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# Geography of American rap: rap diffusion and rap centers

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**Abstract** The goal of this paper was to contribute to the interdisciplinary research that linked place and music by conducting a brief geography of rap. Rap music grew from the isolated Bronx in the 1970s and became a mainstay in popular culture today. Hip hop music was noted for its strong sense of place, as rap credibility (what 'hood do you represented), identities (e.g. Flo Rida), and local slang (e.g. sippin' sizzurp in Houston) were often geographically-based. This research described the various spatial meanings of rap, mapped the diffusion of hip hop music, and identified rap centers. Cartographic analysis was based on the hometowns of 1124 rappers and the release dates of their debut albums from 1979 to 2015. The diffusion of rap followed the hierarchical diffusion pattern by leapfrogging from one major urban area to another.

**Keywords** Rap · Cultural geography · Music geography · Sense of place · Diffusion

## Introduction

Rap music in America grew from isolated urban neighborhoods in the 1970s to become a mainstay in the landscape of popular music today. Behind the catchy beats, lyrics offered glimpses into a world where poverty, police brutality, gang-related violence, and other urban social ills were commonplace. Rising from these ignored urban environments were prideful voices calling for social change to 'fight the powers that be,' as Public Enemy put it. Prominent in rap music was a strong attachment to place, as rap credibility, identities, and local slang usages were often geographically linked. Given the popularity of this musical form, it was somewhat surprising that geographical research on rap music in America has received scant attention (Graves 2009; Carney 2003). Most gaps in the geographic research of rap were filled by scholars across various disciplines (Forman 2000, 2002; Mitchell 2001; Hess 2009; Westhoff 2011). More analysis could be done on the importance of place in rap music, mapping the spread of rap in America, and to describe local styles in major hip hop centers. The goal of this paper was to contribute to the existing interdisciplinary research on rap by providing a geography of hip hop music to date.

## Music studies

A few music geographers (Kruse 2005; Hudson 2006; Johansson and Bell 2009) have added to music studies with research that successfully linked music and place. The subfield of music geography has generally overlooked rap music, thus restricting the field by focusing on other music genres, such as country and

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folk (Gill 1995). Leyshon et al. (1995: 19) warned that the "problem with the standard historical geography of rap… [is t]he assumption that to place rap is to explain it risks denying the mobility, mutability, and global mediation of musical forms." Geographical research on rap followed a traditional approach by identifying cities that have prominent rappers and rap groups (Carney 2003). Graves (2009) described a historical geography of rap by distinguishing folk culture aspects of hip hop from popular culture features of rap music. Placing rap music has been mainly filled by non-geographers due in part to the 'Spatial Turn' in the humanities. Scholars from anthropology, communication studies, cultural studies, and musicology studied the importance of geography in music (Leonard and Strachan 2010; Bennett 2000). In terms of rap research, Murray Forman's book *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (2002) was the seminal piece noting the importance of space and place in the genre. Tony Mitchell's edited volume of *Global Noise* (2001) offered various examples of rap outside of the United States. These works notwithstanding, there were many research opportunities to explore the diffusion of hip hop music within America.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Warf 2006: 107–109), there were two types of diffusion: contagious diffusion and hierarchical diffusion. The former described the transmission of a phenomenon from one person to another, while the latter described the spread of a phenomenon from one city to another in a leapfrog manner. Contagious diffusion depended on people directly sharing ideas with each other or by migrating from one locale to another. Hierarchical diffusion relied on the use of technology to spread a feature from the hearth to more distant places. Anthropologists Peterson and Di Maggio (1975) noted the diffusion of country music popularity across America was linked to the spread of country radio stations and not solely on the migration of Southerners away from the South. Likewise, geographers have studied the origin and distribution of rock and roll music by noting cities where musicians were born (Ford 1994; Butler 1994). These studies described the spatial patterns of music in America without mapping the location of artists over time. Music studies could be enhanced by mapping the diffusion of artists based on their hometowns and the dates their first albums were released. Understanding the origins of rap and its various meanings can provide context to the diffusion of rap.

## Origin of rap

Rap music originated on the streets of American inner cities; however, the roots of rap were deeper than this urban surface. Rap has ties to West African griots, or folk poets, who had an oral tradition described in written records in the 11th Century (Hale 1998). These praise-singers were known for communicating stories and historical accounts through the use of song. Due to the forced migration of Africans to the Americas, many African traditions developed into African American traditions. Aspects of 'playing the dozens' or 'yo' mama' jokes were prevalent in rap battling. In this verbal game of trading insults, a crowd judges who wins or loses based on the humor and causticity of the barbs (Jemie 2003). Feuding and trading insults between rappers and rap centers were prevalent in the history of rap music.

In addition to African continental heritages, African American political and art movements have shaped the formation of rap music (Rabaka 2012). For example, another precursor to rap music was spoken word poetry—popularized by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s (Sablo Sutton 2004). Performance poetry, including its modern manifestation of slam poetry, related to the delivery of rap lyrics in that the recitation style was as important as the poem itself. Rhythmically, rap had ties to the blues, jazz, neo-soul, and R&B traditions. The background beats and sounds of rap, or its musical samples and breaks, were predominately from these African American musical genres. Rap music celebrated the use and/or reworking of preexisting musical elements to create the foundation of a rap song (Williams 2013).

The birthplace of rap in New York City was tied to another African-based tradition. The act of toasting, or the improvised speaking over beats, was a Jamaican musical tradition that found its way to the multicultural borough of the Bronx. DJ Kool Herc, a Jamaican-American, brought toasting and a large sound system to block parties in the 'Boogie Down' Bronx (Chang 2005). Early hip hop consisted of party music—using turntables to extend danceable sections of songs—as illustrated when DJ Kool Herc performed at his sister's party in the recreation room at 1520 Sedgwick


**Fig. 1** 1520 Sedgwick Avenue apartments in the Bronx [photo by author]

Avenue apartments (Fig. 1) in August, 1973 (Kosanovich 2014: 53–54). According to Tricia Rose (1994), hip hop culture, which encompassed fashion, break dancing, graffiti art, and rapping, "attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African American and Caribbean history, identity, and community" (Rose 1994: 21). The origin of rap was born from fusing African, Caribbean, and African American traditions to express modern inner city experiences.

## Meanings of rap

While the historical-cultural roots of rap influence the morphology and outer characteristics of the art form, the meanings of early rap music were tied to a description of inner city life in America, as both an expression of joy and as an articulation of oppression. The first hit that put rap on the popular culture scene was *Rapper's Delight* (1979) by The Sugarhill Gang. The song described a party atmosphere filled with hyper-masculinity and self-boasting, themes still prevalent today. In the song, Master Gee rapped, 'Well, my name is known all over the world/By all the foxy ladies and the pretty girls/I'm going down in history/As the baddest rapper there could ever be.'

A more powerful use of rap was 'conscious rap,' where rappers often provided commentaries about social injustices (Watkins 2005: 21). In *The Message* (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, Melle Mel rapped about a poor urban economy with double digit inflation and unemployment, junkies beating people for money, and a deficient educational system. The frustration felt in the song built up to the chorus: 'It's like a jungle sometimes/It makes me wonder how I keep from going under.' Recently, Chicago rapper Common demonstrated social awareness in the Oscar-winning song *Glory* (2014), by linking the past protests in Selma, Alabama to those in Ferguson, Missouri after the Michael Brown shooting. Commenting on social issues and calling for change, Melle Mel and Common were what Cheney (2005) would call "raptivists."

These examples illustrated the significance of rap, which provided a voice for the marginalized—a strong factor in the global appeal and acceptance of this musical form. Groups that do not have political or economic power can express their local situations to the wider community, country, and world through the medium of popular culture. As rapper Nas said, 'All I Need is One Mic, One Beat, One Stage' (*One Mic*, 2001) to express the urban context he inhabited. For global youth, as Tony Mitchell noted, "rap music and hip-hop culture have in many cases become a vehicle for various forms of youth protest" (Mitchell 2001: 10). In this youthful dissent there were prideful descriptions of growing up at the margins of society.

The positive messages and meanings found in rap music tell part of the story. Rap music has been justifiably condemned for misogynistic lyrics and music videos, homophobia, promoting drug use, and the glorification of violence (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 2012; Gourdine and Lemmons 2011; Hobson and Bartlow 2008; Herd 2009). Controversy surrounded misogynistic rap lyrics and videos, where women were degraded in rhymes and sexually exploited on screen (Adams and Fuller 2006). The hyper-masculine tendency of rap often led some rappers to express homophobia in lyrics by 'demasculinizing' another rapper (Rose 2008: 236–242). Rap music was criticized further for its glorification of violence and the admiration of criminal activities, which propagated negative stereotypes about American inner cities. In a random sample of 632 rap songs from platinum selling albums (selling over 1 million units), Kubrin (2005) found that close to 65 % of the rap songs from 1992 to 2000 referenced violence.

A reason for the popularity of violence in rap was tied to the marketing to middle-class, suburban

audiences whom fanaticize about the ghetto life. Commercialization of hip hop transformed rap away from African American experiences (Blair 1993) and rap lyrical content shifted away from grassroots themes when major record labels bought out independent rap labels (Myer and Kleck 2007). Lena (2006), in analyzing rap lyrics from 1979 to 1995, noted that major labels featured rappers with lyrics emphasizing street credibility (often tied to drugs and violence) and a "hustler" protagonist. In the documentary *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats & Rhymes* (2006), young rappers felt pressure to express violent and hyper-masculine lyrics to get signed to a record deal. Rappers included violent themes in rap music, often with the backing of major record labels, to authenticate their real or imagined urban struggle. This sense of place marker was one of many aspects of geography within the hip hop community.

## Geography in rap

There were strong connections between rap music, identity, and senses of place. City of origin was an important spatial identity marker in hip hop songs, music videos, and fashion (e.g. clothes that supported local sports teams, music video locales, etc.). Wiz Khalifa was proud of his city in *Black and Yellow* (2010) by rapping about the common colors of the professional sports teams in Pittsburgh. Bay Area rapper Tupac mentioned various cities in *California Love* (1995) and Jay Z's *Empire State of Mind* (2009) was an ode to places within New York City. Further, place names became popular references in hip hop and occur at multiple geographic scales. Rappers had pride in their regions (East Coast, West Coast, 'Dirty South,' and Midwest) and were identified in song. These rap regions were self-evident among American rappers: for example, at the beginning of *Hip Hop is Dead* (2006), Nas called to 'NYC, Dirty South, West Coast, Midwest, let's go!'

At the city level, Snoop Dogg represented the LBC (Long Beach City) and Kanye West rapped about Chi-Town or The Chi (Chicago). Nelly put St. Louis on the rap map with *Country Grammar* (2000), where he embodied place with: 'Sing it Loud (What?)/I'm from the Lou' and I'm Proud.' In fact, Nelly's debut album cover depicted the rapper in front of the Gateway Arch. Atlanta rapper Ludacris sang about area codes—another popular geographically-based marker in hip hop culture. Rapper Drake referenced '6' in several rap songs as a spatial marker for Toronto—the digit is the common number in the city's 416 and 647 area codes. In comparison, several Toronto's suburban neighborhoods use the 905 area code. At the street level, Warren G referenced the intersection of '21 and Lewis' in Los Angeles. The importance of geography in rap can also be seen in the actual names of famous rappers, as the T in T-Pain stands for Tallahassee, the D in D-12 represents Detroit, and it's obvious what state Flo Rida called home. Legitimacy as a rapper was based on what 'hood you represented, either at the neighborhood, city, or regional geographic scales.

To use Murray Forman's words, rap put "a pronounced emphasis on place and locality," (Forman 2002: 28) and credibility as a rapper was based on geography and identity; in other words, 'who you are' was answered by 'where you are from.' Street cred was built up geographical since growing up in an inner city neighborhood and surviving the harsh social environment authenticated a rapper. Where you are from was something that a few rappers have to overcome to be accepted in the hip hop. Mickey Hess (2009) notes how the Wu-Tang Clan has justified their street cred in Staten Island—New York City's least credible rap borough because of its perception of being a white community—by rapping about living in the island's two housing projects (Stapleton and Park Hill). Place was critical in providing the legitimacy of Eminem, who grew up in inner city Detroit (Warren, MI), while de-legitimizing Vanilla Ice, who did not grow up in the inner city in Miami. Place, instead of race, could also be the reason that many in the rap community do not give white Seattle rapper Macklemore more credit. Geography can be used as a powerful authenticating tool that may have hampered hip hop's growth across America. Were rappers outside of New York City or Los Angeles, irrespective of their lyrical talents, seen as lacking urban credibility? If you were not from a poor inner city, could you claim to be an authority on street life?

Rap feuds based on a sense of place and territoriality were common, a fact observed in the infamous East Coast vs. West Coast rivalry during the mid-1990s that sadly culminated in the murders of Notorious BIG (East Coast) and Tupac (West Coast). The rivalry was encouraged by record labels and producers, as Diddy's Bad Boy Records supported

Notorious BIG and Suge Knight's Death Row Records backed Tupac. Commercialization of hip hop, as record labels focused on record sales, fostered a climate of rap feuds since controversy sells. Eithne Quinn noted that rap rivalries were "fueled by geography—the geographies of community, of representation, of markets" (Quinn 2005: 182). Here the meaning of rap was territorial: by promoting their region or place, rappers consequently (directly or indirectly) constructed all other places as inferior. Thus, as rap diffused, rap artists from emerging hip hop centers made it a point to place themselves by distinguishing their neighborhood from other areas and rappers.

## Data and methodology

The difficulty in mapping the diffusion of rap music in America was the lack of a current data source on the hometowns of rap artists. This study attempted to overcome this limitation by developing a rap database in a three-step process. First, a list of 1124 rappers was collected from Wikipedia. As an open-source website, Wikipedia has been noted for errors and can be rightfully questioned as a primary source. Thus, Wikipedia was only used as a starting point to identify the names of American rappers. The second step included the confirmation and cross-referencing of rappers and their hometowns from verified internet sources: All Music, Rolling Stone, and MTV. The third step involved noting the year an artist's debut album was released by using online album databases (Discogs and All Music). Using data about albums, and not mixtapes or EPs (Extended Plays), focused this research away from the underground rap scene. The limitations of the created database included a potential undercount of rappers in America, was depended upon the biographic accuracy from music websites, and the exclusion of underground rappers. This data collection methodology did not claim to have developed the definitive database of every rapper in American history.

The diffusion of rap in America can be shown by mapping the hometown of rap artists based on the year of their debut album. Debut albums indicated the potential commercial success of a new rap artist. Hometowns were used instead of birthplaces since rappers could move before releasing their debut album. For example, Tupac Shakur was born in New York City, lived in Baltimore, and then moved to Marin City, California when he was a teenager. For this dataset, his hometown was listed as Marin City (in the Bay Area) since that was where he became a successful rapper. Rapper hometowns, with debut album dates, were then geocoded in a Geographic Information System (GIS). A query of rap artists by debut album date in the GIS allowed for the mapping of rap diffusion by any time periods (e.g. 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s). Rap centers were identified by mapping all 1124 rappers by their debut album date from 1979 to 2015. The top ten top cities with the highest number of rappers were selected and further understood in terms of their local styles. Also, the history of each rap center concentrated on the impact of geography: intra-urban differences and place-based references in lyrics.

## Rap diffusion

In mapping new rap artists based on their debut album release date (Fig. 2), patterns of growth within and between urban areas became apparent. In the 1980s, New York City was the main center of rap by having 64 of the 108 (59.3 %) new rap artists calling the city home. New York City-area rap pioneers, with pre-1984 debut album release dates, included The Sugarhill Gang, Kurtis, Blow, The Cold Crush Brothers, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, and Afrika Bambaataa. It was not until Philadelphia rapper Schooly D (1985), became the first non-New York City metro area rapper to release an album. Los Angeles was a distant second with 14 rappers having a debut album in the decade—Ice T and Easy-E released their debut albums in 1987 and 1988 respectively. In 1987, Oakland rappers MC Hammer and Too Short were the first Bay Area rappers to release albums. The only Southern cities that produced popular rappers in the 1980s were from Miami (2 Live Crew), Dallas (The D.O.C.), and Houston (Geto Boys).

All of early rap centers continued to develop new rappers into the 1990s and rap spread to new metropolitan areas. There were 440 new rappers that had debut albums in the 1990s. New York City continued to be the dominant city in developing rappers and was home to 142 of the 440 (32.3 %) new rap artists. The next major rap city was Los Angeles,

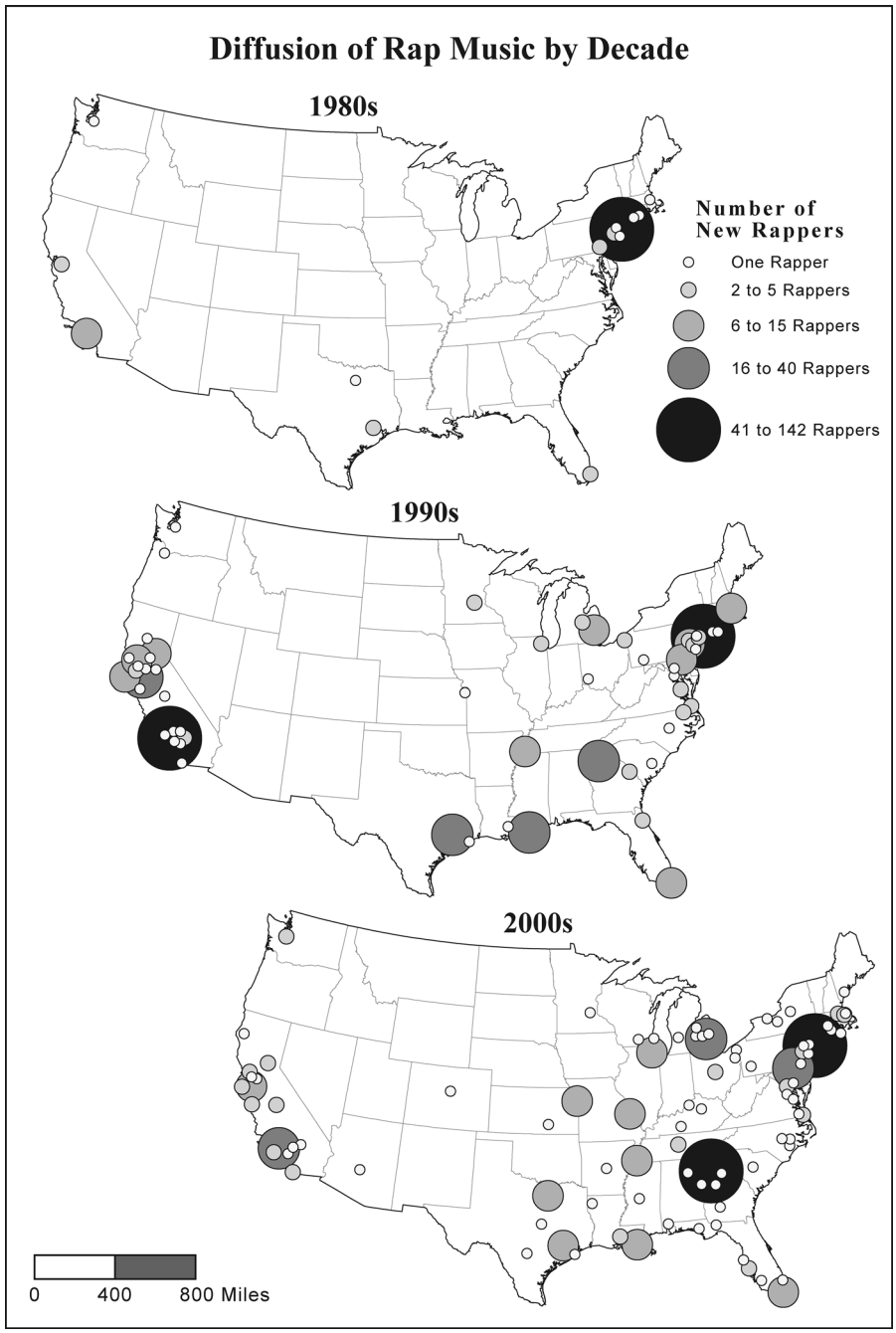


**Fig. 2** Diffusion of rap music by decade based on the hometowns of new rap artists. Rap artist hometowns and year of their debut albums were collected from the following websites: www.allmusic.com, www.discogs.com, www.mtv.com, www.rollingstone.com, and www.wikipedia.org

with 77 new rappers with debut rap albums in the 1990s. Popularity of hip hop music ignited diffusion to smaller urban centers in New Orleans (26 new rappers), Houston (24 new rappers), Oakland (20 new rappers), and Atlanta (18 new rappers) in this 1990s. Some of the earliest New Orleans rappers with debut albums included Master P (1991) and Mystikal (1994). The debut albums of Arrested Development (1992), Kris Kross (1992), OutKast (1994), and Lil Jon (1997) helped place Atlanta on the hip hop scene. There were only a few rappers with albums from the Midwest in the 1990s. Detroit had eight new rap

artists, including Eminem's debut album in 1996, and Chicago developed five new rap artists such as Common and Twista (both had debut albums in 1992).

Post-millennium growth of rap was seen in Southern cities, as Atlanta had emerged as a rival to New York City in generating new talent. New York City still produced the highest number of new rappers, with 72 of the 390 (18.5 %) new rap artists being from New York City. However, the percentages of new rappers from New York City had declined from 59.3 % in the 1980s to 32.3 % in the 1990s to 18.5 % in the 2000s. In the 2000s, Atlanta had 45 new rap artists emerge, while 39 new rap musicians were from Los Angeles. Other cities like Philadelphia, Memphis, and Dallas continued to grow in rap talent over time. Midwestern rap nodes in St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, and Detroit continued to gain recognition in the 2000s—as Chicago rapper Kanye West then noted: 'You Know What the Midwest Is? Young and Restless' (*Jesus Walks*, 2004). Interestingly, there were fewer new rap artists originating from Californian cities, New Orleans, and Houston in the 2000s. The development of new rappers in the 2000s spread away from the largest metropolitan areas near the coast.

The diffusion of rap music progressed from one major urban center to another in America in a leapfrog pattern. The spread of rap from New York City to the other large urban areas benefited from rap music's rise in popular culture. Rap music transitioned from being a fad in the early 1980s to a mainstream musical genre in the late 1980s with the help of radio stations and cable television. Television shows *Yo! MTV Raps* (started in 1988) and *Rap City* (started in 1989) were instrumental in the diffusion of rap music across middle-class America. Rap music spread with people traveling away from New York City (contagious diffusion pattern), however the hierarchical diffusion pattern described the diffusion of rap more closely. In the 1980s, rap dispersed from New York City to distant urban centers of Los Angeles, Houston, and Oakland in a leapfrog manner. The last rap centers to develop were cities in the Midwest, which were closer to New York City than those on the West Coast. If rap music spread according to contagious diffusion, rap would reach Chicago and St. Louis before it would reach Los Angeles and Oakland. Similar to the process of diffusion in country music identified by Peterson and Di Maggio (1975), the diffusion of rap music was disseminated via multimedia platforms and not from a large migration of people. Future diffusion research of the 2010s may provide an indication of the growth of hip hop in America as new cities may develop into rap centers.

## Rap centers

Spatial patterns were apparent when mapping 1124 rap artists by hometown from 1979 to 2015 (Fig. 3). Three major rap centers emerged: New York City, Los Angeles, and Atlanta—these metro areas combined to be home to 50.2 % (or 564 out of 1124) of all rappers in America (Table 1). The gap to the next tier of cities was sizable (New Orleans, Houston, Oakland, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Miami), as no other city produced more than 50 rappers with albums. However, if the Bay Area of California (Oakland, San Francisco, and Vallejo) was considered as one entity, then there were 63 rappers from this conurbation. The relatively lower total number of rappers from the Midwestern cities of Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis was due to the fact that rap diffused into these cities at a later time. A brief historical geography of the top ten rap centers was created by identifying selected rappers, indicating their intra-urban differences, and referencing place-based rap themes. Many rap styles that started in one city were often adopted by rappers from another city over time. Rap music has a long tradition of copying, from using sampled beats and imitating rap styles. Also, due to the complexity of styles and histories in hip hop music, this study only analyzed a very limited sample of rap artists from each center.

### New York City

New York City was the hearth of hip hop culture and was home to 314 rap artists to date. Territoriality in New York hip hop was evident as rappers represent various sub-city geographies of boroughs. Rap rivalries between New York City boroughs started in the 1980s. In representing the birthplace of rap, Bronx rapper KRS-One of Boogie Down Productions puts down Queens' rappers MC Shan and Marley Marl, with *The Bridge is Over* (1987): 'Manhattan keeps on makin' it/Brooklyn keeps on takin' it/Bronx keeps creatin' it/And Queens keeps on fakin' it.' New York City rappers were displayed geographical awareness

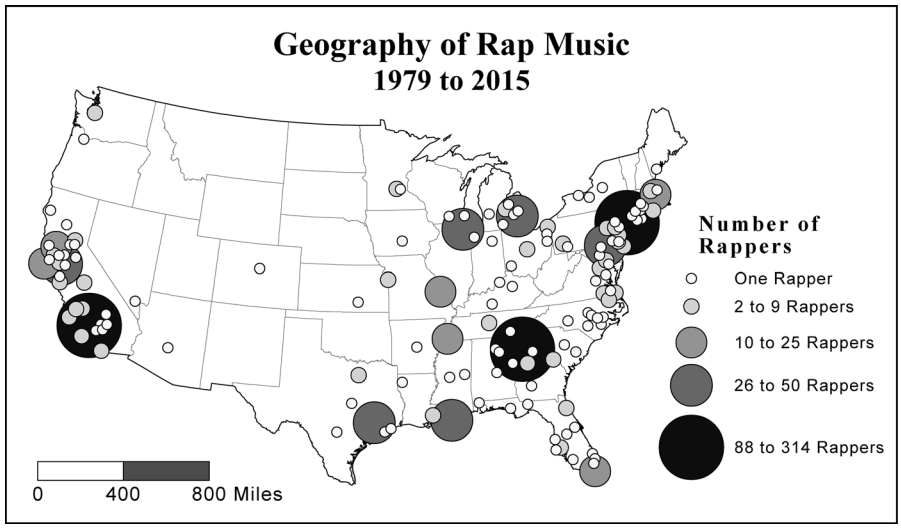


**Fig. 3** Total number of rappers with albums by hometown, 1979–2015. Rap artist hometowns and year of their debut albums were collected from the following websites: www.allmusic.com, www.discogs.com, www.mtv.com, www.rollingstone.com, and www.wikipedia.org

**Table 1** Top 15 cities with the highest number of rappers, 1979–2015

| Rank | City | Number of rap artists |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | New York City | 314 |
| 2 | Los Angeles | 162 |
| 3 | Atlanta | 88 |
| 4 | New Orleans | 48 |
| 5 | Houston | 43 |
| 6 | Oakland | 41 |
| 7 | Philadelphia | 38 |
| 8 | Chicago | 31 |
| 9 | Detroit | 30 |
| 10 | Miami | 25 |
| 11 | Memphis | 17 |
| 12 | Boston | 13 |
| 13 | San Francisco | 12 |
| 14 | St. Louis | 11 |
| 15 | Vallejo, CA | 10 |

Rap artist hometowns and year of their debut albums were collected from the following websites: www.allmusic.com, www.discogs.com, www.mtv.com, www.rollingstone.com, and www.wikipedia.org

about which neighborhoods other rappers represented. New York rap music can be geographically divided amongst the boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan (mainly Harlem).

The South Bronx was the origin of rap music as the early rap pioneers included DJ Kool Herc, Busy Bee Starski, and The Cold Crush Brothers. The hearth of rap music was a part of the Hip Hop cultural movement—the term Hip Hop was coined by Bronx-native DJ Afrika Bambaataa (Pabon 2006: 19). A common occurrence in the 1970s South Bronx was the block party, using stolen municipal power, which was used to lessen gang tensions within the neighborhood (Lamotte 2014). Bronx pride as the birthplace of rap can be seen in street signs in its urban landscape as rappers KRS-One, DJ Red Alert, Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, Afrika Bombaataa, and Grandmaster Caz were a few of the hip hop legends inducted to the boroughs' Walk of Fame. Bronx rap in the 1990s included Latino artists such as Fat Joe (founder of Terror Squad record label) and Big Pun,

Brooklyn rappers in the 1980s included artists such as Big Daddy Kane, Slick Rick, Chubb Rock, and MC Lyte. Perry (1994: 191) analyzed female rapper MC Lyte's video for *Stop, Look, Listen* (1989) and noted that she challenged male space by rapping on the street which countered the negative association of women on the street corner as being prostitutes. Many famous Brooklyn rappers had their debut albums released in the 1990s: Notorious BIG (1994), and Jay Z (1996), Mos Def (1998), and Talib Kweli (1998). Notorious BIG drew upon his upbringing in Brooklyn and constructed some of the most creative clever rhymes. To the envy of other rappers, he took on a persona that promoted the fact he sold crack in Brooklyn (he was arrested at the age of 17) and rapped about the gangster lifestyle (Collins 2006). After Notorious BIG's death in 1997, there was a territorial rap battle in New York

City between Brooklyn rapper Jay Z and Queens rapper Nas. The rivalry was a battle over the 'King of New York' rap title and involved various songs and freestyles that insulted the opposing rapper. The feud was a commercial success for both rappers as people purchased records to hear how each rapper disrespected the other. This territorially-based controversy dissipated as Nas and Jay Z overcame their dispute, especially when the former was signed by the latter to a Def Jam record deal. Nas was one of several rappers in the 1990s that continued the rap tradition from Queens. Rap artists and groups such as Run DMC (1984), Salt-n-Pepa (1986), and Young MC (1989) had debut albums before 1990. Rap reached wider audiences when Run DMC rapped over a sample from Aerosmith's rock song *Walk this Way* (1986). Newer Queens rap artists from the 2000s included G-Unit (tied with rapper 50 Cent) and Nicki Minaj. Part of 50 Cent's street credibility was the fact that he was shot nine times in 2000 on 161st Street in Jamaica, Queens (Birchmeier 2015).

Many rappers from the borough of Manhattan hailed from its Harlem neighborhood—a neighborhood near to the South Bronx. Early Harlem rap innovators included Kurtis Blow and beatboxer Doug E. Fresh. In the song *Rappin' Blow, Part 2* (1980), Kurtis Blow stated: 'I'm Kurtis Blow on the microphone/A place called Harlem was my home.' Another famous rap group from Manhattan in the 1980s was the rap group The Beastie Boys—members were from affluent families. Stratton (2008) argued that The Beastie Boys' Jewishness was central to their success and they brought rap to a mainstream, white American audience. One of their songs was *No Sleep till Brooklyn* (1987)—a party anthem heard across America. The song geographically referenced Brooklyn, a major center for hip hop, and not their home borough of Manhattan. Was geography used to authenticate their rap credibility to wider rap audiences?

## Los Angeles

In its formative days, 1980s Los Angeles rap was known for the development of Gangsta Rap. The main neighborhoods to develop rappers were Compton, South Central, and Long Beach City. The local social tensions within Compton added to the rap themes introduced by the rap group NWA. Their place-referenced album *Straight Outta Compton* (1988), and commercially successful film of the same name (2015), violently described an urban environment filled with police brutality and gang hostilities. This subgenre of rap, Quinn explained, "continually elaborated highly appealing and marketable expressions of authentic place-bound identity… [and] at the same time, intimated the wider context of insecurities about place and the displacing features of post-Fordist capitalism that precisely drove such expressions" (Quinn 2005: 67). Key members of NWA, such as Easy-E, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre, were influential in the West Coast rap scene. Critically-acclaimed rapper Kendrick Lamar continued Compton's rap tradition, as Los Angeles locales and streets were prominently featured in his album *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012). His *King Kunta* (2015) lyrics, and subsequent music video locales, indicated Kendrick Lamar's sense of place: 'Stuck a flag in my city, everybody's screamin' 'Compton'/I should probably run for Mayor when I'm done, to be honest.' Geographical markers used in Los Angeles were similar in importance to those rappers from the various sub-city areas of New York City.

The Los Angeles rap scene was tied to its G-Funk or Gangsta Funk beginnings. Dr. Dre influenced this style and advanced the careers of several Long Beach City rappers such as Warren G, Nate Dogg, and Snoop Dogg. He produced Snoop Dogg's first album *Doggystyle* (1993). A common theme in Snoop Dogg's music over the years was the recreational use of marijuana. A similar theme can be found in the songs from Latino rap group Cypress Hill—named after a local hangout on Cyprus Avenue in the South Gate neighborhood of LA (Cypress Hill 2015).

Another inner city neighborhood of Los Angeles famous for rap was South Central—rappers Ice Cube and the rap group The Pharcyde call this area home. Former NWA member and creative rap lyricist Ice Cube's street credibility was questioned on two fronts: family status and geography. Ice Cube had been criticized for coming from a two-parent family (sadly seen as a negative for some in the hip hop community) and was bussed out of his South Central neighborhood to Taft High School in the San Fernando Valley (Hilson-Woldu 2008: 14–26). These factors were used by some to question his Gangsta background, especially noting that he did not know many Crip gang members from his neighborhood. Nonetheless, Ice Cube lived in South Central and knew about the social climate of Los Angeles.

## Atlanta

A major criticism of the marketing of 'Dirty South' rap in Atlanta was that it obscured the real social and economic problems in the South (Grem 2006). Many of the rap styles in Atlanta rap do not focus on the social ills within Southern inner cities. The rap styles Atlanta included up-tempo beats, Snap Rap, Trap, and Crunk. Atlanta's rap group OutKast had a strong sense of place in their music and they titled their debut album: *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* (1994). The group was known for their rapid rhymes and up-tempo drum and bass beats—for example, listen to *Bombs over Baghdad* (2000). The heavy drum and bass sounds were musical traditions that came to Atlanta from Jamaica via Miami. A development heard in Atlanta-based music and dance in the 2000s was called Snap Rap. In this subgenre, finger snaps instead of drum beats served as percussion, and rap songs and associated dances in *Lean Wit It, Rock Wit It* (2006) by Dem Franchize Boys and *Crank That* (2007) by Soulja Boy Tell'em demonstrated the movement. Popular dances, such as The Dougie, The Bernie, Nae Nae, and Whip Dance, were influential in bridging the gap between hip hop and mainstream cultures. Atlanta teenager Silentó, with his commercially successful song *Watch Me* (2015), referenced several Southern-based hip hop dances mentioned above. Southern Trap, a mixture of electronic dance music and rap, spread in the DJ world and led to the Harlem Shake internet memes and viral videos in 2012.

Starting in Memphis and then becoming popular in Atlanta, Crunk rap was a feel-good subgenre of rap linking music in strip clubs and the Southern underground rap industry (Westwood 2005). Strippers wanted feel-good songs to get the audience excited and local DJs provided these hip hop beats. Even though the etymology of Crunk was unknown, the combination of 'crazy' and 'drunk' were commonly used to describe this rap style about partying. The distinctiveness of Crunk was the expression of emotions in a yell: as the self-proclaimed King of Crunk, Atlanta rapper Lil Jon screamed 'yeah!,' 'what?!,' and 'okay!' in numerous songs. In Southern rap parlance, 'turn up' or 'turnt up' refered to partying while getting drunk and/or high. In the lyrically simple song *Turn Down for What* (2013), Lil Jon wonders why anyone would want to stop partying. The Crunk rap subgenre was the antithesis of blues music, where musicians often used groans to express their feelings of sorrow.

## Secondary centers

Emerging secondary centers offered new subgenres on rap music by mixing local musical traditions and referencing local slang. The fourth largest hip hop center was New Orleans, centering around two major labels: No Limit Records and Cash Money Records. New Orleans rappers Master P (founder of No Limit), Birdman (co-founder of Cash Money), Mystikal, and Juvenile found commercial success by 1995. Lil Wayne was a popular rapper, and due to a recent dispute, a former member of Cash Money Records. He embodied place identity by having 'Orleans' and the New Orleans Saints Fleur-de-lis logo tattooed on his face. Lil Wayne (aka Weezy) grew up in the Hollygrove neighborhood of New Orleans and raps in *Hollyweezy* (2015) that he was 'Too Hollygrove to go Hollywood.' Hip hop culture continued to diversify, as the New Orleans gay culture was known for partying to Bounce music, a dance-orientated rap subgenre (Miller 2012).

The fifth largest rap center was Houston—where pre-1990s artists included the Geto Boys and Scarface. Houston was noted for the rap subgenre of 'chopped and screwed,' where up-tempo beats were abandoned for slow background grooves. DJ Screw (hence the style name) popularized this method by taking current rap hits and re-mixing them by slowing the music tempo down. Slim Thug, Paul Wall, and Mike Jones represented H-Town by rapping over these chopped and screwed beats—for example, in their song *Still Tippin'* (2005). Adding to the lexicon of Houston rap was the local drug usage that was referenced as 'sippin' sizzurp,' The reference was to Purple Drank or Lean, a mixture of prescription-strength cough syrup (consisting of promethazine and codeine) and soft drinks. Hart et al. (2014) surveyed 2349 undergraduates and linked Purple Drank drug use to fans of hip hop music. This popular Southern drug has been linked to the deaths of DJ Screw and Port Arthur, Texas rapper Pimp C, among others.

The sixth largest rap center to develop artists was Oakland, California—extending to the entire Bay Area included rappers from San Francisco and Vallejo. The sexually explicit lyrics of Too Short put Oakland on the map in the late 1980s. Another early

rap pioneer from Oakland is MC Hammer, whom found commercial success in 1990 with his song *U Can't Touch This*. Also in 1990, Digital Underground became popular with the song *The Humpty Dance*. Tupac, who started as a dancer for Digital Underground, became an iconic rapper from the Bay Area. His music touched on rap themes of partying, the 'Thug Life,' family togetherness, and political activism (Stanford 2011). Some of the themes of rap in the Bay Area revolved around the development of the Hyphy Movement (similar to Crunk in the South) in The Bay Area. The style, which was distinguishable by its unique local slang, was short for hyperactive, which referred to getting drunk or using drugs to 'get stupid' and 'go dumb' (Jones 2006). Rap songs mentioned 'ghost riding the whip,' the local phenomenon of drivers walking and/or dancing outside of their slow moving vehicles. For rappers engaged in the Hyphy movement, such as E-40, the music provided an expression of their local culture to a wider audience. E-40 popularized the slang '-izzle' suffix in the West Coast rap lexicon, with 'fo' shizzle' meaning 'for sure' as one example. This rap dialect became more popular when West Coast rapper Snoop Dogg adopted it and used this vernacular in his lyrics.

Another early East Coast center for rap music was Philadelphia—with artists like Schooly D and DJ Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince debuting albums in the 1980s. The latter represented West Philadelphia and were known for their popular hit *Parents Just Don't Understand* (1988). The Fresh Prince, aka Will Smith, parlayed his musical success into acting success, as his TV show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* led to various blockbuster movie roles. Influential Philadelphia hip hop band The Roots produced several albums in the 1990s and were known for being the house band for several rappers' live performances. Ruff Ryder rapper Eve places her hometown of 'Philthadelphia' on several of her early raps. In 2013, rappers Cassidy and Meek Mill continued the tradition of doing the dozens by releasing songs insulting each other.

The eighth and ninth ranked centers of rap were found in the Midwest, Chicago and Detroit respectively. Chicago's own Kanye West—equally known for his creative beats, big ego, and controversial public outbursts—worked with musicians from various musical genres. Kanye West collaborated with Adam Levine of Maroon 5, former Beatle Paul McCartney, and French electronica group Daft Punk. Kanye West's song and video *Homecoming* (2009), featuring Coldplay's Chris Martin, was an ode to Chicago. The song personified Chicago and ended with: 'Jump in the crowd, spark your lighters, wave 'em around/If you don't know by now, I'm talking 'bout Chi-town!' Kanye West did not shy away from his middle-class upbringing, as the educationally-themes titles of his first three albums noted: *The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), and *Graduation* (2007). Had geography as an authenticating tool in hip hop become less important over the years? The diversity of Chicago rap was seen with Lupe Fiasco, a creative lyricist who became prominent with his ode to skateboarding in *Kick, Push* (2006) and for being the official musician of the U.S. Soccer Federation.

Detroit rapper Eminem, a member of D-12, became famous for his criticisms of popular culture icons and for his alter-ego Slim Shady. Eminem's rap credibility, which is difficult for a white rapper to achieve, came by his ascension through Detroit's underground rap battle scene (fictionalized in the movie *8 Mile*, a road that historically separated African Americans and whites). The film described a poor rapper from a trailer park who participated in rap battles, where rappers created rhymes that insulted their rap competitor (similar to playing the dozens). Other Detroit rappers include D-12 artists, Slum Village, Royce Da 5′9″, and Big Sean. Royce Da 5′9″ raps about being the King of Detroit in *Rock City* (2002) and proclaimes: 'If you hate me/You hate the D,' proving that it was difficult to separate the identity of a rapper from the geographic area they represent.

The tenth most populated rap center was Miami, where controversial rap group 2 Live Crew was known for their sexually explicit lyrics and legal battles over censorship. 'Parental Advisory' labels were used on 2 Live Crew's albums of *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (1989) and *Banned in the USA* (1990). Miami remained Florida's major hip hop center, with geography being an important identity marker for many prominent artists. The Carol City rapper Rick Ross named himself after a drug lord—his lyrical themes mention drug trafficking and expensive automobiles. His place-based debut album was titled *Port of Miami* (2006). Cuban-American rapper Pitbull's debut album was titled *M.I.A.M.I.* (2004)—using the city's name to stand for 'Money Is A Major Issue.' Florida rapper T-Pain was the poster child of the Auto-Tune movement in Hip Hop, where a voice processor was used to

correct for off-key sounds. Songs such as *I'm Sprung* (2005) and *Up Down* (*Do This All Day*) (2013) exemplified this sing-song genre of rap music that became popular for many rappers outside of Florida. In a regional dispute, New York City rappers Nas and Jay Z, in *Hip Hop is Dead* (2006) and *D.O.A*. (*Death of Auto-Tune*) (2009) respectively, had criticized the Auto-Tune movement in rap.

## Summary

Rap music started in the Bronx borough of New York City and diffused to several large inner cities over time. The diffusion of rap music followed the hierarchical diffusion pattern of leapfrogging from one large metro area to another. In the 1980s, rap was mainly produced in New York City and then diffused to Los Angeles, Oakland, and Miami. In the 1990s, rap continued to diffuse and grow in Atlanta, New Orleans, Houston, and Memphis. In the 2000s, Midwestern cities of Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis developed more rap artists. This research showed after mapping 1124 rap artists that there were three major hip hop centers: New York City, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. Secondary rap centers were found in the East Coast (Philadelphia), West Coast (The Bay Area), South (New Orleans, Houston, and Miami), and Midwest (Chicago and Detroit). Rappers from these centers developed local rap styles and used local slang to portray their locality. Rap music has a powerful connection to place as rappers legitimized their hip hop authenticity by constantly indicating where they grew up in rap songs. Rap artists even incorporated geography into their identity when creating their rap names and rap groups. Hip hop music within large urban areas can be studied for their geographic meanings and intra-urban rivalries. Future research can build upon this paper and add to the multidisciplinary approaches that study the geography of rap music.

## Discography

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