

Global Hip Hop Studies  
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# Brazil

## ABSTRACT

*The story of hip hop in Brazil is one of empowerment among primarily disenfranchised youth of African and mixed racial heritage. Hip hop's conquest is less a story of ghetto superstars and much more about overall recognition – hip hop as Brazilian culture. Over the years hip hop has grown to embrace ever-widening demographics and identities, mixing styles and (sub)urban geographies across the country. What is perhaps most impressive is the general pride among fans and artists that hip hop is a culture (and not just music) and thus a source of education, belonging and identity. Following legends, such as KRS-One, Afrika Bambaataa and local icons, Nelsão Triunfo and King Nino Brown, upstarts and veterans continue to shout 'I am hip hop' as their mantra. This article is a brief overview of historical and contemporary themes in Brazilian hip hop informed by over twenty-five years of anthropological fieldwork in the city of São Paulo, the indisputable centre of hip hop cultural production of Brazil.*

## KEYWORDS

Brazil  
cultural history  
Universal Zulu Nation  
(UZN)  
global Black culture  
diversity  
regionalism  
hip hop

During the 2013 commemorative performance marking the 25th anniversary of *Cultura da Rua*, a landmark compilation album of Brazilian rap, pioneer breaker and rapper Thaïde gazed at the impressive, multigenerational crowd and pondered the occasion. Before launching into the hit song 'Corpo Fechado', he picked up the microphone and reminded the crowd packed into the main theatre of São Paulo's historic opera house that 'you know, when we were coming up, the police would kick us off the steps of this place. Now, look at us, look at us all. We are up here on stage. Hip hop has made it'.

The story of hip hop in Brazil is one of empowerment, gradual but undeniable, among primarily disenfranchised youth of African and mixed racial heritage. Hip hop's conquest is less a story of ghetto superstars and much

## TOP DJs

- DJ Cia (RZO)
- DJ Eric Jay (independent)
- DJ KL Jay (Racionais MCs)
- DJ Tano (Z'África Brasil)

Special consideration for DJ Zegon who emigrated to the US and helped many artists from there.

## VITAL HIP HOP SONGS

- 'A Procura da Batida Perfeita' (Marcelo D2 2003)
- 'Corpo Fechado' (Thaíde e DJ Hum 1988)
- 'Crisântemo' (Emicida 2013) and 'Tomara' Linn da Quebrada, ft. Davi Sabbag (2020)
- 'Fim de Semana no Parque' (Racionais MCs 1993)

Special consideration for Gog, the master lyricist from the capital city of Brasília, who since the early 1990s has been a major force in Brazilian hip hop.

## GRAF WRITERS YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Anarkia Boladona
- Lost Art
- Os Gêmeos
- Sinha
- Speto
- Tota
- ZeçãoNunca

more about overall recognition – hip hop as Brazilian culture. Over the years hip hop has grown to embrace ever-widening demographics and identities, mixing styles and (sub)urban geographies across the country. What is perhaps most impressive is the general pride among fans and artists that hip hop is a culture (and not just music) and thus a source of education, belonging and identity. Following legends, such as KRS-One, Afrika Bambaataa and local icons, Nelsão Triunfo and King Nino Brown, upstarts and veterans continue to shout 'I am hip hop' as their mantra.

It is important to remember that this is the land of samba, soccer, capoeira and a host of other Afro-Brazilian contributions that later became heralded as national landmarks of Brazilian culture. This, the largest South American nation, was the destination of most enslaved Africans (by far) in the western hemisphere and the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. In other words, there has always been a strong 'Black' and local presence in popular culture in Brazil. The emergence of rap, graffiti, street dance, and DJing in the early 1980s, was considered by most Brazilians to be foolish, a symbol of merely *gringo* US import. Journalists and media personalities quipped that what the early rappers were doing was simple, a *canto falado* ('spoken song'). The term *tagarela* emerged, which trivialized the rappers as just 'tongue-wagging' and thus, according to scholar Spensy Pimentel (1997), not to be taken seriously. This was personified in the figure of Mc Miele and the song 'Melô do Tagarela' (1980), which was a version of 'Rapper's Delight' by the Sugarhill Gang, recorded the previous year.

The path to recognition for Brazilian hip hop – what youth by the 1990s repeatedly referred to as a 'movement' – started in the downtown plazas and subway stations of São Paulo, Brazil's largest city with a metro population around 20 million and the marginalized 'satellite cities' of Brasília, the nation's capital city. Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in Brazil and the origin of so much of Brazilian expressive culture, would become a significant site of hip hop production later in the 1990s with artists such as MV Bill and Marcelo D2. It is important to note that Rio youth marketed certain genres of music as 'rap' in the late 1980s and early 1990s (I recall buying my first cassette tape in São Paulo in 1995 with this keyword plastered on the cover); however, the music was more akin to Brazilian 'funk', a genre with links to Miami style 'bass' made famous by artists such as 2 Live Crew in the late 1980s.

With that said, there are certainly links between hip hop and earlier youth cultures, most prominently *baile black* or 'black' (left untranslated) dance parties. These were both fun and political and were important to fostering a sense of modern, Black identity in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s and early 1980s. Individuals such as King Nino Brown are transitional figures who link these two periods and remind us of the local histories of Brazilian hip hop. Pioneer rappers include: Thaíde, Sharylaine, MC Jack, Gog and Cambio Negro, while early DJs include DJ Raffa and DJ Hum. The foundational breakers were Nelsão Triunfo, Marcelinho and Jabaquara Breakers, while early graffiti artists include: Os Gêmeos ('The Twins'), Binho Ribeiro and Tota. Many hip hoppers changed 'elements' over time, from breakers to rap, from graffiti to breaker, etc. However, Brazilian DJs have been, relatively speaking, a constant – once a DJ always a DJ.

As is the case in many places around the world, hip hop in Brazil began with the circulation of the Hollywood films, *Wild Style*, *Style Wars*, *Breakin'*, *Beat Street* and *Rappin'*. Despite all of the influence from the United States,

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Brazilian hip hoppers have always expressed themselves in Portuguese with occasional US English words sporadically thrown in the mix. My impression based on years of fieldwork in São Paulo is that the relatively minimum influence of the English language stems from a lack of formal education regarding foreign language instruction overall in Brazil but certainly among the poor, working classes as well as an emergent sense of local pride and Black Brazilian exceptionalism. Street dancers (pop and lock, robot, breaking) attracted daily the attention of thousands, while the beginning of rapping and hip hop DJing grew out of night-time dancehall parties and sound crew competitions, which featured dynamic line-ups of rappers hoping to win a spot on a future compilation recording. This is the story of not only Thaíde and DJ Hum but also the most successful and respected group in Brazil, Racionais MCs (literally the ‘Rational Emcees’) (see Figure 1).

Another fundamental link of Brazil to the much of the rest of the hip hop world is the figure of Afrika Bambaataa. His first visit in 1999 and the many subsequent visits to Brazil have influenced local hip hoppers to adopt his philosophy of unity as a way to protect and develop hip hop. It is, indeed, remarkable how strong the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN) has been in Brazil.

Hip hop’s march towards legitimization has been a process of becoming ‘conscious’ by making globalized sounds and ideas locally relevant. In retrospect from the vantage point of the 2020s, Brazilian hip hoppers have emphasized translating as the method to create new Black identities and new, cool personae for the periphery neighbourhoods. The idea has been to keep true to hip hop and be ‘pure’ to the culture. Hence, there were few attempts to incorporate more locally ‘Black’ sounds, such as those of the *berimbau*, the main



Figure 1: Photograph of the legendary rap group Racionais MCs from 1995 in a small club in São Paulo. A map of Brazil with the city of São Paulo highlighted is superimposed onto the photograph. The photograph was taken by the author. Graphic design done by author’s colleague Mariana Gil.

instrument used in the Afro-Brazilian martial art/dance genre of capoeira and *atabaque*, a general term referring to hand percussion used in the Afro-Brazilian religion of *candomblé*. These along with the rare experiments of sampling Brazilian *bossa nova* gained few followers over the years.

There are a few important exceptions to this 'purist' orthodoxy described above. Starting with Marcelo D2, a Rio-based rapper who began his career as the front man of the reggaerock band Planet Hemp in the 1990s, one finds a different approach to hip hop that also features the famous city of Rio, a scene much more known for its *baile funk* scene. As noted above, this is a style reminiscent of Miami bass and more recently Dirty South productions. In 1998 Marcelo D2 released the album *Eu Tiro É Onda*, a playful phrase that offers an alternative to the heavy and conscious lyrics of Racionais MCs and D2's fellow Rio rapper MV Bill. Their lyrics often focus on everyday realities of urban poverty, racism and police brutality, while D2 and the many artists (Black Alien, Quinto Andar) whose careers he helped launch, rap more abstractly. Musically, they, in particular Marcelo D2, mix the nationally popular and internationally recognized genre of *samba* with more conventional hip hop beats.

Another important local concoction is the hip hop produced by Rappin' Hood, Zinho Trindade and Z'África Brasil. What all of these artists do is combine the rich folklore and music of Brazil's north-east – including genres such as *repente*, an improvised rhyme traditionally set as a duel between two men, and *embolada* and *coco*, rhythms that rely on divisions of two and three rather than four – with more straightforward rap. As is evident in the name of Z'África, the theme of African diaspora and Brazil's strong place in this network is another way that local hip hoppers mix it up. DJ Erry-G is an example of someone who has produced shows with this very goal, to place Brazil as a central element in what is called 'Black' music and Africanity. Hip hop is part of this story.

As mentioned above, Brazilian hip hoppers are usually very conscious of the need to integrate the four 'elements' with a guiding 'fifth' element of universal understanding and social harmony – hip hop 'knowledge'. As some rappers and DJs experimented with different sorts of local/global mixtures, graffiti artists too have developed not only their own individual visual styles but a general scene of what has been termed *grapixo*, a hybrid of graffiti and *pixação* (i.e. tagging). In other words, Brazilians have become masters of using the various style of mural painting to elaborate the tag. Street dancers too have incorporated *capoeira* (described above) into many of their routines and individual flair – another example of an extant Afrodiasporic form rehybridizing with hip hop.

Certainly, groups such as Racionais MCs, Gog, MV Bill and Thaíde continue to record and perform, maintaining the highest level of respect from the hip hop community. Since 2010, though, rappers Emicida and Criolo have become nationally and internationally known. In recent years, Criolo has crossed over into several other musical genres and recorded with a range of popular Brazilian and worldbeat artists, such as Caetano Veloso and the Cape Verdean diva Mayra Andrade. Their secret is expert rhyme crafting and a business model including a social media savviness, which sets them apart from earlier hip hop artists. Moreover, there are new topics that Brazilian youth want to rhyme about and provoke listeners to consider today. We must remember that Brazil is a country founded on patriarchy and dogmatic

heterosexual norms. Just as hip hop has targeted racism and class stigma, some hip hoppers are finally beginning to address the importance of feminism and the violence of homo/transphobia. In essence, there has been a 'queering' of Brazilian hip hop. This background helps us understand some of the attraction to artists such as Linn da Quebrada, Karol Conká and Rico Dalasam. Conká builds on pioneering women, such as Lady Cris, Atitude Feminina, Negra Li and the fallen warrior Dina Di, and has put women back at the centre of hip hop featuring a strong voice and attitude. Dalasam and Quebrada represent a supreme triumph over a long list of stigmas (Black, poor, gay, from the [sub]urban periphery) that has crippled the notion of social equality in Brazil. Their message is empowerment.

To echo pioneer rapper Thaíde in the opening vignette, Brazilian hip hop has, indeed, come a long way. No longer cultural outliers, hip hoppers can be seen and heard in any Brazilian city and even in small towns. Rappers and DJs have branched out to participate not only in conventional shows but also in *saraus*, which are popular weekly open-mic poetry and street theatre events located predominantly in the urban periphery. Hip hoppers are involved in fashion shows and children's cartoons. And, while it may seem surprising, given the oversaturation of misogynist rappers on mainstream music platforms, it has been precisely (some) Black rappers who have been at the vanguard of a movement to articulate cultural entrepreneurship (Emicida, Criolo, Konká) to progressive identity politics (Dalasam, Quebrada), what I referred to above as the *queering* of Brazilian hip hop. Such provocations to be open, brash and literally be 'trans' and move across conventional borders of genre and gender (in Portuguese, curiously, these two terms are represented by the single word *gênero*) are all occurring during the most repressive and violent regime in Republican Brazilian history (2016–22), one that governs through explicit white supremacy and homophobia.

In sum, hip hop has established itself as a source and reflection of everyday life in Brazil. Increasingly, hip hop has become the 'beans and rice' of Brazilian culture, a basis for youth nourishment through Black empowerment and social change.

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Derek Pardue is an associate professor in the Global Studies Department at Aarhus University in Denmark. His work has mostly concerned the political and aesthetic expressions of belonging among migrants and marginalized urban dwellers in Brazil, Portugal, Cape Verde and Denmark. His most recent books include *Living (Il)legalities in Brazil*, *Sonic Signatures* and *Sobrevivendo no Inferno* (Routledge, 2020), a collection of short stories inspired by the eponymous album release by the legendary Brazilian rap group Racionais MCs as part of the 33 1/3 music series.

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