

UC Berkeley

Recent Work

Title

Hip-Hop: It's the dash in "Filipeanut-American"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2n87c0zn>

Author

Bass, Angela

Publication Date

2010-05-08

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2n87c0zn#supplemental>

Hip-Hop: It's the dash in "Filipeanut-American"

Can a young San Francisco-born man find his Filipino roots, and channel his frustrations via hip-hop?

by Angela J. Bass

Amateur rapper Albert Balbutin, Jr., 27, regrets that he wasn't raised speaking Tagalog or knowing much about his Filipino heritage beyond its colorful cuisine. It wasn't until 2003, when he pledged a Filipino fraternity at San Francisco State University, that he finally got the Philippine national anthem, "Lupang Hinirang," down pat. Not long after, his mother suffered a stroke that sent her back to the warmth and tranquility of her native Bohol province in the Philippines. Crushed, Balbutin dropped out of school. "I just didn't care anymore after that," he says, sitting at a table in a Subway sandwich shop in Daly City on a mid-October evening. Still starving for knowledge and the knack to convey it to others, Balbutin threw himself into studying, exploring and defining his Filipino identity. And hip-hop became the tool he used to share the gamut of his newfound knowledge.

Like Balbutin, thousands of Fil-Am youth in the San Francisco Bay Area have used the elements of hip-hop to explore both the Filipino and American sides of their culture and identity. Although the Bay Area is home to the largest enclave of Filipinos outside of Manila, many are struggling to find out "who am I?"

Back in the '80s and '90s, Fil-Am kids were asking that same question. Their answer came with their creation of what became known as the mobile DJ scene. Members from crews like Ultimate Sounds and Spintronix lugged turntables, fog machines and rock show-style stage lights between suburban garage parties and school dances. Some turned big profits from their quick music-mixing skills, keeping their peers dancing to the latest hits late into the night. Major battles between a growing numbers of crews ultimately emerged. But the scene was "one of the foremost ways in which Fil-Am youth"—many of them recent immigrants from the Philippines—"built community and shaped their identity," writes Oliver Wang, an associate professor of sociology at California State University Long Beach, who's now writing a book about the scene called *Legions of Boom*.

"Throughout the '80s, the Bay Area saw hundreds, if not thousands, of Filipino youth involved in hip-hop via street dance, graffiti, and especially DJing," says Wang. "If anyone knows any Filipino involved in hip-hop, they know a DJ," such as Richard "Q-Bert" Quitevis, 40. The Daly City-native came of age during the mobile era, but gained international acclaim in the mid-'90s for his hip-hop-inspired "scratch" DJing. Ever since, his persistent innovation with the craft of scratching, or turntablism, has dramatically fanned the flames between Fil-Ams and all other hip-hop elements.

Balbutin is a product of this hip-hop heritage, and now he's trying to use it to find his Filipino roots.

"There's more to *Filipinos* than just hip-hop," says Balbutin, as we talk in Daly City on a mid-October evening, "but for *Filipino-Americans*, hip-hop is the dash linking the Filipino to the American. That's how strong I believe it is."

The San Mateo-based web designer is nowhere near as famous as those who came before him. In fact, he's not at all famous. Instead, he is a microcosmic, prototypical figure among an ocean of 350,000 Fil-Ams in the Bay Area, and 6.1 million Fil-Ams in the United States—many with identities like his that are stitched together by the threads of hip-hop. As proof, he grew up knowing more about the hottest hip-hop trends than about his Filipino heritage. The fact has tormented him to no end for the past several years.

After he dropped out of college, Balbutin threw himself into creating dozens of homemade rap songs. Together, they served as something of a self-searching diary set to music, as he struggled with figuring

out “who am I?”

Balbutin was born at San Francisco’s St. Luke’s Hospital on Thursday, August 12, 1982. If a radio were playing in the maternity ward on that day, it’s possible that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” would’ve been heard thumping in the background. The song hovered near the top of the music charts that summer. Back then, you were fresh if you could pull off lead rapper Melle Mel’s black leather Kangol, studded gladiator wrist cuffs and tattered denim look.

Tonight, in the middle of Filipino American Heritage Month, Balbutin is dressed in a beige, ‘80s-inspired Members Only jacket. There’s a clear stud in his left ear, pierced since his sophomore year at the seaside Oceana High School in Pacifica. His tawny skin and low-cut, jet-black hair gleam under the tungsten lights of the Subway shop as he explains his conviction that hip-hop is the dash linking the Filipino to the American.

It goes a little something like this: Fil-Ams have long lived on the fringes of Asian America’s society of “model minorities,” led primarily by affluent Chinese citizens whose success supposedly proves that it’s possible for all minorities to prosper, if only they make the effort. But as one of the poorest and least educated of all Asian groups, Balbutin points out, many Fil-Ams have often felt more in tune with poor blacks and Latinos. That affinity placed Fil-Ams—the second largest group of Asian Americans in the United States after the Chinese, and the second largest immigrant group after Mexicans—in the path of hip hop culture when it came jetting out of the black and Latino housing projects of the South Bronx in the late ‘70s.

In San Francisco, many Fil-Am families lived next door to black and Latino ones, especially in the Mission, around the Fillmore and South of Market, as Wang has pointed out. And during the mobile DJ era, event promoters drew youth of color from all over the Bay Area, seeing both the monetary and social benefits of diversifying the scene.

“I didn’t feel Asian American when I was growing up,” says Balbutin. “I felt more Latino or black or like the folks whose parents had the same jobs as my parents. They weren’t doctors and lawyers. For a long time, my dad was a farm worker alongside Mexican Americans. Hip-hop comes from that culture: the culture of the hard working class. We had the weight of the United States on our shoulders and hip-hop was saying, ‘Fuck that!’ There’s a lot of anger in hip-hop. That was the only outlet for us, for me.”

Rapping everyday with a friend, starting in his sophomore year at Oceana High in the late-‘90s, led to a penchant for freestyling. By the time he graduated in 2000, he could rhyme about anything. On top of that, he was churning out basic beats over which to spit those rhymes—a process once limited to music industry professionals—using a free computer program called Taureg. “It was fun to actually be the maker of hip-hop songs,” he says. “I got addicted to it.”

His addiction lasted well into his college years. By then, in the mid-2000s, he had upgraded his bedroom studio arsenal to include pricier beat-making software by Reason and Peak, a MIDI keyboard and a USB microphone. “That’s when it flew off,” he recalls.

From October 2005 to October 2007, he channeled his frustrated philippics and tragically funny stories into 29 one- to four-minute hip-hop ditties, which he cranked out with fervor. Clever, laughter-inducing lyrics and funk-driven melodies seemed to seep into his dreams at night, giving him a skeleton of a song to flesh out on his Power Book laptop by day. Eighteen of those songs have the word “Filipino,” “Pinoy” (a Filipino male, pronounced *pee-noy*), or “Pinay” (a Filipino female, or “Filipina,” pronounced *pee-nigh*) in the title. Eight mention Filipino foods or the act of eating.

One such song, “Mystery Lumpia,” begins with Balbutin—as alter ego funny boy, Filipeanut—complaining about not having anything to eat in the house besides a bag of old, frozen lumpia rolls (the deep-fried Filipino equivalent to Chinese egg rolls). “Whether you’re Filipino or not, everyone has a mysterious plastic bag of something in the back of their mom’s freezer,” he writes of the song on his website, warning, “Remember to just leave it alone.” By the song’s end, you actually want him to have answered the question he poses in the hook: “Should I throw these things away or eat them with rice?”

His most cherished track, “Pusit,” eulogizes the pungent Filipino dish of grilled squid. The tentacled sea mollusk is sometimes marinated in soy sauce, and stuffed with diced vegetables. The song recalls the beat and vocal arrangements from the hip-hop girl group Salt-N-Pepa’s 1987 hit “Push It.” Simply replace Salt-N-Pepa’s demands to “Push it real good” with “Pusit’s real good,” and you’ve got the gist. But most noteworthy to Balbutin is the fact that the song features Germany-based Filipino rapper Ganove (pronounced *guh-nova*), whose verses are in hilariously accented Tagalog.

“This song has Tagalog and then it has me,” laughs Balbutin, who produced the track via email exchanges with Ganove in Germany. “I’m not rapping in Tagalog, but Ganove is and he’s really good,” says Balbutin. He thinks for a moment. “It’s weird ‘cause I don’t understand Tagalog, but when I hear Filipinos rapping in Tagalog, I’m like, ‘Yes!’”

Yes, Balbutin’s confidence and skill as a rapper-producer were mushrooming. He proudly posted his songs—including “Crazy Filipino,” “A Pinay Broke Up With Me,” and “Pinoy Spaceboy”—on his website, and on iTunes as a free Podcast. All six of his Podcast subscribers who reviewed his *Filipino and Lovin’ It* album gave him five out of five stars, and lots of fan-like praise for doing justice to Filipino issues and themes.

With fans, a transnational collaboration and the feeling that he was finally “carrying out his duty as Filipino,” Balbutin was becoming the emcee of his dreams—or so he believed.

In most of his songs, Balbutin raps in the same voice he uses when ordering fast food. Unlike the spit-spewing vocals of many of today’s mainstream rappers, Balbutin’s don’t punch as forcefully through the beats he creates. Instead, they ram up against the basslines and drum loops like a lazy super hero, repeatedly failing to overpower the music.

But it was more than just his own amateurish delivery that led him to deify the imperious, foul-mouthed lyrics and sick-tight beats of iconic rapper-producer Andre “Dr. Dre” Young. Dre’s music managed to keep Balbutin “pleasantly distracted” during his tumultuous middle school years in the early ‘90s. Nearly two decades later, Balbutin still idolizes the former member of gangsta rap group N.W.A., a music “doctor” credited with birthing the careers of Grammy-nominated artist Snoop Dogg and Grammy-winning artist Eminem. “If Dr. Dre’s music hadn’t been there,” he says, “I don’t know what would have been.”

“Dr. Dre is still the best producer in the history of hip-hop,” continues Balbutin. “But then again, I’m a part of this little niche of kids who grew up on his music. There are other great artists, but Dr. Dre kept me on lock.” Dre’s hardcore sound may seem to counter Balbutin’s consciousness tip, but there is one key thing about Dre’s music that demands Balbutin’s loyalty.

“For all people, regardless of race and culture, the beat of a song is what’s going to hook them,” he says, pounding the table with his fist for emphasis. “Dr. Dre brought an already existing style—*literally funk!*—to hip-hop,” and rapped about the same things—money, cars and women—that others rapped about, marvels Balbutin. But it’s “because of the damn beats,” he insists, that Dre has become one of hip-hop’s most renowned producers.

As a pre-teen, Balbutin absorbed those beats, referred to as G-Funk or Gangsta-Funk. The George Clintonesque compositions came with a side of Dr. Dre's savvy lyrics on such classic albums as *The Chronic* (1992) and *Dr. Dre Presents the Aftermath* (1996), and were the perfect distraction in the hellish years following the death of Balbutin's elderly father in the winter of '89.

Camiguin province in the Philippines seems nothing more than contented coconut trees, cerulean waterfalls and majestic volcanoes, by the looks of the island's official tourism website. The website points out that, according to "old Spanish documents," infamous explorer Miguel López de Legazpi first landed on its shores in 1565.

More than three centuries years later, American soldiers seized Camiguin during the Philippine-American War. And about 28 years after that, Albert Balbutin, Sr., then 21, fled the realities of Camiguin's impoverished island life, arriving in the United States on May 1, 1929. It was a time when the Ford Motor Company's Model A was at the height of its production and popularity, and the start of the Great Depression was a mere five months away.

Settling in California's Central Valley port city of Stockton, a popular Pinoy hub that would later be dubbed Little Manila, Balbutin, Sr., found work harvesting asparagus crops alongside Mexican farmworkers. A black and white photo in "Remember & Reclaim: A Stockton, California Filipino American History Calendar 2010," produced by the Little Manila Foundation of Stockton and the Filipino-American National Historical Society, shows Balbutin, Sr., clutching an asparagus knife while crouching on a sun-drenched field among fellow Pinoys in straw hats and dusty coveralls.

On August 12, 1982, at age 73, Balbutin, Sr., having long deserted the asparagus farms for a job as a TK in San Francisco, welcomed, with his second wife Memie Balbutin, then 35, a newborn son. They named him Albert Balbutin, Jr. Seven years later, on December 9, 1989, 80-year-old Balbutin, Sr., died.

"My dad was *old*," says Balbutin, wearing blue jeans, a pale red t-shirt and a pair of blue, gold and red sneakers resembling the national Philippine flag. It was around five in the afternoon in late-September. We were sitting in his aunt's compact kitchen, surrounded by some of his cousins, on a foggy hillside in Daly City. On the table sat a plastic container of *buwad*. I tasted the small, salt-dried fish after Balbutin lopped off its head at my request.

It's food that ties Balbutin to his Filipino culture, but that's not enough to answer the questions of identity that Balbutin's father took with him to his grave. Still, not even Balbutin's father could've linked him to the Filipino roots he's now digging for. "My dad was probably more American than Filipino," he says. "He spent most of his life [in the U.S.]" Balbutin remembers his father as a perpetually sick, old man who sat around the house bundled up in scarves. Relatives told Balbutin that he cried at his father's funeral, but he doesn't at all remember doing so. Only later would he feel the sting of his father's absence, like the delayed pain of a finger cut.

"Sixth to eighth grade was really dark for me and my mom," he says, referring to how the bane of puberty commingled with how quickly his mom lost control of the family finances after her husband's death. "That's where all hell broke loose and hip-hop came in," he says of his days at Daly City's Thomas R. Pollicita Middle School, when the music of rap demigod Tupac Shakur, along with Dre's, helped mop up his emotional chaos.

Fast forward to Balbutin's days at San Francisco State. With his father long gone, and his mother having taught him only a few conversations worth of phrases in her Bisaya dialect, Balbutin's search for his Filipino-ness led him to his next serious relationship with hip-hop. This time he fell in love with the solid,

underground community of Pinoy rap, which is almost always infused with messages of cultural pride, community empowerment and an angry middle finger stance toward long-lasting colonial influences in the Motherland, and in the States.

“Ten, twenty years from now, people are going to look back and say, ‘Wow, Filipino-Americans took hip-hop and twisted it up and did something crazy with it,’” says Balbutin. He has just finished listing some of his favorite hip-hop acts that have sprung up from the Bay Area coastline, and around the globe. Among them is Daly City-based rapper Kiwi. The Los Angeles transplant raps about the bravery of Gabriela Silang, the first Filipina revolutionary to lead a revolt against Spanish colonizers, among other Filipino sheroes and heroes. “Kiwi mentions a lot of revolutionaries that I’ve never heard about,” says Balbutin.

Deep Foundation, a group of seven guys out of New York and New Jersey, rap in English and Tagalog, and shoot their indie music videos in both the barrios of Queens and the littered streets of Manila. Balbutin declares in jealous admiration that the group stole his idea to rap in both languages (except that he can’t even speak Tagalog.) And long before seeing any of Deep Foundation’s music videos, he says, he envisioned filming his own in both countries.

Lyrically, many Pinoy hip-hop artists, including Balbutin, tackle the “colonial mentality” that 381 years of Spanish and American rule in the Philippines left behind, dropping the cultural wisdom that so many Fil-Ams crave. In the second verse of one of his more socially aware tracks, “All I Rap About Is Filipinos,” Balbutin raps with heart:

“Turn on the television/Tune into our country/Flip it to the Filipino channel where it’s sunny/Take a closer look and you will see what I have seen/There is more than meets the eye behind the flickering screen/Conquering a beast they call colonial mentality/..I Born outside the Philippines but it still lives inside of me/The conquerable struggle of the Filipino psyche...”

In “Children of the Sun,” Deep Foundation member CeeJay spits his verse in sheer anger:

“They only show light-skinned people on the TV screen/That’s why so many wish their skin was that light in their dreams/We avoid the sun and even use lightening cream/..I The Spanish are gone, but mindset still remains/..I To them we were inferior, join me and disagree/I am brown, I am proud, Filipino, this is we...”

E.J.R. David, a Philippine-born assistant professor of psychology at the University of Alaska Anchorage, set up a website on the issue, framing the state of mind in less lyrical terms. The mentality, he writes, elicits hatred of unique Filipino features such as broad noses and dark skin (which Balbutin touches on in another song, “Dark or Light, I Don’t Care.”) Discriminating against less Americanized Filipinos and dissociating from F.O.B.s (those who are “fresh off the boat” from the Philippines) are other common symptoms, according to David. And, he adds, Filipinos are more likely to passively accept racist treatment as a result of colonialism, arguing that the mentality has been passed down like an heirloom for each new generation, whether living in the Philippines or abroad, to deal with. Today, though, many are choosing to resist that acculturation via hip-hop.

Under colonialism, Filipinos were conditioned into passive, voiceless beings. Under hip-hop’s roof, such behaviors are never tolerated. It’s hip-hop’s assertive-aggressive nature that has attracted so many Fil-Ams to its creative forefront. Hip-hop even demands that its followers possess a unique voice, a personal style, and the courage to stand for great things—even if that great thing is you. Whether a creator or connoisseur of the art form—no matter if you rap, DJ, spray paint, breakdance, design apparel or promote events—hip-hop demands that you do it in a way that is true to the best part of who you are. It assumes, in true American form, that everyone has a voice. For Fil-Ams fighting a mentality designed to *erase*

individuality and *silence* voices, hip-hop is an obnoxiously loud vehicle in which they can't help but to be seen.

But for Balbutin, reality would hit the microphone out of his hand before he could really move crowds, and impact lives, with his music.

Somewhere around the end of 2007, someone left a comment on Balbutin's MySpace page about one of his songs. In Tagalog, the male commentator wrote something like, 'You rap about Filipinos, but your rap isn't in Filipino.'

By "in Filipino," the commentator was most likely referring to "Pilipino," the national Tagalog-based language of the Philippines. According to David, Filipino describes only the people and culture. He explains, "Prior to colonization, the islands we now know as the Philippines were a collection of very different people speaking very different languages. But after the islands became one country, the people in power pushed to create the Pilipino language."

Still, Tagalog and Pilipino represent only two of about 150 unique Philippine languages and dialects. And Balbutin had been slapped in the face with the fact that he spoke neither and none, aside from his ability to order food in Bisaya.

"That was the beginning of me questioning the content of the music I was making," says Balbutin. "I felt he was right. If I'm going to have rap songs saying, 'I am a Filipino,' then why don't I at least say a few Filipino words?"

Balbutin realized that he hadn't actually been making "conscious" rap about the struggles and triumphs of Filipino people. And he hadn't discovered much about his own identity, either. He still didn't know what to call himself: Filipino, Filipino American, or American. He still couldn't speak Tagalog, but merely clung to the cryptic chattering of those who did. He still stomped away angrily—like an admittedly spoiled, only child—when Filipino organizations like Chi Rho Omicron, the San Francisco State fraternity he abandoned, couldn't answer his quixotic questions about Filipino culture and identity. And rhyiming over Dr. Dre-inspired beats about Filipino food, sexy Pinays and his general love for all things Filipino just wasn't cutting it anymore.

Plus, a new steady diet of Pinoy rap was opening Balbutin's eyes to the extent of the many issues affecting Filipinos everywhere, issues that were begging to be verbalized through arguably the most potent of hip-hop's elements: emceeing. Yet, his own understanding of Filipino culture was stuck behind a street food cart. The more he studied the music of his sophisticated, cultured peers, the more he doubted the power of his own. Painfully, he acknowledged that none of his songs actually schooled his listeners about Filipino issues the way he'd intended.

Rapping in Tagalog seemed a crucial step in the direction of becoming the ideal Pinoy emcee, as was learning as much as possible about the history of the Philippines. "What I like about Filipino rappers like Kiwi, Bambu and Yellow Kid is that they know who they are," says Balbutin. "I'm not quite there yet."

His trips back to Bohol in 2007, 2008 and 2009—during which he visited his wheelchair-bound mother, hung out with other relatives, and explored nearby provinces—only made him feel even more isolated from his Filipino-ness. "The more I went back, the less Filipino I felt, and the more American I felt," he says. "Even though I could walk around the Philippines and look Filipino, once I opened my mouth, I was treated like an American, an outsider."

"Once upon a time, I made rap music about Filipino culture, thinking I knew what I was talking about,

but I was wrong,” Balbutin blogged recently. He realized he didn’t have to altogether divorce himself from hip-hop, but he still needed to separate himself from it for a while to reassess what he wanted from it. “What I was really rapping about was a Fil-Am’s point of view of a society I knew nothing about. So, I stopped rapping and started listening for a change.”

“Hip hop is still my passion,” insists Balbutin, nearly annoyed at the suggestion that he has perhaps given up on his music for good. He hasn’t really recorded any new songs since October 2007, save for maybe one or two, but even those don’t satisfy him.

“I’m on my own—what do you call those things professors go on?” he asks me, snapping his finger and squinting upward.

“A sabbatical?” I offer.

“Yeah, I’m on my own sabbatical right now,” he says. “Later, I can come back and teach again. Not teach, but share.”

But one gets the feeling that he really does want to teach through hip-hop music, and that right now he doesn’t possess a professor’s confidence to admit it. Until he does, he’ll keep swapping out his Dr. Dre-inspired beats for books such as *Filipino American Psychology* by Dr. Kevin Nadal. And he’ll keep studying the music of his newest discoveries, such as Philippine-born rapper Aristotle “Gloc-9” Pollisco.

Gloc-9 balances the seemingly passive lyrics of songs like his 2004 hit “Simpleng Tao” (“Simple Guy”) with flashy, lightning speed rapping. While Balbutin was on his two-year music-making high, the 32-year-old Philippine mega star was winning awards for Best Rap Artist at the Philippine Hip-Hop Music Awards. The rapper is a real-life nursing student in the Philippines. What he witnesses in the emergency rooms of poor public hospitals justifies the darker tone on last summer’s release, *Matrikula*. But all four of Gloc-9’s albums expose the many problems faced by Filipino people.

It was a Gloc-9 concert that Balbutin attended at the Fox Theatre in Redwood City, Calif., last October that would push him to get serious about learning Tagalog. Balbutin didn’t know much about Gloc-9 before the concert. Not even what he looked like. When the shaggy-haired emcee walked calmly onto the stage, bling-free, wearing a regular shirt, regular jeans and regular sneakers, the crowd erupted in cheers.

“Why are people screaming at the stagehand?” wondered Balbutin.

“Can you test the mic?” mumbled Gloc-9 into the darkness, seeming even more to Balbutin like the help rather than the main attraction. But then suddenly, the artist started rapping, quickly, in Tagalog.

Balbutin and his friend, Tristan, a loyal fan of American hip-hop, stood stupefied amid a sea of young Tagalog speakers. Tristan’s jaw dropped. Neither could believe what they were witnessing. Without a word, both agreed that this Gloc-9 guy was ridiculously good—even though they couldn’t comprehend a single verse.

“We were like, ‘Whaaaaat?’ recalled Balbutin, reenacting his facial expression: eyes wide, mouth oh-shaped. “That just pumped me up even more.”

Now more than ever, Balbutin wants to rap, just as Gloc-9 does, in fluent Tagalog. He admits he has a lot of work to do before he can truly live out that dream.

Nowadays, a growing sense of pride within the Fil-Am community is dovetailing with its longtime

romance with hip-hop. On a balmy day in October, driving along Mission Street in Daly City, a suburb that more than 30,000 Fil-Ams call home, I spot a group of about 40 Fil-Am high school students mobbing down the sidewalk during after school hours. I pull up beside them and join their walk.

Many are dressed in screen print t-shirts, running jackets and baseball caps emblazoned with symbols from the national Philippine flag: three golden stars for the largest Philippine islands of Luzon, Visayan and Mindanao; eight sunrays for the provinces where the first anti-Spanish revolt broke out; a blue stripe for one's personal sacrifice for freedom, and a red stripe for courage, or what some Filipinos would call "heart."

When a boy of about 15 starts tossing around phrases in Tagalog, my ears perk up, much in the way Balbutin's do whenever he's within earshot of someone who is speaking, or rapping, in the language.

"You speak fluent Tagalog?" I ask at the corner bus stop where the march along Mission had ended. He grins and hesitates, glancing at his friends. He seems unsure if I'm leaning toward poking fun at his accent, or if I'm asking out of genuine curiosity.

"Yeah," he says finally. He then offers up the fact that he was born in the Philippines, but then, as though sensing that he's about to enter a conversation too serious for his age, he adds, "My head was born in the Philippines, and my body was born here."

Whether American-born or Philippine-born, many young Fil-Ams are dissatisfied with the resulting cultural disconnect. It's this same split body existence that convinced Balbutin to reach out for the missing pieces of his identity.

I entered Balbutin's life at a time when he was coming to terms with what he would need to do in order to become the emcee of his dreams. I met him while he was still waving goodbye to his beloved hip-hop music, stowing away his MIDI keyboard, USB microphone and beat-making software for a different journey toward Filipino self-discovery.

Tonight, Balbutin goes back to school.

It's October 20 and his first basic Tagalog class at the Pilipino Bayanihan Resource Center in Daly City is just getting started at around 6 p.m.

Balbutin has been looking forward to the 12-week course for at least the past month. It was about 10 years back when he first actively tried speaking his parent's Bisaya dialect, which he understands well enough for making small talk and, of course, ordering food.

"It was like a whole new world was shown to me," he says of trips to the Philippines with his mother. "When I'd go up and order something in Bisaya, people would speak back to me in Bisaya, and I'd feel like we were one. So, imagine if I spoke the *national* language! I'd reach everybody in any part of the Philippines, not just on one small, little island."

Balbutin sits front and center at a long table in the middle of the classroom amid other students of all ages. He gazes up at his instructor, Ray Gonzales, who regularly smiles and cracks jokes in front of the dry erase board. I sit nearby, small talking.

Tonight, Balbutin and his classmates are learning how to read the Tagalog alphabet, conjugate verbs, and speak basic phrases such as "How are you?"

Balbutin is taking neat, handwritten notes when Gonzalez probes suddenly, “Albert, how do you say, ‘My name is Albert?’ in Filipino?”

“Ako si Albert Balbutin,” Balbutin responds in a low voice.

“Very good, Albert,” says Gonzalez. Moments later, Gonzalez asks the entire class, “Now, what nationality are you?”

Balbutin ventures, “Ako ay Pilipino!” while his classmates respond, “Ako ay American.”

A middle-aged woman looks at Balbutin and asks in Tagalog, “Are you sure?” then says to him in English, “You are Filipino-American.”

Balbutin didn’t respond.

“I think that sealed the deal when it came to me rapping about anything Filipino,” says Balbutin of the woman’s words that first night in class. “I knew that if I were to rap about or claim ownership of something, I’d really have to stop and think if it was really me. I’m not Filipino. I wasn’t born in the Philippines, nor do I know what it’s like to grow up there. I’m American.”

It’s a cold night in November.

Aswangs, dwendes and Minokawas are just a few of the winged or fanged Filipino folklore creatures jutting out from the walls of the 1:AM Gallery in downtown San Francisco, where opening night of the “Tabi Tabi Po” exhibit is under way.

I spot Balbutin in the crowd, eyeing some of the many installments, flipping through books and chatting up the artists who have flown in from New York, Long Beach and the Philippines for tonight’s event.

A cameraman and a female reporter from MYX TV—the Asian music video and pop culture news station out of Redwood City—are scoping the warmly lit gallery for interviewees, including featured artists and patrons of mostly Fil-Am descent.

I stand watching as the reporter interviews a skateboard-toting painter with Filipino and Sudanese roots. His mixed media piece depicts what he calls a “rock steady dwende.” The goblin in shell-toe Adidas honors malevolent spirits and hip-hop’s Jamaican rock steady roots at once.

Scanning the scene, I notice Balbutin talking to the curator, James “GaNyan” Garcia. Once I’m within earshot of their conversation, it becomes clear that Balbutin isn’t talking about art.

“So, what are your views on how Filipinos differ from Filipino-Americans?” I hear Balbutin ask Garcia in what seems like a learning trance. Garcia answers patiently, even though he has an exhibit to oversee. Balbutin asks a second, third and fourth question.

Surrounded by shape-shifting creatures with mismatched limbs, backwards heads and detached torsos, Balbutin seems to fit in among it all, as he, too, is piecing himself together.