

## **The Hood Formation of Vietnamese American Hip-Hop Subjectivities**

By: Dennis Nguyen

### **Introduction**

In the late 1990s, a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American hip-hop emcee, known as Khanh Nho, released several of his songs through Vietnamese and Asian American internet forums. Most of his songs were lyrically in Vietnamese got circulated through the cyber-world, and became the common hip-hop music among many Vietnamese American youths. In 2002, Khanh was featured in Thai Minh Ngo's, also known as Thai or Thai Viet G, song, *Vietnamese Gang*, on Thai's first album *Portland Love EP (2002)* (VietRapper, 2013). Together, Khanh and Thai shocked the Vietnamese American community by being the first Vietnamese hip-hop emcees. Not too long after Khanh and Thai released their music, Vietnamese American hip-hop emcees proliferated throughout the cyber-world. Today, hip-hop music and culture have been adopted by and are proliferating among middle-class Vietnamese youths in Vietnam. Khanh and Thai are credited as being the most prominent Vietnamese American hip-hop emcees (VietRapper, 2013). This research paper explores the subjectivities, authenticities, and identities of Vietnamese American youths. I will argue that through hip-hop, Vietnamese American youths are hybridizing subjectivities in light of divergent histories, cultures, and experiences to construct an identity that is both Vietnamese and American. First, I will illustrate hip-hop dichotomy by tracing the origin and formation of hip-hop as a counter-hegemonic movement of cultural resistance that was originated and embraced by disenfranchised and marginalized youths of color; moreover, I will explain how hip-hop has been incorporated into the mainstream culture and what hip-hop has become in the mainstream culture. Second, I will discuss why and how Asian American youths gravitate toward hip-hop, and their positions and authenticities within

this culture. Finally, I will demonstrate the complex and subtle ways in which Vietnamese American youths forge elements of both hip-hop and Vietnamese cultures to create communities and spaces for their hybridizing subjectivities and identities.

## **Literature Review**

### *Introduction*

Much of the existing literatures on hip-hop subjectivities among Asian American youths have been focused on other Asian American ethnic groups; there is no research that examines Vietnamese American hip-hop subjectivities. I will captivate the concepts and theories that have been argued and demonstrated for other Asian American ethnic groups' hip-hop subjectivities to apply with Vietnamese American hip-hop subjectivities and identities. The common perception within the Vietnamese American community is that Vietnamese American youths who are drawn to hip-hop culture are seen as “bad kids” (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 201). These youths are considered as delinquent children “who show no interest in their own ethnic community” (Zhou & Bankston, 1998, p. 201), and that they have become too Americanized. However, Zhou and Bankston (1998) argued that these children who are considered as bad kids have failed to find a space within the Vietnamese American community, and that because they experience cultural alienation within their own ethnic community; they form their own social network, support system, and their own codes of conducts (p. 201). The same argument can be made with Vietnamese American youths who join gangs—that is—they experience “double marginalization” (Vigil, Yung, & Cheng, 2004, p. 210) from both American society and their own ethnic community. Vietnamese American youths who gravitate toward hip-hop culture are hybridizing subjectivities with different histories, experiences, and cultures. They adopt hip-hop to formulate

their own communities and spaces, and to exchange these different experiences, histories, and cultures; furthermore, to negotiate, converge, and express their multiple identities.

### *Counter-hegemony: Origin and Formation of Hip-Hop*

Originated by disenfranchised black and Puerto Rican youths in Bronx, New York, hip-hop became a new phenomenon in the 1970s (Park, 2005; Woo, 2013). Tricia Rose conveys hip-hop culture includes rap music, graffiti arts, and break-dance (as cited in Maira, 1998, p. 357) that has developed into an idiom of expression for various youths regardless of race, class, and location (Maira, 1998). Other scholars have extended the fourth and essential element that played a vital role in the recreation of hip-hop culture: Deejaying (Schlund-Vials, 2008; Brown, 2012; Woo, 2013). These four elements of hip-hop culture are essential in providing as “sites of wisdom and space of knowledge” (Schlund-Vials, 2008, p. 12) for hip-hop youth. When hip-hop was first originated, it represented the voice of the oppressed and disenfranchised youths of color who were voiceless (Schlund-Vials, 2011; Woo, 2013). Hip-hop was formed as a subculture that did not privileged whiteness, which gave youths of color another avenue to deal with structural conditions of inequalities (Maria, 1998). Structural inequalities in postindustrial–youth of color faced racism, unemployment, and marginalization–hip-hop culture critiqued these dire conditions (Maria, 1998). Hip-hop emcees such as Public Enemy used their artistic lyrics to expressed civil disobedience against the system that marginalized urban youths of color (Woo, 2013). Hence, hip-hop culture has political roots embedded in the sociopolitical and economic inequalities experienced by youths of color in urban communities, and formulated into a counter-hegemonic subculture of youths’ resistance against the dominate mainstream culture.

However, like any other subcultures that become popularized, hip-hop has been incorporated into mainstream culture by corporations in order to make profits. This has shifted

hip-hop from being a vehicle of progressive political resistance by disenfranchised youths of color, to being a more commercially viable and driven culture. Due to corporations' controls and influences, hip-hop is now seen as having "homophobic and misogynistic overtones, celebration of party culture, materialism, and general lack of lyrical inventiveness" (Woo, 2013, p. 8). In addition, in our current globalized world, hip-hop has become transnational and globalized (Park, 2005; Schlund-Vials, 2008), and these controlled imageries depicted of hip-hop have become internalized in the minds of most people (Yeh & Lama, 2006). As a result, many fans, producers, and even scholars feel that the current trajectory of hip-hop has lost its political roots; claiming that hip-hop is dead (Schlund-Vials, 2011; Woo, 2013). For these reasons, hip-hop has negative connotations in many people's perception throughout the world.

#### *Asian American Youths Gravitation and Positions within Hip-Hop*

Asian American youths gravitate toward hip-hop because of their geographic locations. In many United States' metropolitan areas where there are high concentrations of Asian Americans, subcultures of hip-hop have emerged. For instance, the "Hyphy Movement" in the San Francisco Bay Area, G-Funk in Los Angeles, and Crunk in the South (Brown, 2012). Brown (2012) states that in the San Francisco Bay Area, youths take great pride in their local hip-hop artists such as, "Too \$hort, Richie Rich, E-40, 2pac, M.C. Hammer, RBL Posse, and Rappin' 4-Tay" (p. 49). In urban communities such as Oakland and Berkeley, California, Asian American youths are drawn to hip-hop due to the cultural similarities of growing up in low-income neighborhoods between black and Asians (Yeh & Lama, 2006; Brown, 2012). Therefore, Asian American youths adapt hip-hop culture because of their locations, and the influences of local hip-hop's subculture in their communities.

Another reason why Asian American youths are influenced by hip-hop is because of the racial tensions in urban communities. Asian American youths embrace hip-hop because they could relate to dire conditions and the experience of living in low-income communities in hip-hop music. They adopt hip-hop culture and swags (vernacular and mannerism) “as a mean to survive” (Brown, 2012, p. 50) in these communities. For example, Tibetan American youths in Berkeley adopt hip-hop culture because most of them are from impoverished families and face racial prejudices in their schools and neighborhoods (Yeh & Lama, 2006). In these low-income communities, Asian American youths are caught in-between the binary racial hierarchy of United States’ race relations (Brown, 2012). The model minority depiction of Asian Americans forces Asian American youths to embrace hip-hop culture in order to “legitimize their position as ethnic minorities” (Brown, 2012, p. 50). The model minority stereotype also divides Asian American elders and youths. For instance, elders expect their youths to conform to the myth and perform whiteness; while on the other hand, youths adopt hip-hop to counter their parents’ expectations. Asian American youths emulating hip-hop culture are jammed in different expectations: community leaders and their peers (Yeh & Lama, 2006; Brown, 2012). The elders in Asian American communities have claimed that Asian American youths who are influenced by hip-hop are mimicking blackness (Yeh & Lama, 2006; Brown, 2012; Woo, 2013). As a result, both internalization of racism from their parents and societal racism are the contributing factors of why Asian American youths gravitate toward hip-hop culture.

Given the increased presence of Asian Americans in hip-hop, numerous fans, producers, and even intellectuals have questioned and confronted Asian Americans’ status and positions within hip-hop. To illustrate, heated debates between Oliver Wang and Kenyon Farrow (as cited in Woo, 2013, pp. 22-38) show the complications and legitimacy of Asian American youths in

hip-hop. Farrow fears and claims that Asian Americans, just like what Whites have done in the past with Blues, Rock and Roll, and Rhythm and Blues, are another group of oppressors who utilize and benefit off of black culture. Wang, however, alludes and defends that Asian Americans should not be the scapegoats, but instead, one should examine the music industry as a profitable industry. Farrow fires back stating that given Asian Americans are doing better than blacks economically, they appear to be reproducing anti-Black racism and presuming allegiance to white social interests, and have capitalized their status to exercise dominance over African Americans. Recent scholars, however, have suggested that it is the youth's authentic experience and subjectivities that should be what hip-hop represents (Yeh & Lama 2006; Schlund-Vials, 2008; Brown, 2012). Some of these scholars asserted that since hip-hop has been incorporated into mainstream culture and "sold out" its roots, Asian American hip-hop artists are bringing it back to its political foundation and authentic experience of youths of color; given that hip-hop was emerged out of the authentic experience of working-class urban youths (Park, 2005; Schlund-Vials, 2011; Brown, 2012). Thus, the positionalities, authenticities, and subjectivities of Asian American youths in hip-hop are often being questioned because of various institutional influences and the complex experience of Asian American hip-hop artists.

#### *Creating Spaces: Forging Elements of Hip-hop and Asian American Culture*

Since Asian American youths in urban communities are marginalized even within their own ethnic communities, some adopted and utilized hip-hop to create spaces and communities to express their subjectivities and to negotiate their multiple identities. Through hip-hop, Asian American youths form their own communities that they could relate to; Sharma (2010) calls this "communities of sameness." Sharma (2010) conveys many Indian American youths who gravitate toward hip-hop are neither rejecting their Indian ethnicity or mimicking blackness, but

instead they are crafting alternatives to what she termed as “ethnic hip-hop” (p. 85). Ethnic hip-hop is an extension of hip-hop culture that ethnic artists combine their ethnic cultural elements such as languages, musical instrumentals, histories, and experiences with hip-hop elements. praCh’s, a famous Cambodian American rapper, music would fit in this notion of ethnic hip-hop. praCh blends traditional Khmer musical instruments with hip-hop bass lines in his music. He also raps about the historical experience of the Cambodian genocide under Pol-Pot’s regime and Cambodian American resettlement struggles (Schlund-Vials, 2008). Furthermore, ethnic artists use hip-hop to negotiate their multiple identities. For example, one of the subjects in Sharma’s (2010) study, D’Lo, utilizes hip-hop for “flipping the gender scripts” (p. 139), converging and performing all three of s/he identities: American, Hindus, and queers. Ethnic artists use hip-hop to deconstruct and reconstruct identities and subjectivities in a society that rejects and refuses to recognize them as wholly human (Park, 2005). Moreover, ethnic hip-hop has become a global race consciousness (Sharma, 2010). For instance, Schlund-Vials (2008) traces how praCh’s music has become a transnational phenomenon. Thus, many Asian American hip-hop artists blend elements of both hip-hop and their ethnic cultural elements to create spaces and communities where they can express their subjectivities and identities.

### *Conclusion*

Although various scholars have examined Asian American youths’ subjectivities, identities, and authenticities in hip-hop (Maria, 1998; Park, 2005; Yeh & Lama, 2006; Schlund-Vials, 2008; Sharma, 2010; Schlund-Vials, 2011; Brown, 2012; Woo, 2013), there is no existing research about Vietnamese American youths within hip-hop culture. Like their Asian American counterparts, Vietnamese American youths gravitate toward hip-hop to create spaces and communities of hybridizing subjectivities, in which they are negotiating multiple identities by

converging different histories, cultures, and experiences. In addition, I will also provide some additional elements of hip-hop culture that have not been critically examined by scholars that Vietnamese American youths are participating and pioneering in: fashions and instrumental productions.

### **Analysis**

Vietnamese American youths who gravitate toward hip-hop forge elements of both Vietnamese and hip-hop cultures to craft alternative communities and spaces of hybridizing subjectivities to negotiate their multiple identities in light of divergent histories, cultures, and experiences. Through hip-hop, Vietnamese American youths are able to express selfhoods, self-virtues, and virtue-hoods, which are unique and authentic to them. I wish to coin a concept that will demonstrate my theory of why Vietnamese/Asian American youths adopt hip-hop culture that is necessary in comprehending these youths' experiences and behaviors. I call this concept that gravitates youths toward hip-hop as "Hood Performativity." Hood Performativity is a socially constructed ideology and performance that are based on individuals' actions, behaviors, and performance that are distinctly characterized "hood." The term hood is well known in the hip-hop communities as an urban area where people share similarities of urban cultural background, in which they live in and/or grew up in. Among the urban youth, hood is slang for neighborhood. Since hip-hop was originated in urban communities, hip-hop cultural elements are embedded in the urban or "hood" culture.

Essentially, what these Vietnamese/Asian American youths are doing by adopting hip-hop culture is performing hoodness. I borrow Judith Butler's (1990) concept of Gender Performativity, in which Butler hypothesized that gendered roles and norms are socially constructed and performed. I'm also offering my Hood Performativity concept as a counter



acculturation process that Tobias Hübinette (2007) coined as White Performativity. Hübinette conveys that many Korean adoptees in the West who were adopted by affluent European families are outperforming whiteness than white people themselves. Working off W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "Double Consciousness," Hübinette explains that Korean adoptees acknowledge that society refuses to see them as white but sees them as Asians, and they also know that they are Asians but performing whiteness. I am working off this concept; however, I call the consciousness of Vietnamese/Asian American youths in hip-hop as having a Hood-lens. Hood-lens is a perspective of how social, economic, gender, and other degree of multiplicities are functioned based on one's experiences and understandings of the hood culture.

Vietnamese/Asian American hip-hop performers can acknowledge two or more levels of identities consciousness when they perform hoodness through hip-hop. An epitomized example of how Vietnamese/Asian Americans are consciously performing hoodness on multiple levels of identities through hip-hop is D'Lo in Sharma's (2010) case study. S/he is performing his/her triple identities of being American, Hindu, and Queer, and is consciously crossing, blending, and redefining different identities, ontological domains, and praxis. D'Lo is from an urban area of Los Angeles; however, when one sees D'Lo performs, it is not complicated to see that D'Lo performs and demonstrates many different identities. Another example is in Woo's (2013) thesis, a Cambodian American rapper names, Jim, who grew up in a predominately white-suburb. By adopting hip-hop, Jim is performing hoodness; although, he is from different class, culture, ethnic boundaries. Jim may realize that society sees him as, ethnically Khmer, from affluent background, raised in a white-suburb culture, and most importantly performing hoodness through hip-hop. On the contrary, one can live in and/or grow up in an urban or hood community; however, instead of performing the hip-hop or hood culture, one can perform

whiteness and lives life as if s/he is from a suburb culture. Hence, similarly to Jim and D'Lo, Vietnamese American youths who gravitate toward hip-hop are performing hoodness. When Vietnamese American youths gravitate toward hip-hop culture and perform hoodness, they are formulating their own spaces and communities of hybridizing individuals and subjectivities, in which they are negotiating multiple identities by converging different histories, cultures, and experiences.

Earlier I mentioned the formation of hip-hop dichotomy: underground vs. mainstream. Vietnamese American hip-hop subjectivities are also replicating this dichotomy even within the Vietnamese American hip-hop community. The artists who remain underground are consistent with the political foundation of hip-hop culture. For instance, the group Heart2Exist, made of 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans, the two brothers, Le Huy Phong and Le Huy Phat, rap in both English and Vietnamese about political issues they experienced as 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans (Heart2Exist, 2013). In their song, *25 Years (Who I Am)*, released in 2000, twenty-five years after the Vietnam War ended, they expressed the 1.5 generation Vietnamese American identity crisis. Musically, this song is a blend of hip-hop percussions and bass lines with traditional Vietnamese musical instrument: plucked zither. Phat raps in English while Huy translates in Vietnamese. In verse one, they rap:

It's been 25 years since the end of the war  
Did Vietnam win who's keeping the score?  
The wounds have healed yet the scars remain  
Some of us too young to remember the pain  
Now the communist are in control  
The bloody flags are waving in the bitter cold  
No freedom of speech no right to vote  
That's why we left in our fishing boats  
No equality no human rights  
Forced to escape we lost so many lives  
So here we are in the U.S. of A.  
To start a new life it's a brand new day (Le & Le, 2000, Track 1).

The lyrics of this verse reflect the Vietnamese government's political repressions that forced millions of Vietnamese to escape Vietnam in the aftermath of the Vietnamese Civil War. Along with the criticisms of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's government, these brothers reveal the tragedies and pains of the Vietnamese boat people as well. In this song's bridges, they rap about their identity struggles:

Sometimes I wonder who I am?  
Asian or American?  
A lost generation searching for a home  
Eager to be found like words in a poem (Le & Le, 2000, Track 1).

The lyrics in their bridges demonstrate the questioning of their identities and sense of belonging as 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans growing up in America. As illustrated in their bridges, numerous other 1.5 Vietnamese Americans are struggling with their identities, and experiencing with issues of finding a "home" as 1.5 Vietnamese American refugee subjectivity. In their second verse, the brothers rap about Vietnamese refugees' resettlement process and obstacles in America. They also rap about Vietnamese American elders transmitting traditional values to the younger generation Vietnamese Americans:

Our parents had to work in restaurants  
Paint them nails even mow the lawns  
We ate free lunch in public schools  
Looked down upon cause it was uncool  
Made the best with what we've got  
Just to have something meant a lot  
My parents always say concentrate on your education  
When you get sick drink your herbal medication  
Respect your elders finish your rice  
Take pride in your culture and always think twice  
So here we are in the U.S. of A.  
To start a new life in a brand new way (Le & Le, 2000, Track 1).

Political themes and identities issues are expressed in all of their songs in both of their albums *Who I Am* and *Til The End* (2005). In their song *Take Me Back* in the *Til The End* album, the

brothers rap about experiencing racism in America. Because of the racism they experienced, they yearn to be back to a time when they did not have to experience any prejudices: their childhood in Vietnam. The two brothers rap:

Growing up Asian in Cali was tough  
But being a minority made things more rough  
I felt out of place like I didn't belong  
It was hard to understand the difference between right or wrong  
Had to learn a new language took ESL  
Wasn't til twelve til I spoke English well  
Kids were cruel made fun of the way I spoke  
Called me a FOB what a cruel little joke  
I used to walk home with tears in my eyes  
Asking why was I so different trying to hold in my Cry  
I remember once when I was ten  
I ran into this fellow this ignorant man  
He took his hands and slanted his eyes  
"Go back to where you belong" the man replied  
I didn't know what he meant so felt confused and sad  
Now that I understand I feel kinda mad (Le & Le, 2005, Track 4).

The lyrics aforementioned illustrate their struggle as 1.5 generation Vietnamese refugee subjectivity. They had difficulties of learning a new language and also experienced discriminations explicitly in schools and society. In their bridges and choruses, they emphasize these experiences with racism and they recollect nostalgic times of living in Vietnam. Phat and Huy rap:

Growing up different racism was a common theme  
Growing up different is harder than it seems  
But different is good if you know what I mean  
Different is unique just like our dreams  
Take me back to the days when things made sense  
Take me back to my innocence  
Take away the tears that have long since dried  
Give back to me my care-free smile (Le & Le, 2005, Track 4).

Heart2Exist like most 1.5 generation Vietnamese American hip-hop emcees, rap about political and identity issues and mix both Vietnamese and hip-hop cultural elements in their music. Thus,

for these underground artists, they are crafting alternative spaces and communities to express their subjectivities and identities in their music.

On the contrary, there are Vietnamese American hip-hop artists who have become successful with their music but are replicating the norms of mainstream hip-hop culture. These artists, however, are second and third generation Vietnamese American youths. For instance, one second generation Vietnamese American hip-hop artist who has become very successful with his hip-hop music is Thai Minh Ngo. Since his first released album, his music has gone international and he has collaborated with hip-hop artists in Vietnam. In 2010, Thai signed with an Asian Pacific American hip-hop record label based in San Jose, California, 454 Life Entertainment, owned by Chris Luu (454 Life Entertainment, 2013). Recently, 454 Life Entertainment has been in partnership with Universal Music. Thai has always explicitly rapped about the topics in the mainstream hip-hop culture such as gang violence, masculinity, materialism, substance abuse, misogyny, etc. As an illustration, in his first single, *Vietnamese Gang*, on his first album, *Portland Love EP*, he expresses his ultra-masculinity and gang's culture of conducts. One of his verses states as the following:

Hate me so I got to put it down for my click  
Screamin' out Vietnamese cause I'm down for my shit bitch  
We be the realest gooks that you ever know  
We be the thuggish ass Vietnamese fools up in P O bro  
So slow your role, don't wanna step  
Cause if you try to, I'm a have to ride through  
And put your ass in check foo  
It's like that my crew, we be the real cats  
Come to bomb on Vietnam tatted on my back  
Family love got my mind giving a fuck  
Shedding blood for the homies on the block bumpin slugs  
Cause it's the gang that I bang with (Ngo & Nho, 2002, Track 6).

The lyrics above are coded as being affiliated with a Vietnamese gang in Portland, Oregon (PO), and he is willing to die for his gang family by all means includes shooting their enemies in

public; therefore, expressing his masculinity and gang's culture of conducts. From the beginning of his career as a hip-hop artist, Thai has repeatedly rapped about the themes that fans, producers, and intellectuals would consider as mainstream hip-hop. Another second generation Vietnamese American hip-hop artist who is successful in his music career, and is replicating the norms of mainstream hip-hop culture is Jimmyboi. Based in Houston, Texas, Jimmyboi owns his own record label called Live2Hustle. The themes in his music are very similar to Thai's music, that is, he raps about what Woo (2013) states as having "misogynistic overtones, celebration of party culture, materialism" (p. 8). In his song, *What You Know About Me*, Jimmyboi (2013) raps:

Still repping my hometown  
That's H-Town, y'all flakey  
See you suckas be talking  
When I come around, y'all shakey  
I just laugh at you suckas  
You wannabe hustlers, getting no cake b  
Yeah I be hearing that hate  
But I don't get phased, I'm getting my cake  
And when I be in their face  
They're soft as a cake, they're trying to say grace  
So I just stay on the chase  
I'm getting this pape, ain't trying to be late  
We taking this all of the way  
Live2hustle, L2H

The aforementioned lyrics of Jimmyboi's are coded for making money, and he expresses that he does it better than other people when it comes to making money. Phrases such as, "I'm getting my cake" and "I'm getting this pape" are ways in which hip-hop artists code to illustrate that they are making money. His record label "Live2Hustle" (Live2Hustle, 2013) is explicitly conveying that members of this group live to accumulate capitals. Both Thai and Jimmyboi represent the Vietnamese American hip-hop artists who have become very successful and are replicating norms of the mainstream hip-hop culture. Although they are reproducing mainstream

hip-hop norms, they are also creating spaces and communities to express their subjectivities and identities that are authentic to themselves.

It is not my intention to state that by performing the mainstream hip-hop norms artists would become successful, nor am I saying that underground artists are unsuccessful. What I'm hoping to do here is to problematize the hip-hop dichotomy that some scholars have claimed that the mainstream artists perpetuate mainstream norms while underground artists are consistent with the political foundation of hip-hop culture (Sharma, 2010; Schlund-Vials, 2011; Brown, 2012; Woo, 2013). I have mentioned Khanh Nho in the introduction, a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American, who rapped about the norms of the mainstream hip-hop culture. Khanh failed to establish a career as an artist and eventually quit rapping to help his father run a small restaurant in Florida (VietRapper, 2013). I believe that since he rapped about the mainstream norms in Vietnamese and cannot reach a mass audience for his music, he did not become successful with his music. However, because Khanh did not reach a mass audience and did not become successful, he is seen as an underground artist in the Vietnamese hip-hop community. On the other hand, an Oakland-based group calls the Gookstaz, made up of second generation Vietnamese Americans, replicates the mainstream norms and is very successful as hip-hop musicians. Nevertheless, their music and other forms of hip-hop expressions are political. For instance, they code terms such as "for sure," "friendship," and "water" into "4Shushi," "ninjaz," and "OooNaGGi"; therefore, they are showing their Asian American pan-ethnic identity and solidarity. In addition, they changed the names of cities of Oakland and Sacramento into "OakNam" and "SaigonMento" (GookstaZ Soundclick, 2013) as a way to express their hybridizing subjectivities. Furthermore, the name of their group, Gookstaz (gooks), is a racialized term. It was and still is use by racists to subjugate and discriminate Asians and Asian

Americans. However, by using a racialized name that has been historically derogatory toward Asians and Asian Americans, they are demonstrating counter-hegemonic struggles by turning it into a sense of empowerment and liberation from racial antagonism. They changed and coded terms to express counter-hegemonic expressions and to strip the original meanings of these terms from the dominant culture and norms. These examples demonstrate how they are being politicalized: racially and ethnically. The Gookstaz is expressing semiotic guerrilla warfare in their hip-hop music and subjectivity; in a sense, they are creating their own subculture and community. As a result, the hip-hop dichotomy of underground versus mainstream is problematic in terms of which hip-hop artists are authentic to the political foundation or have sold out by performing norms of the mainstream hip-hop culture.

The essential differences between which artists are “underground or mainstream” is their ability to reach mass audience, which is the middle-class consumption. For instance, for the 1.5 generation Vietnamese American hip-hop artists, there are multiple barriers of reaching the middle-class audience. Since these 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans rap about the issues that are political and in Vietnamese, they have limited number of fan base. For them, their only outlets to publicize their music are social media such as YouTube, internet forums, and their own personal websites. If they do not have the middle-class consumption, these artists struggle to get their music heard and they would starve as artists. For instance, like Khanh, some other Vietnamese American hip-hop artists have given up as well to find an alternative income to support themselves. In contrast, Vietnamese American hip-hop artists who have become successful and replicating the norms of the mainstream hip-hop culture are because they can pull in a wider audience to consume their music. These artists’ music is universal and consumed by various youths, regardless of race, class, or gender boundaries. They also have professional



publicities and promotions to draw in more fans as a result of being successful artists. However, I believe that the second generation Vietnamese American hip-hop artists are successful because they are able to express the urban vernacular and mannerism at higher degrees than the 1.5 generation Vietnamese American; this is because they are born and raised in the United States. With this advantage, fans would consider their music to be more authentic than the 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans counterpart.

Furthermore, how some Vietnamese American youths are performing hoodness through hip-hop is by designing their own urban outfits, or wearing urban outfits that are characterized as hip-hop cultural fashion. Numerous Vietnamese American youths are wearing fitted-baseball hats, sneaker-shoes, and t-shirts and/or jerseys of their local professional sport teams. By wearing these gears and apparels, they are showing their allegiances to their, “turfs” (Brown, 2012, p. 103), local urban communities, which is an epitomized of hip-hop cultural fashion. This of course, by wearing these gears and apparels, they are also conveying the reputations of their urban communities. Moreover, with affordable and accessible tools of making their own t-shirts—print screenings or designing them on online—they are creating their own apparels for self-expressions of their subjectivities, identities, and affiliations. To illustrate, every time I would perform live, I would wear one of my t-shirts that says “South East Asian” with my Oakland Athletics fitted-baseball cap. When I wear these apparels, I want express my political and ethnic identities along with the urban community that I am affiliated with. In this sense, I am articulating my political, ethnic, and perhaps, even class identities; nevertheless, most importantly, I am performing my hip-hop subjectivity through urban fashion.

Another element of hip-hop that Vietnamese American youths are performing and pioneering in is hip-hop instrumental productions. This element is considered as a category of

hip-hop elements that is somewhere in-between Deejaying and beatboxing. Like any other cultures, hip-hop is also constantly evolving and transforming its cultural elements. Beatboxing use to be hip-hop percussions that one would make by using just the sounds of his or her mouth. However, recently artists could produce hip-hop instrumentals without actually being in a studio in our modern-day technology era, or using the sounds of his or her mouth. All one has to do is download hip-hop instrumental software products off the internet, and then begins producing hip-hop instrumentals. Some Vietnamese American youths have sampled traditional Vietnamese folklore songs and blend them with hip-hop percussions. Many Vietnamese American hip-hop artists have rapped to melodies that they sampled from a traditional Vietnamese musical instrument of monochord with hip-hop base lines. Thus, by mixing the traditional Vietnamese musical instrumentals with hip-hop instrumentals, they are forging elements of both Vietnamese and hip-hop cultures to express their subjectivities and identities that are both Vietnamese and American.

## **Conclusion**

I have demonstrated that through hip-hop, Vietnamese American youths are hybridizing subjectivities in light of divergent histories, cultures, and experiences to construct an identity that is both Vietnamese and American. By blending elements of both hip-hop and Vietnamese cultures, Vietnamese American youths are creating their own community and space of hybridizing subjectivities to negotiate, converge, and express their multiple identities. They are producers of the ever evolving hip-hop culture, and are forming their own ethnic hip-hop culture, space, and community. Moreover, Vietnamese American youths participating in hip-hop are also pioneering in its cultural fashion and instrumental productions. The significant of this research paper is to illustrate that many Vietnamese American youths who gravitate toward hip-hop are

marginalized in the mainstream culture and their ethnic communities. These youth experience double marginalization; however, instead of turning to gang's culture to find a space and community, they utilize hip-hop to express and negotiate their multiple identities and subjectivities. For instance, artists such as Thai turned to hip-hop as an alternative path to the one he had before hip-hop: gang affiliation. Hip-hop provides them a space to creatively express their authentic experience and self-hoods.

Future research should examine how Vietnamese hip-hop has become a transnational phenomenon. Many Vietnamese American hip-hop artists have gone to Vietnam and other parts of the globe to collaborate with other Vietnamese hip-hop artists. In addition, hip-hop dances have also infiltrated Vietnam. Many middle-class Vietnamese youths have embraced hip-hop dances in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City. Future research should investigate how Vietnamese hip-hop artists in Vietnam influence Vietnamese American and other Vietnamese diasporic communities. A limitation of this research project that I did not cover is examining spoken-words artists. Spoken-words artists are considered as a subcategory of the hip-hop cultural element of emcees. Just like rappers and singers, spoken-words artists are vocalists who express their experience, identities, and subjectivities in rhythms as well. Thus, this makes them emcees of hip-hop culture. Many Vietnamese American spoken-words artists have become very successful with their poetry such as Bao-Phi, who appeared in HBO's Russell Simmons Def Poetry.

To conclude, it seems to me that some scholars are constructing the hip-hop dichotomy as; the underground hip-hop artists are fighting the war of maneuver, while the mainstream hip-hop artists are fighting the war of position. As an underground hip-hop producer and an academic, I would like to offer my perspective on hip-hop and its culture. Hip-hop producers are

the products of their environments. They utilize hip-hop as a way to escape the structural inequalities and conditions of inner city. However, hip-hop gets blamed for the problems of America when all hip-hop producers are voices of the inner city and marginalized people. We should not be debating about whether “real hip-hop” is the underground or “sold out” mainstream. To me, both underground and mainstream hip-hop producers are political in their own way. By replicating and performing mainstream norms, artists tend to get negative imagery and connotations. However, if one is to look at the real reasons why they chose to become hip-hop artists in the first place, it is not complicated to acknowledge that these artists’ main intention is to make it out the urban settings. This is what hip-hop artists mean when they say “trying to make it,” or “trying to make it out of the hood.” When someone is constantly trying to find options to make it out the improvised urban communities; that itself is a political act. Moreover, these artists are self-expressing and creating their own communities for their subjectivities and identities in a society that rejects them as wholly human, and “culture and communal self expression are perhaps most important sites of resistance, the signs in everyday life of an ongoing political struggle” (Fusco, 1993, p. 84). Just like the social conscious hip-hop artists, if fans or agents could relate to their music, these “mainstream” artists are, in a way, dialoguing the inner city struggles. When these artists do become successful, they are also creating jobs for others who normally would not be able to find jobs in the inner city settings. This is what hip-hop supposes to be about. When an artist becomes successful, he or she should give back to the community by using his or her positions in hip-hop to help as much people as he or she could as he or she is climbing up the economic ladder and social status.

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