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**Representing the Dirty South: Parochialism in Rap Music**

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In this article, divided into two parts, I examine the parochial discourse of rap musicians from the Dirty South and study its symbolic stakes through a socio-historical analysis of hip-hop's cultural practices. First, I address the importance for Southern hip hop musicians of mentioning their geographic origins. They develop slang, fashion style, musical and lyrical structures meant to represent the Dirty South. In part II, I examine the Dirty South rap scene, and point out some of its characteristics and idiosyncrasies.

Rap historians generally consider that, before 1979, hip hop was a local phenomenon that had spread out geographically in poor neighborhoods around New York (Ogg 2002, Fernando 1994, George 2001). Chronologically, Kool Herc, using the principle of Jamaican sound system, defined the norms of reference for hip hop deejaying and determined the standard way to accomplish this practice. His style and technique established the elemental structure of rap music and determined the "proper" way to make rap.

It is particularly interesting to note that the emerging sound system scene in the Bronx was spatially distributed as follows. Kool Herc had the West Side, Afrika Bambaataa had Bronx River, and Grandmaster Flash had the South Bronx, from 138<sup>th</sup> Street up to Gun Hill. This parting of the Bronx into sectors (DJs' territories) distinguished the locations that covered the key operative areas for the competing

sound systems. This spatial distribution reveals rap music's particular relationship to specified places.

As rap scholar Murray Forman remarks, hip hop's closely related practices (rap, breakdancing and graffiti) and methods of "constructed place-based identities" shaped symbolic bonds upon which connections were produced within specific social geographies (Forman 70). Identifying a significant relation between the territorial practices of street gangs and hip hop practices that maintained, and in some cases, intensified the structuring systems of turf, Forman is one of the few scholars who do not regrettably ignore a connection which is essential to the understanding of the localist aspect of rap music explored in this article.

Kool Herc with the Herculoids (a crew of versatile DJs / MCs / B-Boys that lengthily reigned undisputed in the Bronx and beyond), and later, Afrika Bambaataa with Zulu Nation, set up entities that borrowed their structures from juvenile street gangs but were unified by the hip hop movement. Owing to this seminal link with street gang culture, hip hop practices are profoundly stamped with some of its characteristics, most notably, a striking localism. S.H. Fernando, for example, considers the hip hop movement as an epiphenomenon of street gang culture (Fernando 48). Indeed, hip hop style wars started amongst gang members turned DJs and gradually extended to other practices like breakdancing, graffiti and emceeing. They generally opposed various groups of DJs, dancers and MCs, competing for supremacy.

Such notions of supremacy or rivalry are essential to the understanding of the dynamics of rap music. Mentioning one's geographical origin (and that of one's rivals) articulates the prevalence of a regional vision in rap music. This prevalence finds its illustration in rappers' constant celebration of their "homes" and "homies" and in their responsibility in the maintenance of the radiance of their home turf. Most rap texts and practices, let alone stylistic variations and other idiosyncrasies such as those that I will underline shortly, satisfy tacit thematic conventions established by the first rap musicians. Mentioning one's geographic origin is part of the stake of supremacy and of the *agon* which characterized the sonic battles of the first hip hop DJs. Rappers, as they so often remind their listeners, represent a specific place. In

other words, they proudly carry the banner of a place and, occasionally, of a posse. They represent both a family and, inseparably, a home turf. In rap music the home turf is, like other status symbols, determining, inasmuch as it confers legitimacy to a rapper.

Having discussed the importance of representing one's geographical origins, I will now study the case of Dirty South rappers. I will point out several vernacular socio-cultural practices and idiosyncrasies evoked in their lyrics that are meant to help them represent where they are from and to distinguish the South from other rap scenes.

According to the Rapdict website the expression "Dirty South" refers to the Deep South region of the USA, including, but not limited to, the states of Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Tennessee and Florida. The word "dirty" reportedly refers to "corruption in the legal system, the oppression, the dirty things they do to make a living like hustlin, thugging and stealing" (<[http://www.rapdict.org/Dirty\\_South](http://www.rapdict.org/Dirty_South)>). As Georgia rapper Bubba Sparxx puts it in his hit single "Ugly": "the South has always been dirty, now it's getting ugly." It's also becoming a great source of pride, as we will see shortly.

The cultural shockwave that DJ music generated in the mid-1970s, with its epicenter in the South Bronx, rapidly spread out to neighboring boroughs, cities and states. Soon, various regions of the US started to create their own kind of rap. At first, most musicians were profoundly influenced by paradigmatic rhyming and production styles from New York or Los Angeles. Then, they progressively developed their own signature sounds and styles (T. Hasan Johnson 458).

The first prominent representatives of the South were the highly controversial 2 Live Crew who lived in the South Florida metropolitan area. In the late 1980s, they established the Miami bass subgenre. In 1988, they popularized a club-oriented sound, with heavy bass (and raunchy lyrics), put Miami on the map, and paved the way for many local musicians hailing from Miami and cities within its direct influence. Luther Campbell, the band's front man, later helped Miami rapper Trick Daddy launch his career. In 1997 Trick Daddy released *Based on a True Story*.

Consistently with the thematic conventions established by previous rappers, Trick Daddy exalted, in his songs, a parochial gangsta lifestyle through “homicidal” lyrics which ostentatiously evoked the dangers of his home: a ghetto referred to as “the Pork ‘n’ Beans Projects” of Miami’s notorious Liberty City, one of the city’s and America’s most infamous areas.

According to T. Hasan Johnson and Jason D. Haugen, the Geto Boys, from Houston, was the first Southern group to receive widespread media attention since 2 Live Crew’s issues with obscenity and censorship had prevented them from securing mainstream accolades. “Mind Playing Tricks on Me,” the Geto Boys’ signature song which showcased their emphasis on storytelling and their use of slow tempo-bass heavy beats not only brought attention to the group but to Southern hip hop. It also introduced a Southern imagery and urban landscapes that clearly differed from those which prevailed in rap at the time.

Arrested development, a rap group from Atlanta would be the first group to benefit from this attention when, shortly after the nationwide success of “Mind Playing Tricks on Me,” they introduced a Southern form of “Afrocentric consciousness” in their album *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life of...* On this album, they used both African and distinctly rural aesthetic elements, Southern signifiers and idiosyncratic Southern soundscapes.

The Geto Boys were nonetheless the forerunners of the explosion of Southern hip hop. They were also the “first major rap figures to emerge out of what would later be a dominating force in rap and in hip hop much more generally: the Dirty South or the Third Coast” (Haugen 245). Even though the rappers of Goodie Mob were the ones who coined the expression “Dirty South” when they used it for the first time on their *Soul Food* LP (1995), the Geto Boys, with their tales of urban street life, set in a Southern urban centre, were considered major innovators of the distinctive laid back vocal performance that would come to be associated with the Southern style, the “Dirty South flow,” and eventually Houston’s Screwed and Chopped style.

This latter style is named after DJ Screw, a DJ from Houston who died in 2000 of a heart attack attributed to an overdose of codeine. In *Icons of Hip Hop*, Jason D.

Haugen explains that for Southern ghetto hustlers and rappers “syrup,” also called “drank,” “purple drank,” or “purple stuff,” is the drug of choice and clearly points at their geographic origins. In their song “Sippin’ on some Syrup” (a Southern version of the “gin and juice” song popularized by Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre), Memphis-based Three 6 Mafia referred to the practice of drinking large doses of codeine-based prescription cough syrup mixed with soda or fruit juice (Haugen 261). The soporific effects of syrup apparently change or enhance the experience of listening to music, and inspired the Chopped and Screwed method of production pioneered by DJ Screw which chiefly consists in slow beats and vocals. Many Chopped and Screwed remixes of rap albums have been released (such as recent hit singles like “Ridin’” by Houston’s Chammillionaire, or Kanye West’s “Drive Slow”).

Getting high on codeine-based cough syrups has become specifically and uniquely identified with rap music, in particular with musicians from the Dirty South (Haugen 260). In folklore, “allomotives” refer to details which may fluctuate depending on the place or time a story is told in order to have a story consistent with the cultural grammar of its audience. “Syrup” is one of the many “allomotives” that help identify Southern rap narratives or lyrics. Brands of cars are other allomotives that can be found in the archetypical lyrics of rappers. Some specific brands or types of cars are seen as status symbols in American ghettos and in the lyrics of their rappers: Jeeps and Land Cruisers in New York, lowriders and 1964 Impalas (Chevy six-fo’) in Los Angeles, and Cadillacs in the Dirty South, as the title of Outkast’s debut album reveals (*Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*), or indeed Ludacris’s emphasis on this brand in his song “Southern Hospitality,” in which he provides an extensive list of the idiosyncrasies of the Dirty South rap scene. Indeed, this rapper starts this song with lines fitting into the established normative emphasis of hip hop on cars:

Cadillac grills, Cadillac mill's  
Check out the oil my Cadillac spills  
Matter of fact, candy paint Cadillac kills  
So check out the hoes my Cadillac fills

Further in the song, he clearly lays the stress upon his socio-geographic origins, through Southern signifiers and slang (*guls*):

Dirty South mind blowin' Dirty South bread  
Catfish fried up, Dirty South fed  
Sleep in a cot' pickin' Dirty South bed  
Dirty South guls gimme Dirty South head

Having put, somewhat significantly, the South on the map of rap music, it was not long before other musicians followed the Geto Boys and Arrested Development. Owing to their success and to the fresh legitimacy of these musicians in the rap milieu, not to mention the recording industry, the Dirty South came to hold a prominent symbolic status in rap music, next to the East and West coasts that had initiated most of its forms. Numerous musicians would repeatedly capitalize on the authority conferred by its recent eminent symbolic status. Jermaine Dupri and Kris Kross, with their hit single "Jump" (1992), were part of what T. Hasan Johnson considers as the second stage of significant musicians to claim the South as a point of origin. According to him, their sound was more colorful and club friendly, especially compared to the Geto Boys' brutal realism and 2 Live Crew's rampant sexuality. However, these musicians similarly emphasized their geographic origins, mostly when they explicitly mentioned their hometown in songs that abounded with signifiers (basketball teams, architectural landmarks, area codes, streets, local venues) meant to concentrate viewer / listener attention on the scenery and urban terrain that constituted their Southern homes. For example Dupri recorded a track entitled "Welcome to Atlanta" in 2001 with local rapper Ludacris, the video of which showed a tour bus being taken around the ATL (a slang expression for Atlanta) by the duo, with appearances by local rap and R'n'B musicians including Lil Jon, Lil Bow Wow, Young Buck, Usher or T.I.

The third stage identified by Johnson, beginning in 1993, consisted in bands like Outkast, Goodie Mob, and the rest of the members of the Dungeon Family. These bands helped to maintain the national interest in Southern hip hop. Indeed, Outkast's

full length debut album *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* is often credited with laying the foundation of Southern hip hop, while their second effort *ATLiens*, with its obvious reference to their “home,” solidified Outkast as the flagship representatives of the Dirty South movement. Even though they were not pioneers, these musicians openly engaged Southern drawl and slang in a much more overt fashion than their predecessors. For example Outkast, in the chorus of *ATLiens* make their Southern origins fairly clear when they sing:

Now throw your hands in the air-urr  
And wave ‘em like you just don’t care-urr  
And if you like “fish and grits” and all that pimp shit  
Then everybody say O-Yea-urr

Similarly, Outkast entitled their fourth album *Stankonia* (“stank,” a commonly used word on the album, is derived from a Southern US pronunciation of “stink”). Also, in 2002, the Nappy Roots, a group of “country boys” from Kentucky released “Aw Naw,” and “po’ folks,” two singles from their album *Watermelon, Chicken and Gritz*. Not only the Southern drawl but also the type of food mentioned in the title of the album explicitly point at the South. Grits, which is also mentioned in the chorus of *ATLiens* “fish and grits” [short for catfish and grits] is a type of corn-based food which is particularly common in the Southern US (there is a “Grits Belt” in the South stretching from Louisiana to North Carolina).

It was in the mid-1990s that mainstream audiences began to incorporate more Southern slang into the popular consciousness. In 2004 for example, Kanye West imitated this trendy Southern accent by mispronouncing words ending in “-ure” in his single “All Falls Down”: “Tell me that it ain’t insecurr / the concept of school seems so securr.” Also, in *Icons of Hip-hop*, Nicole Hodges Persley explains that the popular term “bling bling,” which was originally used in the early 1990s to refer to expensive jewelry, has its origins in the rap culture of Louisiana with the Cash Money Millionaire family, specifically with Baby Gangsta’s song “Bling Bling” (Hess 468).

The nationwide success of OutKast and Goodie Mob did a lot to popularize Atlanta and Georgia in rap music. These bands were among the first acts from the South signed by a major label to gain national recognition. Their success firmly established the South as a dominant force and contributed to the structuring of a well-organized and professionalized Southern rap scene. For example Def Jam, the landmark New York record label launched Def Jam South, which, thanks to its knowhow and its economic and social capital, rapidly became a major label in the South. Goodie Mob's critically acclaimed landmark record *Soul Food*, along with *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* clearly put Atlanta's rap scene on the map, especially with its "Dirty South" track and landmark chorus: "What you Niggas know about the Dirty South?"

By the late 1990s / early 2000s, with the influential success of musicians like OutKast, Goodie Mob or Ludacris, Atlanta had emerged as a major city in hip hop. The city's success and its influence in the rap world continue to this day. It is prolonged with musicians like Ludacris who released albums whose titles, *Country grammar* and *Chicken N' Beer*, point at his home region. There is also T.I., a successful young rapper from Atlanta who starred in *ATL* (a Southern adaptation of John Singleton's landmark movie *Boyz in Da Hood*), or Lil' Jon, a prolific rapper and producer best-known as the founder of a subgenre known as "crunk" (a subgenre which relies heavily on Disco samples, hand claps, heavy-bass drums, and synthesizer sounds). Besides, rappers like Young Jeezy, David Banner, and Slim Thug carried on the Geto Boys, Outkast or Goodie Mob's Southern gangstaism. They keep offering realistic or hyperbolic representations of the poverty and violence which characterize the region's most impoverished quarters. Through gritty or exaggerated lyrics and narratives focusing on Southern hustlers, they reveal the "depacification" of everyday life and the overpowering mood of violence and fear caused by the dereliction of neighborhood infrastructure, the high rates of violent crimes and the gradual desertion of middle-class households (and values) which affect the disadvantaged ghettos of the Southern states.



Through this selective examination of Southern rap, my objective was to elucidate the localist / parochial discourse of rappers. In hip hop, where a rapper comes from is extremely important, and a key element in his or her socio-cultural legitimacy. The turf and style wars established by the Founding Fathers have become essential conventions in rap music. In their wake, hip hop musicians have been devoting choruses, songs, or albums to their places of residence, whether a city, a neighborhood or even a street. As I have pointed out, Murray Forman, had examined the connotations and implications of discursively constructed “space-myths” such as the Dirty South. Such “space-myths” create what Arjun Appadurai calls “a community of sentiment” around a “ghettocentric” sensibility and epitomize “authenticity” in the discourse of rappers. The dual referential strategy of rappers, who refer at the same time to both their *places* (the South) and *spaces* of origins (what Bourdieu and Wacquant call “sites of social relegation”), can, on the other hand, be explained by an idea which supplements that of the “extreme local” coined by Forman.

In their song “The World is a ghetto,” in spite of multiple references to their Southern home in Houston, the Geto Boys emphasize the similarities between inner city urban environments like their Houston’s Fifth Ward home to well-known hostile locations. The discourse of the Geto Boys is definitely consistent with that of many others rap musicians who regularly send shout-outs to a wide variety of American ghettos, and somewhat conflicts, occasionally, with the idea of the “extreme local” introduced by Forman. It seems that the frequent references that rappers make both to their homes and symbolic social spaces (hoods, ghettos, projects) correspond, to a larger extent, to a celebration of a community of ghettos whose similarities are the result of the comparable structural forces that they are submitted to, and whose social practices—especially criminal ones—confer credibility and cultural authenticity to rap music. This dual geography of reference reveals an inter-ghetto deep-rootedness unchallenged by rivalry between areas, whether one is from the East, West or from the Dirty South.

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