"About cocaine, the square, the shots". Rap and (re)territorialization dynamics: imaginaries, practices and transnational economies

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From marginalised neighbourhoods to rap and return

«Don't talk to me about the blocks (ever) / Christmas without gifts (ever) / Always cold like polar bears / About cocaine, the square, the shots»[1]. These are some lyrics of a song written by Neima Ezza, one of the most famous rappers in the social housing neighbourhood of San Siro (Milan), indirectly suggesting the main themes of this special issue: on the one hand, urban space, poverty and marginalisation, in other words, issues related to urban studies (see Cullen and Pretes, 2000); on the other hand, rap itself as an urban culture and a certain fascination with crime linked to some of its sub-genres (gangsta rap and trap, for example), i.e. themes analysed more by a tradition connected to cultural and subcultural studies (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Tanner, Asbridge and Wortley, 2009).

These themes also cross our own research paths, those of two social anthropologists involved in the fields of urban, youth, and gang studies (Grassi, 2018, 2021; Sánchez-García, 2016, 2018, 2020; Sánchez-García and Feixa, 2020). We started our collaboration within a European Project called "TRANSGANG: Transnational gangs as agent of mediation"[2], aimed at developing a renewed model for the analysis of transnational youth gangs in the global era. It was precisely starting from this

1 «Non parlarmi delle popolari (mai) / Dei Natali con zero regali (mai) / Sempre al freddo come orsi polari / Della coca, la piazza, gli spari» (Neima Ezza, Perif)

2 TRANSGANG project, funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's HORIZON 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 742705. IP: Dr. Carles Feixa. Website: www.upf.edu/web/transgang. Contact: transgang@upf.edu. This article is the result of a joint process of reflection between the two authors. However, for Italian Academic purposes paragraphs can be divided as follows. Paolo Grassi: The first three paragraphs of "From marginalised neighbourhoods to rap and return"; "Rap and cities: a provisional review"; the first five paragraphs of "Some emergent themes". José Sánchez-García: The last two paragraphs of "From marginalised neighbourhoods to rap and return"; "Research questions and structure of the special issue"; the last two paragraphs of "Some emergent themes"; "Conclusions".

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research that we realised the need to open up a reflection on something different that in some respects questioned the very interpretative framework of the TRANSGANG project itself: a rap music glocalised scene.

First, let us consider the case of the city of Milan, where Paolo Grassi has been working since 2017. In the early 2000s, Milan was very (in)famous for its Latin American street groups (on which also some researchers had focused their attention – see Queirolo Palmas, 2010). Although these groups have not completely disbanded, they no longer seem to represent one of the most visible socialisation phenomena of the Milanese youths. On the contrary, rap crews formed mainly by 'second generation' kids such as Neima Ezza, have sprung up in many neighbourhoods of the city and increasingly attracted the attention of the media and the public. Rap crews speak about the social contexts where they grow up, their families and friends. They display a collective identity linked to their neighbourhoods, but also mythologising global peripheries, overturning their stigma and playing with a gangsta style. Street life is at the centre of their narratives, while ethnicity seems to be a less central problematic issue (even if the opposition between blacks and whites, foreign and non-foreign citizens in general, has acquired importance). In other words, these crews are characterised by greater ethnic heterogeneity, rather playing an identity construction primarily based on their belonging to specific urban areas (Mansilla *et al.*, 2021).

In Tunisia, between 2014 and 2016, José Sánchez-García conducted fieldworks among rappers in Cité Ibn Khaldoun, an urban peripheral area that is representative of Greater Tunis, not least because a number of young people from this neighbourhood have attempted clandestine emigration and jihadist ventures[3]. Their songs focus on the difficult everyday life of the neighbourhood and the economic dependence on rappers's families. In short, in Tunisia rap comprises a protest against the lack of a real welfare state[4]. It has become a politicised space

3 This "city" was built in the 1970s as part of a clean-up policy put in place by the state that consisted of the transfer of a population from the Jbel Lahmar slum to higher quality environment (Ben Slimane, 1995: 266). Cité Ibn Khaldoun I and VI are part of the upper El Omrane delegation that is dependent on the Tunis governorate.

4 For example, Wajdi (24 years old), a young sub-Saharan man from the area, is committed to underground rap, which he considers a release for what is

after its success during the revolutionary days. In their verses, young people expose their views on 'policies' and 'politics'. Rap, therefore, is part of the Tunisian political field and it reproduces the political differences of young people. Furthermore, young middle-class people integrated into institutionalised politics also use rap to spread messages from political parties in opposition with marginalised youths from public housing neighbourhoods who express their discontent over their educational, economic and social deficiencies. However, if rap means resistance through formal politics and economic constraints, the masculine rappers also reproduce hegemonic discourses on genre. So, rap could be rebellious and conservative at same time depending on the topics tackled in the lyrics.

Thus, through these and other case studies around the globe (see Stuart, 2020), we have realised how rap has experienced a recent development that deeply questions our way of looking at cities and the forms of socialisation of their younger residents. This special issue of Tracce Urbane draws on this consideration. It depicts a reflection on rap and its connection with the urban dimension. Unlike other special issues that mark the outcomes of concluded research processes, this is part of an ongoing investigation. We therefore claim its *exploratory* character. Together with the other authors of the following articles, we will ask questions, formulate hypotheses and imagine research paths that have not been developed yet.

Rap and cities: a provisional review

From its birth, rap has been intrinsically linked to the urban dimension. To get an idea, just consider the first lines of the bibliography edited by Cheryl L. Keyes for the University of Oxford:

stifled within him. He speaks of his anger about those who govern, and about drugs and the situation of his generation of young people. In his songs, his lyrics say things like «Why this youth injects himself, why this other takes *zatla* (hashish)... I don't want to give lessons», and explain, «I address myself to power, tell them that they should get a move on and change things, so that these young people don't have to turn to that». In Wajdi imaginary, rap is the music of the revolution of the black people of the United States – marginalised like him – and it represents the culture of the black ghetto and all the associated racist problems. He explains that «rap is used to address the system and address other people, to tell others what displeases us». Finally, «it represents for me an intellectual revolution. The real thought! A thought that does not destroy but helps to move forward!» (November, 2015).

By the early 1970s [...], [rap] became associated with a youth arts movement driven and populated by black and Latino youth in New York City called hip-hop. Comprised of four elements – breakdancing (b-boying/b-girling), graffiti (writing), disc jockeying (DJing), and emceeing (MCing) – hip-hop also distinguishes a distinct form of dress, gesture, and language that embodies an urban street consciousness[5].

Murray Forman in the introduction of his hip-hop studies reader points out this connection even more deeply: «Early hip-hop was the product of overlapping influences as teens from different neighbourhoods moved across the city, mingling in formal and informal urban spaces» (Forman and Neal, 2004: 1). Similarly, George Lipsitz highlights that rap originated in the South Bronx as a consequence of the failure of urban renewal programs and economic recession with the aim to keep youth gang members away from fighting and illegal activities (as the Afrika Bambaataa case shows – Lipsitz, 1994). From New York in the 1970s to all the metropolises around the world in the following decades (Mitchell, 2001), rap (and hip-hop culture more generally) and cities have shown a profound bond (Alridge and Stewart, 2005). Rap lyrics have always articulated urban geographies and described struggles within urban ghettos. Similarly, breakdance and graffiti can easily be interpreted as forms of appropriation of urban space (Forman and Neal, 2004: 155)
However, this bond between rap and the city has not always received the deserved academic attention, not only in the European context. Moreover, hip-hop has inspired a research agenda only since the 2000s (Miller *et al.*, 2014), clashing with academic resistance that saw it as a not very valid, and at times, retrograde phenomenon. Nonetheless, rap has increasingly become the common language used by young residents of the 'suburbs' worldwide. From the US blocks where rap was born (Lamotte, 2014), to Italian public housing neighbourhoods (De Angelis, 2020), from Spanish marginal areas to North African cities (Barone, 2019; Sánchez-García and Feixa, 2020), rap has proven itself an accessible, malleable and easily hybridised tool to affirm one's position in specific urban contexts, expressing new forms of rooting and belonging, territorialising 'global' themes and languages, and from there establishing

5 https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199757824/obo-9780199757824-0260.xml?rskey=RUYjw4&result=1&q=rap#firstMatch.

transnational social and symbolic ties. In other words, rap has become (or has it always been?) a substantial means of "making the city" or "producing it" (Agier, 2015; Lefebvre, 1967).

Here the transnational dimension of the phenomenon clearly emerges. By transnational we mean specific modes of mobility, exchange and nascent identities originating from the movement of persons, cultural flows, media, technological devices, capital, ideologies and cultures (Appadurai, 1996). Specifically, we are referring to "major transnationalism" (or transnationalism from above) that concerns policies, imaginaries and institutional answers, and also "minor transnationalism" (or transnationalism from below) that concerns young migrants, subcultural traditions and living strategies. At the same time, the current transnationalism can be physical (mobility of persons and things) or virtual (mobility of symbols through old and new media).

Beyond the economic dynamics, the articles included in this special issue mainly discuss cultural trends on global youth as minor transnationalism. The rap scenes presented here emerge as artistic creations with an 'ambiguous' relationship with mainstream managements and multinational capitals. Their references, as the articles show, are transnational, but acquire local and urban connotations and meanings. In most cases, the members of the crews dream of sparkling lifestyles, where sex, consumption, and entertainment can break down the barriers of macro-socially regulated morality which expresses naturalised meanings attached to the world of the marginalised. In diasporic situations, groups of young people have developed glocally-oriented strategies to create self-determination and spaces of creativity through music production, as an alternative to structural obstacles and marginalisation. In recent descriptions of the identity creation processes among youth groups, the influence of an alleged global culture centred on the creation of transnational communities, and the influence of music – specifically pop, rock, rap, reggae and local hybrid scenes – have emerged as major axes for young populations (Sánchez-García and Feixa, 2020). These cultural elements are setting primary reference markers for identity negotiation that the authors of this special issue reflect upon in relation to global youth. The importance of these elements for youth cultures and youth street groups is essential: they develop new ways of diversifying transnational relations, and the possibility of participating in

solidarity groups related to similar practices. In conclusion, transnationalism means the transfer of practices, knowledge, imaginaries and responses that the youths themselves have through migration, subcultural traditions, or life strategies with connections that occur in a larger area than nation-states.
In the context of these cultural productions, the fascination with crime has played, in different times and places, a role as important as it is ambiguous. The territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant, 2008) that has affected certain urban areas has been reversed also thanks to rap, becoming a source of pride, but at the same time self-reproducing classist and patriarchal clichés and stereotypes. The same ambiguity can be found at the economic level, where multinational major record labels cannibalise the voluntary work of young adolescents often excluded from the labour market, intent on self-promoting their music on social media (Belotti, 2021), with at least conceivable dreams (cfr. Appadurai, 2004) of "making it" (thanks to rap).

Research questions and structure of the special issue

In the complexity of this relationship between rap and the city, there are many properly spatial themes that can be explored, at a semiological, anthropological, sociological, urban, but also at a political and economic level. To structure this special issue, we planned a broad proposal based on the following questions: what signs does rap engrave in the territories where it develops? What identities (of class, gender and ethnicity) and what practices and representations does it reproduce or contest? What does it tell about cities? What policies support it (take for example the projects that use rap as a form of participation and self-discovery) or, vice versa, oppose it (through assimilative or repressive actions)? What structural conditions is this phenomenon imbedded in? Is it a new dynamic of cultural colonisation or a media-scape? How are these languages important in terms of the construction of collective identities?
In the breadth of this proposal, we ask authors to trace their reflections back to the places from which they unfold, paying particular attention to the processes of territorialisation and re-territorialisation, thus considering the interaction between subjects, groups and their wider social environment (Raffestin, 2012).

Furthermore, as Appadurai (1996, 2004) points out, the imagination and the imaginary bring us towards something critical and new in the context of global cultural processes: imagination as a social practice. The latter has become an organised field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of culturally organised practice) and a form of negotiation between individual agencies and fields of possibilities defined globally. "Imagination is now fundamental for all forms of agency, it is in itself a social fact, and it is the key component of the new global order" (Appadurai, 1996: 11). For this reason, we invited the authors to also explore the relationships between rap imagery and the conditions in which it is produced.

The contributions, in Italian and Spanish, were written by human geographers, urban planners, anthropologists, urban and music sociologists. The articles refer mainly to two countries, Italy and Spain, with a single excursus on Brazil. The most analysed city is Milan (and its metropolitan area), unquestionably the capital of Italian rap. The other cities taken as case studies are Turin, Rome, Naples, Barcelona and Aracaju (capital of the Brazilian state of Sergipe).

The first section, "In dialogo", holds two contributions. The first, edited by Luca Benetta (a master's student at the Polytechnic of Milan), reports on an excerpt from a focus group conducted within the TRANSGANG project. It investigates the relationship between the Milanese rap scene, the representations of the different local identities of the city and the spatiality that they produce, considering the positions of a group of young artists (rappers, singers, and video makers). The second, by César Andrade Arteaga and José Sánchez-García (Universitat Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona), presents an unusual point of view: instead of showing the use of gangster and street imagery in rap production, it describes how rap is in turn used – also to claim social demands – by members of gangs and street groups (in this specific case, by a Spanish 'chapter' of the Latin Kings, a gang born in the United States among groups of Latin American migrants in the 1960s and then expanded globally).

The second section, "Dietro le quinte", presents some research notes written by an urbanist (Nicolò Molinari – IUAV, University of Venice) and an urban sociologist (Filippo Borreani – University of Turin) on the correlations among trap, marginal neighbourhoods, and violence, referring to the scene of Barriera di Milano

neighbourhood (Turin). The word "ambivalence" (*ambivalenza* in Italian) appears very often in their text: between marginality and escape, joy and depression, stigma and territorial marketing, 'street' credibility and criminal consequences.
The third section, called "Focus", presents four articles, two in Spanish and two in Italian. Jordi Nofre Mateo (CICS.NOVA of Lisboa) examines the connection between the ghettoisation of a neighbourhood in Barcelona – a result of public policies devoted to urban regeneration and community intervention, according to the author – and the emergence of a Spanish Drill local scene, a subgenre of trap music. Frank Marcon and Mara Raissa (Universidade Federal de Sergipe) reflect on the relationship between hip-hop and feminism in Brasil, focusing on the city of Aracaju. Cristina Catalanotti (IUAV, University of Venice) and Giuliano Scala (Aix-Marseille University and University of Naples Federico II) develop an intersection between urban and popular music studies considering the city of Naples and its historical rap scene of the 1990s. Finally, Guido Belloni and Laura Boschetti (CODICI) compares the Milanese rap scene to the French one, specifically focusing on some rhymes of contemporary rappers.
The fourth section, "Osservatorio", collects three articles. Emanuele Belotti (IUAV, University of Venice), rapper and sociologist – undoubtedly one of the principal references for rap studies in Italy nowadays – presents an article that, from the lyrics of some songs of the Italian artist Marracash, speaks of the spatial inequality and social marginalisation that affect many poor Italian adolescents. Andrea Di Giovanni e Vittoria Paglino (Polytechnic of Milan) reflect on the narratives of trap music describing two neighbourhoods of Pioltello, one of the 133 municipalities of the Metropolitan Area of Milan. Roberto de Angelis (Sapienza, University of Rome) develops some comparative notes on rap and trap between Milan and Rome.
The fifth section, "Recensioni", includes a review written by Stefano Pontiggia (Polytechnic of Milan) of Emanuele Belotti's short book titled "Birds in the trap". The review specifically offers an interesting analysis on the commercial aspects related to rap music industry. The sixth one ("Striscia") proposes some pages taken by the graphic novel The Notorious B.I.G. (one of the most influential rappers in history), by Antonio Solinas e Paolo Gallina, published in Italy by Becco Giallo in 2021.
Finally, the seventh and last session ("Portfolio") presents a

photo-essay prepared by Rossella Ferro (a master's student at the Polytechnic of Milan) and Niside Panebianco (a master's student at the London Metropolitan University). The photo-essay presents some reflections on the everyday life and growth paths of young people living in some buildings of the social housing neighbourhood of San Siro (Milan), and aims to question the mainstream narratives that stigmatise the marginal areas of Italy's richest city.

Taken together, all the essays form an interdisciplinary, multilingual and comparative issue that combines written texts, lyrics, photos, and illustrations. We believe that, if read transversely, the contributions, in their heterogeneity, offer four themes which could set up an investigative agenda, that until now has been underexplored in urban studies, at least in Italy and Spain. The next paragraph of this introduction will discuss them.

Some emergent themes

The first theme has to do with the relationship between rap and the city itself. As emphasised by the more classical works developed in the field of rap studies mentioned above, all the contributions of this special issue highlight the importance of this connection. Rap is a manifestation of the street (Marcon and Raissa, in this issue), that shows a close connection to the places where it originated from (Belloni and Boschetti, in this issue). The reasons identified by the authors concern the history of rap music and the urban imaginary it has developed, but also the availability of musical infrastructures that are more easily accessible in certain cities (labels, producers, recording studios, clubs, etc. – see Benetta, in this issue). On the one hand, the relationship between rap and the city is hyper localised by being rooted in single neighbourhoods, streets, or blocks; on the other hand, it is universalised by proposing a new model of identification for young people coming from global peripheries who experience the negative effects of late capitalism first-hand, such as the widening of inequalities, flexibilisation of labour relations, social insecurity, and so on (Molinari and Borreani, in this issue). Furthermore, rap can also show territorialisation processes that pass through original narrations of the city, a language that «reports specific relationships with space,

outlining new geographies» (Catalanotti and Scala, in this issue), regarding for example the opposition between city centre and peripheries, social housing and private neighbourhoods, or among different marginalised neighbourhoods.
Precisely within this process of territorialisation, the second theme that we would like to stress concerns the representation of urban space, between resistance and social reproduction. Here rap emerges in all its ambiguity. What city does rap describe and why? In being a musical culture on the one hand and a commodity on the other, rap constantly evokes the question of its authenticity (Trede, 2019). The authors of this special issue discuss this challenging aspect, elaborating different positions. Nofre, for example, interprets the contemporary Spanish drill as a clear externalisation of "grammars and practices of resistance and protest" against ghettoising urban policies and the racialised repression that young residents in marginalised neighbourhoods of Barcelona are subjected to (Nofre, in this issue). The same dynamic seems to be found in the city of Aracaju (Marcon and Raissa, in this issue) and in the Italian rap tradition of the 1990s, more linked to the world of "centri sociali" (usually occupied and self-managed political squats) and youth political protests (Catalanotti and Scala, in this issue).
Other authors prefer to describe this concern in a more nuanced way. Belotti perfectly explains how the ability of rap to emerge in the cultural industry (especially since 2000s) does not make it an instrument of political subjectivation. However, its imaginaries and meanings display and portray the «socio-economic subordination of those who carry them», i.e. a proto-political attitude that we need to recognise (Belotti, in this issue). Similarly, Molinari and Borreani define rap as a controversial phenomenon, in which through subsumption mechanisms, the market has managed to capitalise on imaginaries that show (often in a grotesque way) conditions of fragility and (urban) poverty, and at the same time that originate from them (Molinari and Borreani, in this issue).
With respect to this, the position of Di Giovanni and Paglino is quite radical. In their opinion, rap constructs "selective and strongly intentional" territorial representations, a hyper reality defined by an imaginary that tends to generalise the narrative on the periphery, «homologating the different contexts, bringing the irreducible variety of situations back to clichés» (Di Giovanni

and Paglino, in this issue). In other words, the rappers (at least the Milanese ones), through their videos and their songs, do not tell anything specific about their cities and their neighbourhoods, but only about their way of representing them.

Among these different interpretations, Belloni and Boschetti propose a possible synthesis: underlining the potential social criticism of rap, its proto-political dimension, or its 'authenticity', does not mean not considering its criticalities (Stephens and Wright, 2000). If inequality and exclusion are intersectional, rap is not necessarily so. By starting from circumscribed experiences, rap necessarily amplifies partial points of view (Belloni e Boschetti, in this issue). Furthermore, the rap scene is not a flat and homogeneous surface. These partial points of view can dialogue and clash, as highlighted for example by Marcon with respect to the crews of feminist Brazilian rappers, who try to make their way into a basically patriarchal and sexist artistic milieu (Marcon and Raissa, in this issue). The same goes for the different sub-genres of rap, each with its own specific languages and narratives (Sánchez-García and Feixa, 2020).

The third theme we want to underline is related to rap and violence. Rather than focusing on the criminal imaginaries produced and reproduced by the rap artists, some authors of this special issue shift their attention to the institutionalised violence and repression that we can find at the basis of the construction of those imaginaries. Prison is a leitmotif continually evoked and normalised by rappers, a close reality, experienced in first person or through the stories of friends and relatives (see Wacquant, 2000). The same goes for the police, the tangible institutional enemy to vent one's anger against (see Fassin, 2011). Contemporary rap and above all some of its sub-genres such as trap and drill show how some areas of our cities are subject to a stigmatising criminalisation that refers to often unspoken urban hierarchies (see Nofre, in this issue). However, prison and the conflictual relationship with the police become a source of pride, an element to display in rap rhymes (Molinari and Borreani, in this issue). Ostentation of violence turns out to be a rejection of the social and inter-generational re-production of inequalities (Belotti, in this issue). The matter of representations and their ambiguity emerge again.

The fourth theme has to do with gender issues within this relationship between rap and the city. This is the main concern

discussed by Marcon and Raissa analysing the feminist rap scene in Aracaju. If in subcultural studies rap analysis was mainly focused on male youth practices, this article highlights the circumstances in which women began to divide and dispute the public rap scene. Women are claiming their right to participation and exposure in public space, in this case through urban street culture developed in the peripheries of the city, exposing their bodies and their voices and articulating and organising their own groups, their collectives and their public actions. Usually, if rap challenges the political hegemonic discourses, economic deprivation and the failure of formal education to acquire musical, production and technologic skills, it does not challenge the gender and social norms of popular classes. In different contexts, women rappers are suffering the discrimination of their male counterparts. On the contrary, Aracaju shows the emergence of a "feminist" rap which denounces gender inequalities.

The same process can be found elsewhere. As a Tunisian rapper explains during José Sánchez-García fieldwork, rap is *"very macho"*, it reflects the male hegemonic discourses on women that maintains the subjugated female perceptions, aspirations and perspectives. The analyses of lyrics of several Tunisian rap's reveal a similar imaginary related to the young male members of the lower classes of popular neighbourhoods: young women are often desirable objects that could be 'bought' (Sánchez-García and Feixa, 2020). At the end, gender inequalities and conflicts – both in rap production and practices – show that these local 'politicised' spaces produced by rap are far from being homogeneous and equal also from a gender perspective.

Conclusions

Rap music provides opportunities that allow youngsters, especially those from the lower classes, to imagine a life horizon with a degree of hope and escape from the peripheries of the social life and from multiple forms of marginalisation in Western societies and the Global South (Sánchez García, 2018). This introduction of the main topics covered in the articles that follow testify that young rappers navigate in difficult circumstances caused by poverty, fragile economies, authoritarian and corrupt governments in conflict, globalised

and intergenerational struggles. Those young people are extremely critical, frustrated, and sometimes overwhelmed by their impotence. In this context, each of the groups presented, combining global and local resources, constructs spaces of possibility, in a physical and symbolic way, which give them livelihoods, cultural practices, scenarios for political disruption, identity ascription and individual dignity.

The territorialisation in peripherical urban spaces of this cultural practices, which often do not renounce occupying the central spaces of the city or passively accept their marginalisation (as women rappers) is a fundamental variable when exploring the conflicts and mediations among the practitioners and with the authorities trying to control the public space. Youth groups create "border spaces" as "safe spaces" for transgression. These border spaces are located on the margins of the social world, so that subjects can think of themselves as subjects between two worlds. In this way, rap and hip-hop practitioners constitute border spaces that use strategies from both the global world and local memory and practices, conferring power to that space that young people re-signify as response spaces. Thus – also according to the theoretical perspective of the TRANSGANG project (Feixa *et al*., 2019) – we understand these spaces of sociability of youth groups as border areas between the subalternity produced by modernisation and colonisation processes, and the marginalisation that considers the members of youth groups as separate subjects who do not accept the options or conditions that (from power) are presented or imposed on them (Mignolo, 2015).

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