In the 1980s, not long after the first hip hop recordings had emerged from New York, African Americans and Latino Americans serving abroad in the U.S. Army imported hip hop to West Germany, through military-affiliated, and thus state sponsored, base nightclubs, American Forces Network radio, and commissaries. Some of these soldiers even built links with German businesses off-base, teaming up with locals through music labels, record stores, and discos, as well as a number of successful performing groups. In addition to discussing the little known role that U.S. military businesses played in exporting and disseminating hip hop culture in 1980s West Germany, I seek to restore music businesses to their rightful position of importance in the growing historical discourse on the globalization of American popular culture. While acknowledging that recorded music, television and movies played important roles in bringing African American culture to Europe, I argue that most crucial to the spread of hip hop in West Germany was the infrastructure of entrepreneurial businesses such as nightclubs, labels, and magazines. These businesses allowed the small but vital community of hip hop fans in West Germany to communicate, sponsor events, and partake in a musical and consumer culture that few Europeans could readily access until the early 1990s. In a broader sense, these transatlantic business partnerships exerted a profound effect on how West Germans consumed, partook in, and understood African-American culture. Indeed, this project doubles as a case study of how the United States’ overseas military empire facilitated the circulation of African American subcultures like hip hop throughout the world during the Cold War.

The Rhein-Main region in particular flourished as an incubator of transatlantic music cultures in West Germany. Although it has since been eclipsed by Berlin as the de facto musical capital of Germany, in the 1980s Frankfurt was one of the most important European cities for popular music, especially for the emergent genres of electronic dance music and hip hop. Like the larger metropolises of London, Paris, and Amsterdam, the city was home to a significant immigrant population. But among all of Frankfurt’s foreign-born populations, it
was the approximately 50,000 U.S. troops stationed in the region, of whom close to a third were African American, that most influenced the city’s musical life. Indeed, I argue that in West Germany and especially in the greater Frankfurt area, black Americans serving in the U.S. military—due to their large numbers and especially their opportunities to collaborate with local musicians and small businesses—participated first-hand in the global dissemination of African American popular music and consumer culture to a degree that was seen perhaps nowhere else in America’s Cold War empire.

By the 1980s, for example, African American deejays playing soul and disco records could be found almost every night in at least one of the five nightclubs on Frankfurt military installations. Deejay crews consisting of African American servicemen battled each other for supremacy on the U.S. base club circuit, cultivating fans among service personnel in Frankfurt and throughout Germany. Even beyond U.S. bases, so-called G.I. discos like Frankfurt’s Funkadelic club embraced African American music and opened their doors to African American soldiers, reversing a longstanding trend of racial discrimination against U.S. troops at German bar and nightclubs. In an effort to repackage hip hop for mainstream European audiences that were more amenable to electronic dance music, labels like Black Out Records in Frankfurt brought together and recorded African American rappers and vocalists (most of them former military personnel) with electronic producers, including performing groups included Snap! and LaBouche. While these acts often earned the ire of critics, they nonetheless sold millions of records in Europe, U.S. and around the world. Strangely, although the vocalists for these groups were often American, in the United States their music became widely known as “Euro-Dance” and “Euro-House.”

In conjunction with this project, I convened a workshop, “The Globalization of African American Business and Consumer Culture,” in February 2012 that drew scholars from three different continents and from the fields of business history, cultural history, African American history, law, and musicology.