

## INTRODUCTION

# The Making of a Hip Hop Globe

**P**edro Alberto Martínez Conde, otherwise known as Perucho Conde, was probably the first rapper to compose a hit song outside the United States. A poet and comedian from the inner-city Caracas barrio of San Agustín, Conde was perplexed by the strange but catchy lyrics of the Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 hit "Rapper's Delight." In 1980 he came up with a Spanish version that went to the top of the charts in Latin America and Spain.

Far from the outdoor jams and battles of the Bronx scene where hip hop originated, "Rapper's Delight" was packaged and designed for travel. But that didn't mean global audiences got it. Conde baptized his imitation "La Cotorra," the term for a pompous and long-winded speech. Other take-offs surfaced from Jamaica to Brazil; in Germany the song was called "Rapper's Deutsch." Cubans called it "Apenejé," because nobody could make sense of the lyrics. As the first rap song to go global, "Rapper's Delight" embodied the mix of fascination and incomprehension that would accompany the spread of early rap.

By the early 1980s the global circulation of hip hop through the music industry was being paralleled by the efforts of hip hop ambassadors like Afrika Bambaataa to spread a message of black brotherhood and unity. Back in 1973 Bambaataa had founded the Universal Zulu Nation, a Bronx-based street organization that drew on the mythology of anticolonial South African warriors to redirect the energies of inner-city gang youth. In April 1982 Bambaataa released his single "Planet Rock," an anthem for this nascent movement, which was producing

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chapters across the city. With its mix of European technorock, funk, and rapping, “Planet Rock” was a model of fusion that imagined unity across cultures the same way Bambaataa had created unity across gang lines.

As he toured Europe and England in November, Bambaataa hoped to set the groundwork for the global spread of his movement. North African immigrant youth in the *banlieues*, or suburban peripheries, of Paris were attracted to Bambaataa and his message of black solidarity. Local chapters sprung up in Britain and Japan, where Bambaataa toured in 1985. In Brazil adherents like King Nino Brown preached “knowledge of self” and experience as the foundations of hip hop.<sup>1</sup> Bambaataa imparted an Afrocentric and socially conscious ethos to his global hip hop followers.

Bambaataa’s mission, to forge a global hip hop community, echoed the aspirations of the Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey. His mission was taken up by the next three generations. Chuck D of Public Enemy took Garvey’s vision of a black planet around the globe in the late 1980s, visiting local communities while on foreign tours. The Black August Hip Hop Project was formed in the late 1990s to draw connections between radical black activism and hip hop culture. The group organized exchanges between militant rappers in the US, Cuba, and South Africa. And the new millennium was the era of diasporic rappers, who forged a politics of global solidarity from within the heart of empire.

These hip hop ambassadors had their counterparts among intellectuals such as Paul Gilroy, who proposed the concept of the “Black Atlantic” as a space of exchange, belonging, and identity among Afrodiasporic communities that surpassed national boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Music held a privileged place in the Black Atlantic, unseating the primacy of language and writing as expressive forms. But blackness did not always have to be the element connecting marginalized communities. George Lipsitz saw “Planet Rock” as part of an international dialog built on the imagination of the urban poor internationally who were suffering from the effects of global austerity policies imposed by transnational

capital.<sup>3</sup> Another set of scholars has more recently used the trope of the Global Hip Hop Nation to express the diffusion of hip hop and its social location as a universal cultural space.<sup>4</sup> All these scholars saw the potential of the market for carrying important political ideas between cultures.

My own quest in this book mirrors the project of these ambassadors and scholars. Could hip hop create a fellowship of marginalized black youth around the globe? Could rappers be the voice not just of a post-civil rights generation in the American ghettos but of a generation of young people in the *cités*, housing projects, barrios, and peripheries of urban metropolises worldwide that has been excluded from the promises of a new global economy? Was there such a thing as a global hip hop generation, and could it act politically?

As I traveled the globe in search of this elusive community, I saw the ways that hip hop was being integrated into the arsenal, repertoire, and landscape of urban youth. Yet the more I probed, the more I became aware of the disconnect between localized expressions of hip hop. If something held them together, it was being lost in a haze of misunderstandings, cultural assumptions, and mixed signals. My own projected imaginings and desires were not being met with the enthusiasm I expected. The easy alliance of a hip hop globe was in danger of being rejected as a fantasy concocted and imposed by the West and rejected by the rest.

The same year “Planet Rock” was released, the single called “The Message” came out. It was credited to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. Where “Planet Rock” preached universal brotherhood and transcendence, “The Message” was an edgy take on ghetto life. Where Bambaataa envisaged a universal consciousness, “The Message” was concerned with the specifics of everyday survival.<sup>5</sup> Produced by Sugar Hill Records—the same label that released “Rapper’s Delight”—“The Message” was another manufactured product. At the same time, “The Message” came to represent a profound counterforce in global hip hop history. And it offered a lesson that could not be ignored.

Exactly this local specificity emerged as key in the global

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spread of hip hop. Hip hop was shaping a language that allowed young people to negotiate a political voice for themselves in their societies. As I learned through my travels, the genesis of hip hop in each case was highly dependent on the history, realities, and constrictions hip hoppers faced from within their own context. The Hip Hop Nation as a transnational space of mutual learning and exchange may not have been a concrete reality. But the transient alliances that hip hoppers imagined across boundaries of class, race, and nation gave them the resources and the platform they needed to tell their stories and provided the grounds for their locally based political actions.

Global hip hop was always marked by a tension between the desire for transcendence and the need to speak directly to local realities. As the hip hop journalist Jeff Chang has said, the incongruous visions of “Planet Rock” and “The Message” could be brought together only on the dance floor.<sup>6</sup> The music held spaces of possibility for unity and cross-cultural understanding that made it powerful. Yet the contradictions between the dual visions at the core of the culture would be replayed throughout global hip hop history.

My motivation for writing this book lies in the abyss that I encountered as I came of age in Sydney in the eighties. In the seventies and early eighties I was surrounded by social ferment and political engagement. I now look back on that time as one when people considered radical change a real possibility. I remember my dad and his brothers debating anarchism. During our school vacations my sister and I were sent to stay with my auntie Dina in western Sydney. I witnessed her work in the refuge movement, which protected women from domestic violence. I read about feminism and racism in the books in my auntie Joyce’s house—Germaine Greer’s *Female Eunuch* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. I began a correspondence with my mum’s cousin Nigel, a socialist activist who was working with the Pintubi Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territory.

I reached adolescence in the mid-1980s. Unemployment was high because of a serious economic recession, public sector

cutbacks, and the decline of manufacturing industries, all inspired by Thatcher- and Reagan-style free-market policies. The glass factory and Resch's Waverly Brewery on South Dowling Street were shut down and the old buildings lay abandoned, their windows cracked and blackened. In the working-class beachside neighborhood where I grew up, youth unemployment fueled problems of heroin addiction, crime, and violence between rival surf gangs. On cold winter mornings the beach was lined with idle youth, smoking weed or surfing. And the people around me gradually withdrew from politics and into their private lives.

Hip hop was one way out of the void I found myself in. In the conscious rhymes of KRS or the funky wisdom of Salt-N-Pepa, I found a path to political awareness. And I met others who had also found a voice through hip hop, as they too compared the political vibrancy of their parents' generation—from the Aboriginal land rights movement to the Cuban revolution—with the bleak political landscape in which hip hoppers came of age. In the media and in popular culture, our generation was labeled Generation X—the ignored generation, the nihilist generation, the apolitical generation. But these labels didn't describe the angry and politicized young people I saw embracing hip hop culture. Bakari Kitwana had used the phrase "hip hop generation" to describe African Americans who came of age in the post-civil rights era.<sup>7</sup> Given the conditions of unemployment, incarceration, and poverty afflicting not just African Americans, but young people from the *banlieues* of Paris to the hillside shanties of Rio, I wondered whether we could talk about such a thing as a global hip hop generation.

I traveled to Havana in the late 1990s, where I witnessed the formation and maturation of Cuban hip hop. Havana was the site of an international hip hop festival. I thought that on this revolutionary island I would find the kinds of transnational solidarities that made the Hip Hop Nation powerful. Not only was this global solidarity a mirage, but Cuba didn't seem as revolutionary as I had hoped. It would take a crisis from the North for me to appreciate the strategic ways in which Cuban rappers negotiated both their revolution and their place on the hip hop globe.

Meanwhile, I was living in Chicago and checking out the hip hop scene by night. What struck me was the value that Chicago hip hoppers placed on independence, especially after I'd witnessed Cuban rappers' reliance on the state. Did this multi-ethnic city hold the possibility for building an autonomous and truly diverse Hip Hop Nation? The city's segregation presented serious obstacles. This took me back to my participation in hip hop in Australia during the mid-1990s and forward to Caracas in the new millennium, where hip hop was tied in to networks of grassroots activism. When our generation came together as a political force, we could find fleeting moments of connection. But, as the Paris and Redfern (Sydney) riots would reveal, some of the most powerful uprisings of the hip hop generation came not from international alliances of activists and rap celebrities, but from the everyday struggles of ghetto communities around the globe.

Of course, one of the central issues of the book remains: Who is the "we" that makes up the global hip hop generation? The easiest part of the answer is the age group—Kitwana defines the hip hop generation as those born between 1965 and 1984. So that would include those of us now in our midtwenties to mid-forties. The harder part is the social demographics of that group. Chang tells us that the hip hop generation includes "anyone who is down."<sup>8</sup> But, if we think of the historically marginalized communities where hip hop emerged, and the housing projects and tenements across the globe where it resonated, the global hip hop generation would not include an Australian Indian female with a doctoral degree and the means to travel around the world. In this book I use my personal narrative as a way to reflect on the nature and scope of the global hip hop generation. Underlying all my endeavors is the hope that some universal thread connects all of us who have been brought together through hip hop culture, especially those in the most vulnerable and impoverished sectors. But I also came to the realization that privilege—whether by birth or acquired, of skin color, nationality, or social class—would always inhibit the attempt to create global communities.

The early elements of hip hop culture to travel internationally consisted largely of graffiti and the dance style known as b-boying. The 1982 tour of Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force had included the pioneering b-boys of the Rock Steady Crew, the Double Dutch Girls, the DJ Grandmixer DST, and the graffiti writers FUTURA and DONDI. The small audiences that turned up at the venues on the European tour were able to witness these elements of hip hop culture live.<sup>9</sup> For the rest of the world, knowledge of graffiti and b-boying came from television and visual culture.

The classic 1982 film *Wild Style*, produced and directed by Charlie Ahearn, was a tribute to the elements of the culture. It was released in cinemas worldwide, including Japan, where the cast of the film went to promote it. Many global fans had their first glimpse of b-boying in the Hollywood blockbuster *Flashdance*, released in 1983. In one brief scene Rock Steady Crew members b-boy to Jimmy Castor's "It's Just Begun." Over the next few years Hollywood capitalized on the international success of Rock Steady's *Flashdance* cameo. Tinseltown produced a string of what Chang calls "teen-targeted hip-hop exploitation flicks," including *Breakin'*, *Beat Street*, and then *Body Rock*, *Fast Forward*, and *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*.<sup>10</sup> These films served up a watered-down version of the culture, but they became some of the first hip hop artifacts to circulate the globe. Through both legit and bootleg copies, aspiring b-boys and b-girls everywhere saw the films, got out their cardboard strips, and in schoolyards, train stations, and on street corners they began to practice the moves.

By the mid-1980s graffiti and b-boying were in decline, and rap emerged as the central means by which hip hop culture was packaged for global consumption.<sup>11</sup> Run-DMC demonstrated the cross-over pop success of rap music with its cover of the rock band Aerosmith's "Walk This Way." The group earned a \$1.6 million endorsement deal with Adidas, marketing the brand as part of a global hip hop lifestyle and culture. A year later Salt-N-Pepa's hit song "Push It" catapulted the female trio to worldwide fame; the song even made it to the Dutch Top 40 charts.

Cable and satellite television also played a role in disseminating rap music. In 1988 the show *Yo! MTV Raps* aired daily in the United States and soon became one of the network's first globally televised programs. It aired on MTV Europe and then MTV Asia and MTV Latino.<sup>12</sup> As a relatively new technology outside the United States, cable television was available mostly to privileged youth. Also, those with more disposable income were the first to consume rap music, because of their access to cassettes and videos through travel or relatives who lived abroad. It was not always true that the oppositional ideas of rap spread automatically from one marginalized segment of youth to another.

The MTV-mediated rap of the mid- to late 1980s surfaced during an era of cost-cutting deindustrialization and privatization of social services that diverted resources from America's urban centers, resulting in growing crime, gang activity, and police violence. The agitating and energetic militant rap crew Public Enemy gained tremendous popularity during this time. With berets, camouflage fatigues, and military drills reminiscent of the Black Panthers, Public Enemy revived an Afrocentric and black nationalist language that resonated with fans around the globe, from Australian Aboriginals to Samoans to black youth in South Africa, Brazil, and Tanzania. Public Enemy, a group from the black suburbs of Long Island, followed in the footsteps of Bambaataa. The group sought to take its vision of a black planet worldwide through constant touring, MTV, and multiplatinum albums.

The other trend to emerge in this era was West Coast "gangsta" rap, announcing its arrival with the defiance of NWA's "Straight Outta Compton." But, where Public Enemy was out to fight the power, gangsta rappers were concerned with survival. Where Chuck D's sense of community drew from a tradition of black protest, the community of the gangsta rapper was the 'hood. As these two currents appeared on the global stage in the era of MTV, they recalled the tension between the universal vision of Bambaataa and the ghetto-centric storytelling of "The Message." How these currents would be received and riffed on at the local level remained to be seen.



By the 1990s global audiences had had access to hip hop culture for over ten years; the decade marked a period of emergence for local hip hop scenes. Rather than simply consuming American rap, global hip hoppers began to create their own versions. Like their Bronx counterparts, who developed a sound system from abandoned car radios and made turntable mixers from microphone mixers, global hip hoppers adapted materials from their local environment. They made background tracks by manually looping break beats on tape recorders. They improvised turntables with Walkmans as decks. And they relied on that most basic of technologies, the human beatbox.

The visual language of graffiti and the bodily expressions of b-boying had transcended cultural differences. But black American-accented rap in English was not so easily adapted to local contexts. Japanese rappers initially found it difficult to produce catchy rhymes because of the arrhythmic nature of their language and its positioning of the verb at the end of a sentence.<sup>13</sup>

Early rap outside the United States tended to imitate American rap, with performers either mimicking American rap songs or coming up with raps in English. In Tanzania, for instance, the Yo! Rap Bonanza competition, held at the New African Hotel in Dar Es Salaam in 1991, featured rappers performing in English and copying American raps. Repeating the English lyrics and copying the rhyme patterns of their favorite groups was often a way for amateur rappers to understand the flow and dissect the construction of verses.

Part of the problem was the lack of models for non-English, non-American rap. The development of bilingual rap by Latino artists in the late 1980s helped to erode the hegemony of the English language in global hip hop. In 1989 the single “Mentirrosa” by the Cuban American artist Mellow Man Ace went multiplatinum. A year later the Chicano artist Kid Frost released *Hispanic Causing Panic*. Chicano rap gained popularity among youth in Latin America, particularly Colombia and Mexico. Around this time the Puerto Rican rapper Vico C, who hailed from the barrio Puerta de Tierra of San Juan, began to achieve

fame with his Spanish-language rapping, and his two singles “Saborealo” and “María” went gold and platinum, respectively.

The biggest market for non-English rap in the early 1990s was in the Francophone world—covering the territories of France, West Africa, and Quebec. In 1991 the Senegalese-born French rapper MC Solaar released his debut album, *Qui Sème le Vent Récolte le Tempo* (Who Sows the Wind Reaps the Rhythm). This record went platinum, and his second album went double platinum.

The success of these French and Latino rap superstars encouraged the development of home-grown underground hip hop scenes. Local movements also began to flourish through their involvement with grassroots cultural exchanges. As a mature rap movement in the States struggled with issues of its own commodification, some rappers began to look outward to the African diaspora as a source of renewed energy.

Outside the circuit of label-organized tours, artists like Fab 5 Freddy and Paris went behind the scenes to meet with local producers, rappers, and fans. They brought their ideas, shared their techniques, donated equipment, and reported on these scenes upon their return. These cultural exchanges are situated within long histories of diasporic engagement. Global Pan-Africanism in Ghana was linked to the country’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, and visits by black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>14</sup> After Bob Marley’s Survival Tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1979, Australian Aboriginals began to see themselves as part of a global black movement. The Cuban revolutionary government had identified itself strongly with the black power movement in the United States and the anticolonial struggle in Africa. American civil rights and black power leaders from Stokely Carmichael to Eldridge Cleaver and Angela Davis had visited the island. But the black nationalism of contemporary hip hop artists was received with greater enthusiasm by young people feeling the effects of racism and exclusion in a new global order.

Another, more unlikely, source of support for local underground artists was the state. For a variety of reasons politicians

were realizing the benefits of associating with the increasingly popular rap movements. In Cuba the revolutionary government harnessed the energy of rappers to bolster the image of Cuba as a mixed-race nation with African roots.<sup>15</sup> In France and Brazil municipal governments organized hip hop workshops in community centers. The Casa do Hip Hop in the *periferia* of São Paulo sponsored weekly classes in b-boying, DJ-ing, graffiti art, and rapping for neighborhood youth. The minister of culture in France under François Mitterrand brought Afrika Bambaataa over to hold hip hop seminars for young people.<sup>16</sup> As problems of crime and poverty spread throughout the urban peripheries in a moment of growing inequalities, culture was seen as a resource that could help divert the energies of youth to more creative pursuits while leaving the power structure intact.<sup>17</sup> But hip hop turned out to be a double-edged sword. It took young people off the streets while also arming them with new kinds of oppositional knowledge and the means for self-organization.

While black nationalist rap took hold in some parts of the African diaspora, in other parts gangsta rap gained momentum. Like the neighborhoods of Compton and South Central Los Angeles where gangsta originated, the barrios of Caracas, Cali, and Medellín and the townships outside Cape Town were marked by vicious cycles of poverty, incarceration, and violence. Rappers in the diaspora drew from vernacular models of masculine rebellion such as the *malandro* in Venezuela or the *tsotsi* in South Africa, in the same way that gangsta rappers in the US situated themselves within the badman tradition in African American folk culture.

Like its American counterpart, gangsta rap across the globe often consisted of first-person chronicles of ghetto life. Rappers recounted stories of being abandoned by their fathers, disappearing job prospects, and resorting to drug dealing as a means of survival. The music was also replete with references to the ghetto as a war zone, quite literally in the case of Colombia, which suffered from a long-term internal armed conflict. Gangsta rap gained immense popularity in prisons, on the

streets, in the barrios. For gangsta rappers the music—like the drug trade—offered the promise of a way out of poverty.

One global icon of American gangsta rap was Tupac Shakur, whose appeal lay partly in his blending of a revolutionary ethos and “thug life.” Tupacistas could be found in the favelas of Rio. Tupac murals adorned the walls of barrios in Caracas. And youth in Cape Town donned his signature bandanna.<sup>18</sup> Politically conscious gangsta rap was common outside the United States. The French group *Suprême NTM* featured a Colt .45 handgun on its album cover and used explicit language, but members of the group also denounced racial and economic exploitation.<sup>19</sup> Instead of using the term *gangsta*, they referred to themselves as *hard core*, a label that captured their unique melding of different genres.

Hip hop had also gained momentum outside the African diaspora during the 1990s. Hip hop culture took off in Asia. This was not surprising, as the sweatshops of hip hop fashion were in Korea, Taiwan, and China, where labels such as Ecko, Fubu, Nike, and Adidas were produced. MTV Mandarin was launched in China in 1995 and helped popularize the lifestyles and brand names of hip hop culture. At the Europe-based b-boy competition known as B-Boy Summit, crews from Japan and Korea were frequent winners, adding greater dexterity and athleticism to the form.<sup>20</sup>

The biggest hip hop scene in Asia was in Japan, which had a long engagement with hip hop culture and black music in general. As the anthropologist Ian Condry describes, the focus of hip hop culture in Tokyo was the club scene, and the first club devoted to hip hop appeared in 1986. A combination of company-sponsored DJ and rap competitions and tours by American artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s helped to spur the nascent rap scene.<sup>21</sup> Although Japanese record labels were reluctant to release rap music at this time, it had a growing following among youth. Japanese hip hop fans have been criticized for consuming black culture as a fad with little knowledge of black history.<sup>22</sup> While the picture is more complex than this—some Japanese artists and fans do make an attempt to learn

about black culture and history—the debate does point to the uneasy place of Asians within the Global Hip Hop Nation.<sup>23</sup>

Hip hop has been highly popular not just in Asia but also among Asian immigrant youth in Western nations such as Canada, Australia, Britain, and the United States. But Asians are not a homogeneous group. The forebears of long-standing communities of working-class Asians in the Caribbean, Pacific Islands, northeastern Australia, and East Africa arrived as indentured laborers during the colonial period. In Britain, working-class South Asians, along with Caribbean immigrants, have historically identified as black Britons because of a shared history of racist exclusion. This has led to the idea of an “Afro-Asian Atlantic” that recognizes the diasporic engagements between blacks, Asians, and Arabs.<sup>24</sup> British South Asian rap groups such as Fundamental that identify as black are therefore locating themselves within this specific history.

In contrast, Asians emigrating to the United States since 1965 have tended to be upper middle class. The dominant image of Asian Americans as upwardly mobile or “model minorities” has placed them at odds with blacks and Latinos. One notable exception is Filipino Americans, who often share the circumstances of urban blacks and Latinos in places like the West Coast. They have been prominent as b-boys and DJs in West Coast hip hop.<sup>25</sup> But the majority of middle-class Asian American consumers of rap tend to inhabit a position similar to affluent whites in the suburbs and have little contact with racialized poverty.

By the mid- to late 1990s the market for global hip hop was being recognized by the music industry, and many local acts had achieved commercial success. The first rap hit in Japan came in 1994, when Scha Dara Parr’s single “Boogie Back Tonight” went platinum. Following two more platinum singles in 1995, by the rap group East End X Yuri, the industry coined the term *J-rap*. The Cuban rap group Orishas sold 400,000 copies of its debut album in 1998 after signing to EMI and went on to win two Grammys. These successes, echoed in other contexts as well, created a greater visibility for global hip hop. But such popularity also led to a growing divide, between groups that called

themselves underground—rejecting fusion with other genres and maintaining a political stance—and commercial groups that geared their music toward mass audiences to gain industry acceptance. The divide between underground and commercial was not always clearly drawn. But it did reflect real contests over access to resources as multinational corporations entered the field and sought to exploit the industry potential of local scenes.

The year 1996 was a watershed for rap. On February 8, 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act, which relaxed media ownership rules. The legislation accompanied broader neoliberal policies of privatization and deregulation. Before passage of the measure a company could not own more than two radio stations in a single market. But as a result of the removal of ownership caps, companies were allowed to own up to seven or eight stations.

The Future of Music Coalition estimated that by 2001 ten companies controlled about two-thirds of the airwaves as a result of the Telecommunications Act. The biggest media conglomerate to emerge from this process was Clear Channel Communications. It owned twelve hundred commercial stations in 2002.<sup>26</sup> By the start of the new millennium, 80 percent of the music industry was controlled by five companies—Vivendi Universal, Sony, AOL Time Warner, Bertelsmann, and EMI.<sup>27</sup> The post-1996 period after the Telecommunications Act was passed came to be seen as the era of corporate rap. The airwaves were dominated by a catchy pop formula coming from a handful of producers.

This trend toward big radio has been followed across the globe. While local scenes had matured and developed, many radio stations were playing mostly American rap. In Kenya the radio stations Capital FM and KISS FM program American artists like 50 Cent because, they argue, it helps corporations sell their products.<sup>28</sup> It is clear that corporate rap on the radio is designed to exploit a lucrative youth market. This American-dominated radio programming contrasts somewhat with

television's practices—about half the programming on MTV Base Africa is African, and about 70 percent of MTV Mandarin's videos are Chinese. At the same time television has been an important medium for promoting hip hop lifestyles and commodities. In Beijing, McDonald's has produced a commercial using Mandarin rap. Likewise, Pepsi, Sprite, and China Mobile have all used rap in their China ads.<sup>29</sup> But rap does not just advertise products. The content of rap songs is so heavily brand identified—from cars to clothing and alcohol—that the music becomes fused with the product. Hip hop has raised the sales of Hennessy cognac by so much that the French company sponsored a contest and offered as the prize a visit to its plant with a famous rapper.<sup>30</sup> It is clear that the innovation and creativity that gave rise to hip hop culture were not to be found in the realm of corporate rap.

The global spread of corporate rap, combined with its popularity among white suburban consumers in the United States, produced troubling racial contradictions for the genre. S. Craig Watkins suggests that corporate rap was designed with young white consumers in mind and that the fascination of white and suburban youth with rap music was just a more complex expression of racism.<sup>31</sup> This was particularly notable in the global arena. American rap acts on tour frequently encountered all-white audiences. The Aboriginal rapper Wire MC recounts the chilling experience of being at a 50 Cent concert in Sydney and seeing the packed white male audience chanting, "Put another cap in a nigga."<sup>32</sup> In some cases local rap artists misappropriated rap's oppositional language to openly reassert racial hierarchies. The commercially popular Israeli rappers Subliminal and The Shadow used their music to advance a right-wing Zionist agenda. The rappers identified with the Israeli army, justifying the occupation of Palestine and presenting themselves as the underdogs.<sup>33</sup>

One response to the dominance of corporate rap on the airwaves was the development of an underground rap movement in the United States between 1995 and 1999. As independent and underground emcees found themselves with less access to major

labels, radio airtime, and venues, they began to find alternative means to build a fan base. The Internet became an important resource as a digital distribution network in challenging the power of the traditional record labels. College and community radio stations offered more varied playlists than the corporate radio stations.<sup>34</sup> And the DIY (do-it-yourself) model—selling tapes out of the trunk as a way to move to a regional label and then a major label—began to be used by underground artists.

The genre of underground rap allowed for a greater variety of narratives than the highly commodified and one-dimensional corporate rap. But, with American underground rap, the locus of hip hop moved away from urban, black, and working-class sectors as artists and audiences became increasingly middle class, white, and multiracial.<sup>35</sup> Underground rap in the US paralleled the rise of underground rap abroad, and underground artists in diverse contexts often shared a suspicion of fusing rap and other musical forms, although the artists didn't always have a common political stance.

Local place-based hip hop genres also began to emerge in cities across the US, from the San Francisco Bay Area's "hyphy" culture to southern "crunk" and New Orleans "bounce" music, the latter influenced by brass band sound and Mardi Gras Indian chants. Greater regionalization of rap began to take place in other countries, too. In France, for instance, unique rap movements emerged in Marseilles and Strasbourg.<sup>36</sup> Regionalization was matched by the growing diversity of sounds and styles in global hip hop. These included the rap-reggae-traditional blend of kwaito in South Africa, the popular highlife rap mix of hiplife music in Ghana, and the drum 'n' bass-, garage-influenced Brit-hop in Britain. Local scenes also diversified, incorporating reggae rap, gangsta rap, spoken-word rap, hard-core rap, rock rap, and R&B-influenced rap under the broader umbrella of hip hop culture. By 2000 hip hop had become a global tour de force, marking out terrain in both mass culture—where its dominant appeal lay—and on the level of the subcultures—where its real dynamism resided.



Like Afrika Bambaataa in the 1980s and Public Enemy in the 1990s, the Black August Hip Hop Project emerged to spread its message of a united hip hop globe in the new millennium. Black August was a network established during the 1970s in the California prison system as a way of linking up movements for resistance in the Americas. The hip hop collective sought to draw connections between radical black activism and hip hop culture. In its statement of purpose, the collective defined its goals as “support[ing] the global development of hip hop culture by facilitating exchanges between international communities where hip hop is a vital part of youth culture, and by promoting awareness about the social and political issues that affect these youth communities.”<sup>37</sup> The collective arranged for the American emcees Paris, Common, dead prez, Tony Touch, Mos Def, and Talib Kweli to perform at the annual Cuban hip hop festivals in Alamar during the late 1990s. In 2001 it organized a concert at the World Conference against Racism in Durban and proposed a tour of South Africa that again would include Kweli and dead prez, as well as Black Thought, Boots Riley, and Jeru the Damaja.

Just like the hip hop ambassadors who preceded them, the Black August rappers were met abroad with a sense of great expectation and enthusiasm. Their language of black nationalism resonated with Cuban and South African youths feeling the effects of racial discrimination as their once-radical leaders pursued policies of austerity. The Cuban emcee Sekou Umoja, from the group Anónimo Consejo, told me, “We had the same vision as rappers such as Paris, who was one of the first to come to Cuba. His music drew my attention, because here is something from the barrio, something black. Of blacks, and made principally by blacks, which in a short time became something very much our own, related to our lives here in Cuba.” The rapper Common organized a meeting with local rappers at which they exchanged ideas and stories. The Black August network brought equipment and records for the Cuban rappers. But, as occurred with the electrifying performances of Bambaataa and Chuck D, it was in the concerts that Black August’s vision of transnational

solidarity was realized. The chants of “I’m an African,” led by dead prez in Alamar, thundered through the stadium as Afro-Cuban youth defiantly claimed their black roots.

The pain of racism may have been the bridge that connected the American rappers with those in the diaspora. But that racism took different forms in each context. On stage in Alamar dead prez burned a dollar bill as a symbol of American capitalism, horrifying local audiences, who saw it as a week’s worth of bread. In South Africa the American artists came to protest the racism of their own government, which withdrew from the Durban conference along with Israel. Yet when the American artists left the concert stage to return to their fancy hotels, the affinities broke down. The American artists’ treatment of leading local artists as hired drivers left a sense that racism looked different for the privileged Americans.<sup>38</sup> Frustrated with this disrespect, the local promoters canceled the tour. Not the least of the problems was the American artists’ clichéd notions of African-ness. The cover of dead prez’s album *lets get free* featured militant black women raising guns to the sky. While dead prez claimed that the image was from the Soweto Uprising in 1976, South African hip hoppers knew that it was from the war of independence.<sup>39</sup>

The attempt to foster cultural exchange and understanding instead drew claims of cultural imperialism from local emcees. Global hip hop scenes were now about twenty years old, and they had their own stars and styles. All that local rappers wanted was to be treated as equals by the visiting American rappers. But, clearly, there were hierarchies within global hip hop. And while Black August saw its mission as promoting social consciousness, some South African rappers saw it as Americans conquering Africa with their rhymes and coming to save the Africans.<sup>40</sup> Other local rappers saw a gap between the politically committed lyrics of the Black August rappers and their actions. As the Cuban rapper Soandry, then of the duo Hermanos de Causa, told the documentary filmmakers Vanessa and Larissa Díaz, “It’s not saying it, it’s not singing it, it’s showing it. To me—none of these people, not dead prez, not Common Sense,<sup>41</sup> not Mos Def have shown me anything. They just say what they say in their

songs, but they don't represent that."<sup>42</sup> Soandry was also bitter about the various rap collaborations between visiting American rappers and Cuban rappers. The resulting productions tended to make money for the American artists but not the Cubans. Cuban rappers, South African rappers, and others were getting tired of the one-way stream of Westerners who were treating local scenes in Cuba, South Africa, and elsewhere as exotic cultures to be packaged for the consumption of Western audiences.

In 1999 the Venezuelan producer Juan Carlos Echeandía decided to make a documentary film that looked at American hip hop. It was the first time a producer from the South—albeit a relatively privileged one—had traveled to the States to interview American artists, producers, and fans. Echeandía returned to Venezuela and documented the growing underground hip hop scene there as well. The result was *Venezuela subterránea: cuatro elementos, una música* (Underground Venezuela: Four Elements, One Music). The film was low budget. The dissemination was not large. But the idea that a hip hopper from the global south might have something to say about American hip hop destabilized the idea that Americans were the ultimate authority on all hip hop, including their own.

By the new millennium, the divide between American and non-American rappers was becoming somewhat irrelevant as diasporic rappers came on the scene. As global hip hop began to come of age, hip hoppers found themselves increasingly torn between the need to make a living and the desire to pursue their art. With record labels picking off a scant few to sign and promote, the rest were left to wonder where their lives were headed. For many, pursuing a career in music meant leaving the comfort of their local scene and heading to international cities. Local superstars in Brazil or Kenya became busboys in New York or taxi drivers in London in order to pursue their dreams. The other source of diasporic hip hop was second generation immigrants from Haiti, Somalia, and Egypt, among other places; these young people were beginning to find a political voice through hip hop. As artists and fans, they generated new circuits of

performance, activism, and solidarity that brought into question the fixed national boundaries that had defined hip hop scenes.

In some ways hip hop has been both global and diasporic since its beginnings. Hip hop's lineage includes the West African griots, or professional singers. It has strong roots in Jamaican dance hall music, itself a *mélange* of different musical influences. Several founders of hip hop culture were Caribbean immigrants: DJ Kool Herc was Jamaican and Grandmaster Flash was from Barbados. B-boying draws on influences as varied as Brazilian capoeira and East Asian karate films. Even today American rap songs incorporate global cultural forms, from Bollywood film songs and Rastafarian religions to Tahitian dance styles. The global is at the heart of hip hop culture, which from the start has borrowed and appropriated and sampled from cultures around the world.

But the diasporic rap of the new millennium emerged in a unique context—that of the post 9/11 world. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, drastically reshaped the contours of race, politics, and global war. The world became embroiled in a “war against terrorism,” in which those perceived as “against us” were often Muslims and people of color. Arab and South Asian immigrant communities were seen as the internal enemy. The children of immigrants born and raised their whole lives in the United States, Australia, France, England, or elsewhere were made to feel like outsiders.

Diasporic hip hop has forged a new global politics of solidarity that connects racism against African Americans to anti-Arab profiling in urban areas and links these issues to the occupation in Palestine and the war in Iraq. Palestinian American emcees such as the Michigan-based Iron Sheik challenge the erasure and denial of Palestinian histories in American public discourse. As the anthropologist Sunana Maira recounts, diasporic rappers have come together in cross-national collaborations such as the 2007 Arab Summit, a project that includes the Palestinian American rapper Excentrik, Ragtop from the Filipino-Palestinian-American group the Philistines, the Syrian American rapper Omar Offendum from the NOMADS, and the Iraqi-Canadian

rapper Narcicyst from the trio Euphrates. These kinds of collaboration are rooted in cross-ethnic activist alliances of black activists from hurricane-stricken New Orleans, Palestinian activists demanding a right to return, and people opposed to the militarization of the US-Mexico border and the apartheid wall in Palestine.<sup>43</sup> For British rappers, such as the South Asian Muslim groups Kaliphz and Fundamental, criticisms of local racism and the global war on terror are couched in the language of militant Islam.<sup>44</sup> At a time when Islam has replaced black power as the enemy within, it's not surprising that it has reemerged as a possible axis for solidarity in the hip hop globe.

Rap has provided a means for young people from immigrant communities to break the silence and network with others locally and globally. And these youth have become the latest hip hop ambassadors to emerge. The Liberian American Blade Brown raps about building a Pan-African consciousness, and in his rhymes he connects racism and slavery to the poverty of many African nations. Although based in the Twin Cities, Blade's producer is from Tanzania, and Blade has collaborated with other diasporic artists in the Twin Cities such as the Kenyan American MC Baraka.<sup>45</sup> African emigration to places like the Twin Cities, Toronto, and New York is creating alternative spaces that break down national boundaries.

Four generations of hip hop ambassadors have traversed the globe with the desire to transcend their immediate realities and link up with others through a universal politics of justice. This communitarian strand of hip hop culture now exists as a counterpoint to the grossly materialistic, individualist nature of corporate rap. But it has sat uneasily alongside the storytellers of the genre, who have been concerned not so much with grand gestures as with rap as a chronicle of everyday life.

In its most contemporary manifestation, hip hop again faced the incongruity of the desire for unity and fellowship across borders and the need to be grounded in a specific place and experience. Diasporic rappers didn't draw the same charges of cultural imperialism that earlier rappers did; first-generation immigrants in particular were deeply rooted in the cultures and

histories that had produced local scenes. But, as their years in the diaspora went by, it became harder for these artists to maintain a bridge with their past. Their concerns were now different from those issues they had left behind. Unmoored from place, they were in danger of losing touch with the specificity at the heart of their music. The Cuban DJ Ariel Fernández, who emigrated to New York City in 2005, posed this question: “Cuban rap doesn’t have the same value outside of its context. It was made in Cuba and for Cubans. How will the movement continue with the same importance outside of Cuba? We cannot pursue it with the same time and energy. And there is not a big public for Cuban immigrant rap.”<sup>46</sup> It has been difficult for rappers as new immigrants to pursue their art, given the demands of everyday survival. They don’t have the same sense of being part of a movement, now that they are scattered in different cities and often separated from their group members. Without the realities of place to anchor it, a politics of global solidarity might start to sound hollow. And at its core hip hop has always been about bearing witness.

**I**n the pages that follow I trace some of the paths that have been carved out by hip hop culture across the globe. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive history of global hip hop or even a summary of national/regional hip hop scenes. Rather, I take readers on my own kind of global tour, through the cities where I have lived, the artists I have met, and the insights I have gleaned. This book is not a who’s who of global hip hop’s celebrities and icons. It brings the narratives of well-known artists together with those of lesser-known artists—what they have in common is my great respect for their work and my belief that their stories deserve to be told.

What drives my travels is the same question that has motivated the hip hop ambassadors of each generation: What is it about hip hop that connects young and marginalized people around the globe? In addition to my physical trip from Sydney to Havana, Chicago, and Caracas, the book documents my personal journey as I struggle with my own commitment to hip hop

as an activist and as an artist. In the mid-1990s I formed a rap group with an Aboriginal woman and a Pacific Islander man in Sydney. But, as I compared their lives and my own, I often wondered how I could justify my participation in a genre dominated by narratives of deprivation. Rap was more than a vehicle for political messages—it was a way of giving voice to the shared experiences of a community. But *which* community did I belong to, and *whose* voice was I trying to represent? I encountered these questions again and again during my travels as I sought affinities with revolutionary rappers in Havana, Asian Americans in Chicago, and blackfullas (Aboriginal people) in Sydney.

*Close to the Edge* betrays my fleeting hope that there is something that connects a global generation of young people, born in an era when corporate-led globalization undermined their basic standard of living yet deprived them of the tools to protest. Whereas their parents' generation took to the streets, they took up a microphone. The rapid-fire spread of the culture was more than media hype. The appeal was more than a fad. Something in the drums spoke to barrio youth in Medellín, French teenagers in the cités, blackfullas in Sydney's Inner West, and young people in the townships outside Cape Town. And something spoke to me.