“Topomusica” in rap music: 
Role of geography in hip-hop music

Kenneth French
University of Wisconsin-Parkside

Abstract
Territoriality and a sense of place are important features of American rap music, as the credibility of a rapper is based on where you are from or what 'hood you represent. This paper builds upon music and place research by introducing the concept of “topomusica” or the importance and inclusion of geography or locality (place names) in music. The study analyses the diffusion of hip-hop from the South Bronx to other inner cities in the US, in which rap regions are distinguishable by rap styles and local slang usages. Many American rappers have categorised themselves geographically to represent the East Coast, West Coast, “Dirty South”, or Midwest. A brief study of selected rappers from around the world provides some evidence of the inclusion of geography in global rap music. The concept of “topomusica” may be applied to global hip-hop music in future research.

Keywords: rap; topomusica; geography; territoriality.

Introduction
There are strong connections between music, identity, and senses of place that have been analysed in cultural studies (Bennett 2000; Leonard and Strachan 2010; Connell and Gibson 2003). Thus, it would not be surprising to find a very strong connection between rap music and geography. Rap puts, to use Murray Forman’s (2002, p. xviii) words, “a pronounced emphasis on place and locality”, and credibility as a rapper is based on geography and identity; in other words, “who you are?” is answered by “where you are from?”. What city you are from is an important
spatial identity marker referenced in rap songs and fashion (for example, clothes and tattoos that support local sports teams, shirts with place names, etc.). Building upon music and place research, this study analyses the importance of geography in rap music.

**TOPOMUSICA**

This paper introduces the concept of “topomusica”: the importance and inclusion of geography or locality (place names) in music. Place name references are very common in rap lyrics (multi-geographic scale examples of topomusica in Table 1). Snoop Dogg represents the LBC (Long Beach City), Kanye West gives shout outs to Chi-Town or The Chi (Chicago), Ludacris out of the ATL or Hotlanta (Atlanta) raps about area codes, and Warren G references the street corner “21 and Lewis”, to name a few. Nelly put St. Louis on the rap map with *Country grammar* (UMVD Labels 2000), where he embodies place with: “Sing it loud (what?)! I’m from the Lou’ and I’m proud”. In fact, Nelly’s debut album cover depicts the rapper in front of the Gateway Arch. Legitimacy as a rapper is based on what ‘hood you represent, either at the neighbourhood, city, or regional geographic scales.

Table 1: Examples of topomusica in rap music at various geographic scales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic Level</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Artist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>My mom is German</td>
<td>Fler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>East Coast</td>
<td>Nas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Chi-Town (Chicago)</td>
<td>Lupe Fiasco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area Code</td>
<td>770 (Atlanta)</td>
<td>Ludacris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood</td>
<td>Straight outta Compton (LA)</td>
<td>NWA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Project</td>
<td>BedStuy (New York)</td>
<td>Jay Z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Corner</td>
<td>21 and Lewis (LA)</td>
<td>Warren G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>Detroit Tigers “D” logo tattoo</td>
<td>Eminem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AMERICAN RAP REGIONS

The diffusion of rap music in America went from the hearth in the East Coast, to the West Coast, then South (or “Dirty South”) and Midwest. Rap music is extremely place-sensitive, for these rap regions are self-evident among American rappers: for example, at in the beginning of “Hip hop is dead” (Def Jam 2006), Nas refers to “NYC, Dirty South, West Coast, Midwest, let’s go!” Not only are there different rap regions in the United States, but there are also different local contexts and local dialect usages that distinguish places within each region.

The East Coast, the birthplace of rap, remains prominent in the rap world by constantly producing new rap artists. With New York City as its epicentre, Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, Nas, and Talib Kweli have made rappers in the East Coast known for creative lyricists. The next prominent rap region to develop was the West Coast, with Los Angeles and the Bay Area (Oakland and San Francisco) as the main rap centres. West Coast rap was known for the development of gangsta rap. Los Angeles rap groups, like N.W.A. and their place-referenced album Straight outta Compton (Priority Records 1988), violently described an urban environment filled with police brutality and gang hostilities. This subgenre of rap, Quinn (2005, p. 67) explains, “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”. Some of the current themes of rap in the West Coast revolve around the development of the “Hyphy movement” in the Bay Area. The style name, which is distinguishable by its local slang, is short for hyperactive, which refers to getting drunk or using drugs to “get stupid” and “go dumb” (Jones 2006).

Rap in the “Dirty South”, first known as the “Third Coast” in relation to the East and West counterparts, has blossomed in recent years. The rap styles of Atlanta include up-tempo beats, crunk, and snap music. Atlanta duo OutKast are known for their rapid rhymes and up-tempo drum and bass beats – for example, “Bombs over Baghdad” (LaFace/Arista 2000). Starting in Memphis and then popularized in Atlanta, crunk rap is a feel-good subgenre of rap tied to the strip clubs and the Southern underground rap industry (British Broadcasting Corporation 2005). Even though the etymology of “crunk” is unknown, the combination of “crazy” and “drunk” has been commonly used to describe this rap style about partying. A recent development heard in Atlanta-based music and dance is called snap rap. In this sub-genre, finger snaps instead of drum beats serve as percussion, and rap songs and associated dances in “Lean wit it, rock wit it” by Dem Franchize Boys (So So Def Recordings/Virgin 2006) and “Crank that” by Soulja Boy Tell’em (Interscope 2007) exemplify the movement.

Recently, the Midwestern cities of Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis exploded on the rap scene. Chicago rapper Kanye West geographically states: “You know what the Midwest is? Young and restless” (“Jesus walks”, Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam 2004). Detroit rapper Eminem, member of the group D-12 (the Dirty Dozen or Detroit 12), became famous for his criticisms of popular culture icons and for his alter-ego
Slim Shady. Adopting local slang, rappers from St. Louis are known for their long “rr” sounds, as songs by Nelly (“Hot in herre”, Universal 2002) and Chingy (“Right thurr”, Capitol/Disturbing the Peace 2003) demonstrate. The insertion of “r” sounds in words is commonplace in the Midland dialect region (Vaux 2003); instead of saying “I wash my clothes”, one would say “I warsh my clothes”. Nelly, member of the place-named rap group St. Lunatics, adopted this *Country grammar* (name of his 2000 debut album) to convey how people live in his locality to the rest of the rap world.

**Territoriality in Global Rap**

The global diffusion of rap is significant, for as S. Craig Watkins (2005, p. 7) explains, “[w]hen virtually nothing else could, hip-hop created a voice and a vehicle for the young and the dispossessed, giving them both hope and inspiration”. As rap spread around the world, some rappers included a sense of place or geography in their music. A tangential study of selected rappers from France, UK/Sri Lanka, and New Zealand show the use of topomusica to place their rap music.

French rap connotes postcolonial connections, as many French rappers have ethnic heritage ties to Northern and Western African countries (Prevos 2001). Instead of describing life in inner city America, French ethnic minorities of Arab and African descent rap about their social marginalization of residing in the poverty-stricken housing projects in the suburbs, or *banlieues*, of Paris and Marseilles. As with gangsta rap on the West Coast, violence and anti-police themes are prevalent in some French rap, and were especially prominent with the riots that burned the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois in October and November of 2005. In a song released just days before the riots, Senegalese-French rapper Disiz La Peste raps (Schofield 2005): “For France it matters nothing what I do/In it’s mind I will always be/Just a youth from the banlieue” (*Les histoires extraordinaires d’un jeune de banlieue*, Barclay 2005). In fact, there is a trend in recent French rap to incorporate sampled sounds from the riots (Werman 2006).

Another important rapper is M.I.A. (“Missing In Acton”), a Tamil born in the UK who grew up in Sri Lanka, India, and UK. Her unique upbringing heavily influences her music. The advent of the Sri Lankan civil war inspired her father to join the revolutionary Tamil Tiger forces, and the rest of her family moved to the South London neighbourhood of Acton, as reflected in her rap name (Bordel 2005). M.I.A.’s album *Arular* (Interscope 2005), which is named after her father, includes rap songs with revolutionary themes:

> Growin up, brewin up/Guerilla getting trained up/Look out, look out/From over the rooftop (“Fire, Fire”).
> You wanna go?/You wanna win a war/?Like P.L.O. I don’t surrender (“Sunshowers”).
M.I.A. controversially introduces rap as a voice of revolution, tying similar insurrections throughout the world, or as she would say “from Congo to Colombo”.

With social disparities between the indigenous population and the white New Zealanders, Maori rap pioneers Upper Hutt Posse brought socially conscious rap and represented Maori militancy in the 1980s, in ways similar to the American rap group Public Enemy (Mitchell 2001). Recently, rapper Che Fu used Maori chants at the beginning of a song about unity in “He kotahi (As one)” (Sony Music 2002): “Ka tu he kotahi, tu tata mai, kia mihi a tu ki te Ao Katumaia I te paerangi” (“Unified together, we will greet the risen sun, shoulder to shoulder heads up on the front line”).

Instead of rap signifying black pride, Maori pride is expressed through the fusing of local traditions with a global medium form. As indicated by Che Fu’s debut album, 2b S.Pacific (1998), interpreted dually as “to be specific”, and geographically as “to be South Pacific”, there is a prideful sense of place found in representing Polynesia.

**SUMMARY**

Topomusica provides a useful lens to study any musical form that incorporates geography (rap, country music, and location of jazz recordings have strong senses of place). In the US, rappers from the East Coast, West Coast, “Dirty South”, and Midwest use local slang and cultural traits to portray their locality. However, the inclusion of a sense of place or territoriality is not exclusive to American rap. References to geography were evident in the few examples of rap music from around the world above mentioned. Future in-depth research can expand upon the concept of topomusica in global rap music.

**REFERENCES**


Che Fu. 1998. 2b S.Pacific. BMG, New Zealand. Phonogram.


