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DJ Kuttin Kandi: Performing Feminism

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As a turntablist, Pinay, poet, feminist, and activist, DJ Kuttin Kandi challenges the sexism manifested in hip hop and popular music by collaborating with other women in her performances, publishing open letters about male-dominated lineups, and speaking critically about controversies such as Day Above Ground's 2013 song and video "Asian Girlz."¹ In his recent book *Filipinos Represent*, Anthonio Tiongson Jr. suggests that hip hop DJing provides a site for Filipina DJs to negotiate gender conventions, sexual norms, and familial expectations.² Kuttin Kandi's performances are a form of critical authorship that actively engages a politics of the feminist body and are grounded in feminist collaboration.

A long-time member of the New York-based DJ crew 5th Platoon, Kandi was the first woman to place in the US finals of the prestigious DMC USA competition in 1998.³ She has toured throughout the US and internationally, performing with distinguished musicians including Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Herc, Black Eyed Peas, MC Lyte, the Roots, dead prez, Immortal Technique, and Le Tigre. Kandi has been deeply involved in cultural advocacy and grassroots political organizations, having worked with Filipino American Human Services and Gabriela Network to fight the sexual exploitation of Filipinas, police brutality, and sweatshop labor. While living in New York, she taught the art of turntabling and DJing at the Scratch DJ Academy, and taught spoken word and poetry to high school students at El Puente Leadership Center in Brooklyn.



DJ Kuttin Kandi making music
Courtesy of Kuttin Kandi

After moving to southern California in 2006, Kuttin Kandi started working at the Women's Center at the University of California, San Diego. Although she began a sabbatical in 2012 after having heart surgery, she recently participated in organizations including the All Peoples Revolutionary Front, which "engages critical knowledge to inform political struggle," and the Peoples Power Assembly in San Diego, which aims to "raise awareness around the issues ... rooted in racial hate, social inequality, and civil injustices" that have resulted in tragedies such as the killing of Trayvon Martin.⁴ This year she organized several fundraising events in New York and San Diego for those affected by Typhoon Haiyan in Southeast Asia in November 2013; the survivors include women and children exploited by a sex trafficking industry that preys upon those made more vulnerable by catastrophic disasters.⁵

Kuttin Kandi's working-class upbringing undercuts the sweeping presumption of an Anglo-Asian overclass referenced by Frank Wu, one that is predicated on the belief that Asians in the US comprise a so-called model minority in contrast to a presumed African American-Hispanic underclass.⁶ Her father immigrated from the Philippines in the late 1960s and her mother in the early 1970s, and she was born Candice Custodio in Elmhurst, Queens in 1975. Her grandmother, cousins, and other relatives joined the Custodio family in the US, and

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she grew up with fifteen people living in a small house, sharing a bedroom with her sister and three cousins.

In Jersey City, her parents owned a Filipino/a store, where they sold food in a turo-turo (“point-point” in Tagalog), an informal eatery in which diners choose dishes of prepared food, and they were among the first Filipino street vendors in New York, selling traditional Filipino foods at street fairs including a vegetarian, bean sprout-based version of ukoy, a Filipino shrimp fritter. When she was nineteen, her father died of cancer. The medical bills from his care resulted in the family’s amassing of a mound of debt at the same time that her mother’s employer filed for bankruptcy. Unable to pay their bills, collection agencies came calling, and the Custodio family had their electricity shut off and faced foreclosure on their home. If they had not managed to sell their house in a three-day window, they would have been homeless.⁷

As a Pinay, Candice did not fit in either at home or at school. She grew up in the predominantly white neighborhood of Fresh Meadows, Queens, where she knew only two other Asian families; when she and her grandmother walked to school, white boys frequently made racist comments to them. As a fourth-grader attending a public school near the projects in Pomonock, Queens, Candice was one of only four Asian students; most of her classmates were Black and Puerto Rican. She recalls “denying [as a child that] I was a brown-shaded Pinay, so ashamed I was not the same as those around me.”⁸ Her feelings of “not fitting in” and her experiences of racism result from what cultural theorist Lisa Lowe identifies as “the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous [which] requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come, as fundamentally foreign origins.”⁹

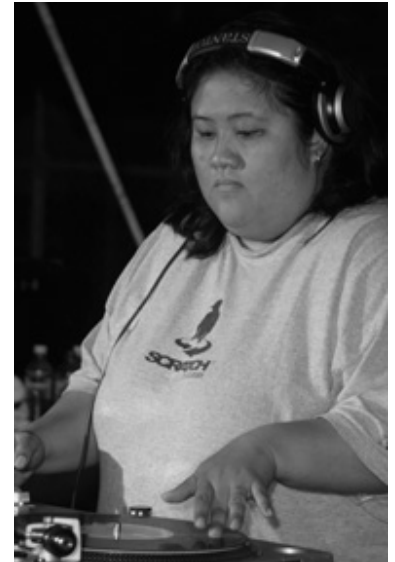
A turning point for Candice occurred when she was nine and attended the annual school talent show. In her words:

“Fresh” by Kool & the Gang came bursting from the speakers. ... [T]wo Pilipina 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 girls simultaneously flipped onto the floor and spun on their backs continuously. ... It was on that night that I sat ... wishing I had the same confidence that [Johanna and Jeanette] had on stage, as they made me proud to be Pilipina and gave birth to my first Hip Hop experience.¹⁰

Rather than encountering hip hop through the sexist lyrics and posturings of male rappers or DJs or through the diva image for women cultivated by the industry, Kandi was inspired to become a part of hip-hop culture by two Pinay b-girls who, through a performance both athletic and joyous, unwittingly helped her to embrace rather than reject her ethnic background. Kandi told me that seeing Pinay turntablist Symphony perform inspired her to become a turntablist herself.¹¹ Kandi has, in turn, inspired other female DJs including Killa-Jewel from Montreal and Pinay DJ One Tyme.¹²

Like other Filipinas who immigrate to the US, Kandi was drawn to the profession of nursing, and she entered a nursing program at Queensborough Community College. After her father’s death, she suffered from intense depression and continued to struggle with an eating disorder she has had since the age of seven. In her poem “Blue and Red” she writes:

always depressed
wore the pants baggy
cause I wanted to hide my body
ashamed to be the real me



*DJ Kuttin Kandi on stage
Courtesy of Scratch Academy*

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even to my own family¹³

Her physical appearance challenges the ways in which female Asian bodies have been culturally constructed. She is not a stereotypically petite Asian woman. As historian Gary Okihiro observes:

Asians embody the geographies of the East and nonwhiteness, and the gendering that delineates “woman.” The Asian body ... reveals that there are within the American imaginary masculine races and feminized races, and normative genders and deviant genders. White manliness in late-nineteenth-century America was made, in part, in the nation’s imperial project in Asia and the Pacific and in the conquest by remasculinized white American men of feminine Asian and Pacific peoples...¹⁴

Kandi disdainfully notes that female DJs are expected to wear revealing clothing, offering “a certain look” with palatable music.¹⁵ Unfortunately a number of female DJs are willing to supply this element to appease a sexist, male-dominated industry and perpetuate the stereotype of women willing to perform in skimpy clothing while haplessly trainwrecking records.

The club DJ and the turntablist inhabit differently gendered worlds. Mark Katz argues that “girls and women are not actively discouraged from battling, and are warmly received when they do participate”¹⁶ and he notes that when DJ Qbert was asked about his hopes for what the future of turntablism would bring, his reply was “More girl DJs.”¹⁷ Thus while the female party DJ may reap more gigs if she dons a halter top, turntabling and DJ battles require skills of people of all genders.



*DJ Kuttin Kandi performing
Courtesy of Scratch Academy*

Kandi emphasizes that performance provides her a “way of her own survival.”¹⁸ Since her hospitalization in 2012, she has written a series of Facebook posts titled *Notes of a Revolutionary Patient*. She has mentioned struggles with depression and past sexual abuse, thoughts of suicide, and having to deal with negative judgments about her body. For her, performing was both healing and therapeutic.¹⁹

Kandi was first exposed to the world of DJing by her father, who was a DJ who spun at parties and who introduced her to the music of Carole King, Michael Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Sly and the Family Stone. At age sixteen, she started to practice turntabling at a friend’s house. Not wanting to contribute to negative stereotypes about women’s inability to scratch while she developed her skills, she practiced in secret as a kind of modern-day belle of Fresh Meadows. She learned from watching her then-boyfriend Roli Rho. “Seeing him spin at parties with his mobile crew, ... being able to rock the crowd, inspired me to want to do the same. It’s amazing to see people dance to music that a DJ plays, and how the DJ has the power to control them. When I saw Roli doing all of that, I wanted to be a part, too.” Kandi’s desire not to sit on the sidelines but to take charge of a room transformed her from a “bedroom DJ” who never displays turntabling skills in public, to a battle DJ, and she started competing herself, even eventually beating Roli Rho himself in a competition sponsored by the hip hop magazine *The Source* in 1998.²⁰

After observing hip hop’s sexism first-hand, in 1995 Kuttin Kandi and a woman named Helixx C Armageddon formed a twenty-member multi-racial all-female crew called the Anomolies. Kandi recalls the Anomolies’ origins:

We wanted to form a crew that brought women together who shared the common love for Hip-Hop music. We wanted to start a bond with other women who are looking for that same understanding and support that we were searching for. Although many of us work with men, we still find it hard to be able to cope with

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certain issues that some men can't deal with or understand.... We wanted to show that there are women out there with skills... who [aren't] all about sex, greed, and violence.²¹

As well as meaning “departure from the common order,” their name the Anomolies, contains the words “No Mo Lies.” Kandi notes that while the Anomolies are still redefining themselves nineteen years after their founding, she

loosely defines them as “open to wom*n-identified, trans* and gender non-conforming.”²²



a-n-o-mo-lies
Courtesy of Kuttin Kandi

She first adopted the alias “DJ Candice” which evolved into Cotton Candy, and eventually into Kuttin Kandi; “Kuttin” refers to the DJ’s art of cutting and splicing from one record to another without losing the beat. The term “turntablist” was invented by DJ Babu to mean a person who “uses the turntable in the spirit of a musical instrument; one who has the ability to improvise on a phonograph turntable.”²³ DJ Rob Swift of the X-Ecutioners argues that “the turn-

table is a musical instrument as long as you [can] see it being a musical instrument. You’re dealing with notes, you’re dealing with measures, you’re dealing with timing, you’re dealing with rhythm. It’s just ... different tools, but the outcome is the same: music.”²⁴ Kandi defines turntabling as “manipulating vinyl through scratching and spinning as an instrument of expression.”²⁵

Scratching refers to the pushing and pulling of records on the turntable to create loops, repeated sections, sound effects, and musical bursts. David Toop defines turntable scratching as “a means of gouging quick, semi-identifiable traces of music from the grooves of a record and transmuting these electronically transmitted traces into furred and splintered drum noise. ... Each individual scratch has the quality of tropical birdsong, a richness of tone spiked with percussive impact.”²⁶

Types of scratching include the baby scratch; the crab scratch, a complex move that requires four fingers on the fader; and a host of other techniques that result in a palette of sounds including burps, chirps, and rubs. Scratching requires a strong arm, quick wrist, an ability to coordinate and juggle multiple tasks at once, an encyclopedic knowledge of a range of musics, and a compositional sense of how to mix and extract musical ideas and to manipulate tempo and pitch, attacks and decays.

Kuttin Kandi can be heard in a section of Fifth Platoon’s “Fifth Platoon Game” scratching over Wreckx-N-Effect’s “Rump Shaker,” a tune that, as suggested by the title, has overt sexualized content and over-the-top misogyny in its reduction of women to quivering posteriors whose “award is a long sharp sword.”²⁷ Kandi’s treatment of “Rump Shaker” is a feminist intervention through turntablism in a tradition of sexist music-making.²⁸

Kuttin Kandi’s mixtapes *Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman* (1995) and *A Bgirl Stance in a Bboy’s World* (1997) contain examples of her feminist tracks that employ samples of songs by women including Queen Latifah’s “Ladies First” and Lauryn Hill’s “Lost Ones.”²⁹ Her mix CD *Scratchalicious* displays her extraordinary scratching skills.³⁰ On the track “4DXO Break Skratch Session,” Kandi takes Lil Mo’s song “Superwoman, Part II” from her 2001 CD *Based on a True Story* and extracts a three-second sample of the line “They don’t make any girls like me.” She weaves the phrase into an urban tapestry of female and male voices, evoking a walk down a street in midtown Manhattan or perhaps a self-assured woman’s internalized voices.

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In a performance recorded at Tableturns, an open turntable event held at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York, Kandi recomposes Silver Convention's 1975 tune "Get Up and Boogie" by extending the solo instrumental section, and slicing apart both the two-word shouted male exclamation ("That's right!") and the four-word female admonition ("Get up and boogie").³¹ She splices together the male and female voices to create a choppy, stuttering effect, which results in the tune's de-dancification—it becomes merely noddable—brilliantly undercutting the song's original premise.

Rather than serving the misogynist goals of a male-dominated industry that reaps financial, social, and political profits from female labor, Kandi believes that

Hip hop can be a positive tool. Hip hop is a culture, but it's also a tool to reach out to people, a tool to express yourself. All music, not just hip hop, is a way to express your inner being, to let people know who you are inside. It makes people understand in ways they can't understand through words. ... [Being a DJ gives you] a way to express yourself and find freedom. Freedom from oppression, freedom from self; that's what hip hop is.³²

With her multi-pronged challenges to sexism in hip hop, Kuttin Kandi shows that feminist DJ authorship can be both critical and collaborative, and expands our notions of what hip hop can be.

Notes

This article is drawn from a paper delivered at "Sexing Sound: A Symposium on Music Cultures, Audio Practices, and Contemporary Art," The Center for Humanities and Ph.D. Program in Art History, CUNY Graduate Center, 21 February 2014.

¹ "Pinay" is a "woman of Filipino descent, a Filipina in America and/or a Filipina American." See Allyson Goce Tintiangco-Cubales, "Pinayism," in *Pinay Power: Peminist Critical Theory: Theorizing the Filipina/American Experience*, ed. Melinda L. de Jesús (New York: Routledge, 2005), 140; DJ Kuttin Kandi, "An Open Letter, A Call to Action to Our Hip-Hop Community: Put us Women on that Line-Up & Stop the Disrespect!" 28 June 2010, <http://hiphopandpolitics.com/2010/06/28/an-open-letter-a-call-to-action-to-our-hip-hop-community-put-us-women-on-that-line-up-stop-the-disrespect/>. For information about the controversy about "Asian Girlz," see Derrick Clifton, "Q&A: 'Asian Girlz' Singer Joe Anselm of Day Above Ground," *Huffington Post*, 5 August 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/derrick-clifton/asian-girlz-day-above-ground_b_3705655.html; DJ Kuttin Kandi, "A Rant to Day Above Ground: I am not your Asian Fetish," <https://www.facebook.com/notes/kuttin-kandi/a-rant-to-day-above-ground-i-am-not-your-asian-fetish/10151746982633374>; and Angry Asian Man blog posting, 30 July 2013, <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2013/07/okay-so-this-is-pretty-much-worst-thing.html>.

² Antonio T. Tiongson Jr., *Filipinos Represent: DJs, Racial Authenticity, and the Hip-hop Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 80-81.

³ Unless specified otherwise, biographical material on DJ Kuttin Kandi is drawn from interviews with the author, New York, NY, 14 July 2003 and San Diego, CA, 17-18 August 2013. DJ Kuttin Kandi's performance at the 1998 DMC USA composition can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-1oybbMzyI>.

⁴ DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Performing to Survive: Accepting Truths and Finding Purpose," in *Empire of Funk: Hip Hop and Representation in Filipina/o America*, ed. Mark R. Villegas, Kuttin Kandi, and Roderick N. Labrador (San Diego: Cognella, 2014), 275; All Peoples Revolutionary Front, About APRFront, <http://aprfsandiego.wordpress.com/about/>; Meeting of the Peoples Power Assembly, San Diego, Malcolm X Library and Performing Arts Center, Valencia Park Branch, San Diego, CA, 18 August 2013.

⁵ Nekoro Gomes, "Excellent Bushwick Hip-Hop Concert Helps Philippines Recovery Effort," *Bushwick Daily*, 13 January 2014, <http://bushwickdaily.com/2014/01/excellent-bushwick-hip-hop-concert-helps-philippines-recovery-effort/>; Dita Quiñones, "MCs Unite for Typhoon Benefit," 7 February 2014, <http://www.nbcsandiego.com/blogs/sounddiego/Immortal-Technique-Unites-Emcees-for-Typhoon-Yolanda-Fundraiser-243642601.html>.

⁶ Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 19.

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⁷ Interview with the author, New York, NY, 14 July 2003.

⁸ DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Introduction: A Hip Hop Story to Tell: It's Just Begun," in *Empire of Funk*, xvi.

⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

¹⁰ DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Introduction," xvi.

¹¹ Interview with the author, New York, NY, 14 July 2003.

¹² Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 242; Tiongson, *Filipinos Represent*, 75.

¹³ DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Performing to Survive: Accepting Truths and Finding Purpose," in *Empire of Funk*, 271.

¹⁴ Gary Y. Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xiii.

¹⁵ Eunice Park, "Kuttin' [sic] Kandi," *AsianWeek: The Voice of Asian America*, 1 August 2001, 24.

¹⁶ Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 134.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Interview with the author, San Diego, CA, 18 August 2014.

¹⁹ Ibid. She elaborates on the relationship between performing and survival in DJ Kuttin Kandi, "Performing to Survive," 271-276.

²⁰ Mark Katz discusses gender in relation to DJ battles in "Men, Women, and Turntables: Gender and the DJ Battle," *The Musical Quarterly* 89/4 (2006): 580-99.

²¹ MarWax, "The ladies, the ladies...: Interview with Kuttin Kandy [sic] (Fifth Platoon)," 30 January 2000, <http://www.5thplatoon.com/articles/kuttinkandiinterview.htm>.

²² DJ Kuttin Kandi, e-mail to the author, 27 June 2014. As Hugh Ryan notes, the asterisk in trans* is used to "capture all the identities—from drag queen to genderqueer—that fall outside traditional gender norms." See Ryan, "What does *trans** mean, and where did it come from?" *Slate*, 10 January 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/01/10/trans_what_does_it_mean_and_where_did_it_come_from.html.

²³ *Scratch*, dir. Doug Pray (Palm Pictures, 2002).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Park, "Kuttin' Kandi," 24.

²⁶ David Toop, "Hip Hop: Iron Needles of Death And A Piece of Wax," in *Modulations: A History of Electronic Music Throbbing Words on Sound*, ed. Peter Shapiro (New York: Caipirinha Productions, 2000), 92.

²⁷ 5th Platoon, "5th Platoon Game," CD *Plugged in 3* (Community Connect, Inc., 2001).

²⁸ Thanks to Loren Kajikawa for sharing his thoughts about this track.

²⁹ Kuttin Kandi's scratching of Queen Latifah's "Ladies First" is posted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75cO-6Mx5HU>.

³⁰ DJ Kuttin Kandi, *Scratchalicious*, The Combo Platter, vol. 2 (Room Service, 2002).

³¹ *Tableturns 2nd Anniversary*, dir. John Carluccio (VHS, 1999). Kandi performs a shorter version of "Get Up and Boogie" at the 1998 DMC USA competition.

³² Michelle Caswell, "Life as a Female Filipino DJ," asiasociety.org, <http://asiasociety.org/arts/performing-arts/music/life-female-filipino-dj>.