished did. When she got to college, her self-awareness and identity quickly evolved and matured. Hip-hop helped her build and bridge community across racial and cultural lines and brought "outliers, dissidents, and subversives" together where they learned about history, oppression, and resistance while bonding through struggle. When Irene became pregnant,

that same community embraced and cared for her as a young mothering teen rather than rendering her invisible and incompetent as other spaces did (Pillow, 2004). The support continued to affirm her possibilities. For Miss Mandy, hip-hop affirmed her struggles as a young person burdened with more responsibilities than her peers and younger sibling. Hip-hop became a space for exploring and making sense of her intersecting identities and passions, which would eventually evolve into numerous career and community opportunities.

Womanism also becomes a key tool in reading hip-hop as a cultural and conceptual sacred space, as well as a physical and contextual one. It bears in mind all zones of dismantling systems of oppression, including the symbolism and necessity of tangible, inhabited space (hooks, 1994; Phillips, 2006; Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006). As such, the ecology of space and the context that informs it vastly transforms the possibilities of teaching and learning (Brooks, 2010; Brooks, 2012; Choules, 2007). Miss Mandy's practice of hip-hop pedagogy is informed by the location she teaches in, as well as the students she serves. Conversely, hip-hop pedagogy informs the physical space she teaches in.

LCPA is located within the east side of San Jose, an urban, ethnic enclave surrounded by liquor stores, immigrant-owned businesses, public housing, unkempt streets, and decaying schools. Although the neighborhoods are robust and alive, they are often ignored and deprived of fundamental resources as are many urban, immigrant areas. The vast majority of LCPA students are kids from this area. Students come into the school keenly aware that their communities have largely, and purposefully, been disinvested in. Miss Mandy's pedagogical practices, including her implementation of

ciphers and open-door policy, has inevitably created a sacred space for students. The relationships she invests in, the affirmations she gives, the curricula she develops, and the activities she implements have become a physical space of security, respect, and reverence. Students are physically able to come into her classroom to feel encouraged, affirmed, heard, and seen despite what their other physical surroundings may suggest.

Although Aiko does not have a consistent learning space that she returns to daily like Miss Mandy, her use of space as spiritual, emotional, and creative exchange is one that stirs new areas of exploration and inquiry for students. Her ability to maximize time through practices like physical rotation and verbal acknowledgement insulates and sustains the space within that time for students to learn intentionally and audaciously. The same can also be said for Irene's use of space. The pedagogical chance she employs for her students to collaboratively create a community showcase that is colored with their culinary visions and physical, emotional, and intellectual creativity courageously disrupts the confines and objectives of traditional schooling (Freire, 2007)

Hip-hop as a sacred space for Asian American women is important because it disrupts and decenters many existing dominant narratives about Asian American women and Asian American women educators. It also brings forth invisible narratives about Asian American women in hip-hop. It highlights a space where Asian American women are able to exist with various truths. Often, Asian American women are rendered invisible, hypervisible, or a confusing, exhausting combination of both (Huynh, 2017; Valverde, 2013). We struggle with and through self-confidence, self-care, mental and physical wellness, cultural tension, and racialized and gendered expectations (Lee, 1994, 2009; Valverde, Maffini, Yee, & Mai, 2017; Vō, 2012). Sometimes we lack mentorship

and struggle to belong. Regardless, we continue to seek and create spaces where we are intellectually, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and collectively challenged, but also affirmed. Hip-hop is a sacred space for us. It would also be very remiss of me not to note that hip-hop exists as a sacred space for Asian American women because of pioneers like Kuttin' Kandi and Aiko. Their willingness to participate in a space vulnerably, passionately, and without regret, when few others would or could, has made hip-hop a space of possibility for so many others. I return to Kuttin' Kandi's introduction in *Empire of Funk* to reiterate the importance but also the possibilities of hip-hop as a sacred space:

I didn't realize this then but considering the dynamics of my household, I was longing for community, culture, and home. I was longing for a place to fill my heart with joy and something to help me express all of this rage and passion inside of me. I didn't know it was going to be Hip Hop nor did I envision it would take me through a whirlwind of drunken and drugged-up party nights to celebrity friendships to championship titles to being a radical activist and now writer." (p. xviii)

### **Mothering as a Core Tenet of Hip-Hop Pedagogy**

When I was developing this research project, I did not immediately think about mothering. Being a mother was not a requirement for the participants and questions about mothering were not immediately included when I was developing my research protocol. Yet, a common thread across the conversations I shared with each of the women was mothering. Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko are all biological mothers. Miss Mandy is not yet a biological mother but hopes she will be soon. Collectively, they all othermother their students and communities (Hill Collins, 1990).

There were numerous examples that demonstrated the presence of the maternal in the hip-hop pedagogies of Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko. Among them

include Kuttin' Kandi's belief in revolutionary love. By using Pinayism as a frame of analysis—particularly the overarching tenet of restoring and protecting a critical love for self, family, and community—I am able to interpret Kuttin' Kandi's ardent conceptualization of revolutionary love as an act of mothering. From how she is caring for Miracle to how she grounds her activism, teaching practices, and participation within hip-hop—*everything* is healing-centered. She is focused on protecting herself, child, communities, and students from white supremacy and fostering space—mindbodyspirit—to implement practices like self-care.

Like Kuttin' Kandi, Irene and Aiko also create and maintain strategies to support the survival and strength of their communities. Womanism's advocacy of investing in all living things is represented in Irene's course's final performative community project and Aiko's street-dancing-centric curriculum. They guide students, the majority of whom are students of color, in breaking out of socially and self-imposed limitations by inviting them to assert their presence and voice within institutional spaces. In doing so, they both witnessed physical, intellectual, and emotional transformations across their students. They were more confident, self-aware, and eager to embrace the unknown. Other examples also include the strong emotional connections Aiko and Miss Mandy share with their students (Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 2002; Green, 2003). Both Aiko and Miss Mandy connect with their students because they engage them actively and attentively. Rather than seeing this practice as insubstantial or obligatory, Pinayism situates it as meaningful, life-changing, and a catalyst for transformative discourse in education (Tintiango-Cubales, 2005). Students trust Miss Mandy and Aiko without reservation, which gives them permission and power to exchange and exist in ways that are honest, vulnerable,

and, most of all, human.

When I probed Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko about how and why they practice hip-hop pedagogy, their responses varied but often drew from the maternal. It was apparent that their responsibilities and philosophies as educators were not mutually exclusive from their responsibilities and philosophies as mothers and othermothers (Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 2002; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2017). They are their full selves no matter the context (Walker, 1990). For these four women, practicing hip-hop pedagogy is a form of collective mothering—a mothering of their students, communities, children, *and* selves. They are facilitators of spaces that disrupt lovelessness and hopelessness; center the well-being and wholeness of students; and empower students to understand and participate in a practice of power “as energy, capacity, and potential rather than as a relation of domination” (Shresbury, 1987, as cited in Green, 2003). Their teaching practices are informed by hip-hop’s artistic, cultural, social, and political consciousness and contexts (Chang, 2005, 2006) but also their own identities, experiences, and emotional strength and wisdom (Akom, 2009; Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 2002; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2017).

Womanism and Pinayism have allowed me to name mothering as a site of power and agency for them, just as hip-hop is. Their experiences, sensibilities, and actions as mothers and othermothers is subversive and profound. As hip-hop pedagogues, they honor, practice, and interrogate hip-hop culture; actively resist racist, sexist, classist, and ableist practices; and assert mothering that centers care, connectedness, community survival, and critical thinking (Akom, 2009; Beaubeouf-Lafontant, 2002; Brown & Kwakye, 2012; Tan, 2009; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2017). Existing research does not

explicitly name mothering as a central tenet of hip-hop pedagogy despite privileging Black women and girls' presence and epistemologies (Akom, 2009; Tan, 2009; Brown & Kwakye, 2012). While mothering is undeniably included in feminist thought, it still remains a developing dialogue within the larger umbrella of hip-hop theory and education. That must change. I insist that the inclusion of mothering as a fundamental tenet of hip-hop pedagogy is necessary and long overdue.

### **Disrupting Anti-Blackness Through Hip-Hop Pedagogy**

As an educator and scholar, complicated discussions about race and other intersecting social identities are part of my educational reality and responsibility. At a time when anti-Blackness is heightened and part of our social and political lexicon, it is vital that we acknowledge that Asian Americans benefit from Black struggle (Ang, 2015; Okihiro, 1994). Although Asian Americans have faced—and will continue to face—racial violence, we are not predisposed to racism and systemic oppression in the same way Black communities are (Ang, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Matsuda, 1996).

Historically Asian American and Black communities have been deliberately pitted against each other in sectors like labor, media, and education to secure white economic and social supremacy (Lee; 1994, 2009; Okihiro, 1994). An example of this is presented by Okihiro (1994) when he discusses the role of Asian laborers in the United States during the 1800s. He explains:

Asian laborers might have been ideal replacements for African slaves because they were productive and incapable of becoming citizens, but they were useful in that they were neither white nor black. Although some believed that the addition of yet another group of people to society would only add to the complexity and hence difficulty of race relations, others saw the entrance of Asians as a way to insulate whites from blacks. Asians were simultaneously members of the

nonwhite Other, despite their sometime official classification as white, and an intermediate group between white and black. (p. 52)

The proximity of Asian Americans to Whiteness has afforded us privileges and protections that leverage us against Black and Brown communities. Consequently, we internalize those privileges and protections as rights, even when they are on the backs of other marginalized peoples.

While it is true that Asian American hardships and social dislocations are erased and that our successes and mobility are hypervisible, the simplification of Asian American experiences is an endeavor of Whiteness. It reinforces victim-blaming ideologies and refutes the prevalence of systemic oppression (Matsuda, 1996). Matsuda calls on Asian Americans to “not to be used” by Whiteness; rather to speak, act, and work truthfully and diligently in the struggle for racial justice. In “We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian-Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?” she writes:

If white, as it has been historically, is the top of racial hierarchy in America, and black, historically, is the bottom, will yellow assume the place of the racial middle? The role of the racial middle is a critical one. It can reinforce white supremacy if the middle deludes itself into thinking it can be just like white if it tries hard enough. Conversely, the middle can dismantle white supremacy if it refuses to be the middle, if it refuses to buy into racial hierarchy, and if it refuses to abandon communities of black and brown people, choosing instead to forge alliances with them (Matsuda, 1996, p. 150).

This research journey has encouraged me to reflect upon my own as well as others’ (who share my similar or intersecting racial, ethnic, and cultural identity) responsibility in disrupting anti-Blackness. What are we doing? What can we do? My use of a Pinayist and womanist framework is especially significant here.

Pinayism and womanism are grounded in a sharp critique and rejection of oppression. For womanism, oppression is interlocking and contextualized through the

experiences of Black women (Hill Collins, 1990, 1996, 2006; Phillips, 2006; Walker, 1990). For Pinayism, oppression is contextualized through the experiences of Pinays and the United States' position as a colonial and imperial power (Tintiango-Cubales, 2005, p. 141). Both see Whiteness as the beneficiary of oppression. Both intend to empower and liberate people to transcend all forms of oppression.

The partnership of these two theoretical perspectives guide me making sense of Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko's practices of hip-hop pedagogy. As I see it, their practices are a reimagination and reassertion of Asian American praxes in racial and educational justice. They are defying traditional methods of schooling, reasserting invisible narratives, and disrupting anti-Blackness. Combined, they are destabilizing Whiteness.

In xoài pham's essay, "Ending Anti-Blackness Needs to Be a Top Priority for Asian Americans—Here's Why," they write that Asian American solidarity with Black communities means prioritizing Black voices, centering Black lives, and "redistributing financial, political, and emotional resources to black folks" (pham, 2016). Beyond financial, political, and emotional resources, I believe that prioritizing Black and Brown voices and lives means strengthening educational resources, practices, and supports that holistically benefit young Black and Brown people. Hip-hop pedagogy can and does do that.

When I think about hip-hop pedagogy as praxis in racial and educational justice, I am drawn to Irene's story about her White woman student whose father was a police officer. Irene acknowledged her White woman student's discomfort and used that as an invitation to push her critical examination, allyship, and contribution in conversations

around Baltimore, Freddie Gray, and state-sanctioned murder. The active participation of White people is necessary in the struggle for racial justice (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). In addition to guiding students through dialogue about racial injustice, Irene guides students in becoming active agents of racial justice by integrating social media and community shows driven by their visions, voice, and creative freedom, which in turn teaches students that their resilience and resolve is an important part of the discourse.

Irene's critical, coconstructed learning space encourages students to draw from their experiences as expertise, as well as evidence to interrogate power and other cultural phenomena. She brings in hip-hop, a culture that is grounded in the narrative of people, to support students in finding their power, agency, and purpose as they participate in the long journey towards freedom and justice. This does not only include the power, agency, and purpose for marginalized students but also for students who have racial and class privilege. As Irene shared, "the struggle is to examine, to continue being critical, and to remain participatory."

I am also drawn to Miss Mandy's effort to affirm and amplify the talents and possibilities of her students. From saying, "You'd be a great beat maker!" to staying after school to listen to a beat a student has made, Miss Mandy prioritizes her students' existence. She consistently reminds her students that she sees and hears them. Her curriculum taps into their emotional strength through her "What's your legacy?" project and also prepares them for college—and optimistically college success—by fostering their critical thinking skills through issues of educational and social equity for Latina/o students.

Returning to the idea that pedagogy responds to context, Miss Mandy's capacity

to practice hip-hop pedagogy is also about where she has taught and teaches. Her conscious decision to enter into and work alongside the most disenfranchised students, in Compton and the East Side of San Jose, was with the intention to serve students, not save them. As Duncan-Andrade (2007) notes about educators that are “*ridas*,” her perspective and intentions were not guided by romantic visions of changing the world. Instead, she recognized that these students could change the world because “children most disenfranchised from society are the ones with the least to lose, and thus are the most likely to be willing to take the risks necessary to change society” (p. 625). While teachers are often recruited by schools with more resources and proven educational achievement, Miss Mandy’s decision to start and continue her teaching career in urban schools is significant. She did not abandon students who also need and deserve exceptional teachers.

Kuttin’ Kandi’s centering of supportive emotional strategies like forgiveness, kindness, compassion, and patience in her pedagogical practices is vital in preserving the young people and communities she serves. Within these supportive emotional strategies, she is focused on encouraging students to honor their feelings, nurture their spirituality, practice accountability for themselves and their communities, and channel their rage that empowers them to act. This is all drastically different from traditional methods and modes of schooling, which are believed to be emotionless and objective (Darder, 1991; Freire, 2007, 2008). As such, centering supportive emotional strategies creates “pedagogic spaces where marginalized youth are enabled to gain consciousness of how their own experiences have been shaped by larger social institutions” (Akom, 2009, p. 63).

Kuttin' Kandi's insistence on confronting White male privilege, as seen through her valiant callout of Shia LaBeouf, is also important in amplifying narratives of those at the margins. White male privilege continues to discount the work, talent, and humanity of people of color while normalizing and praising the work, talent (or lack thereof), and humanity of White men. LaBeouf's theft of the Anomalies' lyric is not an isolated incident—it is a tradition upheld by white supremacy (Smith, 2006). Kuttin' Kandi's work to protect her and her sisters' creative labor while unsettling LaBeouf's luxury of obliviousness invites him, and others, to pay closer attention to issues of privilege (Johnson, 2005). Her hard work of educating others about race and racial privilege is part of how we can undermine the systems that perpetuate it.

Aiko's reimagining education as a committed space of “co-learning, co-facilitating and multi-directionality” (Akom, 2009, p. 56) is about centering students' experiences and voices but most importantly their joy. Centering joy in educational settings means “striving for wholeness and wellness in the face of all the ills of the world” (Agard, 2015). Despite experiencing students for short periods of time, she helps students in discovering, understanding, and feeling happiness. She also supports her own. She creates and holds space for happiness. Happiness is liberatory and radical—especially in the face of trauma, which Black and Brown youth know too often (Agard, 2015). Along with her focus of joy, Aiko insists upon sustaining legacies of hip-hop dance. Aiko is reproducing hip-hop's mission of having fun, taking responsibility, being seen and heard, organizing community, and connecting with people (Herc, 2005, p. xiii) as she passes on her passion for hip-hop dance. For Aiko, dancing was and continues to be a litany of survival for the most vulnerable.

Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko's practices of hip-hop pedagogy illuminate what Duncan-Andrade (2009) refers to as critical hope. In order to disrupt anti-Blackness and transform education as a place that truly serves, honors, and values students—especially the most marginalized—educators must stand in solidarity with them and see students' struggles as their own. Duncan-Andrade urges educators to “reconnect to the collective by struggling alongside one another, sharing in the victories *and* the pain” (2009, p. 189). Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko do that. They do not seek to manage their students. Instead they cultivate their students' emotions, talents, and curiosities. They also do not see their students as broken or irreparable—they are complex and complicated as much as they are human and whole. As Akom (2009) notes, “hip-hop pedagogy is a promising strategy to meet the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly diverse society” (p. 63). For these four Asian American women educators, it is also much more than that. It is an unabashed commitment to learning, listening, loving, and leading with humility and grace. It is helping to shoulder the burden of racial injustice.

### **Hip-Hop is a Vehicle**

“Hip-hop is a vehicle” has been widely used to synthesize and capture what is possible within hip-hop. The saying's origin is often credited to hip-hop artist and activist Talib Kweli and has been modified and exchanged in numerous ways to broaden its vision including “hip-hop is a vehicle for activism,” “hip-hop is a vehicle for social change,” and “hip-hop is a vehicle for young people.” No matter the remix, at the crux, we know that hip-hop has a wealth of promise.

When looking across the four portraits from this study, I saw hip-hop as a vehicle of possibility and exchange. Pinayism and womanism pay close attention to relationships and contend that critical work is never done singularly but collaboratively and through constant negotiation and effort (Phillips, 2006; Tintiangco-Cubales, 2005). Social change is possible when we emerge from and build upon legacies of existing work (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983). As such, I maintain that Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko's practice of hip-hop pedagogy is never done alone. Their efforts and exchanges are done in partnership with the communities they serve *and* with the richness of hip-hop aesthetics and arts (Chang, 2006).

Hip-hop's reputation and reality as colorful, contentious, and complicated is precisely how it moves across space and time. It is a living, creative force that is used to "build audiences and open possibilities" (Chang, 2006, p. xiii). Sometimes those audiences and possibilities are pronounced—other times they are quiet and fleeting. Either way, they all matter. Take, for example, Miss Mandy's hip-hop aesthetic. Her Nike Blazers and "Beats by Lau" headphones are symbols of hip-hop style. Those pieces coupled with her longstanding work with RTSB and appreciation for artists like Kendrick Lamar serve as an open invitation for her audience of students to engage her. She transmits her downness, willingness, and cool through hip-hop.

Miss Mandy's aesthetic is especially significant because she teaches at a predominately Latina/o high school. Students at LCPA do not identify with her ethnically, but aesthetically. They have come to embrace and love her as their own because of their shared love for many things hip-hop. Similar to Miss Mandy, Irene also uses hip-hop to transmit her own downness and willingness—except in her role as a

mother. While hip-hop is innately present in her classroom because one of her courses is about hip-hop dance, it is the way she speaks about her relationship with her son that epitomizes the promise of immersing oneself in hip-hop's art and aesthetic. Irene noted through our conversations that her relationship with her son has matured through their numerous discussions and debates about hip-hop music, history, and visuals. She mentors him and he mentors her through their different hip-hop knowledges. She affirms how he showcases his hip-hop mastery and he thinks it's cool that she has long been committed to hip-hop as a cultural producer and practitioner.

For Aiko and Kuttin' Kandi, this conversation takes on a bit of a different meaning. Part of why hip-hop art movements have persisted and evolved through nearly 5 decades is due in part to their pioneering efforts. They have contributed to building hip-hop's vehicle and they are among the visionaries behind the wheel. A core principle of both Kuttin' Kandi and Aiko's pedagogy is partnership. In their years of service, they have initiated exchange across Black, Brown, and Asian American communities through the hip-hop arts. Communities coalesce because Aiko and Kuttin' Kandi have created space and invited people to participate through hip-hop dance, poetry, and music.

Hip-hop's steady production of diverse art has given these four educators viable and relevant ways to connect and communicate. As Hoch (2006) writes, hip-hop transcends and influences generations because it is "universally relevant and democratically resonant" (p. 362). It is true then that hip-hop is a vehicle. For Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko, hip-hop is a vehicle to participate in the world differently and a vehicle to view the world with immense possibility.

## TRACK 9

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*“Do you hear me,  
Do you feel me?  
We gon’ be alright!”*

—Kendrick Lamar, *Alright*

3/13/2017 10:05PM:

*Hey Cindy, I recently had an informative speech on Kendrick Lamar for my COMM 150 class, which I think went well. Anyways, I found myself wondering about his influence, and in your case, why you decided to have a focus study on him for our class. We talked about him in your class, but I never did quite hear from you. Plus, I am working on my own project because of it. Your response would give clarity and some inspiration.*

3/13/17 10:11PM:

*That’s a great question, Gabriel.<sup>12</sup> I chose to implement Kendrick into my curriculum for many reasons. One, he is beloved figure to young folks like you. I was able to get y’all to invest deeply and differently into conversations about systemic oppression, injustice, race, trauma, and violence using Kendrick. Two, hip-hop is the language of young people and a vehicle of analysis and interpretation. Three, Kendrick is multifaceted.*

3/13/17: 10:13PM:

*His story is familiar (Black kid, poor, from the inner city, broken home) but his storytelling is not as familiar. He’s masculine but vulnerable. He discusses mental health but also has sexual bravado. He critiques the system but also benefits from it. His complexity and nuance gives us a great lens to work from.*

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<sup>12</sup> Not student’s real name.

3/13/17 10:14PM:

*Also, his albums are oral histories, which is a rich tradition in communities of color to preserve our realities and experiences. It is worth noting that he is a big Beyoncé fan as well. Hahaha*

3/13/17 10:17PM:

*Dope response, glad to hear it from the teach herself. Thanks, Cindy! I think I got some ideas.*

3/13/17 10:19PM:

*One more thing. Kendrick embraces Blackness is a way that is beautifully complicated. From the tone of his skin, to his hair, to the women he casts in his music videos. Honoring Blackness is really important as there is a such a long history and culture of anti-Blackness. That's a challenge for you to think about. If you want to sit down and cipher ideas with me, we most definitely can. I'm so proud of you. Really. This conversation reminds me of why I do what I do. Thank you.*

—A text conversation between my student and me

### **Hip-Hop Responds**

A week before the 2016 presidential election I assigned Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d. city*, and *To Pimp a Butterfly* as mandatory listening for my cohort of first year college students. I asked them to draw connections between their lives, Lamar's life, and our course's purveying theme of American life and values. On the morning of the presidential election, we drew those connections together. I first tasked students with identifying the contexts, ideas, and people in his albums. I asked them to consider Kendrick's reality—his circumstances, challenges, and influences. How and where does he speak about his reality? What are his feelings regarding them? Who does he speak about? Who influences his reality? Next, I tasked students with expanding the conversation to consider broader sociopolitical and historical contexts, ideas, and people. What systems, structures, and institutions support and impact Kendrick's reality? What

ideologies are embedded in those systems, structures, and institutions? How do these ideologies impact Kendrick and those close to him? Who participates in these systems, structures, and institutions? Who does and does not benefit?

The dialogue was abundant. Students jumped at the opportunity to discuss albums they enjoyed and an artist they related to. They contextualized Kendrick's reality largely through his homeplace of Compton, California, and the community of people he was surrounded by, including his homies, uncle, mother, and gang members. Students also articulated how the decay of the inner city was reflected in many of Kendrick's own shortcomings. They mentioned policing, public housing, urban schooling, and low wage jobs. They connected everything back around to racism, classism, sexism, and capitalism. When class ended, I announced that we would pick up on our conversation during our next session together and discuss our course's two-part final project... but then the election happened.

The results and aftermath of the election were devastating. I knew all along that the outcome was possible but it was still a difficult reality to grasp. I cried over and over as I thought about my family, friends, future child, and students. There were so many implications that came with this outcome—I wanted nothing more than to run away and hide. But, as I was quickly reminded by my colleagues and comrades, there was work to do. Our community and students needed us now, more than ever.

Two days after the election I returned to class with an adjusted lesson plan. I told students that I had intended to finish our unit on Kendrick but felt that it was important to offer a talking circle to process the election. I opened up the conversation by asking students to select a color to describe how they were feeling. I was red, I said, because I

felt alarmed. Students offered all different types of colors: blue, green, white, yellow, gray, black. Students shared that they were scared, hurt, frustrated, and confused. One student shared that his dreams felt “dead” whereas another refused to share—sitting silently with tears ready to fall at each blink. Other students returned to our conversation 2 days prior, asserting that the President-elect’s success illuminated the persistence of racism. I listened intently, said thank you gently, and cried in front of them and also alongside them.

Our talking circle took many turns through the hour we shared together but I insisted that we end by offering our thoughts on collective- and self-care. How do we care for ourselves and others in moments that are deeply challenging? How do we preserve our spirits? I opened the floor. “Show up to class and do our homework,” one student suggested. I asked them to expand. “They don’t want us to be okay or successful.” Another student encouraged their classmates to continue creating art. “It helps us take our mind off of things but we get to see our stories represented too.” Others chimed in: “Participate in protests!” “Share information on social media.” “Keep talking about it!” “Listen to hip-hop.” When class concluded, I thanked students again for their contributions and stood by the door to encourage them on their way. As one student passed by me, he paused and said, “Hey Cindy, I really like your shirt. Another student chimed in after and said, “. . .and your shoes.” I smiled and thanked them. I had my 72-10 Jordans on and a shirt that I handmade the night before that read, *We Gon’ Be Alright*. They noticed my subtle act of solidarity—that mattered.

A week after the election, my students and I returned to our conversation about Kendrick. This time we drew connections to the election’s aftermath and discussed why

music from artists like Kendrick is vital in times of political, social, and personal strife. In addition to our conversation, I also introduced to students their two-part final project for the class.

Part one required students to participate in storytelling like Kendrick. I tasked them with creating an individual mural (digital, photographic, or original artwork) that reflected five different components of them: (a) a self-portrait, (b) their crew, (c) their homeplace, (d) an institution they exist within and navigate, and (e) a social issue with which they are confronted. In addition to having an image for each component, students were also required to have a caption that detailed the image they captured, why they captured it, and how it represents them. Upon completion, students presented their projects on a collective presentation day.

Part two required students to participate in group storytelling. I tasked students with creating a community mural (once again, digital, photographic, or original artwork) that bridged the experiences, knowledge, realities, concerns, and passions that they had just shared in their individual murals. The intention was to locate parallels across their experiences and to nurture community. Once again students presented their projects on a collective presentation day. Among my favorite projects were two original rap songs with accompanying music videos. One song sampled Drake's *Poundcake* and spoke to the three students' challenges of growing up in broken homes, watching their parents work long hours for little return, and the constant hustle to survive in San Francisco. The other track spoke to issues around education equity including standardized testing and tracking, which was poignantly titled, *Fuck the System*. No matter the medium, students relished the opportunity to use their technological skills and express their creativity.

This was the first time that I had piloted a project around Kendrick Lamar. I assign numerous hands-on, creative, and collaborative projects in my courses but I have never been outwardly explicit or expressive to students about where my inspiration comes from. The project was not perfect (and I continue to think of ways to improve it), but what I learned in assigning it was that it gave students the chance to embrace each other and represent their own brand of consciousness. It also gave them a space to be angry and candid without being criminalized or criticized. My successes in the classroom last semester were a culmination of inspired experiences and practices. I unapologetically laced up my 72-10s, wore a Kendrick inspired t-shirt, and injected hip-hop into my curriculum and practice because I knew that I should *and* could. Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko taught me that.

### **Asian American Womanist Hip-Hop Pedagogy**

What this research journey has taught me repeatedly is that hip-hop pedagogy is powerful, relevant, and necessary. I have also learned that there are new, emerging threads of it. Asian American woman educators are pioneering another type of hip-hop pedagogy and that deserves naming. What does Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy look like? I return back to Zion I's *Bird's Eye View* as inspiration and ground my conceptualization of Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy through the acronym *VIEW*.

To view something is to possess the ability to see or be seen from a particular place. As I see it, Asian American women educators are hip-hop and pedagogical visionaries, too. I utilize *VIEW* as a means to honor their many visions of what

transformative education looks like. As a standpoint and practice, Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy derives from experiencing the world from nuanced, intersectional places. It disrupts traditional educational practices by making love, justice, and care visible in and out of the classroom. It is panoramic pedagogy. Below I conceptualize the pillars of *VIEW* in more detail.

### *Vibe and Vibration*

Inspired by the strong collectivist and community values of many Asian and Asian American cultures, Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy is committed to an atmosphere of collaboration, embrace, and intimacy that is felt across student-to-student relationships, teacher-to-student relationships, student-to-teacher relationships, and classroom-to-community relationships. Central to that atmosphere is a kinetic energy that is supportive, patient, and encompassing of numerous positionalities, experiences, and interests. Vibration also entails that the entire body is in motion. The heart, mind, and spirit cannot be treated as separate entities. Instead they are collective entities that are used together to uplift and transform spaces of learning in partnership with others.

### *Indignation*

Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy challenges widely praised behaviors of passivity, docility, and obedience in schooling. Instead, it welcomes defiance. It firmly believes that indignation is the premise for empowered learning, subversive action, and social transformation. It also understands that indignation is not mutually exclusive from joy (Notoma, 2016). As Audre Lorde (1984) reminds, “Focused with precision [anger]

can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (p. 124). Anger is powerful because it serves as a reminder as to why life is sacred. As we utilize our anger to resist and transform injustices, we are also able to simultaneously experience the countless joys of life.

### *Earnest*

The existence and presence of hip-hop within Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy is not cheesy, additive, or appropriated. It is not enough for an educator to implement hip-hop lyrics into a lesson plan or simply dress in hip-hop trends. Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy is obligated to promoting, sustaining, and evolving hip-hop arts, aesthetics, and legacies in a way that is earnest. It is also responsible for making hip-hop accessible to communities that may lack the invitation or space to participate. In addition to strengthening the existence of hip-hop arts, I am guided by bell hooks’ (1990) concept of yearning as I think about Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy as an earnest practice. Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy is committed to building solidarity to end domination and oppression while calling attention to our shared humanity, passion, and longing for freedom (hooks, 1990).

### *“Woke”*

According to Charles Pulliam-Moore (2016), the term “woke” is a hallmark of the socially-minded Black social media community. The term is generally credited to Erykah Badu who used the term to embolden others to remain cautious and critical of social issues. The term continues to evolve, especially regarding context, but by and large, it

means a critical awareness or, “a healthy paranoid, especially about issues of racial and political justice” (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). Either way, it is a commitment to critical consciousness and the safekeeping of each other. The final conceptualization of Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy is the insistence of staying “woke.” For the Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogue, this demands staying aware of how one benefits from systems of privilege, while also actively working to use those privileges to create meaningful change for the most marginalized. This work is not an individual endeavor. Our consciousness is only powerful when we work in collaboration with others and with more than ourselves in mind. Staying “woke” also entails a commitment to lifelong learning. Even when we are educators, we are not done being educated. It is important that we practice humility in the learning process and continue to read, dialogue, and engage new material. Finally, staying “woke” means keeping up on hip-hop trends that matter to our young people. I am not encouraging us to forget about hip-hop’s pioneers or its “golden years.” I am also not suggesting that hip-hop purists cannot exist. I understand that hip-hop has been commercialized and co-opted in many ways. However, it does very little for our young people when we shame or ignore their trends, slang, dance moves, and music choices. When we do this, we are inadvertently rejecting them and their sensibilities. Knowing what moves and excites our young people is important to making our pedagogies relevant and meaningful. It is also a way for us to show our young people that we are invested in them—something that is imperative in this violent and tumultuous presidential era.

Asian American womanist hip-hop pedagogy is in its early stages of formation. I am certain that it will continue to shift and evolve. My hope is that it will become even

more responsive and radical in its endeavors. However, I do hope that its current form is promising and helpful in supporting young people and the educators who serve them through a multitude of ways of learning, loving, and living.

### **Research Limitations and Future Studies**

This study is limited in many ways. It did not address who is included and excluded from hip-hop pedagogy. I recognize that this is a pervasive critique about critical pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching practices. I also acknowledge that certain pedagogical practices and interventions are meant for specific communities of students despite not addressing that throughout this study. Hip-hop pedagogy is not meant for every student, or every educator, or every learning space.

Another way this study fall short is that it lacks an extensive discussion about hip-hop's commercialization, misogyny, and exploitation. Although I explicitly say that I do not wish to romanticize hip-hop, I do recognize that I could have participated further in navigating and negotiating this tension. Hip-hop's messiness was not a central theme in any of the conversations that I had. As such, I did not feel an urgency to discuss it in great detail. As an extension of hip-hop's messiness, I recognize that hip-hop is very heteronormative. Part of revolutionizing research on hip-hop is making room for LGTBQIA<sup>13</sup> voices. I think this study would have benefitted greatly if I had been able to include more voices and experiences that are relegated to the margins.

One question that I thought a lot about when going through this research journey

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<sup>13</sup> Acronymn for Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Queer/Questioning, Intersexed, Asexual.

was, *what happens when hip-hop and hip-hop pedagogy falls short?* I think this is an important question to explore and does return to the concern of who is and is not a recipient of this pedagogical practice. This question and reflection could be situated as a shortcoming but also a place to continue the research.

With research limitations comes a clear pathway for future studies. This study can deepen its contributions to numerous bodies of research by including a higher quantity of Asian American women educators as well as more diversity in racial, cultural, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities. I also believe this study can further develop by increasing the amount of conversations had as well as the length of time to collect data. During my conversations with Irene, she often told me to check back in 6 to 9 months to better understand and articulate the tempo and vibe of her courses. Due to constraints of time, I was not able to that but I do believe added time to study would have yielded even richer data.

### **Conclusion**

It has been over 3 years since I first dreamt about this project and nearly 2 years since I last sat down and talked to Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko. A lot has changed since then. Miss Mandy is still at LCPA and is now working as an instructional coach. She left her full-time position as an 11<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in order to attend school full-time. She is now pursuing a master's in counseling at San Jose State University. When I asked her why she did not choose to balance teaching and graduate school together, she replied tenderly, "I just don't think it's fair to my students." In addition to her new roles as an instructional coach and graduate student, Miss Mandy continues to

serve with Rock the School Bells and recently celebrated her 7th year of service with the organization.

Miss Mandy and I communicate often and have seen each other a few times in the last 2 years. A little over a year ago, we took a free community kickboxing class with our partners and followed up our workout with dim sum and boba tea. Miss Mandy has invited me numerous times to the yoga studio she frequents and we have made many intentions to get together to do nail art. Last spring, Miss Mandy reached out to me for advice on applying to graduate school. We met up in her neighborhood again and walked to grab sushi as we chatted about funding, different institutions, and the application process. Before I got to her house, she had prepared a list of questions to ask me and during our walk, I started answer them—but not without her grabbing her phone and recording me first.

Kuttin' Kandi has since moved out of the Bay Area and back to San Diego. She has also become a mother again. She and her partner welcomed their second child Sól into the world last spring as Miracle transitioned from baby to toddler. Kuttin' Kandi is still active in the community and consistently shares her vision, voice, and talent at panels, talks, and conferences. She hopes to return to full-time work at an institution or community organization soon.

Irene continues to balance mothering, teaching, freelancing, and community work. She is still teaching Asian American Studies at SFSU and Dance and Asian Studies at USF. Last academic year, Irene and I shared a couple of mutual students. Needless to say, she is still a beloved pedagogue and professor. When Irene and I last spoke, she was spending a lot of time promoting and sustaining her women-led creative agency that she

started in partnership with other women. Irene's work is inspiring new generations of Pinay entrepreneurs.

I have not had much of an opportunity to catch up with Aiko. I know that she is incredibly busy. I have run into her a few times at our local grocery store where we exchanged pleasantries. From what I have seen, she is still actively teaching and sharing her love for dance. Her talent as an educator and dancer remains cherished and revered in the hip-hop community, especially the South Bay Area hip-hop community.

An update on this study's participants would not be complete without an update about me. I am as much a part of this study as Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko are. I started this research journey run down, weary, and depressed. I abandoned my original research trajectory and started anew because, in so many ways, I was in search of hope. There were far too many days when graduate school and writing felt impossible. In the middle of writing this dissertation, I published a chapter in an anthology that spoke to my wounding and rupturing in graduate school. I was so frustrated with the process that I somehow managed to write a chapter about how frustrated I was... with the process. When I would return to writing my dissertation, I would break down before I reopened any document. I struggled immensely through articulating literature, understanding methodology, and asserting my voice and creativity as a scholar. That was until I began writing the four portraits in this study.

The stories of Miss Mandy, Kuttin' Kandi, Irene, and Aiko and the trust they put in me to construct their portraits created an insulated space of existence and affirmation. I was fully present at every juncture of every portrait. This was much more than them looking like me, sounding like me, teaching like me, or sharing similar cultural and

ethnic backgrounds. It was that they loved like me. Their vulnerabilities, risks, and efforts as educators taught me to do and give the same to the writing process. They gave me the chance to document their stories and that served as a beautiful reminder that I had to give the writing process a chance, too.

Perhaps what has changed the most in the last few years is the new sociopolitical context that we all exist in. The new administration is a couple months into its tenure and it is just as terrifying—if not more terrifying—than I thought it would be. I could lose hope but I won't because the richer, wider, brighter view that hip-hop has given me reminds me time and time again that we really will be alright.

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