

Making Territorial Claims: Brazilian Hip Hop and the Socio-Geographical Dynamics of *Periferia*

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Abstract

In this essay I posit that the stylistic divergences in Brazilian hip hop reveal a set of social and geographical dynamics related to São Paulo, the country's largest city and supposed beacon of modernity. The case of São Paulo hip hop speaks beyond Brazil and potentially contributes to larger discussions of the contemporary city complex including the role of the working-class periphery sprawls on urbanism. This text focuses on the primacy of periferia (periphery) as an ideological and spatial concept rooted in the artistic expressions of the "marginal." In their activities, hip hoppers articulate "periphery" as not only a place but also as an epistemology, which in turn works to change the meaning of the city for the historically disenfranchised. Not without its limitations and internal critics, marginality secretes a "magic" or at least retains a pull as hip hoppers and urban, working-class Brazilians, in general, look to convince others of their value in exchange for respect. [Keywords: São Paulo, hip hop, periferia, social geography, urbanism]

Introduction

São Paulo is not a humane city. It resembles more an improvised machine, constructed from scrap iron and barbed wire connecting one piece to another, switched around to fulfill the immediate necessity . . . here there is no possibility of playing around, of joking. Everything is very serious. Violence provides the dominant tone. Violence is present in our experiences with the city itself and its spaces, through the difficulties we face in simply moving about.¹

Amaral 2001:86

It's in the space between things that I exist

It's in the space between things that I exist

Mzuri Sana 2006

We are the periphery / We are the majority

Take from the lyrics and / Use your wisdom.

Ieda Hills 2001

Ieda Hills,² trained in US-influenced gospel and R&B, has been an occasional singing partner with legendary Brazilian rapper Thaïde. She is one of many young women who at the beginning of the new millennium perceived an emerging opportunity in the Brazilian hip hop scene. Similarly, rapper Parteum, the younger brother of the venerable Rappin' Hood and leader of the group Mzuri Sana, has emerged as a charismatic representative of a pensive, abstract rap in São Paulo. The first decade of the 21st century marked the rise of the “positive” rapper and a gradual acceptance of narratives of positivity, soul and the avant-garde as well as a range of musical genres into the hip hop “movement.” However, as I demonstrate in this text, Brazilian hip hop is significantly located in the suburban milieu of the *periferia* (periphery) and any effective “positive” hip hopper still feels obligated to root herself in the ubiquitous spaces of Brazil’s alternative modernity—the “way down” other side of rational capitalism. The impact of *periferia* is not one of homogeneity, rather it presents a challenge of articulation for the local performer to make his/her art connect to an invigorated sense of humanity in a place and state of mind, i.e. São Paulo, which, as Amaral implies, often depends on physical and intersubjective violence for its very existence. In this article, I discuss *periferia* as space and ideology, which hip hoppers, through their cultural work, attempt to restructure São Paulo not only through metaphorical refashioning in rap lyrics but also and perhaps more importantly through a heightened sense of “occupation.”³

In addition to an interpretation of the dynamics of Brazilian hip hop, my analysis contributes to general debates concerning the relationship between city spaces and expressive culture. Concurrently, I provide evidence to support the claim that *periferia* is an epistemological category, which not only speaks to the socio-spatial contours of São Paulo, Brazil but also suggests new working definitions of contemporary cities in general.⁴ I argue that hip hoppers have tacitly understood and worked to redirect the conventional vectors of what Foucault once posited, “space is where the discourses of power and knowledge are transformed into actual relations of power . . . architecture and urban planning are crucial in understanding how power operates” (Foucault 1986). After an initial contextualization of the saliency of cities in contemporary sociality and the role of local hip hop styles in such formations, I provide a more detailed account of *periferia* and hip hoppers’ remaking of the city of São Paulo.

City spaces and subjectivities

The case of São Paulo hip hoppers demonstrates the dynamics of contemporary citizenship in that relatively marginalized social groups have created and developed forums and networks of political agency based on an increasingly visible category of place—the urban periphery. More and more of the world’s population are “urban” and the concentration of this demographic growth is increasingly located in

“slums” (Davis 2006) or more broadly “periphery” suburban spaces such as São Paulo’s *periferia*. The “city” and the experience of the “urban” have become more complex over time, as cities themselves have expanded unevenly into decentralized metropolitan areas that consist of intense density alongside vast emptiness (Ouroussoff 2008; Nefs 2006). In the case of São Paulo, a peripherization has occurred so that the percentage of São Paulo municipality to the overall metro population has gradually decreased over the past fifty years (Moreira, Leme, Naruto and Pasternak 2006; Gois 2004). Furthermore statistics demonstrate that such expansion has been increasingly more uneven with sporadic elite enclaves (Caldeira 2000) surrounded by numerous impoverished working-class neighborhoods reflecting various methods of *autoconstrução* (autoconstruction). Autoconstruction is a common practice in the Brazilian *periferia* that involves architectural improvisation based on available resources. Finally, the peripherization of cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, Beijing, Jakarta and Lagos indicates a distribution of youth towards the periphery.

Various practices of autoconstruction dominate the periphery of São Paulo as demonstrated in a number of studies (Rolnik, Kowarick, and Somekh 1991; Maricato 1979; Holston 1991a, 1991b; Caldeira 2000). Owning a home, regardless of size or quality, is the basis for obtaining *espaço* (space) and *personalidade* (personality) in working-class lives. In his work on autoconstruction practices in the *periferia* of São Paulo, Holston relates local narratives of aesthetic distinction and creating “personality” despite the fact that the material used is virtually the same. Patterns are limited due to the sheer practicality of material costs. However, this does not figure into conceived and perceived difference. It is often a lifetime project and one that generates discourses about the future and potentialities (Holston 1991a:447). In my experience, I have found that the process of autoconstruction in local housing acts as an important metaphor for an understanding of hip hoppers in their articulations of *periferia* as a space of identification.

Brazilian hip hoppers work inside out. They approach spatial “conquests” and “occupations” frequently starting with domestic spaces. For example, in early 2002 Éboni began a new project to construct a graphics studio in a storage space above the modest garage of his parents’ home in Parque Santo Antônio on the south side of São Paulo. Éboni saw this project as beyond personal home repairs, because his idea was to transform this storage space into a *periferia* version of a cyber café and professionalization laboratory. He wanted to invest in a few personal desktop computers, a network of high-speed access, and updated graphic design software. Local youth interested in hip hop, internet design, CD cover graphics, and communication technology would be able to register for classes and computer time in Éboni’s attic/studio. Éboni has always been interested in creating hip hop networks and, as he termed it, “connecting my [neighbor]’hood to the rest of São Paulo and also the global centers of hip hop.”

Éboni's dreams depended on his ability to pitch the community technology project to outside investors, principally the Department of Culture in the São Paulo municipality and local NGOs such as the Cultural House in the nearby Monte Azul neighborhood. Ultimately, Éboni had to scale back his initial plans but over time did accrue enough funding and local interest to establish a core group of ten young men and five young women. He transformed the storage space and expanded his office, which was also his bedroom. Presently, he recruits friends and *periferia* youth through contacts with neighborhood organizations such as Monte Azul to help him with graphic design projects.

Hip hoppers reckon their cultural activities as complementary work in the long-range goals of providing space and distinction to their families. They understand all too well that this process involves difficult negotiations with a host of state institutions and neighborhood individuals and organizations. The experience of hip hop is filled with such negotiation as stage performance itself is something that requires complicated organization and frequent authorization. Working hip hop offers teenagers an introductory education in the art of persuasion and bargaining a skill that is valuable for their future or even present immediate families.

Concurrent with changes in the city, a paradigmatic shift with regard to the operational meaning of citizenship has taken place, so that it has come to signify a set of practices rather than an objective document of status and duties (Álvarez, Dagnino, Escobar 1998; Hagopian 2007; Yúdice 2001; Neate and Platt 2006). Specific to Brazil, Holston and Caldeira (1998) argued that the post-dictatorship period, from 1985 to the present, has demonstrated a “disjunctive democracy” with an agenda of more discursive freedom for the masses coupled with more intense levels of state-sponsored violence. The city has been at the center of this process—a “city of walls” (Caldeira 2000) with privatized security and dehumanizing levels of surveillance along with growing numbers of “insurgent citizenship” (Holston 2008) movements employing discourses of education, property rights and identity politics. Shifts in notions of the city and citizenship are expressed in socio-economic indices such as real estate value and more specifically the contours of capital circulation. Thus, urban spatiality figures prominently in discussions about changes in the global economy (Low 1996; Hannerz 1980). For the first 350 years of its existence, São Paulo was little more than an outpost that linked the coastal city of Santos to the “savage” but resource-rich backlands. As Brazil initiated its first projects of industrial capitalism, São Paulo began to emerge as a point of national modernity and modernization (Love 1980). Such spatial economics are evident within the cultural discourse of modernism in Brazil. In a speech given near the present location of MASP (São Paulo Museum of Art) in 1921, writer Oswald de Andrade called the new industrial landscape of São Paulo the “raw material” of modernist expression. Andrade (1921) urged his circle of friends to consider the idea of São Paulo, e.g. the labor force represented in the factory, as endemic of an “unknown harmony of human violence, of growth and disaster, of struggle, hate, and love.”

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As part of what has been termed post-modernism or more specifically post-Fordism, new dynamics of capital investment and labor organization have influenced new formations of cities. David Harvey (1973, 1985), Fredric Jameson (1984), and Manuel Castells (1977) have argued that dispersal of capital and expansive development of transnational interdependencies worked to fragment the modern notion of cities and urban socialities. Even more boldly, Harvey, William Bunge and other radical geographers asserted that location and spatiality are integral components of the capitalist mode of production. In short, capitalism is a spatial endeavor and depends on certain variables of spatial distribution or what Harvey (1999) described as “circulation” for value to accrue.

São Paulo administrations such as those under the leadership of mayors Paulo Maluf (1993–97) and current mayor Gilberto Kassab (2006-present) have invested significantly in the ideological management of urban space. They have been successful politicians, in part, because they have, literally, capitalized on the spectacle of public works. The degree of publicness as it relates to access, notions of property and usage reveal a distinction between the architectonics of Maluf’s tunnels and Kassab’s bridge, on the one hand, and the representations of public parks by rapper Mano Brown, the fanzines of Limonada and other hip hop activities to be discussed shortly.

Maluf was known for his prodigious development of traffic tunnels throughout São Paulo and, most recently, Kassab has become the master facilitator of São Paulo’s newest “post card,” the Octávio Frias de Oliveira Bridge. With regard to the latter, official São Paulo tourism agencies quickly remind the potential visitor that this bridge is one more reference to the greatest vanguard center in Brazil, a city that dictates

such trends to the rest of Latin America . . . [such a wonderful] coincidence that this inauguration occurs during the SP Fashion Week . . . [the bridge] has become one more example of the city that has been the stage of revolutionary change . . . [a place] that is so grand and imposing that . . . it is responsible for 15 percent of the GDP with only 6 percent of the national population and possesses a per capita salary that is 70 percent higher than the rest of the country.⁵

São Paulo is a city apart. While the millions of workers who commute by bus or train will never be served by such wonderful feats of architecture, transit ingenuity and aesthetics, a cadre of private contractors, investors and elite Morumbi neighborhood residents (the primary beneficiary of this bridge) accrue value in this dazzling territorial claim. These are typical circuits of capital in the propagation of São Paulo as a modern cityspace, for they operate under the logic of spectacle, speculation and disenfranchisement.

Yet, just as it was with “Fura-Fila,”⁶ the exorbitant project under Maluf’s protégé, Celso Pitta, São Paulo mayor 1997–2001, the marginalized often strike back. Less than a week after the technological masterpiece bridge was inaugurated, the bright lights had faltered. Due to the

theft of over 200 meters of copper wire, the newest mark of progress was flickering in a whisper.⁷ In my interpretation of hip hop, I argue that hip hoppers' occupations offer an alternative to multinational corporate and state models of *periferia* value. Hip hop is a kind of labor that is always spatial in nature and effect, which works to offset the historical structure of real estate and other capital investment in São Paulo's urbanization.

The "way down" of the *periferia*: A "marginal" way of knowing

The *periferia* is both a material space and a contested ideology. In Brazil, the *periferia* is a place of autoconstruction, state abandonment, and strongly marked social prejudice. The celebrated slum reality author, Carolina Maria de Jesús, wrote copiously in her diary from her *favela* shack in the Canindé neighborhood during the late 1950s, an era economic historians and sociologists have labeled the second wave of industrialization and domestic migration (Baer 2008; Cardoso 1964) and a time when the *periferia* began to impose itself on the general São Paulo imagination. She remarked,

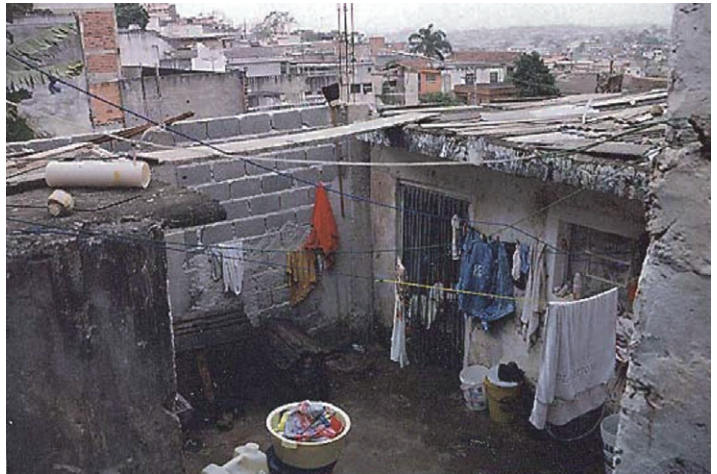


Figure 1. Common space in typical house, Parque São Rafael, East Side of São Paulo, 1999. Photo by author.

I classify São Paulo this way: The Governor's Palace is the living room. The mayor's office is the dining room and the city is the garden. And the *favela* is the backyard where they throw the garbage . . . And when I'm in the *favela* I have the impression that I'm a useless object, destined to be forever in a garbage dump (Jesús 2003:24, 29).

The *favela*, as part of the overall category, *periferia*, is in the way down (*no fundão*) and literally and conceptually "out of the way."

American and Brazilian hip hop scholars have rightly identified the abject locale, and more importantly the range of performative practices connected to "low" places, as an emic stronghold of authenticity and a political and aesthetic launch pad towards authority (Rose 1994; Forman 2002; Guasco 2001; Rodrigues 2003). Similar to the way down or the "way way below," as Robin Kelley once described the range of subaltern



Figure 2. View of local *favela* from state-sponsored housing project in Pereira neighborhood, São Paulo, 2003. Photo by author.

perspectives that inform American black working-class stylization,⁸ the *periferia* is a milieu of refashioning the self and by extension the locale. As Forman asserts with regard to the US ghetto, despite or perhaps because of all its negative complexity, [it] is still heralded as an idealized space for minority teens within rap's cultural discourses precisely because it is considered as being somehow more 'real' than other spaces and places" (Forman 2002:60). Tricia Rose locates the emergence of US hip hop culture in the

"context of deindustrialization" in New York in the 1970s. Her comments about the interface between hip hop culture and US city spaces resonate here: the city "provided the context for creative development among hip hop's earliest innovators, shaped their cultural terrain, access to space, materials, and education" (Rose 1994:34). The task at hand is not to argue more generally that space is a potential resource and limitation of social networks, such as music/art "scenes," but rather to demonstrate how practitioners articulate space, in material and ideological terms, to aesthetic, cultural production (Cohen 1999; Shank 1994; Straw 1991). In the case of São Paulo hip hop what is striking is the hold that *periferia* has on one of the most globalized forms of popular culture.

Even as Brazilian hip hoppers strive to leave the *periferia* behind as too limiting, there is an existential attachment based not only in notions of authenticity but also a set of moral obligations to a collective agency, as signaled in the lyrics of Idea Hills above—"we are the periphery." What distinguishes the US "ghettocentricity" (Rivera 2003:97–126) or "hood"-based hip hop epistemologies from the Brazilian *periferia*-centricity is made manifest in the spatial dynamics of the hip hop culture industry, or what Forman (2002) calls the "spacing out" of hip hop. In both cases the "hood" and *periferia* capture the rich intersection between spaces of experience and materiality; however, US hip hoppers have successfully positioned hip hop, albeit through considerable struggle in the early years, to recognizable public spheres, such as black oral and music traditions, black nationalism and "racial capitalism" (Watkins 2002:206), and then later to youth expression,⁹ which contain established histories of commercial circulation and cultural distribution (Watkins 2002; Boyd 2002). Brazilians, for the most part, associate "black public spheres" with preservation located not in São Paulo but in the colonial capital cities of Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. In addition, Brazilian hip hoppers continue to work against the idea that rap music cannot be made Brazilian.¹⁰ Therefore, circulation of

periferia flows unevenly as many Brazilians are suspicious of its genuine status.

In São Paulo, the persistence of *periferia* as the unifying ideology limits its “spatial mobility” (Kirschner 1998:250). The most obvious ramification of this is the simple fact that, unlike in the US where over the past two decades the hip hop fan base has become increasingly suburban and even rural, Brazilian hip hop remains an urban phenomenon. For example, in contrast to popular music genres such as *música sertaneja*, *música axé*, *forró*, and even to some extent *samba pagode*, Brazilian hip hop artists stick to a limited circuit when they leave São Paulo. There is a fan base and performance infrastructure in southern cities such as Londrina, Curitiba, and Porto Alegre in addition to central cities like Brasília, Belo Horizonte and the coastal cities of Santos and Rio de Janeiro. Recently, there have been excursions to the northeast in cities such as Recife. The cities of the Amazon rainforest area, which comprise over a third of the country’s territory, are off the hip hop *imago mundi* altogether.

Marginality

Brazilians consider the *periferia* a dangerous place, because it represents the outlaw backlands within the metropolitan spaces of modernity and progress (Sheriff 2001; Goldstein 2003). It is the socio-geographical manifestation of the necessary difference for Brazilian bourgeois identity formation. The dialectics of shoreline culture and countryside tradition have generated a great deal of what is gingerly negotiated as Brazilian national history.¹¹ The *periferia* is out of place. Yet, it is the point of address (*ponto que eu peço*), unmistakably the discursive fodder for hip hop culture.¹²

Hip hoppers through their narratives underscore the potential empowerment of witnessing. Whether grounded in the US African-American tradition of spirituality and power, or a general indigenous Latin American tradition of truth and cosmology, the agency in being a witness and relating experience is undeniable (Sanford 2003) More pertinent to the purposes of this text, witnessing is a spatial claim. One must witness from some place and herein lays the significance of the *ponto* (point) of address. As Carolina Maria de Jesús reminds us, the *favela* and the *periferia* in São Paulo is more often than not an unstable point of address. “July 27. I heated food for the children and started to write. I looked for a place where I could write in peace. But here in the *favela* there aren’t any such places. In the sun I feel the heat. In the shade I feel cold. I was wandering around with the notebooks in my hand when I heard angry voices. I went to see what it was . . .” (Jesús 2003:93–4).

The crushing objectification in the real and imaginary figure of the “marginal” in Brazilian hip hop is the variable end result of a broken down, chaotic system of city infrastructure. Simultaneously, the “marginal” is the typical anti-hero of contemporary Brazil, the wayward

migrant with a cursed gift of gab and a similarly Calibanesque attitude of *revolta* (rage).¹³ The marginal is an alternative modern subject, a subaltern author of a translocal cosmology—a worldview based on the quotidian and conventionally abject. It is important to remember that the marginal and the *periferia* are not isolated phenomena but essentially entangled in the modernization, in all its connotations, of cities like São Paulo.

Marginality is a magical myth, one that “exerts a magnetic attraction” for those invested in public policy and cultural expression, as former president and sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso once wrote (in Perlman 1976:xi). Janice Perlman systematically demonstrated in her landmark study of Rio de Janeiro during the height of the military dictatorship in the late 1960s and early 1970s that marginality functions as a powerful myth, because it draws from a historically grounded ideology of difference and an empirically based reality of urbanization and economic policies. These policies have forced millions of Brazilians into a heterogeneous but disenfranchised locality—the *periferia* (Perlman 1976:91–131).

The marginal’s management of precarious life chances has over the last sixty years helped create the polemical place of the *periferia*. The spaces of buses, trains, corner bars, mud slide areas, abject public parks, abandoned school buildings and state residential projects, long lines waiting for social services, and the *bocas* (“mouths” or entryways) of alleys and drug trafficking spots mark the *periferia* as both an area of maverick socio-economic life outside of state concern and a dependent beggar of basic social and health services. The practices of public policy and media representation link such spatialization of marginalization to definitions of the *periferia* as a “culture of poverty.” The *periferia* is thus known and the paradigm of urbanization as a process of civilization and modernization once again is confirmed as a project of inclusion and exclusion. In many ways, the state and the elite-sponsored media sources have fixed the *periferia* in a “timeless iconicity” (Bigenho 2000) of official documents related to indicators of modernity, i.e. real estate deeds, literacy rates, homicide rates and wage earnings. The flow of hip hop expressive culture, among other genres of working-class art and activism, questions such fixity and thus complicates any singular notion of *periferia*.

Of course, this perspective taken as absolute is Manichean and does not do justice to the significant efforts by motivated individuals and groups located in state departments, public and private institutions, and media conglomerates with whom hip-hoppers have established social and educational programs based in part on the re-articulation of public space. For example, in 2001 members of the long-standing hip hop organization *Aliança Negra* (Black Alliance) along with various community activists from their district of Cidade Tiradentes on the extreme east side of São Paulo explored the ruins of an abandoned residential housing project. After some weeks of informal conversations with the temporary residents, *Aliança Negra* gained their consent to make an amateur video documenting the living conditions and the residents’ life stories. The

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posse members negotiated with representatives of the Globo Reporter SPTV, a news program specific to the daily life of the São Paulo metro area, and not only illuminated the present gap in urbanization and state obligations but also utilized the situation to initiate a community workshop of video journalism and basic camera operation.

As the case of Aliança Negra demonstrates, the occupation of spaces and the contestation over place control is politically meaningful as hip hoppers work to rearticulate *periferia* as valuable knowledge for residents to reconsider themselves. To return to Holston, contemporary São Paulo hip hop is an insurgent movement, “a process that is an acting counter, a counterpolitics, that destabilizes the present and renders it fragile, defamiliarizing the coherence with which it usually presents itself (Holston 2008:34). It is the coherence of “marginality” with which hip hop articulates its insurgency and in so doing has provoked thousands of youth and by extension family members and friends to redefine themselves vis-à-vis the city and the power of the *periferia*.

“Marginal” voices

If the “marginal” represents an archetype of *periferia* knowledge, what does (s)he know? The expressive culture of hip hop addresses this in spatial terms. The hip hopper asserts his/her authority through a basis of an experience with the terrain, which then become the *pontos* (points) of address in discursive modes of lyrics (rap), soundscapes (DJ compositions), public imagescapes (graffiti) and body movement (street dance). In essence, these are the intersection points between expressive art and urbanism, which constitute fresh meanings of *periferia* and thus São Paulo overall.

I’m a 100 percent *favela*. Wherever you are, it is the *periferia* that dominates. I know this. When I helped put together “Allies of the Allies” B-boy crew [street dance collective], it was simply to sound this alarm. We of the *periferia* are here and we’ll always be here. We know more than you think we do.”

The spatial terms of the *periferia* vis-à-vis the “marginal” are more dynamic than perhaps this interview excerpt from B-boy Profeta affords. There are two points to be made. First, *favela* and *periferia* are not synonyms. Similar to many hip hoppers, Profeta chose to employ catch phrases like “I’m a 100 percent *favela*,” to gain the attention of, in this case, me, a foreigner who is presumably operating on a set of ideological generalizations about Brazil, *periferia* and hip hop. Over time, Profeta contradicted the conflation he initially made between *favela* and *periferia*.

Favelas are spaces of drastic socioeconomic measures. In fact, most performing hip hoppers do not live in *favelas*; they rather reside in surrounding neighborhoods characterized by more conventional archi-

ecture featuring *casas* (houses) instead of *barracos* (shacks or shanties). To participate actively in hip hop requires a certain material investment. One of the primary goals of hip hop “exchanging information” (*trocar uma idéia*), demands expenditure in the process of becoming conscious. Purchasing recorded music, clothes, equipment, paint supplies, bus passes, photocopying services for ‘zines and event flyers, and computer and Internet services are difficult but potentially manageable for the typical *periferia* dweller and next to impossible for the typical *favelado* (*favela* resident).

Despite this gap, which theoretically divides *periferia* communities, hip hoppers explicitly include the *favela* as an originating point of narration and sociocultural activity through their work in posses and other organizations. The point is that the *periferia* is a heterogeneous space, which nevertheless hip hoppers seek to unite through discursive protagonists such as the “marginal” and rhetorical tropes such as violence and crime in order to establish a new and different system.

Secondly, Profeta implies a sense of stagnant locality when he states that “we’ll always be here . . .” Profeta’s strategic essentialism is an attempt to demonstrate an unshakeable strength and attitude. As Profeta later described the power of *periferia* vis-à-vis hip hop is not about remaining at home. Rather it is about a kind of travel that theoretically fortifies the home, as one familiarizes oneself with the urban terrain and develops social networks of epistemological comparison. *Periferia* is a shared concept.

Hip hop events, just as all social events, are formations involving temporal and spatial development. Events are highlights, but as a social phenomenon, they are better thought of as processes. The prelude and *denouement* of an event encompass trajectories of movement as participants and observers travel, in the case of hip hop, across the city. Different notions of São Paulo emerge from activities within different circuits (Magnini 1985, 1992; Santos 1979). In 2007 Limonada told me a story that demonstrates a development if not an imposition of at least a few *periferia* circuits through the vehicle of hip hop.

Rapper, fanzine (‘zine) producer, blogger and long-time hip hop activist Limonada grew up and continues to live in Jardim Silvina, a periphery neighborhood of São Bernardo do Campo, one of the industrial satellite municipalities within the São Paulo metro area. Limonada and I have known each other since 2002, when we met at the Hip Hop House during one of the monthly hip hop showcases. The “House,” in and of itself, represents a significant hip hop conquest, as it used to be a state-sponsored cultural center in neighboring Diadema municipality with a range of activities. In 1999 various hip hop activists from Diadema, São Bernardo and São Paulo negotiated the takeover and renaming of the facility in the name of hip hop. It is the only institution dedicated to Brazilian hip hop and consequently has become a landmark for the national hip hop community. In 2007 the federal government vis-à-vis the cultural ministry recognized the House as an official *ponto de cultura* (cultural point or institution). Back in 2002,

Limonada and I chatted mostly about his fanzines. In fact, that was the main reasons he had made the forty-five minute trek out to the “House.”

Today Limonada is an avid blogger and recognizes the impracticality of hardcopy fanzines, yet he enjoys reminiscing about those days. As Limonada explains, his is not a nostalgia of simply spirit exactly, but rather of routine. Limonada became aware that to be an informed and respected hip hopper requires an acute sense of space and boundaries.

Maybe I’m lazy now. I don’t really think so. I mean, I’m still out there. You know I have a book out and so it reminds me of my earlier days as a *fanzineiro* lugging around thirty copies of “Folhas” and “Mente” (abbreviations of his two main fanzine titles). You know, I had rarely been out of Jardim Silvina before my involvement with hip hop. I had a couple of jobs cutting glass, working in a factory, collecting bus fares, but that was different. With hip hop I left Silvina and São Bernardo on my own terms and I paid much more attention to the things and people around me. I felt like I saw for the first time other people not only like me but out there going somewhere, on their way to something serious. Being a *fanzineiro* is all about information. I am trying to share what I know with others. I had an attitude of taking what I knew about my *periferia* to the outside. In hip hop events there were dozens or hundreds of people doing similar stuff. I met people and became familiar with streets, transportation centers, landmarks . . . Many of those people I still do projects with today . . . Every weekend we’d take over a place, often a place like in downtown São Paulo, a plaza, park, whatever and almost make it a piece of *periferia*. It was temporary but it was very important. I felt strongly about that and it rubbed off on the way I began to understand how to do other things in my life and also how hip hop can expand and grow . . .”

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Place identity is “constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretch beyond it” (Massey 1992:14; see Straw 1995, 2001; Shank 1994). The links among travel, knowledge, and recognition are not lost on São Paulo hip hoppers. It is extremely important for hip hop performers to know the confines of the immense São Paulo *periferia*. Through live performance venues, rappers, especially, but all hip hoppers cover a great deal of territory going from one live gig to another. Beyond their own performances, hip hoppers make cameo appearances in events across the metropolitan area starting in the afternoon and going into the morning hours of the following day. Hip hop performer and fans are weekend travelers covering up to a hundred miles without ever leaving the metropolitan area. Weekend events in *periferia* clubs, radio stations, cultural centers, public parks, and friends’ birthday parties outline significant spatial networks of culture that engender alliances and promote what is optimistically termed *união* (unity). However, unity is an ideal, an ideological tool of persuasion.

Thus far, I have demonstrated that hip hop value as well as the currency of the city itself are spatial in practice. The axes of center-periphery as socio-economic distribution spheres and psycho-cultural

reservoirs of imagination hold interest for the “marginal” performer, the elitist intellectual, the empowered technocrat and beyond. In the remaining sections of this article, I focus on the differences of representation among São Paulo hip hoppers and analyze the socio-geographical implications of positive hip hop on the magic of marginality.

Hip hop and space

Hip hoppers, the loose term for practitioners of rap, DJ, graffiti and street dance, i.e. the so-called four elements, are deeply invested in the pleasures and politics of reality representation. They are, in fact, normally dogmatic about the needs and purposes of reality representation. Relative to other hip hop communities around the world, Brazilian hip hoppers, centered in the São Paulo metropolitan area, are conservative when it comes to legitimacy. Local hip hoppers generally dislike or distrust crossover of any kind and by the late 1990s they had developed what would become a paradigmatic approach: take the ideologies of marginality levied against the disenfranchised (us) and transform them into new, empowering centers of aesthetics, narrative and identity formation (we). Marginal hip hoppers exemplify what sociologist James Staples referred to as the “tension between constraint and creativity” (2007:17) and thus embody the agency-structure dialectic within marginality. This tension around authenticity acts as a creative impulse for stylistic innovation and reveals significant differences regarding the spatiality of hip hop and by extension working-class *periferia* conceptualizations of the city.

One of the most palpable ideologies of social difference and power is space, in this case, the (sub)urban space of the *periferia*. Just as De Certeau pondered the phatic functions of urban *flanêurs* (1984:97–110), São Paulo hip hoppers have explored the ramifications of their own humble “pedestrian rhetorics” on potential new understandings of the metro area and new directions for hip hop. During most of the 1990s São Paulo hip hoppers found the greatest level of recognition and social effect by emphasizing a particular idea of locality, an extremely literal and empirical notion of *periferia*. As more and more urban youth honed their hip hop skills and access to information technology gradually increased, divergences emerged not only in terms of aesthetics but also as to what the role and the very meaning of *periferia* should be for the hip hop community.

I have organized the local hip hop differences into two emic categories: marginal and positive. For “marginal” hip hoppers, the operative ideology consists of spreading the truths of reality through acute and transparent detail. Transformation comes naturally; or as local “marginal” hip hoppers often claim, change comes *na sequência* (as a follow up). There are very few concrete solutions (another keyword in hip hop discourse) offered, because the primary concern is simply to make sure people understand what reality is. This translates into lengthy reports or

indictments (*denúncias*) of police violence, precarious living conditions, racial discrimination, homicide related to drug trafficking, and police and general state corruption.

The rap group Racionais MCs (Rational Emcees) has been the leader of the marginal style since the early 1990s. In particular, the enigmatic leader Mano Brown has perfected his narration of the indictment as literally and performatively, a matter of fact. For example, his depictions of everyday spatialization and power in “Weekend in the park” (1993) and the recuperation of the marginal as a legitimate protagonist in “Chapter 4, Verse 3” (1997), have influenced countless young *periferia* men in offering a way to understand their surroundings and an empowering perspective about reality representation.

[The kid] doesn't remember even to bring money [to the park] / the money of his dad yelling from inside the bar / He doesn't even remember yesterday, today or tomorrow / He just dreams on the other side of the wall . . . Thousands of self-constructed houses! Dirt roads, this is the [*periferia*] hill, my place awaits me! . . . In the *periferia* the happiness is the same [as over there in the park]! It's almost noon and it's on. It's there [in the *periferia*] where my kin lives, my friends. Everyone here [in the *periferia*] looks like me . . .

I am much worse that what you're seeing / A black man with no remorse and 100% venom . . . The first [shot] goes 'bum', the second goes 'ta' / My style is heavy and I shake the ground / My word is worth a gun shot, I've got a lot of ammo . . .

During the late 1990s, many hip hoppers argued that the marginal approach was not enough. Through rap recordings, fanzine interviews, meeting discussions, and ubiquitous chatter, positive hip hoppers claimed that they were, in fact, prepared to provide solutions to the periphery reality. Some of these included a rejuvenated and activist sense of spirituality through various evangelical denominations rooted in the hundreds of local churches throughout the periphery (Burdick 2008, 2009b). Hip hop positivism also includes orientations toward information and sound technology as a way to escape the limited resources of the periphery. In short, positivism implicitly involves new processes of identification in which hip hoppers imagine their particular issues of locality (detailed so well in marginal hip hop), as similar to other peripheral or marginalized communities in other places and other times. In short, positivists see hip hop as more diasporic and historical in scope. Such a perspective is important, because it means that the ideas and material for local change can come from afar.

The sketchy locales of train and bus terminals, street corners, abandoned parks, and other public places continue to dominate hip hop narration. To borrow from Tobias Hecht's ethnography about street children in Recife, Brazil, these spaces are *pontos* (points), which hip hoppers coordinate to make an alternative cartography of São Paulo.¹⁴ These points are contested sites; the terrain is up for grabs among competing

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reality*

ideological systems within hip hop and conventional Brazilian society, respectively. While the latter is scripted in officially and institutionally recognized documents of maps and urban planning, the former is precisely the object under scrutiny in this text.

A contemporary challenge to *periferia*

In the ethnographic vignettes above, I focused my interpretation on the saliency of *periferia* as a socio-geographic term of hip hop meaning-making. São Paulo hip hoppers, particularly rappers and DJs, have organized the Brazilian hip hop movement historically in synchronicity with the semiotic and political power of *periferia*. The continued success of groups such as Racionais MCs and, since 2001, Fação Central speaks to a certain cohesion and longevity of this spatial discourse. However, since the late 90s and particularly with the rise of “evangelical rap” in the early 2000s and a more abstract or underground rap movement since 2004, there are challenges to *periferia* as the dominant spatial paradigm. In this final section, I will focus on one notable positive rapper, Partéum, and his attempt to escape the *periferia* and offer a solution to pitfalls of conventional hip hop occupations.

As I argued elsewhere (2005), positive hip hoppers tend to engineer their representations in sound, narrative, image and even body movement in a global idiom. They do not foreground the *periferia* as central to their design. For rapper Rappin’ Hood, this has meant a rearticulation of São Paulo hip hop to the nation through an incorporation of Rio de Janeiro based samba and northeastern folkloric beats and rhyme schemes. For rapper Thaíde, at times, this has meant a visual design of technology and a claim to the universal. For evangelical rappers such as Professor Pablo, Lito Atalaia and rap groups such as Apocalipse 16 and Alternativa C, the *periferia* is unproductive and limiting as a horizon of humanity. It is through the universality of popular Christian spirituality, with which one can broaden one’s perspectives and later return to the materiality and conditions of the locale to transform the self and collectivity. For rapper Jamal, who has traversed through representational periods of violent marginality, technological positivity and evangelical positivity, the one cohesive symbol that he maintains is the city. It remains the “proper stage for my hip hop knowledge,” as he explained to me before we set up a promotional photo shoot for his 2002 solo album.

In addition to the challenge from evangelical hip hoppers, a new cadre of stylish rappers and DJs has attempted to leave the *periferia* behind as they foreground the abstract in lyrics and eclectic in soundscapes. Such a break from the design of transparency so hard-hitting and effective on the part of marginal hip hoppers is troubling to some, such as hip hop website manager Éboni (see above). A person engaged in technology, Éboni recognizes that the aesthetic and rhetorical move away from the *periferia* is dangerous, because

as soon as some *boy* [bourgeois male, a resident of the growing gated communities or old “noble” neighborhoods] learns how to rhyme well, it’s all over. The attention paid to the *periferia* will once again be reduced to tragedy, crime and despair.

In terms of consumption, as signaled in the observations by Aldir of Porte Illegal music store, marginal groups such as Racionais MCs and Fação Central still sell more recordings and concert tickets than the upstart positivists. Furthermore, based on my informal surveys of pirated music sales from street vendors, the abstract positivists have bolstered a very small share of sales. With this context one can understand the delicate position of savvy hip hoppers interested in shifting the hip hop paradigm to a new position on locality.

To discuss such a position, I focus on the rapper Parteum. I selected him, because he has been particularly perceptive and articulate in our conversations since 2007. His views on hip hop are compelling as they are simultaneously clever and conflicting. In short, Parteum’s position represents the hold that the *periferia* still maintains even on one of its most thoughtful critics. Parteum, an artistic name based loosely on the Latin word for birth, is actually one of several personae the impressive Fábio embodies. His forays in skateboarding, modernist literature, science fiction, opera, world beat and information technology show Parteum to be a mix between Fernando Pessoa, the famous early 20th century Portuguese writer with several alter egos, and the popular, cross-over New Jersey-based hip hop collective from the mid to late 1990s, the Wu-Tang Clan. Parteum’s recent projects with Mzuri Sana, a hip hop collective based on the ubiquitous Swahili phrase for “very good” include a provocative recording entitled the *Ópera Oblíqua* (Oblique Opera). Everything is apparently off-center, out of time and fragmented. Parteum posts in his emails and various websites: “My shit always works, now and again.” As an alternative to the Rational MCs (Racionais MCs), Parteum offers a “broken rationale.” He waxes poetically on his 2004 recording that

the best ideas are off base . . . my stories begin in the middle . . . they describe heroes, who after losing their powers plan acts of terrorism which never come to pass. They are just passing rumors . . . like the invisible racism in this country . . .

Parteum is a champion of the global. “I hate planes but I love arriving in airports . . . still with the fragrance of another country or city.” With that said, in our email conversations, Parteum insisted that the locality of the *periferia* cannot disappear if hip hop is to maintain a “consciousness.” It is this “continuity” with the past hip hop innovators, as Parteum explained, that demands that the emcee or DJ or graffiti artist or street dancer create links to other performers. For Parteum, this gesture towards bridge building is not simply rhetorical as demonstrated during our discussion about hip hop and popular media. It is important to note that

*Parteum is a
champion of the
global*

Parteum's older brother is Rappin' Hood, a longtime hip hop positive activist and radio personality. When asked about the role of the community radio station, Parteum responded:

It is really a jigsaw puzzle. The [local, *periferia*] radio station is a *ponto* (point) of meeting, media and just getting together. But, it must have a well-defined agenda and be self-sufficient. If not, it quickly becomes a hot potato and what once united the community, divides it . . . I paraphrase Nasir Jones [US rapper Nas], 'the world is yours.' And it's based in this that I state that the meeting place of the neighborhood is vital, but the youth must go beyond and realize that the world is large. We must use the local spaces [such as the radio station as it used to be] to exchange ideas and imagine beyond . . .

In his critiques of local radio and his calls for a broadening of horizons, Parteum cannot let go the quotidian spaces of *periferia*. Even as he, in another email, philosophizes that "at some moment, we go beyond simply surviving and begin to live," implicitly critiquing the marginal mantra of rap as a *periferia* survival report as perfected by the Racionais MCs in their most popular recording "Surviving in Hell" (1997), Parteum quickly acknowledges that "the space of the *periferia* neighborhoods [*quebradas*] must be conquered first and that still hasn't happened. We know that." He moves back to the general in his closing comments to me: "In any city, on any street, any hotel room, any subway car, any library, at any bus stop, I am inspired and I have to believe that there exists some sort of reciprocity between the person, the surrounding [objects] and the everything in between."

Conclusion

Just as with culture, space is never simply given; rather, it is, as Lefebvre argued, a social product, a negotiation between what he called "representations of space" and "spaces of representations" (Lefebvre 1991:33). Dominant social relations are materially inscribed, yet there are always underground practices of difference rooted in everyday life. The contemporary city is best understood as an increasing process of peripherization, a form of urbanization based on rubrics of migration and immigration, global capital investment and communication technology. The logics of marginal and positive styles of São Paulo hip hop represent collective articulations between cityspace experiences, knowledge and alternative cartographies. When hip hoppers create 'zine networks, transform state buildings into hip hop centers, "occupy" youth prisons to conduct citizenship classes (Pardue 2004a) or establish community radio stations, it is not a flip of a switch. Such spatial conquests are considerable acts of symbolic labor against a mountain of history, which has consistently objectified them and their predecessors (rural-urban migrants, dark-skinned, informally educated Brazilians) as a natural resource and not as a tactical player in the circulation of value and the very meaning of the city.

Making Territorial
Claims
*The tradition of
hip hop tends to
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and more
specifically urban
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essential basis of
cultural work*

In part, the debate concerning the role of the city in individual and collective representation manifests itself in the current division in Brazilian hip hop between the positive and marginal camps, respectively. The tradition of hip hop tends to showcase locality and more specifically urban scenes as the essential basis of cultural work. In the US, the “way way down” spaces of disenfranchised urban realities are but one point in the dynamic formation of blackness, the still reigning index of authenticity within mainstream hip hop, the polemics of which range from gender and sexuality politics to capitalist nationalism to language use (Watkins 2002; Collins 2006; McLeod 1999; Boyd 1997; Rivera 2003). Certainly, all of these dimensions are spatialized in the process of circulation as well as initial semiotic construction. However, in Brazil, the city and its banal contours are the primary sources for authenticity in the essential representation of the real against a historical escalation of conflict and contestation in governmental policies and civil society.¹⁵ I demonstrated in this paper that the lingering power of the marginal perspective, despite a proliferation of various positive hip hop styles since 2000, involves an unshakeable truth about representation and hip hop ethos. Namely, one cannot morally jump past the ghetto (*quebrada*), for any real change must be spatially inscribed into the daily contours and experiences of the millions of *periferia* dwellers. This is the rationale for the local word choice of spatial conquest when hip hoppers talk about an event or a performance group.

In São Paulo, the city “that never meant to become a city . . . a by-product of unexpected changes in the trends of the international commodities market” (Sevcenko 1993:180), the *periferia* subject in the garb of the hip hop pundit transforms the abjection, the necessary remainder of urbanization and its capitalist exploitation or what Brazilian historian Nicolau Sevcenko called “the colossal game of chance” (1993:188), into a legitimate *ponto* (point of address). The grounding of the *periferia* as space and concept has had important ramifications for the development of hip hop culture, one of the most important youth movements in urban Brazil. Consequently, the dynamics of *periferia* speak to the unstable and provocative experience of being in and of São Paulo. As the official propaganda of the early 1920s proclaimed, “São Paulo is a runaway train. It cannot be stopped.” Likewise, rapper Thaíde some seventy years later would make the phrase “hip hop, you can’t stop it” (*hip hop, não pode parar*) a signature salutation.

Not unlike conferences such as the International Confederation of Temporary Work Businesses, which geographer Kevin Ward (2007) has attended and created an insightful analysis regarding the role of expert consultants and the dissemination of business knowledge around keywords such as flexibility, São Paulo hip hoppers, too, organize themselves and hold conferences and symposia to debate culture management. The result of such meetings along with more focused activities is, in part, a deepening of the circuits of hip hop. They deploy keywords such as citizenship, *periferia*, marginal, and positive to try and talk back and leave a lasting imprint on the spaces they occupy. Such hip hop conquests,

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however, are difficult to maintain and control. The extent to which hip hop practitioners are able to design a more empowering *periferia* through and beyond the mediation of marginality is not simply a theoretical issue of academia, but it also constitutes one of the primary pragmatic concerns of local actors.

Notes

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¹All translations from Portuguese are mine. The original texts in Portuguese are listed in the References Cited section below.

²I have implemented the following policy with regard to consultant's names. In the case of recording artists, I have used that name, rather than their birth name. For consultants who are not recording artists, I used pseudonyms.

³For the most part, I follow the basic differentiation between space and place as articulated by Grossberg: "places are the sites of stability where people can stop and act, the markers of their affective investment," and "spaces are the parameters of the mobility of people and practices" (1992:295).

⁴I want to thank Bret Gustafson and Emily Yeh for their suggestions pertaining to the literature on epistemology and human geography, respectively.

⁵See <http://www.cidadesaopaulo.com/noticias.asp?idMat=999> for the state-sponsored publicity statement on the bridge.

⁶*Fura-fila* (a colloquial term to cut in line) was a public works project to construct a interurban bus line elevated above some of the major avenues in the São Paulo metro area. See Pardue (2008) Ch.1 for details.

⁷See the article "Funcionarios se arriscam em nova ponte da Zona Sul" on the Globo news website: <http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/SaoPaulo/o,,MUL470090-5605,00.html>

⁸See Kelley (1994:16, and 1997 especially chapters 1 and 2).

⁹Forman shows that the "spacing out" of US hip hop beyond the physical city was, in part, a result from a substantial change in "hood"-based lyrics. "Hip-hop culture was carried outward along both physical and technological pathways, disseminated more widely as its practices evolved away from the central spaces of their origin" (Forman 2002:24). Flores (2000) and Rivera (2003) remind us that the "hood" is itself quite heterogeneous particularly in terms of ethnicity. However, hip hoppers' inclusion of youth as a potential "hood"-based attitude has ameliorated such divisions, at least in terms of hip hop commercial circulation. Even if one were to limit the hip hop-hood matrix to "black America," the reality of the pertinent narratives cuts across different communities of blackness mostly in terms of class, as Watkins (2002:200–205) points out, thus still affording a spacing out of US rap unlike in the Brazilian case.

¹⁰An exception to this would be Marcelo D2, who explicitly terms his musical production "samba hip hop," thus provoking listeners and critics to consider his rap as squarely Brazilian.

¹¹For a classic argument of this spatiocultural tension, see Euclides da Cunha (1957). See also Andrade (1960) for a more general discussion.

¹²This particular phrase comes from the song "Vida Loka" (Crazy Life) by Brazil's most famous rap group Racionais MCs (2002).

¹³See Butler (2007) for an engaging discussion of *revolta* as a generative theme for local youth in Rio de Janeiro to create narratives and other symbolic devices for identification. The reference concerns the creativity around the vernacular usage of *revolta*, which is shared across Brazil and not about a comparison of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo per se.

¹⁴See, in particular, Hecht's discussion of "*pontos* and *galeras*" (turf and gangs) and the implications for an agentive notion of urban geography (1998:42–7). I employed a diacritical emphasis with street children, in accordance with Hecht's argument, which interrogates the notions home and street throughout his ethnography.

¹⁵This statement is in no fashion intended as support for a claim that Brazil is a "racial democracy" or that race and racialization are not part of hip hop semiotics or São Paulo urbanization and urbanism. In my experience, Brazilian hip hoppers have had a touch-and-go relationship with *negritude* as an organizing principle (Pardue 2004b). I find John Burdick's analysis of "black gospel" and "gospel rap" compelling in that he argues that the former have demonstrated a greater and more expansive practice of political mobilization and social action (2009a). This is, in part, based on the contentious relationship Brazilian rappers and hip hoppers have had with blackness.

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