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*Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop
Generation* (review)

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Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation. Sujatha Fernandes. New York and London: Verso, 2011. xi + 204 pp. Notes, references, photographs, index. \$14.95 pbk. (ISBN 978-1-84467-741-2).

The old adage that social scientists, particularly Latinamericanists, pay scant attention to popular culture may soon become a relic if this book is an indication of the richness of studying contemporary Latin American youth culture. Sociologist Sujatha Fernandes has assembled a wonderfully accessible book about a topic that may be at the margins of regional studies, but clearly should not be. African culture's indelible mark in the Caribbean basin, coupled with low-cost musical recording and distribution, warrant a close review of the contribution that hip hop is making around the world, especially in the western hemisphere. The study is replete with cultural and social geographies that readers of this journal will find compelling and engaging. A broader conceptual thread links the study of this musical genre with the urban social movements and globalization literatures.

Fernandes' interest with the topic stems back from working-class neighborhoods that she explored as a young girl in Sydney, Australia, but has continued her study of popular culture in Venezuela and Cuba. Hers is a compelling global journey conveyed in a pithy and readable work that is part travelogue and part academic treatise. It is replete with discussions of Bronx-based rap, anti-colonial and apartheid sentiment directed at the former South African regime, to broad-stroked Marcus Garvey Pan-Africanist sentiments. However, it is the author's emergence in the then-budding formation and maturation of Cuban hip hop from which this book emerges. It considers that seeming paradox about how something as bourgeoisie as contemporary 'youth movement'—with its global brands, MTV and VHI video broadcasts, and simple beat—could survive and thrive without embracing the tenets of the revolution. Indeed, hip hop and Cuban rappers "negotiated both their revolution and their place on the hip hop globe" (p. 5) only to find an echo ranging from the *banlieus* of Paris, to the precarious favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Moreover, all of these cultural threads criss-crossing myriad political and social landscapes have spun their threads in a few short decades. Geographers who might dismiss the study of hip hop and identity politics could easily conceptualize the topic as study of cultural diffusion (although this is not the author's focus) because there are elements of hierarchical and contagious diffusion that would endear the most ardent spatial analyst to the book.

Four short chapters and an epilogue structure this work. "Made in Havana City" logically traces the appropriation and interpretation of 'rap' that becomes cubanized in distinctive ways that nurture the island's budding hip hop movement. The author's South Asian looks often lead to rather humorous encounters in Cuba where she is asked whether she is a Latina, and more embarrassing moments when she is leading a class of Princeton students into a hotel, only to be carded by a security guard to make sure she is not a Cuba (pp. 74-75). Because the author is herself a performer, the tales of this chapter and the book at large offer a unique insight into participant observation and urban ethnography. The Cuban case highlights how music reflects, challenges, and reshapes gender and identity politics. Musical lyrics explore the longing to go abroad and those who live in exile (mentally) on the island. Some musicians think of joining the well-paying *farándula* (new elite) genre of traditional music (*boleros*, *baladas*) for which tourists pay, but selling out means paying a price, where such powerful lyrics such as these might be missed by tourists under the influence of *mojitos*:

“My form of dress means that in the street
 They ask for my ID, despite the fact that when I was a kid
 I also cried, ‘We will be like Che.’
 Now I’m found seated on the bench of the accused,
 Not with crossed arms, but there’s no fokin place in the market
 For people like me, who haven’t taken on the word mixture or
 Fusion.
 If rap is rap and tango is tango,
 Then why do we make this ‘rice with mango’ ” (emphasis added) (p. 44)

Chapter two would seem to make an abrupt shift northbound to the neighborhoods of Chicago, but a detour this chapter is not. Instead, it exposes how the author’s first encounter with Chicago hip hop was not the black audience and participants she had anticipated but rather a multicultural panoply of brown-, black-, yellow-, and white-skinned enthusiasts. The hip hop originally performed in Chicago was gang related and anchored in the South Side, but it had spread to different venues. Here the author weaves an interesting comparison among music, message, and listeners in Cuba, Chicago, and Sydney. After a fairly detailed account of the author’s interactions with rappers, artists, and clubs in the ‘windy city,’ an unexpected global connection is made: money making. As the artist Treese explains, “Forget about Top Forty radio and forget about Best Buy. I’m not taking about that...I’m talking about having your shit worldwide-distributed...” (p. 104). The author concludes the chapter stating that “[t]he global hip hop Nation was fractured...I saw more differences than similarities. And location mattered greatly in defining who you were” (p. 106). Still, a common thread is that artists from Chicago to Havana to Caracas would be hard pressed to turn down lucrative recording contracts, despite much of the anti-globalization and consumerism messages embedded in the lyrics.

I found Chapter three, *Blackfulla, Blackfulla*, to be the least interesting contribution because of its detailed account of the author’s own performances and her interactions with artists in Australia. The connection to Latin America wanes, but there is a transition to Chapter four, which addresses the hip hop scene during Hugo Chávez’s tenure in Venezuela, who has been hosting international hip hop events in recent years. The chapter begins with a tale of Johnny and Yajaira who live in public housing (*bloques populares*) in La Guaira, which were built by the Chávez government after the 1999 floods. The music scene there and elsewhere includes rapper and hip hop lyrics that celebrate the *malandro* stereotype (much like the gangster rap of the U.S.) in a world of material scarcity, low paying manual jobs, and high under- and unemployment. Global dress symbols such as baggy pants and bandanas identify the musicians whose lyrics differ from the middle class kids’ lifestyles in gated communities in middle- and upper-income *barrios*. Hip hop martyrs and icons make up the urban landscape in the form of street graffiti and musical lyrics, and run the gamut from Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, to Mahatma Gandhi.

Fernandes’ conclusions surface in the epilogue of the book. We learn that, yes, to some extent, hip hop culture can “reignite protest politics on a global scale...Global austerity and structural adjustment policies may have created similar cycles of poverty and violence among marginal communities” (p. 185). Perhaps more significantly, the book concludes and demonstrates that racism and race are experienced unevenly in Chicago’s South Side, the West Side of Sydney, the Alamar housing projects of Havana, and the *ranchos* of Caracas.

Reference to a database on lyrics, genres and related tools would have enriched this thin tome, even though there is a departure point at the end (pp. 203-204).

Still, Ferndandes makes the case that understanding hip hop's ruptures and flows across boundaries and spaces is an intriguing endeavor, one that this self-described "Indian-Portuguese-*gringa*" author outlines with panache and grace. While hip hop does not immediately "translate into local cultural understandings of race" (p. 185) it is yet another skill set that geographers will want to add to their toolboxes.

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Experiencing Nature: The Spanish American Empire and the Early Scientific Revolution. Antonio Barrera-Osorio. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. Xi + 211 pp., illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 pbk. (ISBN 978-0-292-72594-2).

The key theme in this short but scintillating book is the role of the Atlantic world in fostering the modern practice of empirical observation, a tradition that broke with the medieval dependence on textual interpretations. Things—be they natural or man-made—needed to be seen “in situ,” recorded in drawings, measured, counted, collected (if possible), classified, and assessed as to their potential economic value and socio-cultural significance. And the arena *par excellence* for such a transformation of scientific methodology was the Spanish American empire. Though Spain initially was searching for the riches of the East Indies, the accidental discovery of the New World required the establishment of institutions, methodologies, and techniques for not only claiming physical territory, but also to fit this new world's peoples, places, plants, animals—the myriad phenomena—into the knowledge space of the Old World.

The author demonstrates how, from the initial explorations and colonization practices, the Spanish invented practices or copied indigenous practices (*encomienda* and tribute), then institutionalized them via legal regulations. As the process moved from oceanic navigation through exploration, settlement, commerce, administrative, political and religious control, the information base increased dramatically. These themes are introduced in a chapter on “Searching the Land for Commodities,” using the discovery and recovery of a new kind of balsam (for long a classical medicine) in Santo Domingo in 1528 as a case study. But it was only the first of thousands of discoveries—plants, herbs, fruits, crops, and minerals—the commodities that Spain and, later, Western Europe received. Spain also exported its own commodities to the new continent, studying carefully how they adapted (or not) to the new varied environments. Experimentation became significant: Where could Old World cereals such as wheat grow best? Could cattle prosper in the tropics? Would vines thrive enough to produce wine?

Chapter Two discusses the role of the Casa de la Contratación in Seville as the center for the collection, regulation, analysis, and diffusion of information from the reports on all these new wonders of the natural world. From 1503, ship pilots could find training courses there, be tested, and acquire the new instruments of navigation; what had originally been thought of as a warehouse for commodities coming from and going to the New World (much like the Portuguese Casa da India model on which it was probably based), now the Casa became an information node where natural scientists, traders, and anybody with new facts and ideas could share their knowledge.

But the collection of information on the complexity of peoples, places, events, and processes of the empire required a more formal methodology, and Chapter Five