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Cosmopolitan preferences: The constitutive role of place in American elite taste for hip-hop music 1991–2005

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Abstract

Sociology has long identified place as an important theoretical category, and a basic element of social life, but the discipline has largely left implicit the role of place as a structuring element of social perception. We reinterpret two debates in cultural sociology—cosmopolitan omnivorism and cultural reception—to show how place has been used as a static category, not a productive source of meanings, in these fields. We then introduce how scholars can further develop an analysis of place meanings, and apply this fresh perspective to our empirical study, a discourse analysis of elite music critics' taste for rap music. We find that critics base their judgments of the genre on three place-based criteria, that: (1) rap must be “emplaced” to be meaningful, (2) “ghettoes” are central to rap's meaningfulness and (3) international scenes are privileged as politically and aesthetically more important than American scenes. These data suggest that the omnivorous taste pattern among American elites follows an intra-genre logic of appropriation that incorporates or rejects cultural objects influenced by the meanings associated with their context of production. We conclude by highlighting the analytic benefit of recognizing place as a constituent element of social perception in cultural sociology.

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Keywords: Place; Omnivorism; Reception; Cosmopolitanism; Hip-hop music

1. Introduction

From the earliest era of American sociology, such as the Chicago School's ecological theories (Park et al., 1925; Wirth, 1928; Zorbaugh, 1926), scholars have been intimately concerned with the spatial patterning of unequal social relations. Yet contemporary sociologists predominantly

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invoke place to study how social phenomena are “emplaced,” including activities such as settlement, consumption, or assimilation (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Pachucki et al., 2007). A handful of sociologists recently challenged the discipline to instead study place “as a constituent element of social life and historical change” (Gieryn, 2000:463; Eck, 2001; Halle, 2001), but the discipline has mostly left place as an implicit element of research. Thus, sociologists have largely overlooked how place works as a structuring feature of the taken-for-granted assumptions that constitute social perception.

What does it mean to think about place as a meaningful social category? How might sociologists study it, and how would they know if and when it is operative? We revisit two lines of research in cultural sociology that offer a foundation from which to study place: the cosmopolitan omnivore thesis (Holt, 1997; Peterson, 1997a; DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004), and reception of culture theory (Griswold, 1987, 1992; Lamont, 1992). Scholars of omnivorism (Johnston and Baumann, 2007) and reception theory (Babon, 2006) have begun to incorporate the role of place in their accounts. We continue toward a more analytic study of place by synthesizing these research strands, and emphasizing the need to recognize the productive nature of place meanings in cultural judgments.

We develop this perspective through our empirical case study, American elite music critics’ writing on rap music.¹ In 2006, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History announced that it would establish a permanent collection of hip-hop objects, memorabilia, and artifacts, with a second exhibit at the National Portrait Gallery.² The canonization of this once denigrated genre in the nation’s premier cultural institutions at once confirms and confronts received sociological wisdom about American elite taste.³ It affirms that American elites do not follow the French model of snobbish opposition of high culture vs. mass taste, but fashion themselves as omnivores (Peterson, 2005). Yet we have only begun to understand *how* cultural objects with low status are legitimated into elite repertoires (Johnston and Baumann, 2007).

Therefore we ask, how do elites legitimate hip-hop music as high-status taste? As “surrogate consumers” whose institutional position confers social legitimacy as influential “taste makers” (Hirsch, 1972; DiMaggio, 1987), the frames elite critics use to express their preferences for rap are a privileged vantage point to illuminate this disposition. Our research demonstrates that place is a resource critics deploy to elaborate their tastes within the rap genre. Elite critics’ writings signal to readers cultivating omnivorous taste a logic of appropriation that incorporates or rejects rap music based on three place-based criteria. They write that rap must be produced in local places, not in corporate studios for the national market, to be authentic; that “the ghetto” is a site from which rap full of personal meaning emerges; and that foreign rap is aesthetically innovative and politically important when compared to domestic production.

This study provides points of departure for future research, and offers three contributions. First, our approach brings richness to the literatures studying the reception of culture and cosmopolitan omnivorism. By using interpretive methods to analyze elite critics’ discourse about

¹ Rap music is one aspect of hip-hop culture that includes dance and art among a number of symbols and practices such as dress and speech (Hager, 1984; Rose, 1994; Chang, 2005). Hip-hop has replaced rap to refer to the musical genre, including in our data, which we address in “Data and Methods.” Because we are solely interested in the musical aspect of hip-hop culture, we use rap or hip-hop music for clarity.

² <http://americanhistory.si.edu/news/pressrelease.cfm?key=29&newskey=318> Accessed February 14, 2007.

³ From a contemporary perspective this recognition may seem unremarkable, given the genre’s ubiquity in global popular culture (Mitchell, 2001). Yet it is instructive to recall that American elites not so long ago perceived the genre as violent, socially harmful, and deserving of censure (Rose, 1991, 1994; Binder, 1993).

rap instead of analyzing survey data counting the number of genres elites prefer, we can see intra-genre patterns centered on place. Elites do not hold all cultural products within a genre in equal esteem, but use place meanings to indicate which objects signal high-status cultural capital. This perspective allows us to extend the theoretical concept of place for cultural sociology by demonstrating its constitutive ability to organize social perception. Elite critics' writings on rap demand an analysis of place, as place meanings suffuse their views on other social features of the genre. Last, this approach yields a modification of Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on the social process of distinction. As symbolic resources used to legitimate certain cultural objects and denigrate others, place meanings are an essential, if largely neglected, aspect of the cultural reproduction of inequality. In particular, elite critics' preference for foreign rap indicates that while some posit cosmopolitanism as a basis for post-nationalist ethics, in practice the display of "worldly attitudes" is a strategy of elite distinction.

While our data illustrate the role of emplacement in elite valuations of hip-hop, place has conceptual salience for other musical genres (Gilroy, 1991; Hebdige, 1979; Peterson, 1997b), other cultural participation practices (DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004; Lizardo, 2005), identity formation (Keith and Pile, 1993; Nassy Brown, 2005), and ratifying scientific knowledge (Henke and Gieryn, 2008). We begin our analysis by joining two previously separate literatures in cultural sociology, cosmopolitan omnivorism and reception theory, using place to reinterpret and connect them.

2. Rediscovering place in cultural sociology

2.1. *Cosmopolitan omnivorism and the reception of culture*

Although the literatures on elite taste and the reception of culture maintain separate research tasks, we suggest that their theoretical motivations are harmonious and can be put in dialogue with place as a linkage. The cosmopolitan omnivorism debate was inspired by Bourdieu's (1984) unmasking of how Kant's "pure" gaze is conditioned and reproduced through the *habitus*. Reception scholars similarly critique aesthetic perspectives that presume actors interpret cultural objects on the basis of their inherent features (Riceour, 1971; Baxandall, 1985), rather than socially shaped experiences.

The theory of cultural valorization argues that audiences distinguish themselves through the cultural forms they appreciate (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978). Bourdieu (1984) recognized that the dominated fraction of the upper class stays ahead of the dominant fraction by legitimating previously debased cultural forms to keep their tastes as salient social markers. This provoked controversy among scholars who argued his data only represented the dispositions of the French upper-middle class after finding that American elites fashion themselves as cultural omnivores, not highbrow univores (Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Lamont, 1992; Bryson, 1996; Peterson and Kern, 1996; van Eijck and van Rees, 2000; Lopez-Sintas and Karz-Gerro, 2005, but see Tampubolon, 2008).

Most omnivorism scholars deduce their findings through secondary analysis of survey research as the relation between high income or status, and a preference for a greater number of cultural genres. Nevertheless, many authors interpret elites' relative openness or tolerance for the greatest number of cultural options as a "worldly" or "cosmopolitan" disposition (Peterson, 1992; Bryson, 1996; DiMaggio, 1996; Holt, 1997; Peterson, 1997a; van Eijck and Richard, 2000:219; DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004; Peterson, 2005:260n7; Johnston and Baumann, 2007:167n2; Belleavance, 2008). Scholars have consistently found a relationship between

omnivorous cultural taste and behavioral patterns of, or beliefs in, relatively broader social interaction (Erickson, 1996; Lizardo, 2005; van Eijck and Lievens, 2008).⁴ Few, however, substantiate their use of “cosmopolitanism” except as euphemism for breadth (c.f. Peterson and Kern, 1996:906).⁵ To fully capture the omnivorism phenomenon, scholars must return to “cosmopolitanism” its inherent geographical meaning (Harvey, 2000), and confront the spatial patterning of elite taste. Unfortunately the primary approach employed in omnivorism research—secondary analysis of surveys—has limitations, as researchers cannot penetrate the logic of elite preferences to find “hierarch[ies] *within* cultural genres” (Johnston and Baumann, 2007:198; Olivier et al., 2008). Reception theory can improve our grasp of elite taste as it observes *how* people judge specific objects—not merely genre categories.

The central orientation of reception scholars is that valuations of cultural objects are socially constructed and vary according to the salient characteristics of audiences. Notably, they find that a cultural object’s appraisal fluctuates across historical eras (Griswold, 1986; Corse and Griffin, 1997; Corse and Westervelt, 2002) and social categories of class, gender, ethnicity and race (Binder, 1993; Lamont, 1992; Radway, 1984; Shively, 1992). These analyses use place to show that differences between national meaning systems affect critics’ interpretations of literary texts (Griswold, 1987, 1992; Liebes and Katz, 1990). Although this challenges the idea that meaning emerges from cultural objects’ immutable qualities, such works—similar to omnivorism—use place statically by analyzing national or sub-national (Lamont and Thevenot, 2000; Griswold and Wright, 2004) interpretative patterns.

A few scholars in each research stream have explored the role of place in aesthetic judgments. Johnston and Baumann (2007) brought place into the cosmopolitan omnivore thesis with their finding that elites legitimate low-status inclusions to the broadening elite palate through the place-based criteria of authenticity and exoticism. But because the authors do not systematize how geographical meanings affect the incorporation of foods, place appears to be a stand-in for exotic rarity (190).⁶ Reception research has likewise found that the site of reception affects an object’s interpretation (Eck, 2001; Guthman, 2003; Lachman, 1988; Peterson, 2003). Babon (2006) applies Baxandall’s notion of the “period eye” to two outdoor sculpture controversies. Because these sculptures violated the expectations that receivers had “attached” to these objects’ locations, she proposes that receivers invoke their “contextual eye,” of what is contextually appropriate when viewing art. Although Babon suggests that the contextual eye is based on “perceptions of a place’s identity” (2006:156), her data indicate it emerges from in-person interactions.

⁴ Omnivore findings have been replicated for North America, Australia, Western Europe, Russia, and Israel (Peterson, 2005), and omnivorism is seen as the dominant mode of elite taste *in* these societies. Ironically, despite attending to the breadth of the omnivore phenomenon, this work has presumed, but not explored, the geographical aspects of “cosmopolitan” omnivores’ taste patterns.

⁵ If none acknowledge its constitutive role, some scholars have hinted toward place in elite preferences. DiMaggio and Mukhtar base their use of cosmopolitanism on elites’ taste for multicultural art museums and jazz music, choices they deem outside the snobbish “Euro-American” canon (2004:189). Bryson suggests elites’ preferences for racially marked musical genres coheres into the cachet of “multicultural capital” (1996). Bellevance (2008) finds a link between travel and cosmopolitan taste among Québécois omnivores.

⁶ The authors suggest omnivores “do not inhabit a nonhierarchical cultural world” and contrast how gourmet writers define first-world foods as authentic (when chefs successfully innovate classic recipes), while foods outside the “European culinary tradition” need only be seen as sufficiently obscure (187). They do not, however, provide a broader theory of place-meanings.

The methodological and theoretical approach we use in this study builds on these fields, and yields two significant new insights into elites' cultural valuations. We suggest reception scholarship can improve the omnivorism literature on elite taste because it is sensitized to *how* people judge specific objects—not merely the genre categories available in survey instruments. We employ reception scholars' interpretive approach and reveal important *intra-genre* patterns of elite taste that center on place meanings. Even if, as omnivorism theory posits, elites prefer a greater number of genres than those with lower levels of income or education, not all objects in each genre are legitimated into the elite palate. Instead, elites use associations of place to distinguish *which* products within a genre are appropriate for high-status consumption. This approach leads our analysis to address a second shortcoming in this scholarship: both fields use a static notion of place by suggesting that cultural judgments vary according to geopolitical boundaries. While that is surely valid, we find that place meanings are constitutive during elite cultural consumption, by designating which cultural objects signal high-status taste. In addition to scholars' attention to the context of reception, or where an object is evaluated, we find that the *context of production*, or where it is created, carries salient meanings that affect how elites judge that object. As we examine next, studying the presuppositions of critics is analytically important given their role in disseminating opinions that draw upon public images of place.

2.2. *Studying the politics of place: elite critics' taste for rap music*

When critics review a concert or album, they are both consumers of these products, and gatekeepers for their audiences' understandings (Hirsch, 1972; Frith, 1996). The very existence of a semi-autonomous field such as music *presupposes* the position of the critic as the actor who carries and disseminates the proper rules, and mode, of judgment (Bourdieu, 1996). As professionals, critics mediate the fields of production and consumption by initiating the “process of objectification” by which cultural objects are charged as legitimate or debased that determines the homology between an object's prestige, and the social class who develop a taste for it (Bourdieu, 1984:230–2). Indeed, Bourdieu singled out “tastes in music” as a privileged site for understanding the relationship between culture and inequality. The “mode of appropriation” is essential to the social basis of taste, particularly for symbolic products such as music, rather than “the conditions of material possession” (such as owning a painting, which even elite journalists mostly cannot afford to do) (1984:282). Yet he insisted that quantitatively establishing the “volume and structure” of tastes “would not really fulfill its purpose of verification if it did not help illustrate the underlying logic of the distributions it establishes” (1984:18, 267). By virtue of research design, most of the previous omnivorism scholarship can only surmise the principles that elites use to sanctify cultural objects. Yet by examining elite critics' discourse on rap we are able to assess how preferences for a genre can be uneven, and elaborate the place-based rationale by which critics simultaneously like and dislike elements of hip-hop music.

From its inception rap has been a spatial practice, an articulation of post-industrial urban youth whose rapping re-imagines the cityscape according to their personal visions (Rose, 1994; Quinn, 2001). As such, place is a dominant narrative in rap music, crucial to constructing one's identity, used to legitimate authenticity claims, and as a marker of representation (Krims, 2000; Forman, 2002). Elaborated further below, this was most starkly evident during the ultimately deadly mid-1990s East Coast–West Coast feud between New York and Los Angeles rappers (George, 1998). Because place is so fundamental to rap producers, it is to be expected that critics

discuss this issue in their commentaries. But elite writers do much more than simply recognize the ubiquity of place in rap: they engage in extensive discursive work to layer in their own ideas of place as rationale for their preferences within the genre.

Two associations of place are particularly important for our investigation of elite critics' discourse on hip-hop music: shared ideas about "the ghetto" and foreign locales. The "black ghetto" is a discursive formation conflating class, race and place that simultaneously calls forth "pathological" characteristics while silencing the lived experience in these areas (Wacquant, 1993; Gregory, 1998). Dominant discursive practices of "the ghetto" support our argument that place-based ideas need not be grounded in personal experience: politicized depictions of inner-city areas are powerful precisely because they are crafted for ignorant audiences who rarely, if ever, visit such places (Sennett, 1970). American media discourse similarly spreads suspicion of, but also fascination with "ghettoes," their inhabitants, and the cultural products that emerge from them (Macek, 2006). Critics' evaluation of internationally produced hip-hop also continues the cosmopolitan disposition by American aesthetes from at least the mid-19th century (Beckert, 2001) through the contemporary era (Lamont, 1992:105–8). This includes Europe as the site of art (Beisel, 1993; Bourne, 1916; Brooks, 1936), museums and music (DiMaggio, 1982), but also the non-Western world. American aesthetes hail non-Western cultural production such as African tourist art as authentic, while masking its status as commodified objects circulating among art markets (Jules-Rosette, 1984; Steiner, 1999). Elites invoke spatial distinctions in which "American culture" is seen as susceptible to commercial exploitation, while "foreign" cultural production is regarded as beyond the reach of inauthentic market corruption (Hegeman, 1999).

So far we have argued that place is undertheorized in cultural sociology, and offered a synthetic reading of research on cosmopolitan omnivorism and reception centered on place. We then highlighted the importance of music critics in the process of elite taste making, and outlined some of the place meanings relevant in their discourse. After introducing our methods, we examining elite critics' written opinions of hip-hop music. We find that the literatures on omnivorism and cultural reception provide valuable, but incomplete, readings of elite critics' preferences for rap music. Because the discipline has not recognized the constitutive nature of place meanings, it has not fully understood the process of elite taste making. The creation of elite aesthetic judgments is infused with associations of place, including those that refer to a cultural object's *context of production*, that elites use to distinguish among elements within genres.

3. Research methods and data

To systematically assess how elite critics discuss their preferences for rap music, we examined the universe of news media articles on the genre in two elite publications, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, from 1991 to 2005. We assembled all of the approximately 3500 articles published in these papers on rap music in this period by searching for the terms "rap," "rapper," and "hip-hop" using the ProStaff and LexisNexis Databases. This period begins after Binder's (1993) analysis of a national controversy over rap lyrics, and ends just before the Smithsonian's announcement of the hip-hop collection. We eliminated all articles written from an "objective," straight news perspective (Schudson, 1978); we kept only articles presenting an author's opinion (Janssen, 1999). This removed articles following the journalistic convention of answering the "5 Ws," including *where* an event occurred (Schudson, 1982); if place is present in our sample, it is not because the author perfunctorily gave such information.

Our sample includes pieces written in the following formats: album and concert reviews, artist interviews and profiles, editorials, and explicitly opinionated commentary on domestic and foreign rap.⁷ To keep our focus on hip-hop music, we excluded articles pertaining predominantly to art (e.g. graffiti), dance (b-boying/break dancing), and other aesthetic forms (theater, spoken word). This yielded 2187 articles, with 1074 from *The Los Angeles Times* and 1113 from *The New York Times*. The articles were read to understand the contours of elite discourse on hip-hop music, especially what themes writers emphasized and how they substantiated their preferences. As that sample was too large for in-depth analysis, we randomly sampled ten percent of the subtotal of opinionated pieces from each newspaper, producing a final sample of 218 articles. These articles were reread and analyzed for content using codes inductively developed by the authors using the Atlas.ti software. We amassed the arguments writers used to express their preferences. Each author read the same subset of articles separately and compared codes to create a comprehensive code list.⁸ When the list was complete, the first author coded all articles, and to ensure consistency articles coded while the list was developed were recoded once the list was finalized. Thus we present qualitative data on how critics elaborate their tastes, and quantitative data regarding the frequency with which critics use particular discursive strategies.

Elite music critics' writings on rap are especially revealing because they illuminate how such actors are simultaneously situated in the field of culture and the subfield of hip-hop music. Such dual positioning further illuminates how *both* the context of production, and of reception, inform critics' taste for hip-hop. We selected the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* for analysis first because their readerships have high levels of income and education compared to other daily newspapers, and comprise an audience likely to be cultivating a "cosmopolitan" disposition.⁹ Elite critics' institutional position and conferred social legitimacy (DiMaggio, 1987) amplify their interpretations as privileged judgments among aesthetes (Shrum, 1991; Jones and Featherly, 2002), and organizations such as the Smithsonian that consecrate aesthetic forms (Allen and Parsons, 2006). These critics are furthermore likely to be interested in a variety of music and make unsurprising omnivores. Yet as actors who must maintain their grasp on their own legitimacy to adjudicate, critics are constrained by social expectations relevant to their place in the stratified field of tastes (Bourdieu, 1984:234–9). Thus the history of racialized stigma surrounding rap music (Rose, 1994; George, 1998) is crucial to decoding *how* elite critics relay to readers concerned with cultivating omnivorous cultural capital—where rap constitutes only one among many preferred genres—the legitimate means to distinguish hip-hop. Elite critics do not universally embrace the genre, but use meanings about rap's *contexts of production* to signal to readers the logic by which to appropriate only certain products within the genre.

By contrast to their high-status position in the broader field of cultural production and consumption, elite music critics are at the margin of the subfield of hip-hop music. Publications such as the *New York Times* are widely regarded within the hip-hop community as jaded against

⁷ Elite critics mirror the trend in popular vernacular for the term hip-hop to replace rap (Chang, 2005). Separate analyses not reported here found that critics' judgments did not substantially vary based on which term they used.

⁸ See Appendix A for a full definition of the codes.

⁹ *New York Times* readers have a median head of household income of \$149,700 (Mendolsohn Media Research, 2007). While lower, at \$81,759 the average head-of-household income for the *Los Angeles Times*' readership is far above the 2006 national household median of \$48,201 (MediaMark Research, 2005; US Census Bureau, 2007). We cannot presume how critics' writings are received, however, the *New York Times* is recognized as offering "an authoritative, elite voice for one of the 'global cities' that are the focus of international economic, political, and cultural interactions" (Ross and Bantimaroudis, 2006:91).

Table 1

Discursive themes in elite rap music reviews 1991–2005.

| | Number of articles with place theme ($n = 218$) | Percent of articles with at least one place mention |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Place | 180 | 82.6 |
| Aesthetic Innovation | 90 | 41.3 |
| Race | 76 | 34.9 |
| Exploitative Industry | 70 | 32.1 |
| Big Business | 68 | 31.2 |
| Politics | 59 | 27.1 |
| Misogyny/Homophobia | 43 | 19.7 |
| Self-expression | 41 | 18.8 |
| Materialism | 29 | 13.3 |

Sources: The New York Times ($n = 111$) and The Los Angeles Times ($n = 107$).

the music and its adherents (Rose, 1994), and genre-specific magazines dedicate space to monitor and expose what they regard as inaccurate mainstream coverage (McLeod, 2002). Nevertheless, the publications chosen for this study are located in the birthplace of hip-hop [New York City], and home of the ‘gangsta’ subgenre [Los Angeles]. Local loyalties have been tantamount to the hip-hop genre since its inception (George, 1998; Forman, 2002), and elite critics’ fidelity to their respective scenes shows the salience of their *context of reception* as well.

4. The role of place in elite critics’ framing of rap music

Our presentation of data begins by introducing several of the key themes elite critics used to describe rap music in the years 1991–2005, and how those themes are subtly, but inextricably, connected to place. Critics’ ideas about place organize their opinions on a host of factors when evaluating rap—the racial, gendered, and class characteristics of the genre’s producers and audience—as well as the lyrical and musical properties of songs. Next, we describe the prevalence of place in our sample, and explore how both *place* and *displacement*—often through the image of the *corporate studio*—are structuring devices that writers use to discuss the genre. We then contrast critics’ responses to local and non-local hip-hop, and address two particular places, “the ghetto” and “the foreign,” that elite critics use to frame their tastes for rap. Specifically, we show that as Bourdieu (1984:231–2) predicts, as the artistic field changes—in our case becomes increasingly global—critics’ dispositions correspondingly adjust.

4.1. The ubiquity of place in elite discourse on rap

Before discussing how place structures the other themes present in elite music criticism, we begin by demonstrating the pervasiveness of place-based referents in our sample.¹⁰

Table 1 shows that critics employ references to place in over 80 percent of the articles in our sample, which is at least twice as frequently as the three next most prominent themes. These references range from the *scale* of a street corner, to larger sites including cities, regions, nations,

¹⁰ As seen in Table 1, there are other less prominent elements of this discourse, such as gender and sexuality, that for reasons of space we do not fully discuss. Our analysis does overcome a key substantive omission in the literature by attending to how these issues are informed by critics’ sense of place, however.

and even continents. The most common technique links a hip-hop artist to her or his *neighborhood*, mirroring the lyrical practices of rappers (Forman, 2002).

Wu-Tang's nine members grew up in Staten Island's projects, where they started making music in their basements. . . They have put Staten Island on the cultural map: 'Shaolin,' as they call the borough, is a leitmotif in their music, and their lyrics are a chronicle of how drugs, violence and the pressure for cash shape life in the projects (NYT 1/11/98, p. 1.43).

Critics pay similar attention to the micro-locations of rap in international contexts. Writers identify foreign rap scenes in localized urban-geographical terms, such as Havana's Playa section, Rio de Janeiro's Vigario Geral favela, or housing projects in Parisian *banlieux*.

The next most frequent mode of geographical naming is references to *city* settings. Critics often introduce rappers by their hometown, and these references are often connected to the artists' musical styles, such as "Kanye West, from Chicago, is known for wistful, playful beats. . ." (NYT 9/7/03, p. 2.87). Critics also link cities to broader *regional* rap styles:

Lil Jon, who hails from Atlanta, is an inventor of crunk, a Southern hip-hop style that has emerged as one of the most radical developments in the last few years of pop music (NYT 11/28/04, p. 2.30).

As rap became an increasingly *global* phenomenon in the late 1990s (Toop, 2000; Mitchell, 2001), writers also began to employ geographical terms to suggest rap's international spread.

There are now emerging hip-hop movements in Europe, South America, and Japan (LAT 8/20/99, p.2).

Meanwhile, artists in France (DJ Cam, the Might Bop), Japan (DJ Krush) and Britain (Coldcut, the Propellerheads) are injecting new life into the music genre (NYT 3/14/97, p. 1).

Although critics refer to continents and nation states less frequently than they do to cities, in our sample of 218 articles, critics write about rap scenes in 36 different countries.

These references to place illustrate the importance of the sites where rap is produced to critics, an observation that may seem expected given the "obsessive preoccupation with place and locality" in the genre (Forman, 2000:89). Yet even these preliminary data establish the salience of place, relative to other social features of the genre, as the primary lens through which critics evaluate the genre, and that critics understand rap styles to be embedded in place-based scenes. We now expand upon this claim to note that whether and how critics depict the location of rap's place of production informs if critics *legitimate or denigrate* rap.

4.2. *The place-based organization of critics' taste*

To investigate the place-based patterns in critics' discourse about rap, we first compare articles that mention a place name with those that make no geographical reference (as seen in columns 1 and 2 in Table 2). Critics distinguish rap music by the *context of production*, which we illustrate by contrasting critics' when critics do or do not associate rap with a particular place.

As seen in Table 2, articles referring to contextualizing places are more likely to include themes that praise rap, such as the music providing important messages about race and aesthetic innovation (Rows 1 and 2). When critics see the music as produced in the corporate studio, or suggest its displacement from localities, favorable descriptions decrease *and* criticism increases considerably. When they do not reference place, writers are significantly more likely to portray rap as the boring product of a big-business music industry (Row 3) that purveys misogyny and

Table 2

Difference of means for articles describing rap as “Displaced” vs. “Emplaced”.

| | Displaced ($n = 38$) | Emplaced ($n = 180$) | T-Value |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| Aesthetic Innovation | .18 (.393) | .46 (.500) | −3.210** |
| Race | .16 (.370) | .39 (.489) | −2.750** |
| Exploitative Industry | .18 (.393) | .35 (.478) | −1.998* |
| Politics | .11 (.311) | .31 (.462) | −2.551** |
| Big Business | .58 (.500) | .26 (.437) | 4.036*** |
| Self-expression | .5 (.226) | .22 (.413) | −.2371** |
| Misogyny/Homophobia | .24 (.431) | .18 (.388) | .757 |
| Materialism | .16 (.370) | .13 (.335) | .495 |

Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Asterisks give two-tailed probability values from *t*-tests for equality of means between displaced and emplaced articles (see [Appendix A](#)).

*** $p < .001$.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

materialism (though the last two are not statistically significant). We see strong evidence for a dualistic logic: when critics identify rap with a distinctive place, they link the music to racial pride, politics, and the issues facing particular rap scenes. When critics do not identify the music with a particular place they concentrate on its negative aspects, particularly the homogenizing effects of the mass-market and stereotyped images found in studio produced music.

4.2.1. *Emplaced rap: good music, important lyrics, and a means of personal communication*

Critics have a complex repertoire of place-based signals that distinguish between rap created in particular locales from rap produced under commodified, “displaced” conditions. We find that critics’ dualistic preferences for the genre strongly adhere to particular scales: music seen as produced under local or transnational conditions is praised as authentic, while hip-hop associated with the American or national scale is criticized as vitiated by the effects of commercialization.

As seen in the top row of [Table 2](#), critics most strongly associate rap’s aesthetic advances with rap from particular places. Found in 46 percent of articles in our sample mentioning place, but only 18 percent of those that do not, critics identify a sound by where it is produced. Critics say rap cannot be understood without reference to place, as the following exception illustrates: “What Atlanta does not have is a clearly identifiable sound, the kind of audio trademark that. . . stamps many rap recordings from Los Angeles and New York” (NYT 4/28/02, p. 1.24). Critics’ celebration of place-based innovations is stronger when the context of production is foreign (a finding elaborated in [Table 4](#)). In discussing foreign rap music, elite writers praise artists who combine U.S. rap forms with the styles of their home countries to produce new *transnational* “hybrids.” Thus Panjabi MC, a British producer, is credited with helping spawn “U.K. Bhangra—a mélange of Indian, hip-hop and dance music” (LAT 6/8/03 p. E.45).

Critics’ sense of connection between artistic creativity and place is equally exhibited by their perception that the domestic record industry is an exploitative force. As seen in Row three of [Table 2](#), critics are almost twice as likely (35 percent vs. 18 percent) to perceive the harmful effects of the industry when rap comes from particular locations because only *then* is there the potential to destroy authentic cultural production. In a piece describing the Fugees’ rise from a New Jersey act to national prominence, we see evidence of a theory on the dialectical relationship between the uninspiring rap mainstream and the fecundity which exists outside it:

It happens every four years. Right when hip-hop seems to be on the verge of losing its creative momentum, fresh talent emerges from the underground to remind us of the genre's brilliance (LAT 4/2/96 p. 1).

Critics relate the scales of state and nation to contrast original and market oriented rap.

Artistic undergrounds usually grow in dim, cool corners. The California experimental hip-hop scene, which emerged in the early 1990s as an alternative to gangster rap, has yet to prove its ability to take root nationwide (NYT 8/14/99 p. B12).

Critics' sense of "the underground's" fragility is echoed by their fear of consequences that mass-market trends have on authentic artists. A national culture industry thriving on categorization and homogenization is markedly more real when rap is seen to be a localized, place-oriented practice.

Critics' use of the lenses of race and place to refract issues of the record industry, creativity, and stereotype trafficking. Row two of Table 2 indicates that when critics talk about race—an extremely important category in media coverage of rap—they are more than twice as likely to discuss place (39 vs. 16 percent). Critics understand rap as an essentially African-American practice, and invoke the connections between race and spatial domination underlying rap's meaning: "Like blues, jazz, rock and soul, hip-hop evolved from the limited means of the African American underclass" (LAT 3/14/97 p.1). Critics also appreciate when other ethnic express themselves through hip-hop, and situate these groups in similar urban conditions to their African-American counterparts:

Prach Ly pops in a CD as his car threads through Long Beach's refugee neighborhoods. The poor of many nations live on these tattered streets, where homes of Buddhist Cambodians are distinguished by humble front porch shrines and pots of fragrant lemon grass. . . Ly is no stranger to the street, having circled the outskirts of gang life as a juvenile. The apartment building where his family then lived, on Long Beach Boulevard north of the San Diego Freeway, was infested with gangs and crime (LAT 12/17/03, p. B.1).

Critics similarly recognize foreign artists for appropriating rap to convey their cultural otherness, such as the "French-born Arab and black youths" of Paris' suburbs who use rap to decry the racism and inequality they experience (NYT 11/24/05 p. E1).

Elite writers' sense for rap as a situated racial practice informs how they see rap artists as political commentators. As seen in Table 2, they see the genre as a political product in almost one third (31 percent) or articles mentioning place, nearly three times as many as unlocated rap (11 percent). They especially appreciate when rappers explicitly address political subjects:

Sporty Thievz made a name for itself last year with 'No Pigeons,' a flippant response to TLC's hit 'No Scrubs.' But now the group from Yonkers, N.Y., has more serious issues on its mind. The trio joins. . . a host of other rappers on 'Hip Hop for Respect,' a five-song CD being released Tuesday that addresses police brutality, especially the controversial deaths of Amadou Diallo and Tyisha Miller" (LAT 4/23/00, p. 67).

Across the globe, critics see politics infusing rap music. Below we discuss why writers are more likely to identify foreign rap as more political than American forms, but for now we

point out that writers see rap as intimately involved in oppositional politics abroad. Last, critics recognize that rap provides the opportunity for localized artists to explore the self and one's experiences. Row six of [Table 2](#) shows that 22 percent of articles discuss rap as a means of self-expression when they perceive it to be emplaced versus only 5 percent of pieces that do not mention place. As such they laud iconoclasts like Public Enemy or the French rapper MC Solaar for taking, in their eyes, uncompromising stances against the vagaries of popular taste. The following section provides further evidence of the importance of place to elite critics' preferences for rap: these writers reserve their harshest critiques for rap they see as not produced in particular places.

4.2.2. "Displaced" rap in the national mainstream: uncreative, and full of racial stereotypes

As place occupies "discursive primacy" in rap music ([Forman, 2004:156](#)), it is expected that critics forcefully respond to it. When critics discern rap to be produced in the commercial studio for the domestic market, they are less likely to view the genre as a vehicle for authentic aesthetic or political expression. Often without any place referents, these articles refer to the genre euphemistically as a national, mainstream phenomenon, and recall the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture ([Adorno, 2001](#)):

There is innovation now, but it is generally so far beneath the radar screen that you can find few traces of it on mainstream radio play lists. What you do find is a manufactured pop sound that substituted the hit-making strategies of savvy record producers for the burning artistic vision that fuels truly great artists (LAT 1/1/03 p. E.18).

A different critic highlighted the mass-market dislocation of rap:

Bart Simpson shouts out "Yo!" Disney releases an album titled "Rappin' Mickey." McDonald's commercials feature cute toddler twins, dressed in fashionable baggy clothes, rapping their way to a Happy Meal. *Two decades after it emerged on the streets of the South Bronx*, hip-hop has become a dominant force in American and global pop culture. *No longer a local art form of street stories and freestyle poetry*, the hip-hop sound, style and slang now provide fodder for mainstream movies, television, radio, fashion, advertising and, of course, new media (LAT 3/14/97 p. 1, emphasis added).

Critics warn that once rap is produced with commercial intent, its meanings are in danger of being leached away. As the profit-minded industry brings the genre into the mass-market, critics' sense that the creativity and artistic autonomy that only *local* music scenes can cultivate are lost. Row 5 of [Table 2](#) (Big Business) dramatically shows that 58 percent of non-place articles depict rap as a corporate behemoth, compared to 26 percent of the pieces mentioning place.

In addition to their critique about the market *sapping away meaning* from hip-hop music, critics condemn dislocated big-business rap for reinforcing gendered and racial stereotypes to a mass (mostly white) market. Critics argue that mass-market rap marginalizes innovative, political rappers who are too risky for commercial exposure. One critic points to the experience of The Lifers, a group made up of inmates in New Jersey:

The Lifers Group is a rap group with an unusual credo. "Learn at the expense of our sorrow. Help keep our membership low. Help save tomorrow's minds from crime today." That's hardly the kind of tough talk you hear from Ice Cube, the Geto Boys and most of today's new generation of hip-hop hard guys. Unfortunately, MTV, which plays dozens of videos by wanna-be rap gangsters, hasn't got the message. According to Hollywood Records, which recently released the Lifers Group EP, the all-important video channel has refused to

play the group’s “Belly of the Beast” video, saying its depiction of prison life—and prison language—is too graphic (LAT 4/14/91, p. 60).

The mass culture that glorifies stereotypical black gangster images dislocates this important cultural expression. Thus critics maintain that artists have to negotiate the process of popularity while maintaining their authenticity, tied to their local experiences, in the face of commercial pressure to do otherwise. This tension is symbolized by where rappers call home:

For many rap artists, the decision whether to stay or leave is difficult. Stardom may mean a mansion far from the humble surroundings where many of their lives began, or a more secure environment for their families. But performers struggling to keep their creative edge, and credibility with their audiences, are pulled by the communities where their talent took root. So many have chosen to stay (NYT 9/24/95, p. 1.43).

Rappers who reach mainstream successes through means that critics see as legitimate—such as distributing mix-tapes and word-of-mouth—can remain “true” to their place of origination after they cross over to the mainstream, while chastising rappers who concoct their street credibility.

Taken together with the findings on emplaced rap, these data point toward several features ill explained by the existing literatures on omnivorism and reception. Initially, the negative reviews in which place is not present reveal that these critics do not universally praise the genre, but use place to alert to readers *which* cultural products are appropriate for high-status consumption. Yet unlike Johnston and Baumann (2007), who report that all of their gourmet articles reference place, a substantial minority (17.4%) of our sample discuss how rap has become displaced from local conditions and co-opted by mainstream, commercial forces. This supports our contention that music critics do not reflexively parrot the importance of place to rap’s producers but maintain their own ideas about place, and its absence.

Moreover, these data indicate that the context of production is the means by which elite critics signal their preferences for cultural products. Elite critics’ descriptions of rap as valorized or denigrated suggest a place-based modification to Bourdieu’s field dynamic opposing artistic production for the market, as opposed to “restricted production” created under relatively autonomous conditions for other producers and connoisseur audiences (1984, 1993, 1996). This dualism of place associations highlights in particular the opposing valences connoted by locales of different scales. Critics describe mainstream rap produced for the national market as a placeless corporate studio product that retrenches stereotypes, while rap embedded in place-bound scenes is seen as carrying socio-political messages. Critics’ views on authenticity in hip-hop can be similarly rendered through the concept of scale: rap produced in local sites within the U.S., or under transnational conditions abroad, are portrayed as sincere efforts without commercial aspirations. But when writers suggest rap has been produced under displaced conditions for the domestic market, they suggest that the profit motive has violated that authentic status.

Last, critics’ rhetorical choices about foreign rap imply that omnivores’ cosmopolitan taste is not an abstract matter of breadth but is indeed spatial. In the examples reviewed so far, writers single out those cultural products that span geographical scales to have global cachet. Before delving more deeply into that argument, we discuss how critics’ own position in geographical space—in this case the cities of New York and Los Angeles—affects their place-based judgments on hip-hop music.

5. Elite critics’ place-based preferences

5.1. Linking contexts of production and reception: critics’ local loyalties

Just as critics distinguish between emplaced and displaced rap, they also adjudicate *among* the places in which rap is created. Elite critics’ estimation of the rap music produced in their respective cities allows us to show that in addition to the import of the context in which rap is produced, the context in which critics receive hip-hop matters as well.

Critics’ recognition of the import of New York and Los Angeles to the genre is shown in the *amount*, and *type*, of coverage devoted to these scenes: as shown in Table 3, 65 [36 percent] of the emplaced articles are situated in one of these cities. But though the papers had almost the same number of articles about New York rap [20 vs. 19], the *NYT* had only 6 pieces on the LA scene while the *LAT* had 20. Both papers ran pieces on New York throughout the 15-year period, while two-thirds of the *NYT* articles were in the early 1990s, when LA was the “white-hot center of the rap universe” (*LAT* 1/31/92 p. 14). Most of the *New York Times*’ coverage of LA rap was of that era’s “gangsta” subgenre that spawned hip-hop’s mainstream commercial success—yet not the music so much as the legal and political controversies it generated.

But it is Interscope’s gangsta rap roster that has drawn the most attention to the five-year-old Los Angeles label. Several of the rappers have had legal troubles, including Snoop Doggy Dogg, whose murder trial just opened in Los Angeles. Last May, William J. Bennett, head of the conservative group Empower America, and C. Delores Tucker, chairwoman of the National Political Congress of Black Women, began pressuring Interscope’s financial partner, Time Warner, to dissociate itself from the label (*NYT* 12/3/95, p. 2.34).

Likewise, if *LAT* critics regularly covered New York rap, they made their hometown preferences explicit.

Table 3
Coverage of local and rival rap scenes.

| City covered paper | Los Angeles | | New York | |
|--------------------|-------------|-----|----------|-----|
| | LAT | NYT | LAT | NYT |
| 1991 | 2 | 1 | 2 | – |
| 1992 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| 1993 | 1 | – | 1 | – |
| 1994 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 1995 | – | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| 1996 | 3 | – | 1 | – |
| 1997 | – | – | 2 | – |
| 1998 | 1 | – | – | 4 |
| 1999 | 1 | – | 5 | 3 |
| 2000 | 1 | – | 1 | 2 |
| 2001 | 1 | – | – | – |
| 2002 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 2003 | 2 | – | – | 1 |
| 2004 | – | – | 1 | 1 |
| 2005 | 1 | 1 | – | 1 |
| Total | 20 | 6 | 20 | 19 |

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Dr. Dre, rap producer, NWA apostate and architect of the Compton sound, is an enigma. The Dre sound is clean but edgy, featuring big-bottomed, slightly dirty beats, and powered by guitar and bass that is not sampled, but recreated in the studio, so that—unlike East Coast rap productions—the final product is not inflected by the fidelity of scratch R&B records that have been played a million times (LAT 12/27/92, p. 74).

Still, although both papers described music produced in their home city in favorable terms, the attitude toward non-local music varies across the papers: the *NYT*'s association of LA rap with commercialization and violence is far graver than the *LAT*'s stylistic preferences for West Coast rap. When combined with the relative paucity of LA coverage, the *NYT* was far more dismissive toward LA than vice versa. The rivalry between these cities was most starkly illustrated when they anchored the feud between East Coast and West Coast rap scenes culminating in the deaths of Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. While the media was widely blamed for turning a lyrical battle into violence (Morrison and Dangerfield, 2007), our sample only included 6 *LAT* and 2 *NYT* pieces on the subject. Whatever the media's role, elite critics' attitude toward the events make clear that in their view, the "inner-city" places from which rappers hail are to blame.

On the West Coast, there was Tupac Shakur. On the East Coast, there was Christopher G. Wallace, a.k.a. the Notorious B.I.G. and Biggie Smalls. Now both are dead after drive-by shootings. Despite their differences, both purveyed a similar message. They rapped about a gangster street life of gun toting, drug dealing, easy women and endless battles for dominance. That life, spawned by inner-city poverty, was titillating and dramatic, but it was inevitably suicidal, with violence begetting violence (NYT 3/10/97, p. A.10).

Cutting across the local sensibilities of critics writing for both papers, however, is deference to hip-hop's historical-geographical trajectory. Pieces in the *NYT* frequently refer to New York City as the "birthplace of hip-hop," and almost as a mantra for understanding today's rap, stress the specific places of the genre's original geographical context:

Hip-hop culture, which also includes dancing, fashion and visual arts, has been widely available for at least 13 years—longer in the right neighborhood. As early as 1974, disc jockeys in the South Bronx were chopping up and recombining music on multiple turntables, and they were soon joined by rhyming rappers (NYT 2/2/92, p. 2.1).

NYT critics' nostalgia for the imagined conditions in the 1970s neighborhoods of New York City is especially resonant, and when they discuss rap made there their sense of place, politics, and expression—which they see as hallmarks of the genre during its creation—cohere:

Six young men sat around a table nodding their heads and tapping their hands in time to the thumping beat flowing from a boom box. One of them, a Harlem poet who calls himself Vast—as much for his intelligence as his girth—stood up and began rhyming to the music. . . His music is not the kind heard on the radio, but is part of a thriving rap underground in the city. They are true alternative music-makers, intent on keeping close to the roots of the hip-hop culture that once flourished in parks, clubs and block parties, where dueling M.C.'s traded volleys of words, not bullets, with rhymes that ran the gamut from goofy to uplifting. (NYT 4/7/99 p. B.1).

The *LAT* critics' respect for hip-hop's socio-spatial origins exist alongside any current preferences they may have for locally produced music.

Unlike the other indigenous musical forms of jazz, country and rock, the roots of rap can be traced back to a specific location (the South Bronx), and an acknowledged handful of individuals, among them its undisputed originator, DJ Kool Herc. . . , Grandmaster Flash, Grandwizard Theorore (who invented 'scratching'), DJ Hollywood, and Afrika Bambaataa (*LAT* 8/2/99, p. 2).

Critics for both papers mirror the local loyalties that are a hallmark of the genre (Forman, 2002) by expressing fidelity with the music produced near them, and a relative prejudice against non-local music. In so doing, critics' preferences reproduce in homologous fashion the bicoastal competition within the field of production between New York and Los Angeles hip-hop artists (Bourdieu, 1984:232–9).

Critics' local loyalties confirm that the context of reception, as well as production, is a basic element in which place influences aesthetic judgments. Elite writers maintain salient ideas about the places in which cultural objects are produced, *and* their location in geographical space affects their tastes. Yet our data show that the context of reception has effects beyond Babon's (2006) portrayal. Receivers do not merely use their "contextual eye" to assess a cultural object in terms of where they consume it. Instead, the effect of a location on reception relates to the evolution of that cultural form. For instance, although each city's critics prefer locally based scenes, the *LAT* writers maintain allegiance to New York the site of rap's origins. As this fidelity is important to the hip-hop community (Rose, 1994; Forman, 2002), it underscores that elite critics mind conventions specific to the hip-hop subfield. Conversely, writing from the home of hip-hop, the *NYT* writers cover the Los Angeles scene far less, and are much more dismissive. As such, critics' context of reception affects their preferences, but has varying effects depending the genre's prescriptions. We next discuss how critics signify an omnivorous disposition to readers by using the place-based frame of "the ghetto"—especially rap produced in foreign inner-cities—to legitimate certain forms within the genre.

5.2. "The Ghetto" as the site of personal and political expression

"The ghetto" is the predominant place typification imagined in critics' writing, and this context of production is perceived to be home to the racialized "underclass" (Wilson, 1987)—at once landscapes of violence, crime, and poverty, but also fetishized sources of authentic counter-cultural production, including hip-hop music, graffiti, and break dancing (Rose, 1994; Watkins, 2006; Quinn, 2001). Critics use a variety of terms to mark rap's racial-urban origins—the streets, inner-city, etc.—and employ suggestive ethnographic description to signal these locations. The Wu-Tang Clan rappers, for example, "are bound to Park Hill, a Staten Island neighborhood where the red brick housing project towers over weather-beaten storefronts, and a mural names the neighborhood's young dead" (*NYT* 9/24/95 p. 1.43). Table 4 reports the frequency of themes present in the 26 percent of articles referring to the ghetto versus those situated elsewhere. The results underscore the power of "the ghetto" as the "socio-spatial milieu" (Forman, 2002) that informs critics' place-based preferences for rap.

Elite critics most prominently understand rap to be a political project when it emerges from "the ghetto." Comparing Tables 2 and 3, almost half (47 percent) of the pieces that locate rap in "the ghetto" also mention rap's political importance, up from 31 percent of articles that mention some

Table 4
 Difference of means for articles locating rap in “the ghetto” or not.

| | Rap from non-“ghetto” places (n = 171) | Rap from “the ghetto” (n = 47) | T-Value |
|----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|----------|
| Aesthetic Innovation | .40 (.492) | .45 (.503) | –.532 |
| Race | .35 (.479) | .34 (.479) | .133 |
| Politics | .22 (.413) | .47 (.504) | –3.521** |
| Big Business | .33 (.473) | .28 (.452) | .735 |
| Self-expression | .15 (.360) | .32 (.471) | –2.625** |
| Misogyny/Homophobia | .22 (.417) | .9 (.282) | 2.123* |
| Materialism | .16 (.366) | .4 (.496) | 2.073* |

Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Asterisks give two-tailed probability values from *t*-tests for equality of means between “ghetto” and non-“ghetto” articles.

** *p* < .01.
 * *p* < .05.

place other than the ghetto. Critics likewise describe rap as meaningful self-expression more than twice as often in pieces about “the ghetto” versus other places (32 percent vs. 15 percent). They further locate rap’s contemporary flourishing in urban neighborhoods outside the United States such as London’s East End, or “working-class southeast Santiago” (LAT 11/25/98, p. 1).

While elite writers imbue “the ghetto” with affirmative associations of personal and political expression, they are scathing when they think that rappers producing for the market misappropriate ghettos, using them as markers of authenticity and as a contextual backdrop for their greed and ruthlessness. These writers see negative tropes of misogyny and materialism occurring when rap becomes detached and produced apart from “real” ghetto contexts:

Crack use has stayed constant over the last decade, government statistics say. So has the gangsta rap that presents the drug trade as a ghetto survival strategy, a source for true-crime stories and a metaphoric template for the rap business. Since the mid-1990s the quickest way up the pop charts has been to join a brand-name hip-hop crew and to rap about sudden wealth, sudden death, brutal choices, and sexual conquests (NYT 2/29/00, p. E.5).

Another writer described (unnamed) rappers’ insincere class and urban claims when he wrote:

The final irony is that some gangsta rappers are middle-class guys posing as inner-city killers. . . . When middle-class blacks fabricate violent urban pasts, they pay homage to murder (NYT 8/27/93 p. A.28).

For these elite critics, the falsified gangster background of rappers exploit violence, misogyny, materialism, and place—specifically, “the ghetto.” Thus the same activities, such as violence or materialism, can become authenticated only when experienced by ghetto residents. Elite critics clearly maintain expectations about “the ghetto” as a privileged location of personal and political expression. They do not issue blanket condemnations of artists who engage in and rap about these activities, but claim the authority to adjudicate when such experiences are authentic:

Lloyd Banks had seen some bad things in his New York neighborhood of Jamaica, Queens. Shootings, arrests, drugs, death, despair. . . . That atmosphere is part of the common ground shared by the other members of [the rap crew] G-Unit, a kind of brotherhood that has allowed each of the members to learn from the experiences and mistakes of others. (LAT 8/5/04, p. E.14).

Table 5

Difference of means test for themes in rap by national origin.

| | U.S. (n = 187) | Foreign places (n = 31) | T-Value |
|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| Rap from “The Ghetto” | .15 (.358) | .61 (.495) | −6.288*** |
| Aesthetic Innovation | .35 (.477) | .81 (.402) | −5.059*** |
| Politics | .22 (.415) | .58 (.502) | −4.355*** |
| Self-expression | .19 (.391) | .19 (.402) | −.084 |
| Race | .38 (.487) | .16 (.374) | 2.383* |
| Big Business | .36 (.481) | .10 (.301) | 2.932** |
| Misogyny/Homophobia | .22 (.415) | .3 (.180) | 2.468* |
| Materialism/Bling | .16 (.363) | .0 (.000) | 2.374* |

Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Asterisks give two-tailed probability values from *t*-tests for equality of means between U.S. and international articles.

*** $p < .001$.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

Yet “the ghetto” does not carry universal meaning for music writers, but is informed by its national context, and together these inform elite’s cosmopolitan tastes for rap music. The final geographical pattern we find is critics’ preferences for rap beyond American borders.

5.3. Critics’ cosmopolitan preferences for foreign rap

Elite critics’ writings on rap produced abroad are especially revealing because they offer an opportunity to dissect critics’ taste for a geographically “clean” set of cultural objects shorn of local loyalties. In this discourse, connotations associated with “the ghetto” intersect with a set of place-based meanings centered on a view of America as home to commercial, inauthentic cultural pursuits. Foreign rap scenes, by contrast, are seen to produce politically important and aesthetically innovative music. Understood through the prism of geographical scales, elite writers’ cosmopolitan outlook distinguishes rap music when it is seen as the hybrid product of the American form combined with foreign influences in transnational contexts.

Table 5 indicates that elites situate more than 60 percent of foreign rap in “the ghetto,” while only 15 percent of our articles locate American rap there—in part why critics valorize overseas production.¹¹ Yet our data show that elite critics do not merely contrast American with foreign rap, but also maintain preferences tied to specific foreign locations. The passage of time has analytic salience as well: critics’ taste for foreign rap, and their depiction of domestic production as vitiated by market forces, occur *as the genre globalizes*.

5.3.1. “Weakly” exotic rap hybrids as more aesthetically innovative than U.S. rap

Elite American music critics almost synonymously link “weakly” exotic international rap with aesthetic innovation. We term such hip-hop weakly exotic as critics praise the results of mixing the American form with other national or traditional musics instead of singling out overseas rap for its absolute otherness. Such places are highly associated with creative output: as

¹¹ In results not reported here, the significant patterns between critics’ perception of U.S. and foreign rap endure even when articles discussing rap from American and international “ghettoes” are compared. Displaced articles ($n = 38$) are included in the U.S. total because, as noted above, these typically make reference to the genre as a whole, and contextually signify the genre as an American music, if disembedded from local sites of production.

seen in Table 5, 81 percent of the international articles discuss innovations in the genre, compared to 35 percent of articles about American rap.

American musicians like Gang Starr and Digable Planets broke borders last year by combining hip-hop with jazz. At the same time in England, the Brand-New Heavies, the Young Disciples and Soul II Soul were not only fusing hip-hop and jazz, but throwing funk, soul and gospel into the mix as well. On Monday night, the Brand New Heavies demonstrated that from an overseas vantage point, pop-music genres traditionally ghettoized in America can be gracefully combined (NYT 5/12/94).

A quote from “Sergent Garcia, a Paris-born rapper, guitarist and singer of Spanish and French descent” illustrates the weakly exotic, transnational places from which critics locate hybrids: “Paris is one of the world’s great immigrant cities. You’ve got people from all over the world there, and music from all over the world” (LAT 2/22/02, p. F.1).

Critics also appreciate the process of “localization” (Bennett, 1999, 2000), of indigenizing U.S. rap with local musical forms and lyrical content instead of reproducing American styles. This critic’s gushing prose underscored the robust preference for transnational conditions of production when reviewing an album by the Cuban-Parisian group Orishas:

One of those magical records that manages to land on the scene at the right time, “Cubano” merges the seemingly incompatible worlds of hip-hop and traditional Cuban rumba into one irresistible package (LAT 2/19/01, p. F.4).

Critics associate such localization with further politicizing the genre, again suggesting that only in transnational contexts is rap fully realized.

MC Solaar is having a smoke and a think. “In the beginning,” he says, taking a long, pensive drag off his cigarette, “we all wanted to be like American rap.” But now rap in France is developing its own personality. The deejays are sampling French discs, not just old American Top 40. The rappers are writing about French problems, like the astounding unemployment rate that is particularly high among youth and increasing racial violence (LAT 6/8/94 p. 1).

Although the difference in perceptions of aesthetic innovation slightly narrows when American and foreign “ghetto” rap is compared, critics’ writings suggest that foreign hip-hop music is almost *ipso facto* the genre’s most important innovative force. When critics write about foreign scenes, they mention that rap has American origins, but suggest that rap fulfills its potential outside the U.S.

While critics see hybridity in a variety of foreign locales, they mostly locate it in global metropolises relatively accessible to well-traveled American aesthetes, such as Paris or London. As such, critics’ transnational preference underscores their, and their readers’, access to cultural and economic capital relative to non-elites. Indeed, the exoticism of foreign rap in part explains critics’ excitement: such production is outside the domestic mainstream, and as relatively unknown to American audiences, represents an opportunity for these writers to maintain their position as arbiters of avant-garde taste. Thus omnivore scholarship is only partially correct to label elite tastes for *multiple* genres as cosmopolitan preference for openness as evidenced breadth. Our data show an *intra-genre* distinction centered on place, elided by research analyzing survey results, that elites maintain a strong taste for foreign rap as compared to American production. Last, we extend this finding to show that elites use place associations to distinguish even among foreign rap scenes.

5.3.2. Critics' estimation of the political differences between domestic and foreign rap

Earlier, we showed that when critics see rap as emerging from the ghetto they are much likelier to identify the music as politically important. In Row 3 of Table 5, we see that critics are significantly less enthusiastic about the social meaningfulness of U.S. rap (22 percent) compared to the foreign scenes it has inspired (58 percent). Save for the articles about underground American scenes, critics overwhelmingly valorize rap from *foreign* scenes, most of which are seen to emerge from “the ghetto.” These are not the weakly exotic sites of aesthetic hybridity: they are either the urban places of the Global South, or their gritty counterparts within the weakly exotic metropolises identified above where immigrants from nations of the Global South inhabit.

Hip-hop, rooted in the urban ghettos of the United States, has become the voice of defiant Israeli youngsters whose social life has been jolted by suicide bombings in cafes, pubs and discos during a Palestinian uprising (LAT 12/27/02 p. E.46).

The French banlieues, though, have found a voice in talented rap musicians. They burst on the scene here 15 years ago, borrowing a musical style from African-Americans, but using lyrics that spoke to the irate, frustrated and unemployed youth of immigrant extraction in the very banlieues where many of the rappers were raised (NYT 11/24/05, p. E.1).

Binder (1993) describes similar examples about American rap from the 1980s, but there is no longer comparable appreciation of rap's domestic political engagement. American rappers are recognized for participating in voting drives, advocating for penal-reform legislation, and writing socially conscious lyrics. But when these are mentioned, they are not given the transformative power of rap's political contribution in foreign contexts.

The following quotes compare critics' depictions of two instances in which rap music is used in electoral politics, in the United States and in Kenya. These highlight that critics are more likely to write about politics in foreign scenes, and that their tone also reveals the difference in critics' associations of place:

The Democrats and the Republicans have lined up legions of musicians to provide the partisan soundtrack to this fall's presidential race... Hip-hop and R&B stars are also recording music in support of the Democrats. Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds, Mary J. Blidge, Missy Elliot and Wyclef Jean—along with several dozen others—will remake Harold Melvin & the Bluenotes' 1975 hit “Wake Up Everybody” (LAT 8/15/04, p. A.28).

But when compared to foreign political rap, the American version is trivial:

Until recently, Kenyans felt defeated and downtrodden as they watched their country's downward spiral of economic and social decay. But a political transformation with the defeat of Daniel arap Moi's handpicked successor in the country's first real elections, in December, has given them a new spirit that is best captured in a single word—unbwogable. The bizarre adjective exists in no dictionary. It is a mixture of Luo, one of Kenya's many tribal tongues, and English. It was coined last year by a duo of Kenyan rap artists known as GidiGidi MajiMaji, whose song “Who Can Bwogo me” has become the country's new national anthem (NYT 2/16/03, p. 1.14).

Across situations that could have been described similarly, the latter critic offers a breathless description of rap in Kenyan politics, while the former does not suggest much importance to rap's contributions to the election besides being a “partisan soundtrack.”

A key reason for this divergence is critics' differing perceptions of the effects of the commercialization of rap in the U.S. and abroad, which again is highly significant, but in the

Table 6
Coverage of U.S. commercialism, and foreign rap.

| | Domestic commercialism | Foreign rap |
|-------|------------------------|-------------|
| 1991 | – | – |
| 1992 | 3 | 1 |
| 1993 | 3 | 2 |
| 1994 | 2 | 1 |
| 1995 | 1 | 2 |
| 1996 | 2 | – |
| 1997 | 1 | – |
| 1998 | 2 | 4 |
| 1999 | 2 | 1 |
| 2000 | 4 | 3 |
| 2001 | 4 | 2 |
| 2002 | 1 | 1 |
| 2003 | 6 | 5 |
| 2004 | 4 | 5 |
| 2005 | 3 | 4 |
| Total | 38 | 31 |

Sources: The New York Times ($n = 111$) and The Los Angeles Times ($n = 107$).

opposite direction. As seen in Table 5, more than 36 percent of domestic, but only 3 percent of foreign pieces, describe rap as enmeshed in commercialized production for the market.¹² Critics see American rap’s political commitments as overwhelmed by the damage done by the national culture industry, damage that has not [yet] affected foreign scenes. Indeed, this temporal dimension is essential to understanding critics’ cosmopolitan taste, and can be rendered by Bourdieu’s analysis of how fields of taste and cultural production correspond to one another over time. Bourdieu (1984:231) indicated that, “every change in the system of goods induces a change in tastes,” and that such new tastes in turn abet the success of producers creating objects that suit those preferences. As seen in Table 6, our sample illustrates such a dynamic occurring in geographical fashion. As the genre globalized throughout the late 1990s (Mitchell, 2001; Forman, 2002), elite critics increased their coverage of foreign rap. At the same time, they became progressively concerned over the effects of placeless commercialism in U.S. hip-hop. Clearly, concerns over market forces [especially in the *NYT*] exist in the earliest years of our sample. But the data also qualitatively confirm that critics lamented what they saw as the paired trends of domestic rap having succumbed to the profit imperative, and become depoliticized.

A decade ago, rap seemed poised to be a politically charged medium. In 1989, the Stop the Violence Movement released “Self-Destruction,” a gold single in which KRS-One and Public Enemy urged listeners to curb violent behavior. . . But in the late 1990s and for the first part of this year, political commentary has been scarce in commercially successful rap. Contemporary political rappers such as Common and Dead Prez tend to remain critically acclaimed but overlooked in the marketplace (LAT 4/23/00 p. 67).

¹² This confirms omnivorous elites prefer cultural products created with relative autonomy from market forces (Lizardo and Skiles, 2009), but at least in this case, that relation is grounded in critics’ understandings of place meanings, and influenced by the passage of time.

These data provide a final revision to the cosmopolitan omnivore scholars who have hypothesized that is a temporary, fleeting phenomenon (Peterson, 2005). We provide evidence that this may indeed be true—but for reasons to do with the context of production. The cosmopolitan disposition for rap amongst elite critics is first of all a fairly recent development, dependent upon the presence of the genre’s multinational diaspora. Moreover, the logic of elites’ preference suggests that they may soon tire of foreign production, finding it to be void of aesthetic and political qualities as they have turned against the majority of American hip-hop.

6. Hip-hop’s conditions of production: critical differences of opinion

Having indicated these differences in the coverage of domestic and international rap, we now address whether critics’ opinions mirror dissimilarities in the conditions in which rap music is produced in the United States and abroad. We contend that while innumerable differences exist between U.S. and foreign rap scenes, the critics in our sample hone in on the damage commercialization has wrought on American rap, a concern warranted by consistent attention from rappers and hip-hop scholars alike (Blair, 2004). Yet they largely neglect to cover the thriving, if underground, American scenes where radical lyrics and committed activists are to be found (Davey, 2006). At the same time, American critics rarely mention that foreign rap scenes are themselves large commercial markets, often with the same multinational media firms present in mainstream American rap, and frequently face the same agonizing pressures over mass-market commercialization (Lipsitz, 1994; Xie et al., 2007). Some foreign artists in our sample are bona fide international superstars, and sell anywhere from hundreds of thousands of albums, in the case of Orishas (Billboard, 2000), to MC Solaar, who has sold over 5 million (Allfree, 2005). Even the Kenyan group GidiGidi MajiMaji is signed to a Warner Music Group subsidiary.¹³ This combination suggests that it is almost impossible to be commercially successful and politically relevant American rapper, while foreign rappers achieve aesthetic and political advances with no threat of profit-seeking inauthenticity.

This conjuncture, we believe, is the outgrowth of elite critics’ hierarchized opinions of the conditions in which hip-hop is produced. Specifically, their inattention to the “the dangers of commercialism” in discussions of international rap reflects elite Americans’ tendency to see foreign cultural production as beyond the reach of the market forces (Jules-Rosette, 1984; Phillips and Steiner, 1999). While critics lament American commercialization, they are silent on the potential homogenization or exploitation of the music industry abroad, a key concern in critiques of the globalization of culture (Hirsch, 1992; Bourdieu, 2003). Critics’ obsession with commercialization’s corrosion further obscures that the music industry was instrumental in spreading rap beyond the neighborhoods of New York City to its now-global reach. As such, they fail to mention that rap circulates as a commodity *and* as a potentially subversive text, that even if the commercialization process asymmetrically ensures the dominance of U.S. music, the industry can never determine the meanings that rap has abroad (Lipsitz, 1994; Rose, 1994). It is precisely that process, despite its faults, that gave rise to the foreign scenes elites now cherish.

This bias of mainstream media against American rap has been long noted in critical academic works (Dyson, 1993; George, 1998; Forman, 2002; Rose, 1994); our data contextualize this finding by highlighting the relational construction of foreign rappers as social and cultural exemplars. Critics appear to apply a different standard for aesthetic innovation to domestic and

¹³ <http://www.gallomusicsouthafrica.co.za/>.

foreign rap. International rap achieves aesthetic breakthroughs by combining locally available sounds with the U.S. rap form, yet American artists must mind the genre's history to avoid creating a derivative, unexciting style. This runs counter to the perspective of hip-hop scholarship that has traced how from its inception, rap music has been a hybrid form, with multicultural, diasporic roots (Chang, 2005; Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1991; Ramsey, 2003; Toop, 2000). While cultural tastes are always subjective, the criteria critics use to evaluate rap's aesthetic qualities offer a lower threshold to foreign artists.

Critics similarly complain about the lack of popular political rap in the United States, while offering a narrow definition of politics that favors overt discussions in groups' lyrical content. Given this construction, it very well may be that foreign groups are more likely to include political topics in their songs. Yet this perspective echoes the arbitrary presumption that rap is "political" only when groups articulate a formal agenda (Rose, 1991; Kelley, 1996; Niang, 2006) when rap music inherently offers a cultural-political medium of expression for marginalized youth (Hooks, 1991). And critics' opposition between commerce and politics overlooks how *all* of rap's social project has benefited from popular exposure (Kitwana, 2002).

7. Discussion and conclusion

7.1. Statement of findings

We have argued that place has significance in understanding three aspects of cultural critics' social activities. First, we emphasized that elite critics are symbolically located at the apex of the field of cultural production and reception, but at the margins of the hip-hop subfield. Secondly, we find that these contexts of *production*, once encoded in rap songs, circulate as part of the cultural object. Elite critics use these as symbolic resources to signal appropriate tastes to omnivorous readers. Last, our findings on the coverage of local scenes in New York and Los Angeles extend sociological understanding of how contexts of *reception* shape cultural tastes.

These are the mechanism by which place informs elite critics' judgments, as well as the pattern of American omnivorousness. It is an organizing logic of appropriation for American elite taste, a tool used by critics to establish distinction within the subfield of rap music for readers seeking to cultivate high-status tastes. Place is a constitutive of the "process of objectification" (Bourdieu, 1984:231) in which elite critics assimilate new cultural products into the field of tastes. Elite critics signal to readers whether rap is appropriate for high-status consumption by virtue of where it was created, with observable and distinct meaning systems, and for local audiences who understand and relate to the lyrical content. In doing so, this work provides insights into the reproduction of inequality through the manufacture of cultural capital.

Most omnivorism scholarship has presumed national taste cultures that respond to similarly bounded fields of artistic production. We incorporate reception theory to appreciate how an American audience interprets a genre that has spawned an international field of cultural production, a nuance overlooked by research based on surveys that use an undifferentiated category of "rap." We also draw upon the concept of scale from human geography to illustrate intra-genre taste hierarchies, notably that elite critics attach importance to both local and transnational contexts while eliding or denigrating the national scale of production. In addition to their local loyalties, critics also valorize rap from "the ghetto," and they mobilize place associations to legitimate these rap styles. Elite critics especially see foreign "ghettoes" as crucibles of political and cultural activism, almost impervious to the commercial forces that have overwhelmed the once-potent U.S. urban cores. This confirms Johnston and Baumann's (2007)

point that low-status cultural objects far from the U.S. can be valorized because of their distance from American audiences. Yet our data allow us to make the further argument that the imagined characteristics of particular place typifications shape elite taste.

7.2. *Implications for future research*

While place is a fundamental feature of the production and consumption of rap music, the concept has conceptual utility for understanding other cultural genres as well. We have argued that the ghetto is a particular “socio-spatial formation” (Forman, 2002) through which critics display their preferences for rap music. Grazian (2003) revealed similar associations between urban places and black musical forms held by voyeuristic white “anti-tourists” who judge Chicago blues music to achieve “rugged authenticity” only when performed in South Side clubs by African-American musicians. Given the salience of race among hip-hop artists (e.g. the controversy over the commercially successful white rapper Eminem), future work might also consider the role of cultural critics’ demographic and artistic background in their opinions of rap. Place is also a symbolic principle of transnational music communities used to suggest solidarity and continuity with the past, enacted in Diasporic forms such as reggae (Hebdige, 1979; Gilroy, 1991), and bhangra styles (Banerji and Baumann, 1990; Huq, 1999). While our findings broach the importance of locality in the context of reception, future work should delve deeper into the meanings of other specific places to address how those, too, structure taste. Future studies might also consider whether the context of production or reception have varying salience when the cultural object is immobile, such as architecture, rather than music.

Recognizing the constitutive power of place offers much to sociological research, as place structures ideas used in many social activities, not merely aesthetic practices. In contrast to our analysis of how place is used as a *label* of identification, place can be a cultivated aspect of identity: Nassy Brown’s (2005) analysis of “Liverpool-born Blacks” reveals how place and race intertwine to form the basis of that community’s self-understanding. Henke and Gieryn (2008:257) find that while “some places ratify scientific claims” because they are known to be where brilliance flourishes, others (e.g. pubs) are *not* seen as sites of legitimate scientific discovery as they are where “regular people” congregate. Perceptions of place also have political consequences, such as how Wilson’s (1987) ghetto-underclass nexus has influenced social policy. Scholars need to be reflexive when employing place typifications to avoid retrenching socio-spatial stigmas (Gregory, 1998; Wacquant, 2002).

Finally, our findings emphasize that sociology must return the original, spatial meaning to the “cosmopolitan” portion of the term “cosmopolitan omnivorism.” Elite critics do not maintain an abstract preference for openness and tolerance that translates into lengthy lists of cultural likes. Elite critics favor foreign rap scenes for their aesthetic innovation and oppositional politics, perceiving this production to be unaffected by commercialization. As a socio-political ideal, cosmopolitanism refers to the belief that through travel and exposure to difference, parochial identifications such as nationalism will become subordinate as we become citizens of the world (Nussbaum, 2002; Appiah, 2006). Yet we find writers opining for an upper-middle class audience that is relatively able to enact this lifestyle. Thus we confirm that cosmopolitanism as it exists among contemporary American elites is neither innocent nor idealistic (Beck, 1998). Elite critics’ preferences for foreign rap operate as a strategy of distinction, signaling that it is acceptable to like rap when it is produced in the right places for the right reasons.

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Appendix A. Definition of codes

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Place | the use of a formal place name to describe the creation (producers) or consumption (audiences) of rap music. |
| Displaced | either the absence of any geographical referent, or the use of use of place names to suggest rap becoming disembedded from local contexts, such as in the following quote: “ <i>Two decades after it emerged on the streets of the South Bronx</i> , hip-hop has become a dominant force in American and global pop culture. <i>No longer a local art form of street stories</i> and freestyle poetry, the hip-hop sound, style and slang now provide fodder for mainstream movies, television, radio, fashion, advertising and, of course, new media” (LAT 3/14/97 p. 1, emphasis added). |
| Ghetto | the use of one of the terms the ghetto, streets, street corner, or inner-city to locate the production, distribution, or consumption of rap music. |
| International | the use of place names for locations outside the United States. |
| Politics | describing either rap lyrics as providing political commentary, or rappers themselves as involved in socio-political activism. |
| Aesthetic Innovation | evaluative judgments suggesting a song or album produced a creative, musical breakthrough. This was often in the context of blending multiple genres to produce “hybridity.” |
| Self-expression | describing the practice of rapping, or a particular song, as enabling a meaningful communication of personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences. |
| Race | describing rap as a creative practice by or for African-Americans, or as appropriated by other ethno-racial groups. |
| Big Business | mentioning the music industry (the five major record labels, concert promoters, corporate-owned radio stations, advertisers) or the process of a rapper crossing over into the mainstream. |
| Misogyny/Homophobia | describing the content of a rap song or album as containing negative gendered or sexual stereotypes. |
| Materialism/ Bling | depicting rappers as ultimately or solely interested in accruing money or material objects. |

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