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Shop talk: The influence of hip hop on Filipino–American barbers in San Diego

ABSTRACT

Barber culture frequently intersects with hip hop. Barbershops often incorporate rap music, street wear apparel and popular culture into their daily environment. In tandem, an important part of hip hop culture is the haircuts and designs that people choose to get. Many Filipino-Americans across the United States utilize barber and hip hop culture to help create their own unique sense of identity – a sense of identity forged in the fires of diaspora and postcolonial oppression. In this first instalment of the GHHS ‘Show and Prove’ section – short essays on hip hop visual culture, arts and images – I illustrate the ways in which Filipino-Americans in San Diego use barber shops both as a means of entrepreneurialism and as a conduit to create a cultural identity that incorporates hip hop with their own histories of migration and marginalization. I interview Filipino-American entrepreneur Marc Canonizado, who opened his first San Diego-based business, Goodfellas Barbershop Shave Parlor, in 2014. We explore the complex linkages between barbershops, Filipino-Americans and hip hop culture, as well as discuss his life story and plans for the future.

KEYWORDS

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Imagine opening up your first barbershop in the heart of San Diego. With fresh paint on the walls, five brand new chairs complete with fully equipped workstations and a sleek designer logo, you are ready to do a grand opening for your family and friends. During the gathering, a fellow barber spots the famous battle rapper, Supernatural, at a nearby store. You frantically try to catch him to show your appreciation for his work and contributions to the game, all while trying to promote your newly opened shop. Supernatural walks into the family event, and even proceeds to bless the celebration with a freestyle shouting out the local business.

I still recall when Marc Canonizado, a Filipino-American barber and co-owner of Goodfellas Barbershop Shave Parlor, texted me immediately after his 'family and friends grand opening' describing how ecstatic he was to have Supernatural stop by. To this day, he cites it as one of the greatest moments in his career.

The next time I was in the chair getting a fresh fade from Marc, his experience with Supernatural reignited our long-lasting conversation about how haircuts and hip hop have tremendously shaped who we are today.

HAIRCUTS AND HIP HOP

Barber culture frequently intersects with hip hop. Barbershops often incorporate rap music, street wear apparel and popular culture into their daily environment. Conversely, an important part of hip hop culture is the haircuts and designs that people choose to get. Alexander (2003) highlights these intersections by conceptualizing barbershops as a space of cultural currency, or cultural communities where information such as music and current events can be shared and relationships can be created. As just one notable example, HBO's 2018 series *The Shop* features LeBron James alongside guest stars discussing social and cultural issues in sports and entertainment as they receive haircuts.

Barbershop culture first garnered mainstream popularity in the United States with the *Barbershop* film franchise (2002). It featured an ensemble cast including Ice Cube, Cedric the Entertainer, Anthony Anderson and Eve. Mukherjee (2006) contends that the film series is a reflection of the 'ghetto fabulous aesthetic' of hip hop culture, which emphasizes the success of the black entrepreneur but simultaneously critiques the hegemonic discourses of neo-liberal capitalism. While much of the literature and mainstream media focus on black barbershop culture, you can similarly find many Filipino-Americans across the United States who also utilize barber and hip hop culture to help create their own unique sense of identity – a sense of identity forged, like that of African American communities, in the fires of diaspora and postcolonial oppression.

Similar to Mukherjee (2006), in this first instalment of the *GHHS* 'Show and Prove' section – short essays on hip hop visual culture, arts and images – I illustrate the ways in which Filipino-Americans in San Diego use barber shops both as a means of entrepreneurialism and as a conduit to creating a cultural identity that incorporates hip hop with their own histories of migration and marginalization.

FILIPINO-AMERICANS AND HIP HOP

Previous research has highlighted how Filipino-American culture has been long intertwined with hip hop. For example, Wang (2015) documents the

Fil-Am Bay Area mobile DJ scene from the 1970s to the 1990s. A cornerstone of this genre-defining movement, Legendary DJ Q-Bert, garnered national attention and eventually joined the Rock Steady Crew to win the 1992 DMC World DJ Championship. Female DJs also played a central role to the 1980s party scene. Wang interviews women who regularly snuck out of their traditional Filipino homes to stay out late and perform gigs ranging from garage parties to nightclubs. On the mic, Los Angeles Fil-Am rappers Kiwi (Jack DeJesus) and Bambu (Jonah Deocampo) gained popularity after their release of *Barrel Men* in 2006 as the rap group Native Guns (Viesca 2012). Drawing on their experiences from the Los Angeles Riots, both rappers organized to support broader movements of cultural activism rejecting neo-liberalism, class inequality, police brutality and racism. In particular, they used hip hop to navigate their own identities as Filipino-Americans in conjunction with the struggles of other racial minorities at the time.

Hip hop's reach in the Filipino-American community has also extended well beyond the music industry, and has long been intertwined with sports, film, clothing and fashion, and even hairstyles. For instance, accompanying the Bay Area DJ scene of the 1990s was a distinct sense of style and identity that utilized street brands and unique hairdos (Wang 2015). Javier (2014) similarly highlights how Pinoy Apparel merged urban fits with Filipino representation. Their projects ranged from the Revolt Jacket of 2009, which incorporated the Filipino flag in a half-zip cotton hoodie, to the PI/LA Snapback of 2010, a collaboration with MC Bambu and DJ Muggs of Cypress Hill and Soul Assassins.

Today, barbers across the United States still use hip hop as a source of inspiration for their urban style haircuts. Rich Mendoza, aka Rich the Barber, is the owner of *Filthy Rich Barber Shop* in New York. He attributes his success to his growing Instagram following and rap-star clientele, which includes the likes of Drake and Big Sean (Potkewitz 2019). On the West Coast, Jay-R Mallari has similarly created buzz around his craft. He resides in Vellejo, California and works at *Legends the Barbershop* on landmark Fairfax Ave. His clientele most notably features Stephen Curry of the NBA Golden State Warriors, but also includes Los Angeles Clippers' coach Doc Rivers and DJ/Record Producer Carnage (Quijano 2015). Their influence has been part of a larger movement of Fil-Ams incorporating their own histories into barber and hip hop culture. This article thus aims to contribute to the aforementioned research by examining the complex linkages between barbershops, Filipino-Americans and hip hop culture.

THE BARBER: ON BARBERSHOPS, FILIPINO-AMERICANS AND HIP HOP

Marc Canonizado (Figure 1), 36, is a Filipino-American entrepreneur who opened his first San Diego-based business, Goodfellas Barbershop Shave Parlor (store logo shown in Figure 2), in 2014. He studied sociology at CSU San Marcos, focusing on human interaction and the formation of culture. Using his knowledge of people and culture, Marc chose to become an entrepreneur and enrol in barber-college. He started a business out of his parents' backyard, cutting friends and family to build his clientele while working full time as an instructional teacher's aide at a local elementary school. Despite



Figure 1: Marc Canonizado cleaning up his client's beard at Goodfellas Barbershop Shave Parlor. All image credits: Marc Canonizado (@gfbsshaveparlor, Instagram) and Garrett Tartt (@findyourplayground, Instagram). Website: <https://goodfellas-barbershop-shave-parlour.business.site>.

cultural expectations from the Fil-Am community to work a traditional full-time job, Marc chose to do an apprenticeship at a local barbershop to gain experience. He remembers having to make the decision to go 'all-in' on cutting hair. To this day, he still credits his family, mentors and friends for helping him learn how to start and run a small business.

He eventually began working at Goodfellas Barber Shop, which was created in 2008 by Aaron Anderson. They worked together to build the brand and a client base heavily rooted in urban culture. The barbers cut in a shop that blasted rap music, discussed current events, and even had the occasional turntable session. On any given Monday, you could find them skateboarding outside or free styling over a beat. Notably, they were also able to bring together barbers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to come together and form a tight knit community. Marc recalls one of his favourite memories: cutting alongside his long-time mentor and cousin from the East Coast, Khalil Malamug. He discusses how inspiring it was to see both East and West Coast, regardless of race and gender, coming together to cut hair.

Marc, a first generation Filipino-American, credits hip hop culture (specifically rap music, art and urban streetwear) as major influences growing up in the San Diego Filipino-American community in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As it became clear in our barber shop reminiscences, we both recall growing up often having our Filipino identities relegated to the household and within ethnic enclaves. Our families spoke to us in both English and Tagalog, taught us our own family histories and incorporated Filipino cultural traditions and practices. Yet, to avoid standing out beyond our own community much of our



Figure 2: *Goodfellas Barber Shop Shave Parlor* logo. Marc Canonizado and Garrett Tartt.

cultural identity stayed in the home. We were instead encouraged to assimilate into ‘American’ culture, which included speaking English first, learning American customs, and adopting popular culture. Hip hop spoke to both of us and provided us with a means to express our own unique Fil-Am identity where we were often regarded as not Filipino enough, but also as not American enough. Viesca (2012) indicates that these experiences were part of a broader social process occurring in various locations across the United States where many Fil-Ams used hip hop to create meaning and identity through their own standards of cultural production.

In particular, Marc cites the overlap of barber and hip hop culture, with many haircuts being rooted in popular hip hop fashion trends. In the early 2000s, the popular trend of a perm with a high fade was inspired by rappers such as Easy-E and film characters such as Pinky from *Next Friday*. In addition, urban street wear, such as Stussy and Supreme, shaped barber culture when he was growing up. Even the latest sneaker drops were popular topics of discussion amongst the barbers. As Ricard Mendoza illustrates today with his daily use Supreme x Andis clippers, fashion and hair go hand in hand (Kusumadjaja 2017).

The intersections between barbershop, Filipino-American and hip hop culture frequently create intricacies and pitfalls that barbers have to navigate. Marc describes the subtle nuances necessary to better understand his



Figure 3: John Canonizado, a military veteran, putting in work at the shop. Marc Canonizado and Garrett Tartt.

clientele. Many of his customers are Fil-Am, and thus require an awareness of hair texture and stylistic influences. He adds that understanding key words in Tagalog, having shared common experiences and possessing similar cultural practices provides lots of shop talk during his clients' time in the chair. Yet, barbers also learn that these intersections can clash. For example, Rich Mendoza recalls repeatedly being denied job opportunities because of his ethnicity. Businesses frequently stated not wanting to hire him because they were not sure he could pull off urban haircuts (Potkewitz 2019). Jay Mallari also faced scrutiny from the local community for using the Filipino flag as a cape when giving free cuts during Filipino Heritage Night at the Golden State



Figure 4: John Canonizado trimming his son's hair at the shop. Marc Canonizado and Garrett Tartt.

Warriors' Oracle Arena (Conclara 2019). Mallari apologized upon being notified that the flag should not be used as a curtain or drape. He expressed his desire to proudly represent his heritage to the community and did not intend to desecrate the flag.

Furthermore, Fil-Am culture often emphasizes the importance of family, which often extends beyond kinship and includes close and long-time friends, as a result of migration and marginalization. Rich Mendoza recalls spending much of his childhood at his mother's beauty salon, which he has now transformed into his own business, *Filthy Rich Barber Shop* (Potkewitz 2019). Similarly, Marc cites the importance of family and friends who work alongside him. His younger brother, John Canonizado, can be seen cutting hair next to him every day. John remembers watching and learning from his brother when he was cutting friends and family in his parents' backyard. The practice is still a multi-generational family affair, as John can be seen trimming his son's hair at the shop (shown in Figure 4).



Figure 5a-b: The barbers taking family pictures at both Goodfellas shops. Marc Canonizado and Garrett Tartt.

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THE SHOP AND THE VISION

Once Goodfellas Barbershop started gaining popularity, Marc took out a loan of \$10,000 to open his own shop under the same brand name. The North Park area, an open LGBTQ and alliance community, was an ideal location for the Goodfellas brand, which supports diversity and inclusion within the San Diego community. The shop proudly flies the LGBTQ flag above their front door. Alan, a fellow barber, recalls the time when the chairs were filled with locals getting fades and undercuts for the upcoming annual 'LGBTQ PRIDE' festival. He discusses the influence of hip hop's line ups and designs that were popular during the event.

In addition, Marc emphasizes the importance of the military population to his business. Whether they are coming home from deployment, currently stationed at the local Navy bases, or retired, many of the clients are looking for fresh haircuts with clean line-ups and fades. John (a military veteran himself) explains how the Navy plays a special role for Filipino-Americans (shown in Figure 4) – especially Fil-Am men. Marc, John and I were all born in California because our fathers joined the Navy and were stationed in San Diego, a large Navy town. Indeed, Villegas (2016) contends that it is essential to understand the linkages between the military and Filipino-American identities, and more importantly how hip hop culture (which includes fashion and hairstyles) can act as a mode of expression and identification for Fil-Am military members dating back to the 1980s.

Ultimately, barber and hip hop culture are inextricably tied to one another. Marc thanks hip hop for shaping his identity and playing such an important role for many San Diegans, Filipino-Americans and barber cultures. He reminds himself every day that he is living his dream – interacting with people, embracing a culture that raised him and owning his own business cutting hair. He remains thankful that he is able to work with his brother every day and see his children and nephew grow up in the shop over the last four years.

More importantly, he prides himself on giving back to the community, which shaped him by supporting local businesses and encouraging a family environment (Figure 5). He aims to follow in the footsteps of fellow barbers like Marc Bustos, a Fil-Am barber who gives free haircuts to people around the world (Yan 2017). He hopes that the future holds more opportunities for him to help others grow and succeed, much in the same way that others who paved the road before him did.

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