

Hip Hop from Italy and the Diaspora: A Report from the 41st Parallel

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This is a story written at the confluence of Italy and its Diaspora. It is a tale that emerged from the dialogue between residents of Italy and members of the diasporic community using hip hop, a constellation of Afro-centric cultural forms developed in the United States, as the medium for communication. It recounts the production of a three-day event in Tuscany that brought together Italian hip hop artists and rappers of Italian descent from Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United States for a symposium and a series of performances and demonstrations.

In October of 1999, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute hired me to develop and lead a new division entitled Academic and Cultural Programs. The twenty-two-year-old Calandra Institute is a research institute dedicated to the study and promotion of Italian American history and culture, and that conducts original research, offers courses, maintains a research library and an archive of historical artifacts, runs student and faculty exchange programs with Italian universities, provides career counseling on CUNY campuses, produces a cable television program and video documentaries, and publishes a social science journal entitled *The Italian American Review*. One of my responsibilities is to conceptualize and implement an annual program of symposiums, conferences, and public events that bring scholarly research on Italian Americans to both academics and the general audiences.

A few weeks before joining the Calandra Institute I had met Italian composer and musician Lorenzo Brusci who was the sound technician on a video documentary my siblings and I are producing on our paternal grandmother's one-hundredth birthday celebration in Abruzzo. In addition to leading the electronic experimental band Timet, Lorenzo organizes the annual Rassegna di Arti Contemporanee «Cicli» music festival in Montevarchi and Terranuova Bracciolini, in Tuscany's Arezzo province. Through the course of several conversations and follow-up emails, Lorenzo and I developed the concept of bringing together Italian hip hop artists and rappers of Italian descendant for a event in June 2000 that we dubbed «Hip Hop from the Italian Diaspora».

The basis of this idea grew directly out of my personal Web site – www.italianrap.com – where I document the history of rap in Italy, discuss the various aesthetic and social aspects of the culture, and provide Web-related resources like an artist directory, a message board, and links to other sites. Launched in December 1998, the site attracts artists and aficionados of rap Italiano from Italy, the United States, and around the globe, with over five thousand visitors each month.

I first heard Italian rap in 1990 when an Italian friend visited New York City and brought me Jovanotti's (Lorenzo Cherubini) 1990 CD «Giovani Jovanotti». While Jovanotti's pop tunes were catchy, his raps in English were atrocious. Jovanotti's horrid aping of African American music epitomized the worst in European pop culture that watered down vibrant

black musical styles into aural schlock. Geared toward Italian teeny boppers, the recording was representative of Jovanotti's early work in the days before he transformed himself into a socially conscious recording artist and developed what music critic Felice Liperi termed «rap canzonettistico» (Liperi, 1993, p. 171).

It was four years later when I first heard the music that was changing the Italian music scene and cultural world after my friend's brother sent me a series of cassette tapes featuring Italian hip hop and reggae at the time – Frankie Hi-Nrg MC, Il Generale and Ludus Pinsky, Sud Sound System, and the Neapolitan bands 99 Posse, Almamegretta, and Bisca, as well as others. This music was radically different from Jovanotti's initial and embarrassing forays into hip hop. The localizing of a global black popular culture in Italy was achieved through a series of interlocking elements. First, artists were rapping not in a phonetic English but in Italian and in various Italian dialects. Secondly, a number of them were creating musical hybrids that combined the global pop styles of rap and reggae with Italian vernacular musical traditions. And lastly, artists were addressing social justice and political issues, rapping about topics from the historic economic exploitation of the Mezzogiorno to the devastating impact of the mafia¹. These were sounds I could only imagine in my wildest dreams.

Born and raised in Brooklyn as a child of southern Italian immigrants, rap Italiano from the first half of the 1990s resonated strongly with me². Early rap Italiano demonstrated that one could cultivate a sense of italianità by being grounded in local reality while still being connected to the larger cosmopolitan world, and do so with style. In the United States, in particular in the northeast, I had painfully observed that Italian Americans had developed personal and collective identities that were based on ethnic chauvinism, racism, sexism, and/or homophobia (Capone, Leto, and Mecca, 1999; Orsi, 1999; Rieder, 1985; Sciorra, in press). I had sought to create an alternative italianità for myself that was politically progressive and culturally popular, and that ultimately aimed to build «forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities» (Hall, 1988, p. 28). This self-awareness was not achieved without struggle and remains a continuous and dynamic process (Hall, 1990, p. 235). My ventures in rediscovery, reinterpretation, and reinvention (Fisher, 1986, p. 195) sought to understand the transnational process of the Italian Diaspora through its political, economic, and cultural manifestations, on both sides of the Atlantic (Gabaccia, 2000). To this end, I acknowledged the historic exchanges between Italy and the Diaspora and situated my place within an Italian history of economic deprivation, vernacular cultural production, and labor migration that was undervalued or made invisible in the rhetoric of official Italian nationalism (Verdicchio, 1997) and American history books and the mass media.

That was one reason why a song like Almamegretta's 1993 «Figli di Annibale» (Hannibal's Children) was such a breath of fresh air for me living in the United States. This musical exegesis unmasked the hidden negritude of the Mezzogiorno by celebrating southern Italians' historically ambiguous racial identity and the historic and emerging affinities between Italian working people and recent immigrants and people of color. To a reggae organ's pulsating accompaniment, rapper Raiss's raspy voice recounts in encapsulated form the African general's march over the Alps and down the peninsula's spine to trace why so many Italians are dark skinned. In the chorus, he proclaims in a haunting whisper, «Se conosci la tua storia, sai da dove viene. Figli di Annibale, sangue d'africa» (If you know your history, you know

where you come from. Hannibal's children, blood of Africa.).

My scholarly interests as a folklorist in la cultura negata of southern Italian immigrants and their descendants in New York City – the yard shrines housing concrete statues of the Madonna and various Roman Catholic saints, the religious processions and vibrant street feste, and Sicilian vernacular poetry, to name just three – sensitized me to the popular music emerging in Italy during the 1990s. Instead of publishing my research on rap Italiano in an obscure academic journal, I decided to use the Internet to disseminate my personal and professional interests to a significantly larger audience.

Something fascinating happened soon after launching my Web site. I began to receive emails from Italian immigrants and descendants of immigrants who were «hip hop heads» living in Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. Some were ecstatic to discover that Italians rapped, while others, especially those in Europe, were familiar with the Italian hip hop scene and provided me with a growing list of hip hop artists from the Italian Diaspora³. This blurring of national boundaries under the flag of the planet-wide «Hip Hop Nation» by youth who rapped in different languages but shared a common musical and cultural vocabulary, provided new opportunities (with the help of the Internet) to connect members of the Italian Diaspora. This very idea was echoed in the longitude coordinate that names the Neapolitan group La Famiglia's 1998 debut CD, «Quarantunesimoparallelo», astutely establishing the historic connections between the cities of Naples and New York, a key link for the Italian Diaspora, and amplifying the possibilities for collaboration that hip hop offered Italy and the Diaspora. On the track «Pe'cumpari» (For my pals), Mauro Di Camillo of La Famiglia's KTM (Ki.Ta.Mourt') crew sums up in English the expansive vision for a Diaspora-wide connection vis-à-vis hip hop:

This album is for all the heads that for one reason or another had to go and handle their BI [business] and parted their motherland for different motives of survival. After years of melting in the pots of all the major cities of this planet, the remembrance of where their past generations came from will never be forgotten. It's kept in a special place in their hearts and will remain there forever. The culture of hip hop is a way of life and La Famiglia lives this life on a day to day basis. So sit back and fasten your seat belt and enjoy the voyage. A course has been set and the correct coordinates are in check. Final destination: the 41st parallel project.

It was in keeping with this spirit that I created a separate page on my Web site dedicated to these hip hop artists from the Diaspora.

Lorenzo and I developed a format that included a round table discussion to open the event, followed by two days of performances in the respective town piazze featuring hip hop's «four arts» – rapping, DJing, break dancing, and aerosol art – in afternoon displays and two formal nocturnal concerts. I set about inviting the rappers while Lorenzo prepared the groundwork – publicity, equipment rentals, etc. – for our arrival.

The Artists

My choice of artists was influenced by a series of factors. I had come to know various artists through the Internet and from personal encounters, and the strength of those relationships was a crucial factor. I was also interested in featuring Italian artists who were committed to a community-based and socially-conscious music that was a strong part of early rap Italiano (see

below) as oppose to the recent crop of artists who, in keeping with the growing trend in the American scene, were more focused on self reflective issues within hip hop culture and aesthetics (style, improved prosody [*le metriche*], boasting [*autocelebrare*], «dissing suckers», being «hardcore», etc.), were increasingly recording love songs scored to R&B choruses and Puff Daddy-inspired samples, and were adopting the «gangsta» persona complete with sexist lyrics and Los Angeles gang-inspired posturing. The other crucial factor was money. The town councils of Montevarchi and Terranuova Bracciolini were the financial sponsors of the event, generously underwriting artists' transportation, accommodations, meals, and modest honorariums. (The idea of an American city footing the bill for such an event is unimaginable.) But the budget prohibited inviting big name acts, especially Italian American artists like DJ Muggs (Lawrence Muggerud) of the group Cypress Hill and DJ Scribble (Scott Ialacci) of MTV, as well as a large group like the Lordz of Brooklyn. In addition, I was unfamiliar at the time with the MCs Genovese, Marco «Manifest» Guglielmo, Jo Jo Pelligrino, Don Scavone, or Joe Summa. As a result, the quality of some invited performers did not meet the artistic standards of the larger hip hop community.

Frankie Hi Nrg MC is a seminal figure in the development of rap Italiano, whose family history speaks to the internal migration from south to north, particularly from Sicily to Torino, in the post-World War II era. His brilliant 1993 debut CD «Verba Manent» helped introduce acid jazz and a more funky sound to rap Italiano, while his rye use of sampled recorded voices derided official discourse and mainstream rhetoric. This recording, more than any other, signaled a shift from the self-produced and self-distributed music that characterized the formative years.

Rap took root in Italy in the late 1980s in the creative hothouses of i centri sociali, one of the lasting socio-cultural experiments of the politically charged 1970s (see Adinolfi *et Al.*, 1994). Centri members, dedicated to a radical left and often anarchist vision, considered themselves part of a national «Movimento Antagonista». Chanting «Il potere è come lo spazio; si prende non si chiede» (Power is like space; you don't ask for it, you take it) (Ibid., 51), students and workers appropriated abandoned factories, schools, prisons, gas stations, and stores to create sites deemed «autonomous» from the market and the state. These transformed spaces were proclaimed centri sociali occupati autogestiti (occupied and self-governed social centers). These community initiatives also provided sorely needed social services like day care, drug counseling, and AIDS prevention to students, workers, the unemployed, the homeless, and recent immigrants. I centri were also cultural retreats offering films, concerts, discussion circles, photography workshops, etc. While the centri were founded first in the centers of northern industrial cities, they have also been established among the poorly constructed and hideous high-rise apartment buildings on the periphery of sprawling cities, as well as throughout the south.

Rap groups or «posses» were formed in and became closely associated with various centri: the Lionhorse Posse came out of Milano's Leoncavallo; the centro L'Isola nel Kantiere in Bologna produced L'Isola All Stars; Rome's Onda Rossa Posse (Red Wave Posse) formed in the centro Forte Prenestino; and, Nuovi Briganti (New Brigands) developed in Messina's Fata Morgana. The tune «Curre curre guagliò» (Run, Man, Run!) by 99 Posse recounts the day in 1991 when hundreds of students and unemployed workers left a university assembly to retake

the centro Officina 99 in Naples from the police:

Curre curre guagliò	Run, man, run
Tante mazzate pigliate	We took so many beatings
Tante mazzate ma tante mazzate	So many, so many beatings
ma una bona l'aimmo dat	But we also gave them back
è nato è nato è nato	And it was born, it was born, it was born
n'atu centro sociale occupato	An occupied centro sociale
e mo' c' 'o cazzo ce cacciate	And now you'll not kick us out.

A number of centri operated sophisticated recording studios and duplication equipment in an effort to maintain control over music production, distribution, and the price of recordings in the over-inflated Italian market, thus circumventing the involvement of multinational corporations like Sony and Philips. This practice of *autoproduzione* or self-produced recordings, created an almost artisan approach to hip hop (Ibid., pp. 31-42).

The artistic militancy of African American rap, especially as practiced by performers like Public Enemy, N.W.A., and Krs-One, served as a formidable model for Italian youth who addressed a wide range of social issues such as the mafia, the devastating impact of heroin, neo-fascism, the separatist political party La Lega Nord, the economic tyranny known simply as *la miseria* and the subsequent immigration of millions of Italian laboring poor, the exploitation of recent immigrants, etc. (Liperi, 1993, pp. 187-204; Liperi, 1995, pp. 185-90)⁴. The politically engaged artists of the Italian branch of the Hip Hop Nation aggressively sought to recover a popular memory, what Sicilian writer Elio Vittorini called *«la storia del mondo offeso»* (the history of the insulted world), as a weapon for social justice (Vittorini, 1969, p. 136).

Frankie Hi Nrg was not affiliated with a specific centro but represented a new generation of «b-boys», rappers (MCs) and DJs (turntablists) who mixed beats and improvised raps in their parents' apartments located on the urban fringe. His song «Faccio la mia cosa» (I do my own thing) addressed the new venues for creating hip hop: «non sono un compagno ma un b-boy in effetto nella casa, e faccio la mia cosa» (I'm not a comrade but a b-boy working out of the house, and I do my own thing). Frankie was verbally attacked by artists associated with i centri for being inauthentic and for signing with the multinational RCA (Mitchell, 1995, pp. 338-43). But Frankie did not shy away from political and social issues, in fact, his raps took on racism, the historic underdevelopment of the Mezzogiorno, and right-wing terrorism with a powerfully poetic style that differed from the strident, in-your-face militancy of the previous generation of rappers. In «Fight da faida» (faida = feud), Frankie dealt with the mafia's nihilistic power and mystique, and the Italian state's collusion with the network of organized crime:

Sud, non ti fare castrare dal potere criminale che ti vuole fermare: guastagli la festa, abbassagli la cresta, guarda la sua testa rotolare nella cesta. Libera la mente da ogni assurdo pregiudizio: è l'inizio della fine del supplizio che da secoli ti domina, ti ingoia e ti rivomita, potere di quei demoni, che noi chiamiamo «uomini», che uccidono altri uomini, che sfruttano noi giovani, che tagliano le ali agli angeli più deboli. Potere che

soggioga, potere della droga, potere di uno Stato che di tutto se ne frega: strage di Bologna, Ustica, Gladio, cumuli di scheletri ammassati in un armadio.

South, don't be castrated by the criminal power that wants to stop you: end the partying, come down off your high horse, see your head spin around in the basket. Free your mind of every absurd prejudice: it's the beginning of the end of the torment that reigned for centuries, that you swallow and regurgitate, the power of those demons, that we call «men», that kill other men, that exploit us youth, that cut the wings of the most weakest angels. Power that subdues, power of drugs, power of a state that doesn't give a damn of anything: massacre at Bologna, Ustica, Gladio, piles of skeletons collected in a closet⁵.

The song cleverly incorporates traditional Sicilian musical motifs, from the bouncy sound of the maranzano (jaw's harp) to Frankie's cousin Vabbina La Bruna's performance of a children's filastrocca (nonsense rhyme). «Fight da faida» was an example of what was called musical contaminazione (contamination), the head-on collision between local Italian musical traditions and a host of borrowed international styles like rap, reggae, and dub⁶.

One way Italian rappers repositioned international hip hop was by using Italian dialects in opposition to a national trend of flattening language distinctiveness. While Italians have become increasingly fluent in the national language as a result of television, higher education, migration, increased leisure travel, as well as popular music, Italy, especially the south, remains a multilingual society (Lepschy *et Al.*, 1996, pp. 73-75). Groups like the DLH Posse from Udine, the reggae band Pitura Freska from Venice, Pooglia Tribe from Puglia, and Sa Razza from Sardinia have claimed their respective dialects as valid forms of expression for contemporary Italian popular music.

La Famiglia Polo, Sha-One, and DJ Simi – deliver their pungent rhymes in Neapolitan in a conscious search for a popular voice rooted in place and the everyday lives of working people. In fact, their hilarious and biting «Prrr...» is a verbal assault on the standardization of language use, complete with targeted raspberries (from which the song takes its title) aimed at a northern Italian voice that repeatedly asks for clarification from the Neapolitan rappers.

Malaisa is a powerful and stunning performer who has quickly made her mark on the historically male-dominated art form. She is part of a long line of Italian female MCs like La Pina, Sab Sista, and Posi Argento who have proved that «hip hop con le tette» (hip hop with tits), to quote La Pina, brings a unique perspective and significant contribution to the scene. At the time she joined us in Tuscany, Malaisa had broken her contract with the recording label Sony at the onset of her CD's release and had begun a self-distribution and independent promotion initiative, thus returning to rap Italiano's roots. Ice One, the prolific and renowned MC, DJ, and producer, joined Malaisa for the concert. His hypnotic songs like «Io sono quello che suono» (I am what I sing) were self-referential paeans to hip hop's power in opposition to mind-numbing mainstream capitalist culture.

With Italy's arrival into the first world's industrial and post-industrial global economy, immigrants from across the planet are arriving at Italy's doorsteps seeking employment and a

better life. The country's new multicultural flavor is reflected and embraced within hip hop with artists like DJ Lugi, Rawl MC, and Cina (of the Rome Zoo) who were born in Ethiopia, Zaire, Egypt, respectively, as well as the Roman group Indelebile Inchiostro, with its roots in Brazil, Nigeria, and Uganda. **Gaza MC** of Montevarchi, whose mother hails from Somalia, was part of a group of young Tuscan performers that included among others **Dr. Snot**, **DJ Ramas**, and **DJ Seya**, who had not recorded but would have an opportunity to perform at the event for their family, friends, and neighbors.

I contacted and invited a number of artists from the Diaspora who in the end were unable to participate. While Basel's hip hop pioneer Chéjah (Stefania Cea) aka Luana dropped a few lines in Southern Italian dialect (her parents immigrated from Calabria) on her début CD «Seriosistas», she raps and sings primarily in English. The French group Fonky Family, that includes Italian-decent MCs Le Rat Luciano and Don Choa, were on tour during the «Diaspora» event. I was particularly intrigued by Akhenaton (Philippe Fragione) of Marseille, who had performed with the group IAM⁷. His raps speak specifically to his transnational upbringing between Naples, New York, and Marseille. The title song of his 1995 solo CD «Mètèque et Mat» (Mestizo and check mate) boldly proclaims:

La pro-latinité est mon role
Pas étonnant venant d'un napolitain d'origine espagnole
Les surnoms dont j'écope reflétaient bien l'époque
Je suis un de ceux qu' Hitler nommait nègre de l'Europe

I'm pro-Latin
Which is not surprising being a descendant of a Neapolitan of Spanish origins
The surnames that I have reflect well the epoch
I'm one of those that Hitler named Europe's Negroes⁸.

His song «L'Americano» is a condensed history of southern Italian migration using the chorus of Neapolitan composer and singer Renato Carosone's 1950s classic «Tu vuo' fa' l'americano» (You want to play the American). Unfortunately, Akhenaton was already booked to enter the recording studio at the time of our event.

Two artists from the Diaspora – Mass MC and Toni L – had already established ties with the Italian hip hop community. Mass MC (Gianni Valente), whose parents hail from Aprilia outside of Rome, was performing in Sydney with **DJ Skizo** of the Italian turntablist group Alien Army and as a result both artists agreed to participate. Mass is an aggressive lyricist, a microphone avenger, and a self-proclaimed «battle MC» with numerous recordings under his belt. Toni Landomini, better known as Toni L of Heidelberg's Advanced Chemistry, was one of the early MCs on the German scene⁹. His solo debut was called «Der Pate» (The Godfather), and the title song used the mafia mask to level a devastating lyrical attack on lesser rappers. Toni had recorded with Gente Guasta from Lombardy, in what was emerging in Europe as an exhilarating polyglot cross-fertilization of linguistic heterogeneity and artistic expression.

In North America, two rappers I was unfamiliar with came to my attention after contacting me vis-à-vis the Web site. Queens-based rapper **BL One** (John Messina) and his musical partner **Shorty**, brings a rough New York City-edge to the microphone that includes a

cinematic-inspired mafioso persona¹⁰. Twenty-year old Canadian Giustizia La Bomba (Giuseppe Barilla), who immigrated from Reggio Calabria at an early age to Ontario, Canada, had a deep attraction to Italy, evident from his stage name, his raps in both Italian and English, and the map of Italy tattooed on his chest.

Highlights from the Event

In organizing the round table, we were confronted with the basic question concerning language – would the conversation be conducted in Italian, English or a mix of the two? Our audience consisted of approximately seventy-five people, who were primarily Italians from Tuscany, Sicily, Brindisi, Milan, and other parts of the country but also included visitors from New York, San Francisco, and Germany. Unfortunately, the translator was not up to the challenge, resulting in a less than adequate outcome. In turn, some panelists were not able to follow and fully participate in the discussion as it shifted exclusively to Italian.

The issue of language led to a discussion of Italian rap's poetic antecedents found in the older oral and written poetic tradition of *ottava rima* and competitive verse, with Lorenzo noting that Montevarchi was home to a revered but ailing declaimer (now deceased) Libero Vietti (Povoledo, 2000, p. 24). The poetry's metrical form consists of eight hendecasyllables in alternating rhyme, and spontaneous poems and song forms (performers often shift between reciting and singing) allow poets to demonstrate their wit and verbal dexterity on a chosen topic in poetic debates known as *contrasti* or *dialoghi*. These dialogues in verse often pit a socially inferior protagonist against an elite character, e.g. a peasant versus a rich landlord, with the former winning the argument (see Ancona, 1991)¹¹. Polo was particularly articulate about the need to keep rap rooted in local reality and one of the reasons why La Famiglia continued to compose and perform in Neapolitan while other Italian MCs had abandoned rap in dialect.

Damir Ivic of Italy's premier but now defunct hip hop magazine *AL*, discussed the evolving nature of rap Italiano and the changes that have taken place from the highly politicized days of *i centri* to the contemporary scene where hip hop has become Italy's latest fashion trend (see also Damir, 1999, pp. 30-32). A lively discussion ensued with Lorenzo Brusci, Ice One, Malaisa, and members of the audience including reggae artist Giacalone addressing the economics of music production and ongoing relationship between popular music and political work in Italy.

Switching between English and Italian, Toni L discussed his role in the German hip hop scene and his collaboration with other immigrant/ethnic communities, in light of racist violence in Germany. This co-mingling is evident in his former group Advanced Chemistry, which was formed by a multicultural mix of an Italian, a Turk, and a Haitian in an artistic struggle of solidarity and resistance to racist rhetoric and violence. Toni's comments pointed out the possibilities hip hop offers emigrants from, to, and within Italy and their descendants for creating new and hybrid social configurations that cross national and ethnic boundaries.

After the roundtable and dinner, young MCs and DJs from Montevarchi, Terranuova Bracciolini, and other nearby Tuscan towns discussed the meaning and difficulties of being involved in and creating hip hop outside of the large cities. They showed clips from the 1982 American film «Wild Style», shot independently in the streets, playgrounds, and clubs of New

York City, and the audience reacted enthusiastically to it, especially the scenes with the acclaimed Rock Steady break dancing crew. Eighteen years later, the film's influence in spreading hip hop globally is still evident.

The single most remarkable aspect of the event was the way in which the local piazze were transformed into public and officially sanctioned venues for hip hop culture. In Terranuova, local DJs and MCs initiated an afternoon session of free style (improvised verse) from the performance stage. Things heated up when Malaisa took her turn at the microphone, delivering a blistering and relentless rap that improvised on such topics as the immigration of Italian workers and the return of the Diasporic community to the event itself, and the need for Italians not to become consumer slaves to America culture. Malaisa was joined by Mass MC and the two of them worked the stage together. Another memorable moment came the following day when DJ Skizo scratched to the six o'clock bells calling Montevarchi's parishioners to mass. He went on to spin records for Italy's Frankie Hi Nrg, then the German Toni L, and finally, for Mass from Sydney, serving as a cultural ambassador for the Diaspora project. Local MCs Dr. Snot and Gazza demonstrated their linguistic dexterity and professionalism, and the latter rapped briefly in Somalian, while his immigrant mother ululated in approval from the audience.

In addition to MCs and DJs, some of Italy's best graffiti artists and break dancers were present at the three day event. Aerosol artists Zeno-K from Lecce, Wany from Brindisi, and Yahoo and Flake from the AS Crew of Tuscany, among others, participated in an outdoor demonstration, painting a series of murals on a forty foot wall of wood panels in Terranuova's Piazza Torre. Italy's powerhouse breaking crews – Fighting Soul, Ready To Start, Incredible Stylez Squad, and Effect Level Crew – provided a stunning display of physical virtuosity and improvisational skills on sheets of linoleum laid out the patterned stone of Piazza Varchi in Montevarchi. The most telling moment illustrating Italy's multicultural future was the appearance of young kids around eight-years-old, first a young girl who looked to be Rom and later a group of boys I took for eastern European immigrants, followed the moves of the breakers and then created their own versions of hip hop moves¹².

The success of the event can be measured in part by the resulting collaborative efforts. Malaisa and Ice One initiated a compilation recording project that will include Australia's Mass MC and the Tuscan Gaza and Dr. Snot. A few months after the June event, Italian American rapper Marco «Manifest» Guglielmo journeyed to Italy and performed and recorded with Italian artists Fritz the Cat, Gente Guasta, and Turi¹³. There is discussion of a follow-up «Diaspora II» event, as well as a CD compilation. The dialogue is in place, the «course has been set and the correct coordinates are in check. Final destination: the 41st parallel project».

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

¹ It is beyond the scope of this essay to properly address the rich history of Italian hip hop and its various components. For a more thorough look, see Androutsopoulos and Scholz (<http://www.fu-berlin.de/phin/phin19/p19t1.htm>); Campo, 1995, pp. 61-96; Mitchell, 1995; Mitchell, 2001; Pacoda, 1996; Plastino, 1996; Scholz, 2001, pp. 139-62; Scholz, 2002, pp. 220-52; Verdicchio, 1997, pp. 160-69; Verdicchio (<http://members.tripod.com/~verdicchio/ritmo.html>); Wright, 2000; and, my Web site <http://www.italianrap.com>.

² My family history is significantly more complicated than a single, unidirectional immigration narrative; in fact, it is a series of stories crisscrossing the Atlantic for close to a century. This legacy of transnational migration is evident in one branch of my family tree: my paternal great great-grandfather immigrated to Argentine and repatriated; his son immigrated to New York where my grandfather was born and moved to Italy as a child with his family; my grandfather returned to New York as an adult, where my father was born, moving to Italy as a child with his family. My father returned to New York when he was twenty-eight-years-old. In turn, I have been traveling to Italy to visit family and friends for twenty-seven years. In 2001, I became an Italian citizen.

³ I knew about the Italian American presence in the multicultural mix of early New York graffiti artists. Richard «Seen» Mirando was the legendary «whole car king» of the 6 subway line who was a member of the United Artists crew during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Comet was an early member of the famed Crazy 5 crew that dominated the IRT 2 and 5 lines. The legendary Dondi's mother was Italian American. Other Italian American writers included FuzzOne, Boots 167 of Mission Graffiti, Billy 167 of Slick, Inc., CAVS of the Subway Vandals, John 150, Rammellzee (another Italian/African American), and SAR of the Master Blasters.

⁴ Italian rappers have repeatedly revealed the affinities shared by immigrants from and to Italy. This is probably best illustrated in Bisca's «Tammuriata del lavoro nero» (The Drumming Song of the Underground Economy) which recounts the sordid history of southern Italian immigration and then states that Naples' Piazza Dante is filled again with a new generation of poor people surviving on the margins:

E' nat' nu lavor' e' nat' nir'	A job is born and it's born illegal
e' nat' in' e campagne	It's born in the countryside
e' nat' 'miezz' a via	It's born in the middle of the street

e' nat' int'e cantier' It's born at the work site
int'e famiglie da borghesia Among the rich families.

⁵ Bologna, Ustica, and Gladio are references to national tragedies and right-wing terrorism known to involve or are believed to involve the Italian government. On the August 2, 1980 a bomb exploded in the Bologna train station, killing 85 people and wounding over two hundred. The bombing was part of a campaign of right-wing terrorism dubbed the «strategy of tension» that attempted to destabilize the country and prevent the Italian Communist Party from joining the ruling governmental coalition.

On June 27, 1980, an Italian passenger airplane crashed near the island of Ustica in the Tyrrhenian Sea killing all 81 people on board. Italian public opinion holds that the plane was shot down by a missile launched by the Italian and/or American air force, and that the government is covering up the truth.

In 1956, the American Central Intelligence Agency established, funded, and trained «Operation Gladio», a network of former Fascist government officials, Italian military personal, and Cabinet ministers who prepared to stage a right-wing coup d'état. By far the best musical expose of the issue (and probably the best example of rap in English by an Italian artists) is Sergio Messina's 1990 tune «Radio Gladio», in which he addresses Americans about «forty years of politicians known to be thieves, connected with the mafia, totally corrupted and irrationally supported by your government, again afraid of the communists».

⁶ Much has been made in the popular press of contaminazione in contemporary Italian music. Ethnomusicologist Goffredo Plastino (1996) has taken a closer look at the phenomena in Puglia's Salento region, among the Neapolitan groups, and with other artists.

⁷ For more information in English on IAM and Akhénaton, see Prévos (2001) and Swedenburg (2001).

⁸ «The title of the CD, moreover, is a brilliant, multilayered pun. *Mètèque et mat* rhymes with *echec et mat*, the expression for "checkmate". *Mètèque* means "wog", and so the literal translation of the title is "Wog-mate". Furthermore, the word mat comes from the Arabic *mât*, meaning "to die", and, contrary to normal French rules but following the word's Arabic origins, the "t" is pronounced (the English "checkmate" carries the same Arabic etymology)» (Swedenburg, 2001, pp. 71-72).

⁹ For more information in English on Advanced Chemistry and Toni L, see Pennay (2001).

¹⁰ The image of the Italian American mafia plays a significant role in American gangsta rap, with African American MCs taking on Italian sounding names like Ghetto Mafia, Capone (of the duo Capone and Noreaga), the New Orleans group Gambino Family, Irv Gotti from New York, and many others. Italian American performers Lordz of Brooklyn, Jo Jo Pellegrino, Genovese, and Don Pigno have also adopted a media-derived mafia guise. A comparative study examining the role of the mafia in rap Italiano and among rappers of Italian decent would be an interesting one to explore.

¹¹ Mitchell points out the similarities of rap Italiano with earlier forms of opera in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were a type of recited music drama. After «the

development of commercial opera in Venice» and the introduction of songs and dances, eighteenth century «audiences had grown weary of the single voice in opera, and the duet form was borrowed from comic opera, which enabled characters to "quarrel and call each other names"» (1995, p. 345).

¹² Photographs of the event can be seen at <http://www.italianrap.com/diaspora>.

¹³ See Guglielmo's essay «On the Frontlines: Rap and the Poetics of Anti-Racism» (in press) for his involvement in the American scene.

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