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From Spaghetti Funk to “Difendi Roma”: Regional Dialects and Right-Wing Nationalism in Italian Rap

In the early 1990s, Italy witnessed the development of a student movement that protested against the increasing privatization of the educational sector. The student movement frequently organized rallies and expressed its dissent by squatting and occupying schools and universities across the Italian peninsula. At the same time, Italy experienced the emergence of hip-hop culture, with artists such as Rome's Assalti Frontali and Naples' 99 Posse who supported the political battles of the student movement by providing a soundtrack to it. Hip-hop artists spread their political messages through the network of students and young people hanging out in the *centri sociali*, an especially Italian network of squatted community centers. Picking up the baton from the militant singer-songwriters of the 1970s, Italian hip-hop artists often mixed rap with other foreign musical influences such as reggae and punk, while also choosing to sing and make rhymes in dialect. Together with the opposition to forms of privatization of Italy's educational system, in their lyrics these groups expressed concern for the lack of antifascist activism among the youth and denounced the gradual abandonment of antifascist ideals by members of the parliamentary Left.

In the following decades, hip-hop reached an unexpected popularity in Italy, which led to the genre's mainstreaming and an increasing linguistic uniformity within the genre. No longer an expression of regional characteristics, artists preferred to sing in Italian in order to become successful among different audiences. In doing this, hip-hop's lyrics also became less militant, adopting more frivolous themes and abandoning the *centri sociali* in favor of commercial clubs and discos. Understanding hip-hop's potentialities to recruit large numbers of young people, in the late 2000s, hip-hop was paradoxically appropriated by right-wing movements. For example, neofascist groups such as Italy's CasaPound started organizing street art conventions on graffiti and promoted the emergence of hip-hop crews like Rome's Drittacore. In their lyrics, Drittacore use rap to promote right-wing nationalism and an anti-immigration rhetoric.

In my essay, I analyze the efficacy of antifascist rap in the 1990s and compare it with the appeal that it has met among right-wing crowds. In considering CasaPound's attempt to appropriate some of hip-hop culture's disciplines, I not only show a general crisis in political ideologies and cultural values, but also the power of neo-fascist movements to manipulate and reinvent subcultural formations to influence the youth.