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'Represent': race, space and place in rap music[1]

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Say somethin' positive, well positive ain't where I live
I live around the corner from West Hell
Two blocks from South Shit and once in a jail cell
The sun never shined on my side of the street, see?
(Naughty By Nature, 'Ghetto Bastard (Everything's Gonna Be Alright)', 1991, Isba/Tommy Boy Records)

If you're from Compton you know it's the 'hood where it's good
(Compton's Most Wanted, 'Raised in Compton', 1991, Epic/Sony)

Introduction

Hip hop's capacity to circumvent the constraints and limiting social conditions of young Afro-American and Latino youths has been examined and celebrated by cultural critics and scholars in various contexts since its inception in the mid-1970s. For instance, the 8 February 1999 issue of US magazine *Time* featured a cover photo of ex-Fugees and five-time Grammy award winner Lauryn Hill with the accompanying headline 'Hip-Hop Nation: After 20 Years – how it's changed America'. Over the years, however, there has been little attention granted to the implications of hip hop's spatial logics. *Time*'s coverage is relatively standard in perceiving the hip hop nation as a historical construct rather than a geo-cultural amalgamation of personages and practices that are spatially dispersed.

Tricia Rose (1994) arguably goes the furthest in introducing a spatial analysis when she details the ways that hip hop continually displays a clever transformative creativity that is endlessly capable of altering the uses of technologies and space. Her specific references to hip hop culture and space stress the importance of the 'postindustrial city' as the central urban influence, 'which provided the context for creative development among hip hop's earliest innovators, shaped their cultural terrain, access to space, materials, and education' (1994, p. 34). As this suggests, the particularities of urban space themselves are subjected to the deconstructive and reconstructive practices of rap artists. Thus, when, in another context, Iain Chambers refers to rap as 'New York's ''sound system'' . . . sonorial graffiti' with 'the black youth culture of Harlem and the Bronx twisting technology into new cultural shape' (1985, p. 190), he opens the conceptual door onto corresponding strategies that give rise to the radical transformation of the sites where these cultures cohere and converge or the spaces that are reimagined and, importantly, remapped. Rap

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artists therefore emerge not only as aberrant users of electronic and digital technologies but also as alternative cartographers for what the Samoan–American group Boo Yaa Tribe has referred to in an album title as 'a new funky nation'.

Indeed, there is very little about today's society that is not, at some point, imbued with a spatial character and this is no less true for the emergence and production of spatial categories and identities in rap music and the hip hop cultures of which it is a central component. Rap music presents a case worthy of examination and provides a unique set of contexts for the analyses of public discourses pertaining to youth, race and space. Rap music is one of the main sources within popular culture of a sustained and in-depth examination and analysis of the spatial partitioning of race and the diverse experiences of being young and black in America. It can be observed that space and race figure prominently as organising concepts implicated in the delineation of a vast range of fictional or actually existing social practices which are represented in narrative and lyrical form. In this paper, I seek to illuminate the central importance of spatiality in the organising principles of value, meaning and practice within hip hop culture. My further intent is to explore the question of how the dynamics of space, place and race get taken up by rap artists as themes and topics and how they are located within a wider range of circulating social discourses. The prioritisation of spatial practices and spatial discourses that form a basis of hip hop culture offers a means through which to view both the *ways* that spaces and places are constructed and the *kinds* of spaces or places that are constructed.

The paper traces the way in which hip hop's popularity spread from New York to other US cities, most notably Philadelphia and Los Angeles but eventually more geographically marginal cities such as Seattle, and it discusses changes that have taken place in rap production, particularly the rise of artist-owned labels. Such developments encouraged the emergence of distinctive regional rap sounds and styles, as well as strong local allegiances and territorial rivalries, as the identities and careers of rap acts became more closely tied to the city and to its specific neighbourhoods ('hoods) and communities. The paper examines the effects of all this on the spatial discourse of rap. It points to a gradual shift within rap from a concern with broad, generalised spaces, to the representation of specific named cities and 'hoods (as illustrated by Gansta Rap from the Californian city of Compton which celebrates and glorifies Compton as well as the street warrior and gang rivalry) and the representation of smaller-scale, more narrowly defined and highly detailed places (as illustrated by rap from the North West city of Seattle which has a distinctively local flavour).

Locating hip hop

Describing the early stages of rap music's emergence within the hip hop culture for an MTV 'Rap-umentary', Grandmaster Flash, one of the core DJs of the early scene, recalls the spatial distribution of sound systems and crews in metropolitan New York:

> We had territories. It was like, Kool Herc had the west side. Bam had Bronx River. DJ Breakout had way uptown past Gun Hill. Myself, my area was like 138th Street, Cypress Avenue, up to Gun Hill, so that we all had our territories and we all had to respect each other.

The documentary's images embellish Flash's commentary, displaying a computer

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generated map of the Bronx with coloured sections demarcating each DJ's territory as it is mentioned, graphically separating the enclaves that comprise the main area of operations for the competing sound systems.

This emphasis on territoriality involves more than just a geographical arrangement of cultural workers and the regionalism of cultural practices. It illuminates a particular relationship to space or, more accurately, a relationship to particular places. As Flash conveys it, the sound systems that formed the backbone of the burgeoning hip hop scene were identified by their audiences and followers according to the overlapping influences of personae and turf. The territories were tentatively claimed through the ongoing cultural practices that occurred within their bounds and were reinforced by the circulation of those who recognised and accepted their perimeters. It is not at all insignificant that most of the dominant historical narratives pertaining to the emergence of hip hop (i.e., Hager 1984; Toop 1984) identify a transition from gang-oriented affiliations (formed around protection of turf) to music and break dance affiliations that maintained and, in some cases, intensified the important structuring systems of territoriality.

Flash's reference to the importance of 'respect' is not primarily addressing a respect for the skills or character of his competitors (although, elsewhere (George 1993) he acknowledges this as well). Rather, his notion of respect is related to the geographies that he maps; it is based on the existence of circumscribed domains of authority and dominance that have been established among the various DJs. These geographies are inhabited and bestowed with value; they are understood as lived places and localised sites of significance, as well as being understood within the market logic that includes a product (the music in its various live or recorded forms) and a consumer base (various audience formations). The proprietary discourse also implies, therefore, that even in its infancy hip hop cartography was to some extent shaped by a refined capitalist logic and the existence of distinct market regions. Without sacrificing the basic geographic components of territory, possession and group identity that play such an important role among gang-oriented activities, the representation of New York's urban spaces was substantially revised as hip hop developed.

Clearly, however, the geographical boundaries that Flash describes and which are visually mapped in the documentary were never firm or immovable. They were cultural boundaries that were continually open to negotiation and renegotiation by those who inhabited their terrains and who circulated throughout the city's boroughs. As the main form of musical expression within the hip hop culture, the early DJ sound systems featured a series of practices that linked the music to other mobile practices, such as graffiti art and 'tagging'. Together, these overlapping practices and methods of constructing place-based identities, and of inscribing and enunciating individual and collective presence, created the bonds upon which affiliations were forged within specific social geographies. Hip hop's distinct practices introduced new forms of expression that were contextually linked to conditions in a city comprised of an amalgamation of neighbourhoods and boroughs with their own highly particularised social norms and cultural nuances.

Hip hop, space and place

Rap music takes the city and its multiple spaces as the foundation of its cultural production. In the music and lyrics, the city is an audible presence, explicitly cited

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and digitally sampled in the reproduction of the aural textures of the urban environment. Since its inception in the mid-to-late 1970s, hip hop culture has always maintained fiercely defended local ties and an in-built element of competition waged through hip hop's cultural forms of rap, breakdancing and graffiti. This competition has traditionally been staged within geographical boundaries that demarcate turf and territory among various crews, cliques, and posses, extending and altering the spatial alliances that had previously cohered under other organisational structures, including but not exclusive to gangs. Today, a more pronounced level of spatial awareness is one of the key factors distinguishing rap and hip hop culture from the many other cultural and subcultural youth formations currently vying for attention.

Throughout its historical evolution, it is evident that there has been a gradually escalating urgency with which minority youth use rap in the deployment of discourses of urban locality or 'place', with the trend accelerating noticeably since 1987–88. With the discursive shift from the spatial abstractions framed by the notion of 'the ghetto' to the more localised and specific discursive construct of 'the 'hood' occurring in 1987–88 (roughly corresponding with the rise and impact of rappers on the US West Coast), there has been an enhanced emphasis on the powerful ties to place that both anchor rap acts to their immediate environments and set them apart from other environments and other 'hoods as well as from other rap acts and their crews which inhabit similarly demarcated spaces.

Commenting in 1988 on rap's 'nationwide' expansions beyond New York's boroughs, Nelson George writes, 'Rap and its Hip Hop musical underpinning is now the national youth music of black America . . . rap's gone national and is in the process of going regional' (George 1992, p. 80). George was right, as rap was rising out of the regions and acts were emerging from the South (Miami-based 2 Live Crew or Houston's The Geto Boys), the Northwest (Seattle's Sir Mix-A-Lot and Kid Sensation), the San Francisco Bay area (Digital Underground, Tupac, Too Short), Los Angeles (Ice T, N.W.A.) and elsewhere. Indeed, the significance of the east–west split within US rap cannot be overstated since it has led to several intense confrontations between artists representing each region and is arguably the single most divisive factor within US hip hop to date. Until the mid-1990s, artists associated with cities in the Midwest or southern states often felt obligated to align themselves with either East or West, or else they attempted to sidestep the issue deftly without alienating audiences and deriding either coast. In the past several years, however, Houston, Atlanta and New Orleans have risen as important rap production centres and have consequently emerged as powerful forces in their own right.

Today, the emphasis is on place, and groups explicitly advertise their home environments with names such as Compton's Most Wanted, Detroit's Most Wanted, the Fifth Ward Boyz, and South Central Cartel, or else they structure their home territory into titles and lyrics, constructing a new internally meaningful hip hop cartography. The explosion of localized production centres and regionally influential producers and artists has drastically altered the hip hop map and production crews have sprung up throughout North America. These producers have also demonstrated a growing tendency to incorporate themselves as localised businesses (often buying or starting companies unrelated to the music industry in their local neighbourhoods, such as auto customising and repair shops) and to employ friends, family members and members of their wider neighbourhoods. Extending Nelson

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George's observation, it now seems possible to say that rap, having gone regional, is in the process of going local.

The regional proliferation of artist-owned record labels

Reflecting on the intensification of regional rap activity within the US during what might be defined as the genre's 'middle-school' historical period,[3] Nelson George writes that 1987 was 'a harbinger of the increasing quality of non-New York hip hop', citing as evidence the fact that three of the four finalists in the New Music Seminar's DJ Competition were from 'outside the Apple – Philadelphia's Cash Money, Los Angeles's Joe Cooley, and Mr. Mix of Miami's 2 Live Crew' (George 1992, p. 30). In the pages of *Billboard*, he observed that despite New York's indisputable designation as the 'home' of rap, Philadelphia rappers in particular (most notably, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince) were making inroads on the scene and on the charts, making it 'rap's second city' (George, ibid). This expansion was facilitated by the emergent trend in the development of artist-owned independent labels and management companies which entered into direct competition with non-artist-owned companies.

After years of bogus contracts, management conflicts, and poor representation, a growing number of artists began dividing their duties between recording or performing, locating and producing new talent, and managing their respective record companies. By forming self-owned labels and publishing companies and establishing themselves as autonomous corporate entities, forward-thinking rap artists were also able to maintain greater creative control over their production while ensuring increased returns on their sales. In a rather excessive discourse, artists spoke of throwing off the corporate shackles of the recording industry as well as invoking the quite separate issues of building something of which one can be proud or being remunerated in a more lucrative manner.

Once several key labels such as Luther Campbell's Skyywalker Records and Eazy-E's Ruthless Records had been established and had proven the viability of the venture, their initiatives were rapidly reproduced as numerous artists followed suit. For many recording artists, to gain wealth and material renumeration for their work suddenly meant learning the production and management side of the industry and exercising entrepreneurial skills as well. As the trend expanded, small artist-owned and operated labels burgeoned and another tier was added to the industry. With the rise of artist-owned labels there was also an increased emphasis on regional and local affiliations and an articulation of pride and loyalty in each label, its artist roster, and the central locale of operation.

Rap is characteristically produced within a system of extremely close-knit local affiliations, forged within particular cultural settings and urban minority youth practices. Yet the developments in the rap industry, whereby production houses or record labels might be identified on the basis of their regional and local zones of operation, are not unique to this current period. For instance, independent 'race record' labels, which targeted blacks in the South and in larger northern urban centres throughout the 1920s and 1930s, flourished in part due to the enhanced mobility of black populations which maintained their affinities for the various regional blues styles. Nelson George's consistent attention to black musical tradition, the music industry's gradual permutations, and rap's growing national influence led him to note in *Billboard* that 'regional music used to be the backbone

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of black music and – maybe – it will be again' (31 May 1986, p. 23). He recalls black American musical production in the immediate post-World War 2 period when independent labels were dispersed across the nation, recording locally and regionally based artists while servicing the needs of black music consumers within these regional markets.

Examining the history of black popular music in the 1960s and 1970s, the names Motown, Stax, or Philadelphia International Records (PIR) evoke images of composers, producers and musical talent working within very specific studio contexts in Detroit, Memphis, and Philadelphia. The dispersed independent labels and production sites that operated from the 1950s through the 1970s are therefore culturally meaningful and relevant to descriptions of black music of the period as they convey an idea of consistency and identifiable signature sounds or styles.[6] This trend has continued with rap, with more pronounced and explicit connection to specific locales and the articulations of geography, place and identity that sets the genre apart from many of its musical predecessors.

Of the smaller labels that had thrived in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, most disappeared as musical tastes shifted, as economic transitions evolved, or as the industry majors swallowed them or bumped them out of the market by introducing their own specialty labels. Towards the end of the 1980s, the US music industry was no longer even primarily American, with the major parent companies being massive transnational entities with corporate offices based in several countries. Yet, in both rock and rap there was a resurgence of regional production in the mid-to-late 1980s and, with it, the resurgence of regionally distinct styles. In the black music sector these were exemplified by the Minneapolis funk that was a trademark of artists like Prince, The Time, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, or Jesse Johnson; the Washington, DC go-go sound of Chuck Brown, Redd and the Boys, and especially Trouble Funk; and from Chicago, house music exemplified by DJ Frankie Knuckles. Rap production in New York, Los Angeles and Miami also began to display regionally distinct 'flavours' to a greater extent as individual producers emerged with their own trademark styles and influences. Individual studios such as Chung King in New York also became associated with specific production styles and sounds in rap.

As evidence of the arrival of artist-owned labels in the rap business, in December, 1989, *Billboard* featured advertisements in a special section on rap that illustrated the trend. Among these were ads for Eazy-E's Ruthless Records (Compton, CA), Luther Campbell's Skyywalker Records (Miami, FL), and Ice T's Rhyme Syndicate (South Central LA). Appearing alongside these were advertisements for the established independent rap labels Def Jam, Tommy Boy and Jive as well as ads for the newer 'street' divisions of major labels including Atlantic ('The Strength of the Street'), MCA ('Wanna Rap? MCA Raps. Word!') and Epic ('Epic in Total Control. No Loungin', Just Lampin' '). The phenomenon has since evolved to the extent that artist-owned operations have become relatively standard in the industry, existing as influential players alongside the major labels.

As a later entrant, Death Row Records (initiated in 1992 by principal investors Suge Knight and former member of the rap group Niggaz with Attitude (N.W.A.) Dr Dre) flourished through a lucrative co-ownership and distribution alliance with upstart Interscope Records, which was itself half-owned by Time Warner's Atlantic Group. Although a series of misfortunes in 1996–97 decimated the label,[7] it rose to virtual dominance in the rap field between 1992 and 1997 with top-charting releases

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by Dr Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Tupac Shakur as well as the soundtrack albums *Deep Cover* (1992) and *Murder Was the Case* (1994). One of the factors that characterised Death Row Records from its inception and which is common to the dozens of artist-owned and operated rap labels to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, is an organised structure rooted in localised 'posse' affiliations.

Homeboys and production posses

Greg Tate suggests that, 'every successful rap group is a black fraternal organization, a posse' (1992, p. 134). On the same theme, Tricia Rose writes that 'rappers' emphasis on posses and neighbourhoods has brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness' (1994, p. 11). For Public Enemy's Chuck D, posse formations are a necessary response to the fragmentive effects of capitalism: 'the only way that you exist within that mould is that you have to put together a ''posse'', or a team to be able to penetrate that structure, that block, that strong as steel structure that no individual can break' (Eure and Spady 1991, p. 330). As each of these commentators suggests, the posse is the fundamental social unit binding a rap act and its production crew together, creating a collective identity that is rooted in place and within which the creative process unfolds. It is not rare for an entire label to be defined along posse lines with the musical talent, the producers and various peripheral associates bonding under the label's banner.

With collective identities being evident as a nascent reference throughout rap's history in group names like The Sugarhill Gang, Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew, X-Clan, or the 2 Live Crew, the term 'posse' was later unambiguously adopted by rap artists such as California's South Central Posse or Orlando's DJ Magic Mike, whose crew records under the name 'the Royal Posse'. In virtually all cases, recording acts align themselves within a relatively coherent posse structure, sharing labels and producers, appearing on each other's recordings and touring together.

The term posse is defined as a 'strong force or company' (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1985) and for many North Americans it summons notions of lawlessness and frontier justice that were standard thematic elements of Hollywood westerns in the 1940s and 1950s. This is, in fact, the basis of the term as it is applied within rap circles, although its current significance is related more precisely to the ways in which the Jamaican posse culture has over the years adapted the expressive terminology and gangster imagery of the cinema to its own cultural systems. In her illuminating research on the sinister complexities of the Jamaican posse underworld, Laurie Gunst (1995) explains how the posse system grew under the specific economic, political, and cultural conditions of mid-1970s Jamaica, evolving into a stratified and violent gang culture that gained strength through the marijuana, cocaine and crack trade. As she explains, the Jamaican posse system has, since 1980, been transplanted to virtually every major North American city.

The Jamaican posse expansion is important in this context as it coincides almost precisely with the emergence of rap and hip hop in New York's devastated uptown ghetto environments. This connection is strengthened when rap's hybrid origins that were forged in the convergence of Jamaican sound systems and South Bronx funk are considered. The concept of the posse has, through various social mechanisms and discursive overlays, been traced upon many of rap's themes, images, and postures that take the forms of the pimp, hustler, gambler and gangster

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in the music's various sub-genres that evolved after 1987. Rap has also been influenced by the gangland models provided by the New York mafia and Asian Triad gangs.

Since roughly 1987 hip hop culture has also been influenced by alliances associated with West Coast gang systems. Numerous rap album covers and videos feature artists and their posses representing their gang, their regional affiliations or their local 'hood with elaborate hand gestures. The practice escalated to such an extent that, in an effort to dilute the surging territorial aggression, Black Entertainment Television (BET) passed a rule forbidding explicitly gang-related hand signs on its popular video programmes.

'The 'hood took me under': home, turf and identity

It is necessary to recognise that the home territory of a rapper or rap group is a testing ground, a place to hone skills and to gain a local reputation. This is accurately portrayed in the 1992 Ernest Dickerson film *Juice* where the expression 'local' is attributed to the young DJ Q, in one instance suggesting community ties and home alliances whereas, in another context, it is summoned as a pejorative term that reflects a lack of success and an inability to mobilise his career beyond the homefront. In interviews and on recordings most rappers refer to their early days, citing the time spent with their 'home boys', writing raps, perfecting their turntable skills, and taking the stage at parties and local clubs or dances (Cross 1993). Their perspective emerges from within the highly localised conditions that they know and the places they inhabit.

As a site of affiliation and circulation, the 'hood provides a setting for particular group interactions which are influential in rap music's evolution. In rap, there is a widespread sense that an act cannot succeed without first gaining approval and support from the crew and the 'hood. Successful acts are expected to maintain connections to the 'hood and to 'keep it real' thematically, rapping about situations, scenes and sites that comprise the lived experience of the 'hood. At issue is the complex question of authenticity as rap posses continually strive to reaffirm their connections to the 'hood in an attempt to mitigate the negative accusations that they have sold out in the event of commercial or crossover success. Charisse Jones has noted a dilemma confronting successful rap artists who suddenly have the economic means to 'get over' and leave the 'hood. As she writes in the *New York Times* (24 September 1995, p. 43), contemporary artists such as Snoop Dogg or Ice T are often criticised for rapping about ghetto poverty and gang aggression while living in posh suburban mansions.

Those who stay in the 'hood generally do so to be closer to friends and family, closer to the posse. While a common rationale for staying in the 'hood is familiarity and family bonds, in numerous cases artists also justify their decisions to stay along a creative rationale, suggesting that the 'hood provides the social contexts and raw resources for their lyrics. Others leave with some regret, suggesting that the 'hood may constitute 'home' but its various tensions and stresses make it an entirely undesirable place to live (this is even more frequent among rappers with children to support and nurture); there is no romanticising real poverty or real danger.

The 'hood is, however, regularly constructed within the discursive frame of the 'home', and the dual process of 'turning the 'hood out' or 'representing' (which involves creating a broader profile for the home territory and its inhabitants while

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showing respect for the nurture it provides) is now a required practice among hardcore rap acts. The posse is always explicitly acknowledged and individual members are greeted on disk and in live concerts with standard 'shout outs' that frequently cite the streets and localities from which they hail. This continual reference to the important value of social relations based in the 'hood refutes the damning images of an oppressed and joyless underclass that are so prevalent in the media and contemporary social analyses. Rap may frequently portray the nation's gritty urban underside, but its creators also communicate the importance of places and the people that build community within them. In this interpretation, there is an insistent emphasis on support, nurture and community that coexists with the grim representations that generally cohere in the images and discourses of ghetto life.

As in all other popular music forms, 'paying dues' is also part of the process of embarking on a rap music career, and the local networks of support and encouragement, from in-group affiliations to local club and music scenes, are exceedingly important factors in an act's professional development. One way that this is facilitated is through the posse alliances and local connections that form around studios and producers. For example, in describing the production house once headed by DJ Mark, The 45 King, the rap artist Fab 5 Freddy recalls that 'he had this posse called the Flavor Unit out there in New Jersey . . . He has like a Hip Hop training room out there, an incredible environment where even if you weren't good when you came in, you'd get good just being around there' (Nelson and Gonzales 1991, p. xiii).[10] This pattern is replicated in numerous instances and is also exemplified by the production/posse structure of Rap-A-Lot Records in Houston (home to acts such as the Geto Boys, Scarface, Big Mike, Caine, and The Fifth Ward Boyz) where the company was forced to relocate its offices because 'artists were always kicking it there with their posses like it was a club' (*Rap Sheet*, October 1992, p. 18). By coming up through the crew, young promising artists learn the ropes, acquire lessons in craft and showmanship, attain stage or studio experience and exposure and, quite frequently, win record deals based on their apprenticeships and posse connections.

Few rap scholars (Tricia Rose and Brian Cross being notable exceptions) have paid attention to these formative stages and the slow processes of developing MC and DJ skills. There is, in fact, a trajectory to an artist's development that is seldom accounted for. In practice, artists' lyrics and rhythms must achieve success on the home front first, where the flow, subject matter, style and image must resonate meaningfully among those who share common bonds to place, to the posse and to the 'hood. In this sense, when rappers refer to the 'local flavour', they are identifying the detailed inflections that respond to and reinforce the significance of the music's particular sites of origin and which might be recognised by others elsewhere as being unique, interesting and, ultimately, marketable.

The spatialisation of production styles

The posse structures that privilege place and the 'hood can be seen as influential elements in the evolution of new rap artists as well as relevant forces in the emergence of new, regionally definable sounds and discourses about space and place. For example, critics and rappers alike acknowledge the unique qualities of the West Coast G-funk sound which defined a production style that emerged with Dr Dre's work on the *Deep Cover* soundtrack and the release of his 1992 classic *The Chronic*

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(Death Row/Interscope), and arguably reached its apex with the 1994 release of Warren G's *Regulate . . . G Funk Era* (Violator/Rush Associated Labels). Other local artists in this period, such as the Boo Yaa Tribe, Above the Law, Compton's Most Wanted, and DJ Quik, also prominently featured variations on the G-funk sound and reinforced its influence in the industry as an identifiable West coast subgenre. G-funk makes ample use of standard funk grooves by artists including George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, Gap Band, or the late Roger Troutman, and is characterised as being 'laid-back' and sparse, featuring slow beats and longer sample loops. While it was regarded as a regionally distinct sound, it was also often related specifically to Dr Dre's production style and was comparatively categorised by its difference from the more cacophonous East Coast jams (recognisable in the early work of the Bomb Squad, the production crew of the rap act Public Enemy). As Brian Cross (1993) notes, however, the impact of the G-funk style among California rap acts is also related to the extended influence of late 1970s funk music in the Southwest that was a consequence of limited access to independently produced and distributed rap product in the early 1980s, delaying rap's geographic expansion from New York to the Los Angeles area.

Explaining the Bomb Squad's production processes following the release of Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990, Def Jam), Chuck D describes his production posse's familiarity with various regional styles and tastes and their attempts to integrate the differences into the album's tracks. As he states:

> Rap has different feels and different vibes in different parts of the country. For example, people in New York City don't drive very often, so New York used to be about walking around with your radio. But that doesn't really exist anymore. It became unfashionable because some people were losing their *lives* over them, and also people don't want to carry them, so now it's more like 'Hey, I've got my Walkman'. For that reason, there's a treble type of thing going on; they're not getting much of the bass. So rap music in New York City is a headphone type of thing, whereas in Long Island or Philadelphia . . . it's more of a bass type thing. (Dery 1990, p. 90)

These regional distinctions between the 'beats' are borne out in the example of the Miami production houses of Luther Campbell or Orlando's Magic Mike. In Florida (and to some extent, Georgia) the focus is on the bass – Florida 'booty bass' or 'booty boom' as it has been termed – which offers a deeper, 'phatter', and almost subsonic vibration that stands out as a regionally distinct and authored style.[11] Within US rap culture, artists and fans alike reflect an acute awareness that people in different parts of the country produce and enjoy regional variations on the genre; they experience rap differently, structuring it into their social patterns according to the norms that prevail in a given urban environment. Thus, the regional taste patterns in South Florida are partially influenced by the central phenomenon of car mobility and the practice of stacking multiple 10 or 15-inch bass speakers and powerful sub-woofers into car trunks and truck beds.

Add to these stylistic distinctions the discursive differences within rap from the various regions (i.e., the aforementioned Gangsta Rap from the West Coast crews, the chilling, cold-blooded imagery from Houston's 'Bloody Nickle' crews on Rap-A-Lot Records, or the 'pimp, playa and hustla' themes that are standard among Oakland and San Francisco cliques), the localised posse variations in vocal style and slang, or the site-specific references in rap lyrics to cities, 'hoods, and crews, and a general catalogue of differences in form and content becomes clearly audible. What these elements indicate is that, while the rap posse provides a structured

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identity for its members, it can also provide a referential value to the production qualities and the sound of the musical product with which it is associated.

Rap's spatial discourse

In his enquiry into the cultural resonance and meanings of the term 'the 'hood', Paul Gilroy poses the question, 'how is black life in one 'hood connected to life in others? Can there be a blackness that connects, articulates, synchronises experiences and histories across the diaspora space?' (1992, p. 308). He criticises the idea of 'nation' that has emerged as an important structuring concept in American hip hop culture (mainly after 1987) and remains sceptical of the value invested in the discourses of 'family' unity (communicated in the rhetoric of black brotherhood and sisterhood) when there is so much territorial antagonism evident in the strands of rap that privilege the spatialities of gang culture and turf affiliation. Gilroy expresses his perplexity with the closed contours that the 'hood represents, suggesting that its inward-turning spatial perspectives inhibit dialogue across divided social territories and cultural zones. He further argues that redemptive attempts to appeal to either the black 'nation', or to the 'family' of internationally dispersed blacks in the rap subgenre known as 'message rap' are ill-conceived and based in a particularly North Americanist viewpoint that harbours its own exclusive and hierarchically stratified biases.

Perhaps more in line with Gilroy's expansive, trans-Atlantic visions of rap's diasporic potential is the track 'Ludi' (1991, Island Records) by the Canadian act the Dream Warriors. Based in Toronto, the group is part of one of the world's largest expatriate Caribbean communities. Like Gilroy's London, Toronto could be seen as an

> important junction point or crossroads on the webbed pathways of black Atlantic political culture. It is revealed to be a place where, by virtue of factors like the informality of racial segregation, the configuration of class relations, the contingency of linguistic convergences, global phenomena such as anti-colonial and emancipationist political formations are still being sustained, reproduced, and amplified. (Gilroy 1992, p. 95).

In mapping a cultural 'crossroads', the song Ludi utilises an early reggae rhythm and a lightly swinging melody (based on a sample of the Jamaican classic 'My Conversation', released in 1968 by The Uniques) that taps into a particularly rich moment in the evolution of the reggae style and revives a well-known Jamaican track while relocating it within the performative contexts of hip hop.

'Ludi' (which refers to a board game) begins with rapper King Lou stating that the song is for his mother – who wants something to dance to – and his extended family to whom he offers the musical sounds of their original home environment. The family to which he refers is not, in the immediate sense, the family of black-identified brothers and sisters that cohere within nationalistic and essentialist discourse but literally his siblings. He then expands his dedication to the wider 'family' of blacks with a comprehensive roll-call of the English and Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands and Africa which inform (but by no means determine) his cultural identity. There is no attempt to privilege an originary African heritage nor is there a nostalgic appeal to the Caribbean heritage. This extensive list recognises Toronto's hybrid Afro-Caribbean community and refers directly to a locally manifested culture of international black traditions (rather than a single tradition of essentialist blackness) within which the Dream Warriors devel-

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oped as young artists. The song's bridge also reinforces the Caribbean connection by making several references to the turntable practices of Jamaican sound systems that are mainstays throughout internationally dispersed Caribbean communities.

Later in the track, King Lou's cohort, Capital Q, reminds him that 'there are other places than the islands that play Ludi. Why don't you run it down for the people?' Here, employing a distinctly Jamaican DJ 'toaster' dialect, King Lou provides a wider expression of black diasporic identification as he expands his list to include Canada, the UK, and the United States, countries where the Afro-Caribbean presence is the largest and most influential. He concludes by mentioning his international record labels 4th and Broadway and Island Records and, finally, names the influential Toronto-based independent production house, Beat Factory, that first recorded the group. In this last reference to Beat Factory he effectively returns the scale to the local, closing the circle that positions the Dream Warriors within a global/local system of circulation.

There is no simple means of assessing the impact of this expansive global/local perspective but, within Gilroy's innovative theoretical *oeuvre*, the track can be celebrated for the ways in which its musical and lyrical forms reinforce the dispersed geographies of contemporary black cultures without falling victim to the conservative reductions of black essentialism. Without cleaving towards either the rhetorical rigidity of black nationalist Rap or the nihilistic vitriol of gangster rappers ('niggaz with (bad) attitude'), the Dream Warriors present an alternative path. As 'Ludi' illustrates, the group unselfconsciously articulates an evolving hybrid identity informed by transnational migrations that are actively manifested on local grounds.

On the other end of the rap spectrum is the example of artists who mainly operate within a discursive field featuring spatialised themes of intense locality. Whereas the proponents of Message Rap evoke an expanded vision of black America, it is in contrast to the ghettocentric visions of urban black experience that also emerge in the genre, mainly within the lyrics of Gangsta Rap. Despite many shared perspectives on black oppression and systemic injustices, there exists a tension in the interstices between the expansive nationalisms of Message Rap and the more narrowly defined localisms of Gangsta Rap with its core emphasis on 'the 'hood'. This distance is widened in view of the unapologetic claim among numerous studio gangstas who, like the rap artist Ice Cube on the N.W.A. track 'Gangsta, Gangsta' (1988, Ruthless/Priority), claim that 'life ain't nothin' but bitches and money'. The two subgenres are addressing generally common phenomena in their focus on black struggles for empowerment, yet they are deploying spatial discourses and programmes of action that do not fit easily together.

The emergence of an intensified spatial terminology was not a sudden occurrence, but by 1987 when New York's Boogie Down Productions (also known as BDP), featuring rap acts such as KRS-1, Eazy-E, and Ice T broke onto the scene, the privileging of localised experience rapidly acquired an audible resonance. From New York, BDP released 'South Bronx' (1987, B-Boy), a track that aggressively disputes the allegations of various rappers from Queens who, in the aftermath of Run-D.M.C's commercial successes, claimed that they were rap's true innovators. KRS-1's lyrics reaffirm his home turf in the South Bronx borough as the birthplace of hip hop, reinforcing the message in the now-classic chorus with its chant 'South Bronx, the South, South Bronx'.

Giving name to South Bronx locales and to the artists who inhabited them,

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anchors his testimony. He attempts to prove its dominance by recounting the genre's formative stages with close attention to locally specific and highly particularised details:

Remember Bronx River, rolling thick
With Cool DJ Red Alert and Chuck Chillout on the mix
While Afrika Islam was rocking the jams
And on the other side of town was a kid named Flash
Patterson and Millbrook projects
Casanova all over, ya couldn't stop it
The Nine Lives crew, the Cypress Boys
The Real Rock steady taking out these toys
As hard as it looked, as wild as it seemed

I didn't hear a peep from Queen's . . .
South Bronx, the South South Bronx . . .

The references to people and places provide a specificity that is comparatively absent in Eazy-E's important (but often overlooked) single release 'Boyz-n-The Hood' (1988, Ruthless/Priority) from the same general period. Musically, 'Boyz-n-The-Hood' is considered to have done little to advance the genre aesthetically. Yet, in its uncompromising linguistic turns and startling descriptions of homeboy leisure (involving beer, 'bitches', and violence), it was riveting and offered a new hardcore funky model for masculine identification in hip hop:

'Cause the boyz in the hood are always hard
Come talkin' that trash and we'll pull your card
Knowin' nothin' in life but to be legit
Don't quote me boy, 'cause I ain't sayin' shit

Describing the LP *Eazy-Duz-It* on which the single first appeared, Havelock Nelson and Michael Gonzales explain that it 'overflows with debris from homophobia to misogyny to excessive violence. And yet, anyone who grew up in the project or any Black ghetto knows these extreme attitudes are right on target' (1991, p. 81). Despite such claims to authenticity, however, it is important to ackowledge that the rugged discourses and sensational imagery of violence and poverty are highly selective and are drawn from a range of mundane, less controversial and less marketable urban experiences.

Eazy-E's 'Boyz-n-The Hood' reflects many of rap's earlier modes of spatial representation that conceive of the ghetto landscape as a generalised abstract construct, as *space*. The introduction of the terminology of the 'hood, however, also adds a localised nuance to the notion of space that conveys a certain proximity, effectively capturing a narrowed sense of *place* through which young thugs and their potential victims move in tandem. Claims to the representation of authentic street life or 'hood reality emerged with sudden frequency following the rise of Eazy-E and N.W.A., who were among the first to communicate detailed images of closely demarcated space in this manner. This suggests that 'reality', authenticity and reduced spatial scales are conceptually linked among those who developed and sustained the spatial discourses of the 'hood. The main contribution of the track 'Boyz-n-The Hood' is ultimately its influence on the popularisation of a new spatial vocabulary that spread throughout hip hop from all regions as artists from the West Coast gained prominence in the field.

By most accounts, the spatial discourse that coheres around the concept of the 'hood emerges in rap by California-based artists with the greatest frequency and

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force. But in the popular media as well as in academic treatises, the focus on West Coast rap in this period tends to be on the expressions of 'gangsta' violence and masculine aggression to the exclusion or minimisation of prevalent spatial elements. For example, as David Toop writes, 'the first release on Ruthless Records, launched by rapper Eazy-E and producer Dr Dre in 1986, was like a tabloid report from the crime beat fed through a paper shredder' (1991, p. 180). The very term 'gangsta rap' is more concretely concerned with the articulation of criminality than any other attributes that may emerge from its lyrical and visual texts. Having become sedimented in the popular lexicon as the key or trademark term for the subgenre, it is difficult to challenge critically the primacy of criminality and to replace it with a spatiality that precedes the 'gangsta-ism' that saturates the lyrical texts. The criminal activities that are described in gangsta rap's intense lyrical forms are almost always subordinate to the definitions of space and place within which they are set. It is, therefore, the spatialities of the 'hood that constitute the ascendant concept and are ultimately deserving of discursive pre-eminence.

Since rap's invention, it has become somewhat of a convention for the rapper to be placed at the centre of the world, as the subject around which events unfold and who translates topophilia (love of place) or topophobia (fear of place) into lyrics for wider dissemination. This is illustrated in Ice T's 'Intro' track on his debut album *Rhyme Pays* (1987, Rhyme Syndicate/Sire). As an introduction, the track allows Ice T to present his hip hop curriculum vitae which is explicitly defined in spatial terms:

A child was born in the East one day
Moved to the West Coast after his parents passed away
Never understood his fascination with rhymes or beats
In poetry he was considered elite
Became a young gangster in the streets of LA
Lost connections with his true roots far away . . .

The description of a personal exodus embarked upon by the young rapper under conditions of extreme adversity is crucial to the construction of mystique and legend. Describing his entry into LA gang culture and the rap scene in the magazine *Rap Pages,* Ice T identifies cities, neighbourhoods, high schools and housing projects that have meaning to him and to those familiar with these areas:

I went to a white school in Culver City, and that was chill, but I was livin' in Windsor Hills near Monterey Triangle Park . . . When I got to high school all the kids from my area were gettin' bussed to white schools and I didn't want to go to them schools. So me and a few kids from the hills went to Crenshaw. That's where the gangs were. (*Rap Pages*, October 1991, p. 55)

Here, place is a lens of sorts that mediates one's perspective on social relations. It offers familiarity and it provides the perspectival point from which one gazes upon and evaluates other places, places that are 'other' or foreign to one's own distinctly personal sites of security and stability (no matter how limited these may be). Ice T may be from the East, but he is shaped by Los Angeles and it is the spaces and places of LA that provide the coordinates for his movement and activities.

Ice T (ibid.) goes on to make the distinction between East Coast rap and the emerging LA 'gangsta' style, noting that the latter developed out of a desire to relate incidents and experiences with a more specific sense of place and, subsequently, greater significance to local youths who could recognise the sites and activities described in the lyrics. In this regard, Rap offers a means of describing

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the view from a preferred 'here', of explaining how things appear in the immediate foreground (the 'hood) and how things seem on the receding horizon (other places).

Adopting a boastful tone and attitude, Ice T also locates his origins in the New Jersey–New York nexus, essentially fixing his own 'roots' in hip hop's cultural motherland. Ice T is in this mode clearly centring himself, building his own profile. In the process, he relates a history that invests supreme value in New York as the first home of hip hop, naturalising his connections to the artform and validating his identity as a tough, adaptive and street-smart LA hustler, the self-proclaimed 'West Coast M.C. king'. Ice T's references to New York illuminate the spatial hierarchy that existed at the time; the Northeast was still virtually unchallenged as the dominant zone of hip hop cultural activity. Battles among rap's pioneers and upstarts were still being waged on the local, interborough scale in New York although, gradually, New York's monopoly on rap production and innovation was lost as various other sites of production emerged. The rise of the LA rap sound and the massive impact of the gangster themes after 1987 resulted in the first real incursion on New York's dominance. This development had the additional effect of polarising the two regions as the aesthetic distinctions based on lyrical content and rhythmic styles became more defined and audiences began spending their consumer dollars on rap from the nation's 'West side'.

'The West side is the best side': representing Compton

The West's arrival was heralded by a deluge of recordings that celebrated and glorified the street warrior scenarios of the California cities of South Central Los Angeles (with help from the 1988 Dennis Hopper film *Colors* and Ice T's galvanising title song on the soundtrack), Oakland and, especially, Compton. Starting with N.W.A.'s 'Straight Outta Compton' (1988, Ruthless/Priority), numerous recordings circulated the narrative imagery of vicious gang-oriented activities in Compton, including the tracks 'Raised in Compton' (1991, Epic) and 'Compton 4 Life' (1992, Epic) by the group Compton's Most Wanted, and DJ Quik's 'Born and Raised in Compton' (1991, Profile) or 'Jus Lyke Compton' (1992, Profile). Appearing on the cover of his album *Way 2 Fonky* (1992, Profile), DJ Quik poses alongside a chain-link fence topped with razor wire, sporting a jacket emblazoned with the Compton logo, proudly advertising his home territory. Through these multiple means of signification the city of Compton rapidly gained a notoriety informed by the image of tough and well-armed homeboys and the ongoing deadly conflict between rival gangs operating with a near-total lack of ethics or moral conscience. This last point can be most clearly discerned in the ubiquitous refrain that 'Compton niggaz just don't give a fuck'.

Tricia Rose and Brian Cross situate the rise of Compton-based rap in two quite different frames of understanding. Rose writes that

> during the late 1980s Los Angeles rappers from Compton and Watts, two areas severely paralyzed by the postindustrial economic redistribution, developed a West coast style of rap that narrates experiences and fantasies specific to life as a poor young, black, male subject in Los Angeles. (1994, p. 59)

Her assessment situates the phenomenon of West Coast styles and lyrical forms in an internally based set of socio-economic conditions that are responsive to tran-

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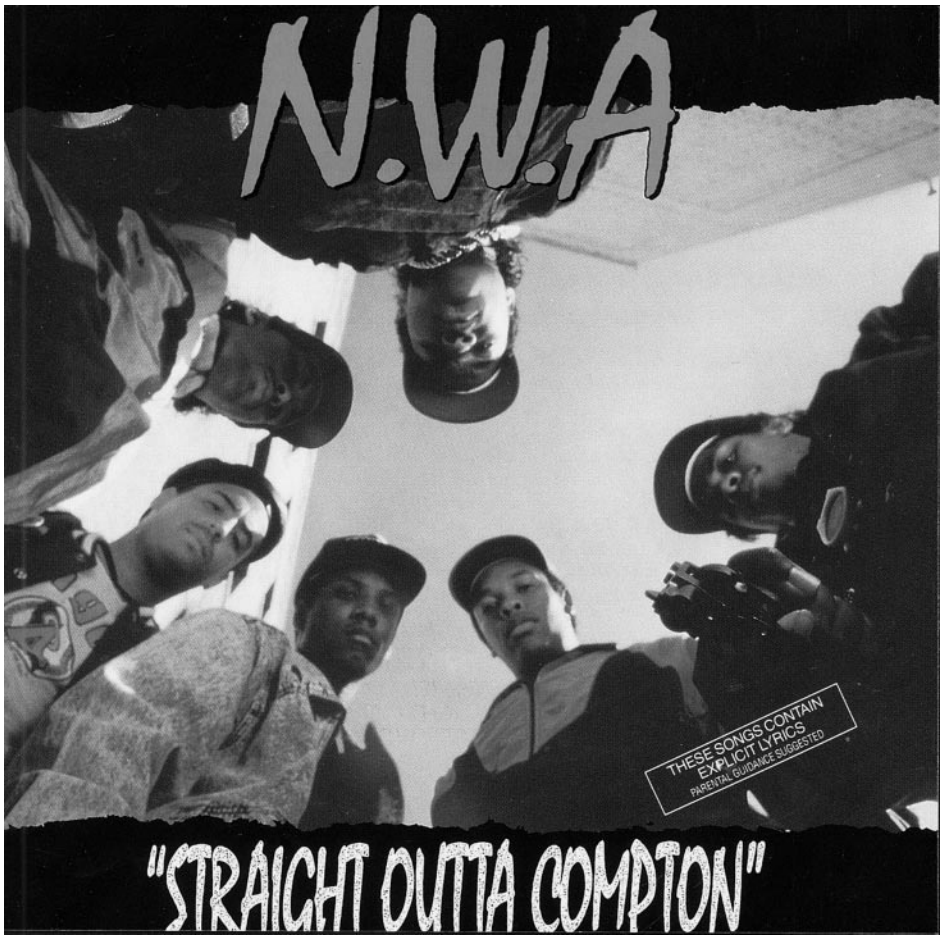


Figure 1. N.W.A. (Niggaz with Attitude) amplified the emergent discourse of the 'hood and created a geographic schism in the industry with their introduction of the ''gangsta'' ethos, gun imagery and the pronounced emphasis on their spatialised West Coast identities within their hometown of Compton in California.

sitions within a complex convergence of global and local forces, or what Kevin Robins (1991) refers to as 'the global/local nexus'.

Brian Cross locates the rise of Compton's rap scene within a wider and more appropriate cartographic relation to New York and other California locales:

> Hiphop Compton, according to Eazy, was created as a reply to the construction of the South Bronx/Queensbridge nexus in New York. If locally it served notice in the community in which Eazy and Dre sold their Macola-pressed records (not to mention the potential play action on KDAY), nationally, or at least on the East Coast, it was an attempt to figure Los Angeles on the map of hiphop. After the album had gone double platinum Compton would be as well known a city in hiphop as either Queens or the Bronx. (Cross 1993, p. 37)

Refuting Rose's interpretation, the general narrative content of 'Straight Outta Compton' sheds little light on the city or its social byways and does not demonstrate any particular concern with the locality's economics. Its basic function as a geographical backdrop actually follows the same standard constructions of abstract

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space heard in Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 'New York, New York', recorded five years earlier, or in Eazy-E's solo effort, 'Boyz-n-the-Hood'.

Without detailed spatial descriptions of landmarks and environment, Compton does not emerge as a clearly realised urban space on the N.W.A. track even though it is the group's home town. The California city is instead treated as a bounded civic space that provides both specificity and scale for the communication of a West Coast Rap presence. The group is 'representing' their home territory and the song's release was their bold announcement that the 'boyz' from the 'hoods of Compton were 'stompin' ' onto the scene and could not be avoided by anyone who paid attention to developments in the business. The Compton and South Central LA crews were not only serving notice to their neighbouring communities that they were in charge, but they were also serving notice to New York and the entire hip hop nation that the new sound had arrived and the balance of power (forged in a mix of arrogance and inventiveness) had tipped towards the West. This was the beginning of a decade-long antagonism between East and West coast rap that has too frequently proven that the gangster themes comprising the lyrical content are based in more than mere lip service or masculine posturing.

On the track 'Raised in Compton' (1991, Epic/Sony), MC Eiht of the rap group Compton's Most Wanted explicitly racialises the urban spaces of the city, more fully addressing the specificities of its cultural character and providing a further sense of the place that he recognises as his formative home. He reproduces several of the general elements that N.W.A. had already imposed on Compton's representational repertoire, but for him the city also has a personally meaningful history that is manifested in his identity as a gangster turned rapper:

> Compton is the place that I touched down
> I opened my eyes to realize that I was dark brown
> And right there in the ghetto that color costs
> Brothers smothered by the streets meaning we're lost
> I grew up in a place where it was go for your own
> Don't get caught after dark roaming the danger zone
> But it was hell at the age of twelve
> As my Compton black brothers were in and out of jail

The attempt to historicise his relations to the city and the 'hood makes this track slightly more complex than 'Straight Outta Compton', as MC Eiht's bonds to the localised Compton environment are defined as the product of an evolving growth process, as a child becomes a man. Subjective history, conveyed here in an almost testimonial form, and the experiences of space, together offer relevant insights on the social construction of a gangster attitude or a gang member's *raison d'être*.

George Lipsitz isolates similar tendencies with his focus on the socio-political importance of merging musical and non-musical sources of inspiration and experience among California chicano rock musicians since the 1960s:

> As organic intellectuals chronicling the cultural life of their community, they draw upon street slang, car customizing, clothing styles, and wall murals for inspiration and ideas . . . Their work is intertextual, constantly in dialogue with other forms of cultural expression, and most fully appreciated when located in context. (Lipsitz 1990, p. 153)

Like the California chicano music Lipsitz describes, 'Raised in Compton' explicitly highlights a customised car culture, urban mobility and the sartorial codes of the Compton streets ('T-shirt and khakis'). In its inclusiveness of the minor details that are, in practice, part of the daily norm for many urban black youth in the cities

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surrounding Los Angeles, the song accesses the spatial and racial characteristics of the city of Compton that have influenced and shaped the man that MC Eiht has become. The closely detailed articulation of spatial specifics (place names and site references, etc.) is still lacking but there is also a rich description of some of the social formations that are spatially distributed and which reproduce the forces underlying the black teen gangster ethos with which MC Eiht, and many others, so clearly identify.

Maintaining the gang member's pledge to defend the gang (or the 'set') and the 'hood forever is the theme of MC Eiht's 'Compton 4 Life' (1992, Epic/Sony). This track also offers a personal profile that ties MC Eiht into the neighbourhood environment and inextricably links him with the deeper gang structures that prevail. Mid-point in the track he challenges outsiders to 'throw up your 'hood 'cause it's Compton we're yellin', in a calculated 'turf' statement that is entirely consistent with the structures of spatial otherness that are fundamental to LA gang culture. Eiht and other gangsta rappers enter into the discourses of alienation and social disenfranchisement as a negative factor compelling them towards a criminal lifestyle. Yet they also expound their own versions of alienating power, drawing on the imagery and codes of the street and entering into a discourse of domination that subjugates women, opposing gang members or those who are perceived as being weaker and thus less than them. Framed in terms of gun violence and human decimation, these expressions are intended to diminish the presence of others who represent other cities and other 'hoods. This is the articulation of control through domination, ghetto style.

Spatial domination and geo-social containment are conceived in the threatening form of 'one time' or 'five-o' (the police) and other gang members, each of whom constitute unavoidable negatives of life in the 'hood. Defeating the enemy forces is the ultimate goal, but in establishing the competitive dynamic, MC Eiht acknowledges that, even in victory, the local streets and the 'hood impose their own kind of incarcerating authority:

Compton 4 Life
Compton 4 Life

It's the city where everybody's in prison
Niggers keep taking shit 'cause ain't nobody givin'
So another punk fool I must be
Learn the tricks of the trade from the street
Exist to put the jack down, ready and willin'
One more Compton driveby killin'

There is a brief pause in the rhythm that could be heard as hanging like doom, stilling the song's pace and flow and creating a discomforting gap in the track. When the chorus 'Compton 4 Life' suddenly breaks in with the final echoing syllable, it becomes clear that the title is formed around a double entendre: it is an expression of spatial solidarity and loyalty to the 'hood, yet it also refers to the pronouncement of a life sentence and the apparent hopelessness of eternal imprisonment in the city's streets and alleys.

As 'Straight Outta Compton', 'Raised in Compton' and 'Compton 4 Life' suggest, 'our sensibilities are spatialized' (Keith and Pile, 1993 p. 26). This point is made resonant when considering Compton artist DJ Quik's mobile narrative on the track 'Jus Lyke Compton' (1992, Priority), in which he witnesses and describes the nation-

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wide impact of the Compton mythology, and Bronx-based rapper Tim Dog's defensive articulation of Bronx pride in the lyrical assassinations of N.W.A. and all Compton artists on the track 'Fuck Compton' (1991, Ruffhouse/Columbia). Compton's central significance is maintained through the lyrical representation of activities that are space-bound and which are then discursively traced onto the identities of the rappers who 'claim' Compton as their own. The issue of whether or not the tracks refer back to a consistently verifiable reality is rendered moot by the possibilities they present as textual spaces of representation. Artists discursively locate themselves in an array of images and practices within the texts, constructing a relatively coherent identity out of the urban debris that is evidently a crucial aspect of the Compton they experience.

Despite claims by critics of gangsta rap, such as David Samuels (*New Republic*, 11 November, 1991), or folk musician Michelle Shocked, who suggests that 'Los Angeles as a whole and South Central specifically bear little resemblance to the cartoon landscape – the Zip Coon Toon Town – of gangsta rap' (*Billboard*, 20 June, 1992, p. 6), the subgenre's narrative depictions of spaces and places are absolutely essential to an understanding of the ways that a great number of urban black youths imagine their environments and the ways that they relate those images to their own individual sense of self. The spaces of Compton and other similar black communities that emerge through their work are simultaneously real, imaginary, symbolic and mythical. With this in mind, the question that should be asked is not 'is this real and true', but 'why do so many young black men choose these dystopic images of spatial representation to orient their own places in the world?' By framing the question thus, the undeniable fascination with the grisly mayhem of the lyrical narratives is displaced and one can then embark on a more illuminating interrogation of the socio-spatial sensibilities at work.

Representing the extreme local: the case of Seattle

By the end of the 1980s, Rap artists had provided an assortment of spatial representations of New York and Los Angeles that were both consistent with and divergent from the prevailing image-ideas of those urban centres. Rap artists worked within the dominant representational discourses of 'the city' while agitating against a history of urban representations as they attempted to extend the expressive repertoire and to reconstruct the image-idea of the city as they understood it. This proved to be a formidable challenge since New York and LA exist as urban icons, resonant signs of the modern (New York) and postmodern (LA) city. They are already well defined, the products of a deluge of representational images, narrative constructions and social interactions.

Rap's emergence from city spaces that are comparatively unencumbered by a deep history of representational images, which carry less representational baggage, presents a unique opportunity for lyrical innovators to re-imagine and re-present their cities. As a traditional frontier city and a prominent contemporary regional centre, Seattle might, in this light, be conceived as an *under*represented city that lacks the wealth of representational history common to the larger centres to the South and the East.

In the mid-1980s the Pacific Northwest was, for much of the US, a veritable hinterland known best for its mountains, rivers and forests and as the home of Boeing's corporate and manufacturing headquarters. In the music industry, Jimi

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Hendrix was perhaps Seattle's most renowned native son, but the city was otherwise not regarded as an important or influential centre for musical production or innovation. The city's profile changed considerably with the rise of Bill Gates's Microsoft corporation in the outlying area and the emergence of the Starbuck's coffee empire and, by 1990, it was also garnering considerable attention as the source of the massively influential (and commercially successful) 'Grunge/Alternative' music scene that spawned bands such as Hole, Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and the SubPop label. Music has subsequently emerged as an essential element in the construction of Seattle's contemporary image although the industry's rock predilections have not been as favourable to the city's rap and R&B artists.[12]

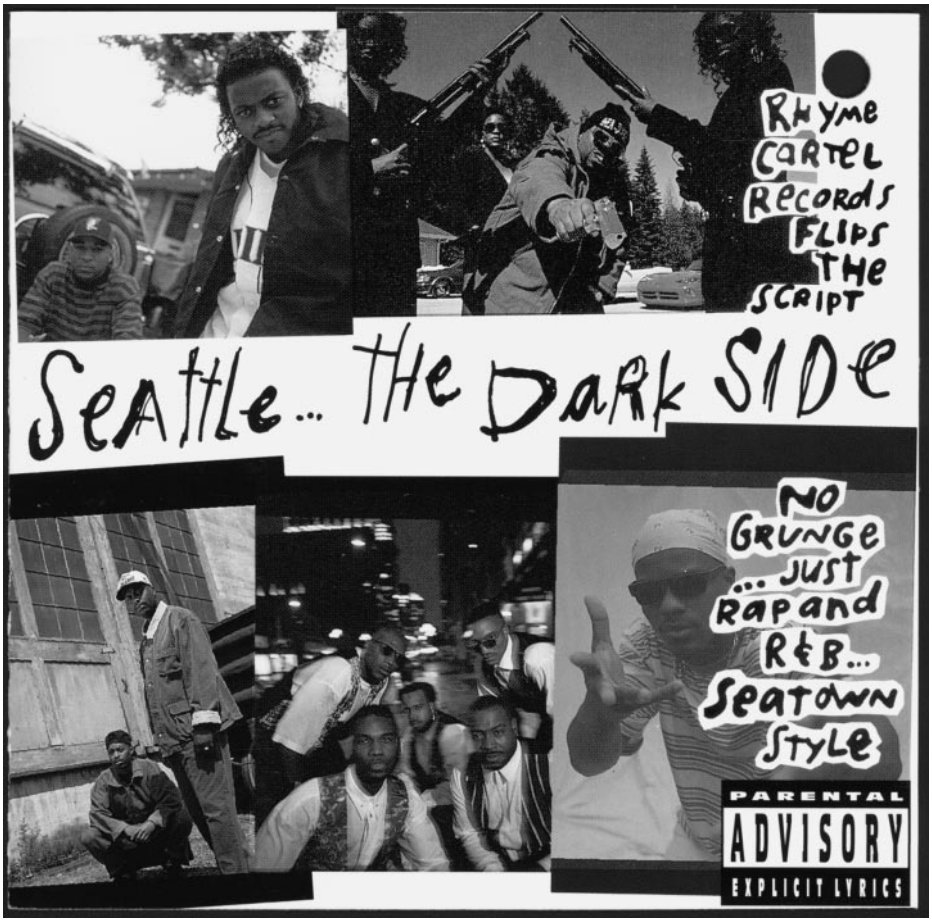


Figure 2. Representing racial and spatial otherness in the Seattle music scene. Rap and r & b artists from Seattle and Tacoma acknowledge the region's unique grange rock genre even as they distance themselves from it.

In the spring of 1986, Seattle rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot's obscure track 'Square Dance Rap' (NastyMix Records) made an entry onto *Billboard* magazine's Hot Black Singles chart. The release failed to advance any radical new aesthetic nor did it make a lasting contribution to the rap form. Its relevance, however, is in its capacity

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to reflect the diverse regional activity in rap production at that time as artists and labels attempted to establish themselves within the rapidly changing conditions fostering regional and local expansion. Mix-A-Lot's emergence illustrates the fact that rap was being produced in isolated regions and, as the track's chart status suggests, that it was selling in significant volume within regional 'home' markets.

Despite this, an advertisement for Profile Records appearing six years later in *Billboard*'s 'Rap '92 Spotlight on Rap' (28 November 1992), portrays the proliferation of industry activity with a cartographic cartoon entitled 'Rap All Over the Map: The Profile States of America'. New York, Chicago, Dallas, St Louis, Vallejo and Los Angeles are all represented with the names of acts and their respective regions and cities of origin. The Pacific Northwest is conspicuously labelled 'uncharted territory', which refers to Profile's inactivity there but which also reproduces the dominant image of the region as a distant and unknown frontier in the view of those from the nation's larger or more centralised rap production sites.

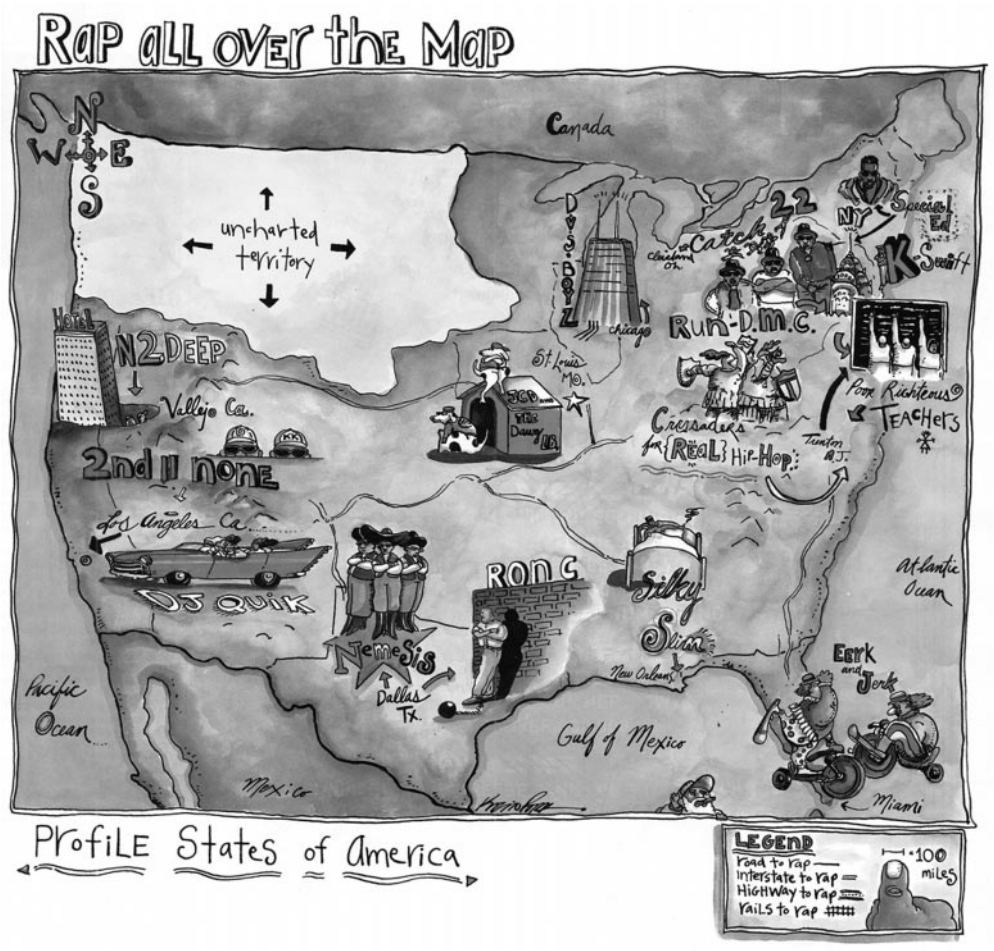


*Figure 3. Industry geography as seen from the vantage of one record label: Profile Records advertisement (*Billboard*, 28 November, 1992).*

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Regardless of the advertisement's centrist biases, the fact that Seattle was at this stage on the charts (and, in hip hop parlance, 'in the house') indicates that rap's consumer base had extended geographically and, moreover, that new and unforeseen sites of production such as Seattle were also being established. In an interesting spatial inversion, Bruce Pavitt, co-founder of the Alternative-oriented SubPop label, actually regarded Seattle's spatial marginality as a positive factor for local musicians, stating that, 'one advantage Seattle has is our geographical isolation. It gave a group of artists a chance to create their own sound, instead of feeling pressured to copy others' (*Billboard*, 18 August 1990, p. 30). Sir Mix-A-Lot slowly solidified his Northwest regional base. His single 'Baby Got Back' reached the number one position on the *Billboard* pop charts, eventually selling double platinum.

Displaying pride in his Northwestern roots, Sir-Mix-A-Lot provides an excellent example of the organisation of spatial images and the deployment of a spatial discourse. In general terms, details that might be overlooked speak volumes about space and place, presenting additional information about the ways that an individual's daily life is influenced by their local environments and conditions. For instance, the standard group photo in the inner sleeve of *Mack Daddy* depicts Mix-A-Lot's Rhyme Cartel posse wearing wet-weather gear consisting of name-brand Gore Tex hats and jackets. This is a totally pragmatic sartorial statement from the moist climate of the Pacific Northwest that remains true to hip hop's style-conscious trends. It displays a geographically particular system of codes conveying regionally significant information that, once again, demonstrates hip hop's capacity to appropriate raw materials or images and to invest them with new values and meanings.

Of all the CD's tracks, 'Seattle Ain't Bullshittin' ' is exceptional for the manner in which it communicates a sense of space and place with clarity, sophistication and cartographic detail. Establishing himself on the track as a genuine Seattle 'player', as the original Northwestern 'Mack Daddy' (a term for a top level pimp), Mix-A-Lot bases his claim to local prestige in his persona as a former Seattle hustler who successfully shifted to legitimate enterprises as a musician and businessman. He adopts a purely capitalist discourse of monetary and material accumulation, reproducing the prevailing terms of success and prosperity that conform to both the dominant social values and the value system inherent within the rap industry.

As the title suggests, Seattle is the centrepiece to the track. This is clear from the beginning as Mix-A-Lot and posse member the Attitude Adjuster ad lib over a sparse guitar riff:

Boy, this is S.E.A.T.O.W.N., clown (forever)
Sea Town, Yeah, and that's from the motherfuckin' heart
So if you ain't down with your hometown
Step off, punk
Mix, tell these fakes what the deal is . . .

As the bass and drums are dropped into the track, Mix-A-Lot lyrically locates himself as a product of Seattle's inner-city core known as the CD (or Central District):

I was raised in the S.E.A. double T. L.E.
Seattle, home of the CD, nigga
19th and, yes, Laborda,
pimpin' was hard . . .
It wasn't easy trying to compete with my homies in the CD

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Seattle's Central District is home to a sizeable concentration of black constituents who comprise roughly 10 per cent of Seattle's total population. Mix-A-Lot's portrayal of the CD neighbourhood is not explicitly racialised yet the references to pimping and competition among 'homies in the CD' easily fall into a common, even stereotypical definition of 'the 'hood' that is pervasive throughout rap of the period.

The Attitude Adjuster states at one point that 'it ain't nothing but the real up here in the Northwest', attesting to the hip hop practices and related cultural identities that are evident in Seattle as well as the rest of the nation. Unlike most major American cities, Seattle's black presence does not have a huge defining influence on its urban character: black youths are a socially marginalised constituency within a geographically marginal city. The Attitude Adjuster's pronouncement may suggest a hint of defensiveness but it also gives voice to the region's black hip hop constituency that is, as the subtext implies, just as 'hardcore' as that of other urban centres.

Having established his ghetto credentials, Mix-A-Lot expounds on several spatially oriented scenarios, shifting scale and perspective throughout the track with his descriptions of local, regional and national phenomena:

So even though a lot of niggas talk shit
I'm still down for the Northwest when I hit the stage
Anywhere U.S.A.
I give Seattle and Tacoma much play
So here's to the Criminal Nation
And the young brother Kid Sensation
I can't forget Maharaji and the Attitude Adjuster
And the hardcore brothers to the west of Seattle
Yeah, West Side, High Point dippin' four door rides . . .

Mix-A-Lot adopts the role of Seattle's hip hop ambassador, acknowledging his own national celebrity profile while accepting the responsibilities of 'representing' the Northwest, his record label and posse, and fellow rap artists from 'Sea Town'. Exploiting his access to the wider stage, he elevates the local scene, bringing it into focus and broadcasting the fact that hip hop is an important element of the Seattle lifestyle for young blacks living there as well.

The perspective shifts again as Mix-A-Lot adopts an intensely localised mode of description, recalling the days when he 'used to cruise around Seward Park', moving out of the bounded territory of the city's Central District that is the posse's home base. Seattle is cartographically delineated here through the explicit naming of streets and civic landmarks that effectively identify the patterned mobility of the crew:

Let's take a trip to the South End,
We go west, hit Rainier Ave. and bust left,
. . . S.E.A. T.O.W.N., yo nigger is back again
. . . Gettin' back to the hood,
Me and my boys is up to no good,
A big line of cars rollin' deep through the South End,
Made a left on Henderson,
Clowns talkin' shit in the Southshore parking lot
Critical Mass is begging to box
But we keep on going because down the street
A bunch of freaks in front of Rainier Beach
Was lookin' at us, they missed that bus
And they figure they could trust us . . .

With its references to the city's crosstown byways and meeting places, the track

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successfully communicates an image of the common, 'everyday' leisure practices of the Rhyme Cartel posse while also retaining a privileged local or place-based perspective that resonates with greater meaning for all Seattle or Tacoma audience members. This audience will undoubtedly recognise its own environment and the track will consequently have a different and arguably more intense affective impact among Seattle's listeners and fans. Unlike Compton, which was popularised through a relentless process of reiteration by numerous artists, Seattle is represented much less frequently: 'Seattle Ain't Bullshittin' ' is a unique expression of Northwest identity. For example, there is no similar track on the Seattle-based Criminal Nation's *Trouble in the Hood* which was also released in 1992 (NastyMix/Ichiban), although references to the region are sprinkled throughout several tracks and on the liner sleeve one group member sports a Tacoma T-shirt identifying his hometown.

In 1992, the trend towards such closely demarcated spatial parameters was not yet a common characteristic in rap, although it was increasingly becoming a factor in both lyrical and visual representations. Rather than an expression of a narrow social perspective celebrating the local to the exclusion of other wider scales, 'Seattle Ain't Bullshittin' ' demonstrates a rather successful method of representing the hometown local 'flavour' on an internationally distributed recording.

Conclusion

Rap music's shift towards a self-produced discourse introducing the 'hood as a new spatial concept delimiting an 'arena of experience' can be weighed against larger trends currently restructuring global and national economies, transforming national and regional workforces, and, often, devastating urban localities. As numerous supporters have suggested, rap emerges as a voice for black and Latino youth which, as a large subset of North America's socially disenfranchised population, is at risk of being lost in the combined transformations of domestic and global economies that are altering North America's urban cultures today. The discourse of space encompassed by the term ' 'hood' may in this context also be interpreted as a response to conditions of change occurring at a meta-level, far beyond the scale of the local (and the influence of those who inhabit it).

The requirement of maintaining strong local allegiances is a standard practice in hip hop that continues to mystify many critics of the rap genre. It is, therefore, imperative to recognise and understand the processes that are at work and to acknowledge that there are different messages being communicated to listeners who occupy different spaces and places and who identify with space or place according to different values of scale. It is precisely through these detailed image constructions that the abstract spaces of the ghetto are transformed into the more proximate sites of significance or places of the 'hood. Looking beyond the obvious, spatial discourse provides a communicative means through which numerous social systems are framed for consideration. Rap tracks, with their almost obsessive preoccupation with place and locality, are never *solely* about space and place on the local scale. Rather, they also identify and explore the ways in which these spaces and places are inhabited and made meaningful. Struggles and conflicts as well as the positive attachments to place are all represented in the spatial discourses of rap. This is not a display of parochial narrowness but a much more complex and interesting exploration of local practices and their discursive construction in the popular media.

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Endnotes

1. **Glossary of Terms**
   Gangsta Rap: popularized in 1987–88 by Los Angeles-based artists such as Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.) and Ice T, this rap subgenre is renowned for its uncompromising lyrical depictions of gang culture, gun violence, anti-authoritarian attitudes, drug distribution and use, prostitution, etc. The frequent expressions of racist attitudes, homophobia, sexism, misogyny, and anti-social aggression are often criticized with progressive social movements and among mainstream commentators, making the artists who are most clearly associated with the subgenre pariahs of a sort.
   homeboys/boyz: once used as a term to delineate the differences between urban and rural blacks in the U.S., the term 'homeboy' has undergone a transition and today refers primarily to one's immediate circle of male family, friends and neighbourhood acquaintances who inhabit a generally common social space (although it can also be used more expansively as an endearing term when referring to those of common affinity who inhabit other places and spaces). The term homegirls is also used in this manner.
   hood: an abbreviation of ''neighbourhood''. The term was amplified and widely disseminated within rap's hip hop vernacular, especially after 1988. It refers primarily to urban ghetto regions and other local sites of significance.
   Message Rap: a subgenre of rap that overtly and explicitly engages with political and cultural themes relating to race, economics, social justice, history, etc. Message Rap often isolates actual situations or events, elevating them for analysis or criticism in rap's public media forum. KRS-1 and Public Enemey are among the artists most commonly associated with this subgenre.
   pimp, playa, hustla: these terms are symbolically linked to the icons of ghetto success portrayed in 1970s 'blaxploitation' films, a distinct film genre that included films such as Shaft, Superfly, The Mack, Cleopatra Jones, and Coffy. Featuring black directors and lead actors, these films were commonly set in the ghetto neighbourhoods of U.S. cities and portrayed a highly stylized image of 1970s street life accompanied by well-known r&b soundtracks. The pimps, playas and hustlas of these films were commonly involved with the illegal financial practicies of prostitution, gambling, extortion, etc, but in hip hop and rap the meanings of these terms are altered and refer to the control and domination of rap and the capacity to generate wealth in new music business contexts.
   possee, crew, clique: these are generally (but not exclusively) male fraternal organizations that display pronounced spatial allegiances and have a membership that is bound together by shared affinities. The terms can be used interchangeably.
   representing: employing multiple communicative modes and cultural practices to define and articulate individual or posse identities, spatial locales grounded in the 'hood, and other aspects of individual and collective significance.
   shout-outs: originating with the traditional Jamaican sound systems, this is the practice whereby the DJ or MC literally call out the names of friends and crew members, or the names of streets and neighbourhoods through which they circulate, in an expression of appreciation and respect. Shout outs can be heard in both live concert performances and on recorded tracks.
   sub-woofer: powerful bass speakers that are designed to provide maximum clarity of low frequency tones and a visceral rumbling effect without compromising the quality of the overall sound reproduction.
   tagging: the practice of using markers or spray paint to write one's name on public property. Tags are small and rapidly deployed and should not be confused with larger, more complicated and multi-coloured graffiti.
   toaster: an early Jamaican antecedent of the contemporary rapper, the toaster accompanied the DJ's rhythm tracks by 'chatting' on the microphone. Classic artists displaying the toaster vocal style who emerged on the Jamaican music scene between 1968 and 1971 are U-Roy, Big Youth, and I-Roy.
   turf: urban geographical space that is claimed on behalf of a gang or other cohesive group as a possession to be policed and defended against real or perceived intruders.
   'turning the 'hood out': similar to 'representing', this involves the specific articulation and announcement of one's proximate geographical locale and the individuals and features which constitute it and define its distinct character.
2. As an indication of the distinctions between rap and the more encompassing hip hop culture, rap artist KRS-One has said 'rap is something you do, hip-hop is something you live' (quoted in *The Source*, June 1995, p. 40). Rap is the music of hip hop and its central form of articulation and expression.
3. Hip hop's timeline can be roughly divided into three general eras: old school refers to the period from 1978–86; middle school covers the

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period between 1987–92; and new school extends from 1993–99. In some cases, the present is referred to as 'now school'.

4. See Reebee Garofalo 1997, (pp. 257–64); see also, Brian Ward (1998).
5. The factors leading to the demise of Death Row include the murder of its marquee star Tupac Shakur, Suge Knight's nine-year sentence for probation violations, an FBI investigation of possible gang-related enterprises including money laundering, and the desertion of its key producer Dr Dre. In 1998, the artist Snoop Doggy Dogg defected to Master P's New Orleans-based No Limit Records.
6. The Flavor Unit posse at the time included such Rap notables as Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Apache, Lakim Shabazz, and Naughty By Nature who, perhaps more than the rest, explicitly refer to their origins as New Jersey rappers hailing from 118th Street, 'Illtown', in East Orange. After internal restructuring, the posse's most bankable star, Queen Latifah, emerged as the executive head of Flavor Unit Management.
7. For a detailed examination of the Florida 'bass' phenomenon, see the special feature of *The Source*, March 1994.
8. Addressing the relatively minor industry consideration for Seattle's black artists, Sir Mix-A-Lot's Rhyme Cartel Records released the conspicuously titled *Seattle . . . The Dark Side* in 1993. The cover prominently proclaims that the release 'flips the script. No Grunge . . . just Rap and R&B . . . SeaTown style'.

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