

Rap's Dirty South

From Subculture to Pop Culture

In a broad analysis encompassing regional history, cultural geography, and hip-hop aesthetics, Matt Miller's exploration of hip-hop in the U.S. "South Coast" offers a welcome respite from the frequent emphasis on east-west dynamics. According to Miller, the "Dirty South" is more than an offhanded spatial title but a discursive articulation of identity and difference that Southern artists invest with intense value and meaning. Southern hip-hop artists proudly celebrate their regional styles, accents, and attitudes even as they confront stereotypes and wider misperceptions from those who live elsewhere.

On display here are the circulating perceptions of urban-rural dichotomies as well as the distinctions between North and South that have, since the nation's inception, been informed by deeper issues including race, slavery, freedom and emancipation. Black southerners confront these regional characteristics directly with rap and hip-hop presenting new media apparatuses through which to challenge and subvert the dominant symbols of white repression that persist. We also see here how the "marginal" status of Southern rappers functions in a dual sense as a barrier to industrial access and as a bond of sorts; the symbolic values of "the Dirty South" produce shared affect and regional pride as well as distinguishing artists within larger nation-wide contexts.

Rap's Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop Culture

Matt Miller

"I'm from the dirty, filthy, nasty Dirty South."—Cee-Lo (Sanneh).

In the mid 1990s, a new phrase, "Dirty South," began to gain currency within the subculture of rap music. Introduced in a 1995 song by the Atlanta-based group Goodie Mob ("Dirty South"), the term became a standard way of referring to the American South among rap music listeners, commentators, and artists, both within and outside the South. Within five years, the idea of the Dirty South had passed from subcultural to broader usage, and had become a common way to refer to the South and its various rap music scenes within music journalism from all over the English-speaking world. Since that time, the concept has penetrated into popular culture to the degree that it has been appropriated or referenced by country and blues bands and has also appeared in such diverse and nonmusical contexts as high school sports teams, television ads for Pepsi, and the most recent collection of short stories by Elmore Leonard.

My investigation of the Dirty South idea began with the questions, why or how is this imagined space dirty, and how has the way it is imagined changed over time? I discovered that the meaning attached to the term is not fixed but fluid, shifting in accordance with the needs and pre-conceptions of those who employ it. Both aspects of this phrase—"dirty" and "South"—are problematic and wide-ranging in their meanings and associations. Dirt and dirtiness have negative connotations of uncleanliness, disorder (Douglas), corruption, unfairness, and sexuality, but dirt can also be a powerful symbol for place and land (Yaeger), and, in a biblical sense, for human life itself. At the same time, the idea of the South and its role in American political and cultural life—often bearing connotations of poverty, ignorance, rurality, and violence—has been a unique and volatile force in the culture of the U.S. The South exists less as an actual, coherent geographic region and more as a space which is imagined on collective and personal levels. This fluidity of meaning also applies to interpretations of southern history, which often break down along racial lines; the collective experience of African Americans in the South has produced a chain of negative associations that extends into the present day, while many whites subscribe to a more romanticized interpretation of the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy. In many states, continuing tension between blacks and whites often takes the form of debates over Confederate symbolism in official contexts.

In the pages that follow, I offer a brief history of rap music in southern cities in order to situate Goodie Mob's song "Dirty South" within cultural, historical, and economic contexts. I subject

the song's lyrics to close analysis in order to better understand the representation of the South as put forth by the rappers of Goodie Mob. I then examine the ways in which their articulation of this space was received first within the subcultural community of rap music listeners and subsequently by critics and journalists on a national and international level. I demonstrate that as more and more people began to employ (and thus define) the phrase "Dirty South," the understanding of its meanings, both overt and implicit, underwent significant shifts.

Several conclusions emerge after tracing the evolution of the Dirty South. First, the idea of what makes the Dirty South dirty underwent a significant shift as the term became accepted within a larger cultural context. The Dirty South envisioned by Goodie Mob ("Dirty South") and their artistic collaborators in 1995 and the Dirty South as understood by critics and journalists in 2000 share many of the same basic components but differ greatly in emphasis. Second, the creation of a distinct Dirty South identity has been shaped by forces both external and internal to the American South, with outsiders reacting through their preconceptions about the South and insiders reacting, sometimes out of their own economic self-interest, to their perception of those preconceptions. This extremely complex interplay of motives and influences result in a Dirty South which is far from a "natural" space within the larger context of American rap music. Rather, like country and western's cowboys and "hillbillies," it is a contrivance born out of the structures of artistic and economic dominance that have determined the development of rap music as a commercial art form. Finally, with regard to the Dirty South as a new aesthetic movement, while some general tendencies and trends emerge, it is impossible to narrow down the rap music produced in major Southern cities to one set of practices or conventions.

Rap Music in the South: A Brief History

Since rap music's initial development in New York City during the mid 1970s, it has been characterized by the production and consumption of place-based identities, to the extent that "representing" one's home town or neighborhood has become a defining element of the genre. The exact reasons why rap music seems to be keenly attuned to issues of place remain unclear, although they are likely related to the lack of adequate representation of marginalized communities in the mass media environment, a historically-rooted trend which continues to the present day. While rap music has become a powerful vehicle for the expression and transmission of place-based identities, these are not static in character or number—they are created and renegotiated in response to changes within the field of rap music production, as well as larger social forces.

The establishment of a particular place within the national geography of rap music depends upon a certain amount of production which is recognized by the wider listener base and critical community as representative of that place and therefore offering a unique perspective on the art form. The reputation or amount of prestige attached to particular places is also fluid, although a self-reinforcing tendency usually predominates once a certain amount of momentum has been achieved in terms of production and infrastructure. For this reason, the range of possible expressions of geographic identity has been expanding along with the infrastructure of the music itself. Initially limited to the various neighborhoods and boroughs of New York, the geographic repertoire of rap music has been steadily expanding and evolving in order to accommodate artists from other cities who began to express themselves using the new form.

From its point of origin, the production of rap music spread first to other large cities in the Northeast, then jumped the continent to colonize southern California. With the rise of greater Los Angeles as an up-and-coming center for rap music production, new forms of place-based identities were introduced. Although New Yorkers still dominated the rap music industry in the Northeast, they began to be grouped with artists and producers from nearby large cities such as Philadelphia to form a cultural bloc called "the East Coast." Meanwhile, the Los Angeles-based scene engendered another imagined region in the rap music universe, "the West Coast."

Economic and creative tensions between those who identified with one of these two imagined spaces were reflected in the development of distinct aesthetic and lyrical tendencies that were associated with each contingent. Although these differences were often more imagined than real, they did exist to some extent, as rap music from the "West Coast" during the mid-to-late '80s was often characterized by slower tempos and "gangsta"-themed lyrics. The perceived stylistic and thematic tensions between "East Coast" and "West Coast" artists were overlaid upon a pre-existing image of dangerous and violent black masculinity which constituted an important feature of rap music's discourse.

Until the late 1980s, major label investment in rap from southern cities was largely nonexistent. Independent record label owners initiated the development of the rap music infrastructure in the large cities of the South in the 1980s by producing records by local artists. What success these artists did enjoy was local, or, at best, regional. Building upon such local momentum in cities like Houston and Miami, artists and companies emerged that showed potential for wider audience appeal.

Luther "Luke Skyywalker" Campbell (born 1960), who grew up in the poverty-wracked Liberty City area of Miami, was able to create a new and lucrative market in the late 1980s for bass-heavy club music with simple, sex-oriented call-and-response lyrics such as those featured in the song "Me So Horny". Throughout the late 80s and early 90s Campbell achieved wide commercial successes despite, or perhaps because of, a highly publicized and antagonistic relationship with various state and county officials, as well as with self-appointed moral crusader Jack Thompson. Campbell entered into various distribution agreements with Atlantic and Island during these years but always maintained a significant amount of independence in his business dealings. Campbell, whose net worth was estimated at 11 million dollars in 1989, was forced into bankruptcy in 1995 after a series of lawsuits brought by former associates, prominent among them Atlanta-based rapper Peter "MC Shy-D" Jones (Smith). Campbell was the first southerner to grace the cover of rap music magazine *The Source*, appearing on the January 1991 issue as "Hip-Hop's Man of the Year."

In Houston, James Smith, an African American used-car salesman, and Cliff Blodget, a white software engineer with an interest in gangsta rap who had moved to the city from Seattle, founded the Rap-A-Lot label in 1987. The label was pushed into the national spotlight in 1990, when Rap-A-Lot teamed up with Rick Rubin's New York-based company Def American to release an album by the Houston group The Geto Boys. Citing the violent and misogynist content of many of the group's lyrics, manufacturer Digital Audio Disc Corp. refused to press the album. Subsequently, the agreement with Geffen, Def American's distributor, fell apart. Rubin was able to secure a last-minute distribution deal for the album with WEA, a subsidiary of Warner Bros., but this association would be short-lived; the company declined to distribute the group's next album, *We Can't Be Stopped*, which was eventually distributed through Priority Records in 1991. Rap-A-Lot continued its association with Priority until 1995, when Smith moved the label's distribution to the Virgin subsidiary Noo Trybe (Rosen). Although Rap-A-Lot has probably passed its peak in terms of sales and artistic relevance, its success and that of associated artists like The Geto Boys and Scarface (a member of the group who has had several successful solo releases) has paved the way for a flourishing rap music scene based in Houston. The Geto Boys were featured on the cover of *The Source* in February of 1992.

The history of rap music in Atlanta dates back to 1980, when Shurfine, a white-owned label that released records by soul artists like The Mighty Hannibal in the 1960s, released *Space Rap* by Danny Renee and the Charisma Crew. Throughout the 1980s, independent labels continued to play a significant role in the city's rap scene, but major labels invested significantly more in the development of Atlanta's rap music infrastructure in the late 80s and early 90s than they did in Houston or Miami. Labels such as So So Def and LaFace helped establish Atlanta as a center of production, and Atlanta-based groups like Arrested Development, Kriss Kross, OutKast, and Goodie Mob met with considerable success in national markets.

Antonio "L.A." Reid and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds (born 1956 in Cincinnati and 1959 in Indianapolis, respectively) started producing music together when they were both members of the R & B group The Deele in the late 1980s. In 1989, they moved to Atlanta and started the LaFace Records label as a joint venture with national label Arista—an event described as "a pivotal moment . . . in Atlanta's role as a music center" (Paris). The features of the city that attracted them included its "unhurried pace, convenient airport, relatively cheap suburban office space and mostly untapped reserves of raw talent" (Dollar). LaFace initially focused on R & B acts like Jermaine Jackson, Damian Dame, and TLC but would soon become a major force in Atlanta's rap music scene in the mid 1990s with acts such as OutKast and Goodie Mob. A 1995 extension of their agreement with Arista was "reportedly worth \$10 million" (Flick).

Jermaine Dupri (born 1973) grew up in the College Park area of Atlanta and achieved enormous commercial success with his So So Def label before the age of twenty. He benefited greatly in his endeavors from the experience and music industry connections of his father, Michael Mauldin, a former musician who managed rap and R & B artists. Mauldin was one of the coordinators for the New York City Fresh Fest, which in 1984 was the first rap music show to tour nationally, and in which Dupri performed as a breakdancer with the group Whodini, beginning when he was only twelve years old. He started producing music in his teenage years, and in 1991, at the age of eighteen, started the So So Def label. Dupri secured a distribution deal with Columbia, and, with his father acting as Chief Operating Officer, achieved breakthrough success for the new label with the 1991 debut album by teenage rappers Kriss Kross, *Totally Krossed Out*, which would eventually sell six million copies. Despite this and other achievements, he complained in 1993, "Being from Atlanta, it's hard to get respect from people in New York and L.A." (Murray "So So Successful").

The Atlanta-based group called Arrested Development, led by rapper Todd "Speech" Thomas, put forth an early expression of a selfconsciously southern identity within the realm of rap music. A native of Milwaukee, Thomas spent his summers with his grandmother in rural Tennessee and eventually moved south to attend the Art Institute of Atlanta. Partnering with Savannah, Georgia native Tim "DJ Headliner" Barnes, Thomas formed Arrested Development, a "southern-folk-ethnic-rap" group (White) which would eventually grow to include several other members. Hailed by music critics as an antidote to the self-destructive tendencies of gangsta rap, the group won two Grammys for their 1992 debut album on Chrysalis *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life of . . .* (which sold over 1.5 million copies), before breaking up after a less successful follow-up album. The song "Tennessee"—the group's most prominent engagement with the South as a lyrical subject—tells of a narrator in search of an ancestral homeland, which he finds in the South, where he "climbed the trees [his] forefathers hung from." Through the use of such themes, as well as visual imagery in the form of stereotypically rural clothing such as overalls in contrast to the flashy gear preferred by many rappers, the group developed a critical reputation for their "distinctly southern style" (Dilday). Their music (sometimes characterized as "alternative rap") featured positive, spiritually uplifting lyrics and a "world music" aesthetic. The sense of southernness conveyed by the group was more closely linked to northern urban blacks' feelings of nostalgia and rootlessness than to the rap music of the South's major cities, which generally bore more resemblance to the bass-heavy, call-and-response lub music of 2 Live Crew.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, southern artists like The Geto Boys and 2 Live Crew engaged in the traditional rap music practice of "representing" their neighborhoods and cities in their lyrics, but they did not express an identity that encompassed the entire South. Similarly, southern producers and label owners like Jermaine Dupri who complained about marginalization within the rap music industry could only imagine the South in terms of what it lacked in comparison to the more established centers of production. These perceptions would begin to change in the mid 1990s, as artists, producers, label owners, and ordinary listeners from southern cities like Atlanta, New Orleans, Houston, Memphis, and Miami contributed to the construction of a new imagined

space within the rap music universe, one which could operate on the same level as “East Coast” or “West Coast.”

Several factors, including the growing investment in rap music in the large cities of the South and a certain degree of creative stagnation in the established centers of production, led to an opening in the market for music that expressed alternate regionally based identities. Artists and producers from the urban centers of the American South would fill this void, as listeners and corporations from both within and outside the South scrambled to stake their claim to this newly discovered territory. An increased interest on the part of critics and listeners in these local scenes from large southern cities—including but not limited to Atlanta, New Orleans, Miami, Houston, Memphis, and Richmond—brought to light many previously unknown artists and introduced the rest of the nation to new aesthetic and thematic interpretations of the art form. The developments in these southern cities also formed the basis for a new imagined space and an associated cultural identity, which grounded itself in the phrase “Dirty South.”

The term entered the public discourse by way of a song, “Dirty South,” which was featured on the Atlanta-based group Goodie Mob’s 1995 debut album, *Soul Food*. While it is possible that the term was used in some circles of southern rap music listeners before it was codified in Goodie Mob’s “Dirty South,” the song seems to have served as the catalyst for its transformation to an imagined space claimed by many southerners and recognized by many from outside the South. At first, only rap insiders of various sorts picked up the term, which competed with such other contenders as “third coast” or “south coast,” but by the year 2000, it was fully entrenched, and references to the Dirty South peppered the entertainment sections of major newspapers all over the country. As the phrase passed from Goodie Mob’s song to the larger sphere of popular culture, the contours of this imagined region would undergo significant transformations.

The Goodie Mob’s Dirty South

Along with the title track, “Dirty South” was one of the more commercially successful songs from Goodie Mob’s 1995 debut album *Soul Food*. Although its authorship is often reduced to “Goodie Mob” among rap music listeners and in the popular press, the song features lyrics written and voiced by guest rappers (and fellow residents of the East Point suburb of Atlanta) Cool Breeze and Big Boi (of the rap duo OutKast). Big Gipp is the only member of Goodie Mob who actually raps on the song—the other members (Cee-Lo, Khujo, and T-Mo) perform back-up vocals. Nevertheless, the members of the group who did not rap on the song have made public commentary about its meaning and that of the term that it popularized. After the release of the song as a single, a *Billboard* reviewer described it as “another southern-bred tale from Atlanta’s Goodie Mob [that] introduces listeners to the drug trade south of the Mason-Dixon line” and complains that “the insightful lyrics that Goodie Mob usually display are metaphorically lost in this yarn” (“Single Reviews”). While the lyrics could be said to fit this general description, to dismiss them as meaningless or trite ignores important features that differentiate “Dirty South” from similarly themed works.

In the first stanza of the song’s chorus, the group makes reference to the Red Dogs, a paramilitary drug enforcement squad in Atlanta: “One to the two the three the four/Them dirty Red Dogs done hit the door/And they got everybody on they hands and knees/And they ain’t gonna leave until they find them keys [i.e., kilos].” The remainder of the chorus describes the effects of several illicit drugs, then proceeds to make an epistemic challenge to the listeners, who are imagined as plural, male, and African American: “See powder gets you hyper, reefer makes you calm/Cigarettes give you cancer, woo-woos make you dumb/What you niggas know about the Dirty South?” [Note: For the purposes of my study, I have used the album version of “Dirty South”; in the radio version, the chorus is changed to “What you really know about the Dirty

South?"] The rappers use the local context of Atlanta as a framework around which they imagine a Dirty South characterized by repressive police tactics and a drug-dealing "gangsta" culture. The lyrics also convey an overarching theme of unfairness or injustice that draws upon imagery from previous visions of "the South."

These underlying themes of unfairness, injustice, and betrayal are explored in several ways within "Dirty South." On the CD release of *Soul Food*, "Dirty South" is preceded by a skit titled "Red Dog" which sets the tone for the song that follows. In a brief exchange, a man who identifies himself by the nickname "Straight Shooter" pounds on the door of a drug house or apartment and asks the respondent to "hit [him] three times" (sell him three bags of drugs). Immediately after the transaction is completed, members of the Red Dog counternarcotics squad break down the door, ordering all to the floor with guns drawn. It seems that the ironically named "Straight Shooter" was helping the Red Dogs in a drug sting. In the Dirty South, no one can be trusted.

Along these same lines, one of several narratives or narrative fragments within the song revolves around a scheme in which the narrator scams the nation's then chief executive in a drug deal: "Now if dirty Bill Clinton fronted me some weight/Told me keep two, bring him back eight/And I only brought him five and stuck his ass for three/Do you think that Clampett will sic his goons on me?" Used in this manner, the reference to Bill Clinton speaks to the complicity of (white) economic and political elites in the drug trade. The playful alteration of Bill Clinton's name to Jed Clampett (a reference to a character from the 1960s television series *The Beverly Hillbillies*) reveals a conflicted engagement with certain perceptions of the South, as well as with the political persona of Clinton himself. The Arkansas politician, whose rise to national power coincided with the institutional development of Atlanta's rap music scene, inspired both time-worn stereotypes of the backwards "good ole boys" of the Old South and a celebration of a capitalist, non-racist "New South." Clinton seemed to embody a racially inflected southern identity that included both white and African American elements—an intersection of "Bubba" and "our first black president." Still, one should not assume too much sympathy for Clinton on the part of the members of Goodie Mob. In "Goodie Bag," another song on the 1995 *Soul Food* album, the rapper first conflates Clinton and fellow southern politician Newt Gingrich, then complains that he "can't keep Billy and his uncle [Sam?] out [his] fuckin' goodie bag." New South politicians like Clinton and Gingrich are integrated into an imagined space where unfairness reigns, and where law enforcement is nothing but an extension of a corrupt and racist power structure—in other words, a space that looks a lot like the "Old South" from the perspective of many African Americans.

On the local level, the lyrics contain an engagement of sorts with the issue of police practices in Atlanta. Just what is "dirty" about the Red Dogs goes unsaid, but one possibility is that the adjective refers to the unnecessary violence and gang-like behavior that seem to plague police units of this type. The Red Dogs merged into the regular force after several of their number were dismissed or disciplined for reasons of corruption and excessive force. The unit was involved in several controversial shootings, including one which took the life of eight-year-old Xavier Bennett in November of 1991 at the East Lake Meadows housing complex (Scruggs). The youngster's accidental death at the hands of police was mentioned in the song "Police Brutality," released by Atlanta-based rap group Success-N-Effect in 1992.

In addition to offering an (admittedly oblique) critique of power relations in the U.S. and the South in particular, the lyrics engage with the issues of slavery and its ramifications on the level of individual identity. Stating "See life's a bitch then you figure out/Why you really got dropped in the Dirty South/See in the third grade this is what you told/You was bought, you was sold," the rapper addresses the psychological effects upon African American identity formation that exist in the wake of the South's history of slavery and discrimination. Implied in this lyric is the suggestion that the educational system plays a role in the transmission of a racialized identity which

de-emphasizes the agency of African Americans. The insinuation of these lines is that being born (black) in the South is a kind of curse, one that hinges upon black children being “told/You was bought, you was sold.” Once a black person has been able to “figure out” why they were unlucky enough to be born into the American South, the song implies, the logical reaction is to suspend all rules of fairness in the pursuit of a criminal lifestyle and its material rewards.

Except for a brief reference to Atlanta’s Piedmont Park, “Dirty South” unfolds against the backdrop of East Point (a small town within the sprawl of “metro Atlanta” which still maintains separate municipal government), as well as the proximate Southwest Atlanta area (referred to as “Southwest” or “the SWATs” in other songs on *Soul Food*). Within the political economy of the rap industry and listener base, the lyrics challenge those who would dismiss either the creative potential of the South or the determination of its inhabitants with its insistent question: “What you niggas know about the Dirty South[?]” The desire to “represent” is expressed through various references to Goodie Mob associates and their territories: “Perry Homes to Herndon Homes, to all the Homes/Adamsville to Pool Creek, shit just don’t sleep in the Dirty South.” Within the text of the song, the act of mapping and local knowledge are intimately tied to the ability of drug dealers to avoid police: “See East Point Atlanta threw this road block/Talkin’bout all this blow traffic got to stop/So the big time players off John Freeman Way/Had to find themselves another back street to take.”

The verse rapped and written by Big Boi of OutKast presents another side of the Dirty South, one characterized by strip clubs, luxury cars, and objectified women. Whereas the Dirty South imagined by Cool Breeze and Big Gipp is a male space by virtue of its almost total absence of women, Big Boi—who built a simulacrum of a strip club stage in his home to act as “inspiration” for his rhyme writing (Murray, “The Poet and the Playa”)—allows their presence only as sexual objects and receptacles. In his rap, he does not address the themes of drug dealing, local knowledge and representation, and unfairness that characterize the verses contributed by the other rappers. Still, his vision of the Dirty South as strip club *demimonde* introduces elements that have proved significant and enduring in the popular understanding of the concept. Also noteworthy among these is an identification with southern speech patterns—“Kickin’ that same southern slang” (Goodie Mob, *Soul Food* LaFace Records, 1995)—that are perceived as distinctive.

In interviews following the release of “Dirty South,” members of Goodie Mob generally characterized it as a politicized indictment of an unreconstructed New South and stressed their desire to illuminate “the political side, the real historical side of Atlanta that everyone doesn’t really talk about” (Sarif 38). Many of their statements invoke the ongoing struggle, well engaged by 1996, over the presence of Confederate symbolism in the state flags of Georgia and South Carolina. A 1996 *St. Louis Dispatch* article (Hampel) cites group member T-Mo as “[saying] that the song portrays Atlanta as a racist stronghold where the confederate flag still waves for ‘good ole boys and slavery.’” In 1998, Big Gipp, another group member, maintained that “the symbols of slavery still stand in the South, and it’s evidence that the mentality still lives ... Ain’t too much changed; they just learned how to make it look a little bit better” (Vognar).

Wills Felin’s 2000 documentary film *The Dirty South: Raw and Uncut* features several interview portions in which the members of Goodie Mob expand on their notions of the South’s dirtiness. Continuing racism and white domination is the most prominent of these themes. As Khujo explains,

it’s just dirty in the form of ... racism, ... it’s still ... the old prune-face ass white folk who still run the ATL ... that’s what’s dirty about it, ’cause they still run it ... they run the ATL from the inside out. ... During the nighttime, the street is ours ... during the daytime they got white folk comin’ from all over Roswell, I’m talkin’ about Alpharetta, comin’ in just to run ATL out of these big buildings that they done fuck around and built downtown. That’s what dirty about it, you feel what I’m sayin’?

Big Gipp integrates themes of a rise in prominence of southern rap acts and the need for black economic empowerment to his comments about the meaning of "Dirty South," emphasizing the need to "start controlling this business and getting all the other folks up out of it so all of us can always eat, sleep, and go to the mailbox, just like everybody else."

Fellow group member Cee-Lo adds that the importance of the South lies in its civil rights legacy, portraying the region in metaphorical terms: "a great number of our black leaders ... come right from the South, so, the South is the heartland ... the South is ... a mother." Within the context of the film (but with larger correspondence to the entire Dirty South phenomenon), if the South is "a mother," then the strippers who make up the female interviewees in the film could be said to represent the flip side of a Madonna/whore binary. Big Gipp concludes that "at the end of the day, [the Dirty South is] all about family," as he mediates upon the material culture, spatial realities, and childrearing practices of southern black life: "Cadillacs, Lincolns, man ... I'm talking about bar-b-cue, back yards, big houses, man. ... Raised up by your Grandmama." Khujo's comments also touch upon themes of southern roots and family connections: "Now runaway slaves comin' back down to the South ... So it's like, before you down the South ... know what your roots are all about, 'cause without your roots you ain't gonna grow period, folk, and that what the dirty South is, dog."

Goodie Mob's assertions of anti-black racism and discrimination in the South and in "the ATL" in particular seem somewhat incongruous with recent data on the success of the black middle class in that city, often called a "black Mecca" for its combination of economic possibilities and historic civil rights legacy (Williams and Pearson). Their claims, however, should be considered in the context of the public discourse over official display of the Confederate "battle flag," which was featured prominently on Georgia's state flag from 1956 (when it was adopted as a statement against school desegregation) until 2001. The issue of confederate symbolism in the state flags of Georgia and Mississippi, as well as the presence of confederate flags atop the state capital buildings of Alabama and South Carolina, contribute to a racially charged debate that continues to the present day. Rappers from the South often use the potent symbol of the confederate flag to make the point that racism is still flourishing. In a skit featured on the debut album from Atlanta-based rappers OutKast, a pilot landing in Atlanta points out, "to the far left you can see the Georgia dome, which, by the way, still flies the confederate battle flag."

Complaints of black poverty and white economic domination contribute to another aspect of the South's (and Atlanta's) perceived dirtiness, one which is borne out by a recent investigation by Keating. In reference to the much-heralded Southern economic boom, he concluded in 2001 that in Atlanta, "the region's exceptional economic development did not ameliorate previous inequalities; it deepened them." Keating further argues that "business-driven public policy plays an integral role in augmenting the disadvantages of the economy" and reports that "49% of blacks looking for homes in the Atlanta area in 1989 reported that they had been discriminated against by real-estate agents" (1-2, 59). Despite these barriers, African Americans in Atlanta and other southern cities did make significant economic progress during the 1990s, but this was often unevenly distributed with regard to class, disproportionately benefiting middle- and upper-class blacks in suburban areas (Williams and Pearson). Framed in this context, Goodie Mob's perception of the prevalence of economic disparities and racial discrimination in "the ATL" would seem to be not so far off the mark. In addition to these economic woes, issues surrounding traffic gridlock and the use of public space during the annual African American college spring break event called Freaknik were a continuing source of racial friction in Atlanta during the mid-to-late 1990s. Whereas Khujo complained of white suburbanites flooding the city center to occupy "these big buildings that they done fuck around and built," a parallel side to this unofficial segregation of public space was the subject of comment by *The Source's* Wilder, who observed in late 1994, "who's not chilling downtown is white people. Downtown Atlanta in the daytime is like thirty to one, blacks to whites."

Interviewed in 2001, New Orleans-based rap mogul Master P also referred to larger socioeconomic forces in his explanation of the term "Dirty South": "That's what we mean by the Dirty South—poverty, projects, congestion—all that. It's everything that's going on" (Wartofsky). Although he does not mention racism as an element of the "dirtiness," a review of recent economic data from the New Orleans area indicates similar inequalities to those seen in Atlanta. A 2002 article in the *Times-Picayune* used data from the 2000 Census to conclude "the median income for white households remains nearly twice that of black households in the New Orleans area." The article goes on to cite sociologist John Logan's observation that "the gap between white and black earnings in the New Orleans area remains striking," lagging behind a national trend toward a narrowing of that disparity. Logan points out that blacks often continue to live in "much worse neighborhoods" than whites with comparable incomes, a fact which he attributes to housing discrimination. As a result, blacks in New Orleans often face "a higher neighborhood crime rate and public schools of lesser quality," regardless of their income level (Warner and Scallan).

These perceptions about the South and its hostility to the interests of African Americans may be better understood in light of political and economic dynamics on the national level. While the New South ideology that developed in the wake of legal segregation contributed to the economic boosterism and reluctance to address issues related to racism and black poverty on the part of southern politicians like Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, their attitudes cannot be separated from the radical rejection of issues of racial and gender equity that began in the Reagan era. Carnoy describes the ideological undercurrents of the 1992 presidential election:

Twelve years of conservative rule had a major impact on the ideology of racial inequality. Not only were race relations put on the back burner, but employers, teachers, social workers, and state and local governments all got the message that racial inequality was mainly blacks' problem, not one of government responsibility. The ultimate result was an ideological shift that forcefully and negatively affected minorities' ability to overcome entrenched discriminatory practices (219).

Although Bill Clinton's ideals about race and social justice were certainly more progressive than those of either of his two predecessors, many of his positions and policies reflected the rightward shift in American political discourse and policy that took place during the Reagan-Bush years. His failure to address the racial bias of the "war on drugs" and the resultant surge in incarcerated African Americans, as well as his support for radical welfare reform, represented a continuation of the most mean-spirited neoconservative policies of the 1980s. As the lyrics of "Dirty South" suggest, many working and middle-class African Americans were aware of their continuing status as outsiders within the southern and the national contexts in the decades following the civil rights movement.

While "Dirty South" and its subsequent explication featured largely negative perceptions, a related recording by Goodie Mob adds an element of balance to the group's portrayal of the South. "Dirty South Remix" was released as a single in 1996 and features an uncredited (most likely owing to contractual obligations) guest appearance by New Orleans-based rapper Mystikal. The standard definition of a rap music remix, in which elements from the original work are recombined or altered, does not apply to "Dirty South Remix," which would be more appropriately titled "Dirty South, Part 2." The lyrics voiced by Mystikal and the four members of Goodie Mob are completely new—the only elements that remain from the original "Dirty South" are a small portion of the backing track and a minor vocal sample.

In "Dirty South Remix," a new chorus (rapped by Cee-Lo) is introduced, one which links southern speech patterns, southern violence, and a defensiveness regarding stereotypes projected from outside: "Just 'cause we kind when we speak/Out-of-towners think we weak/But if you disrespect me/We can show you we dirty/Dirty South." In contrast to "Dirty South," in which the

corrupt and lawless elements of the South are emphasized, the verses in "Dirty South Remix" feature references to distinctive features of the rappers' environment: "Born and became strong on this red clay soil/Pine cone fights and summer nights"; "Another scorcher—must be a day in ATL." The song does not appear on any of the group's albums, and, unlike "Dirty South," received virtually no media attention and never penetrated the Billboard charts. For this reason, the contribution of "Dirty South Remix" to the discourse around or understanding of the new conception of the South in rap music can be said to be much less than that of "Dirty South." Still, it gives us valuable insight into the ways that the South was imagined by these rappers.

Whatever Goodie Mob and their collaborators Cool Breeze, Big Boi, and Mystikal intended to express with the songs "Dirty South" and "Dirty South Remix," the Dirty South concept was quickly picked up by rap music aficionados, especially those located in the South. A post submitted to the Usenet forum rec.music.hip-hop on July 11, 1996 by a Texas-based contributor known as OverTime is one of the earliest instances of its use within this subculture of dedicated rap music listeners. OverTime's post, which appeared under the subject line "The DIRTY SOUTH!!!" not only employs the regionally based phrase and imagery introduced by Goodie Mob but also touches upon many of the issues and perceptions that they encapsulate.

According to OverTime, creative stagnation and excessive commercialization in the established centers of production make room for southern artists, who have not enjoyed the respect they are due: "everybody needs to recognize that the real underground shit in rap is coming out of the SOUTH COAST!!!! Both the east and the west are too commercialized." Like Goodie Mob's, OverTime's vision of the South is one riddled with contradictions. On one hand, the South is characterized by continuing white racism and discrimination: "Most Soutside [sic] rappers have their own record companies and labels because its no secret that white folks are racist and wont support you." On the other, the South is a cultural homeland for African Americans: "all yall follks NEED to come back home to the South Side [...] where yall roots are any way." OverTime cites the presence in the region of "most of the Historical Black Colleges & Universities" as evidence for this claim. Ultimately, he calls upon his peers to "cancel all the east v west beef" and "get wit the SOUTHSIDE and get on the Rise like them ELEVATORS," referring to a song "Elevators (Me & You)" by Atlanta-based rappers OutKast. In addition to putting forward some of the more abstract ideological issues invoked by the term "Dirty South," OverTime also provides an overview of the musical activity in the major creative centers of southern rap, which he breaks down along the lines of "Texas . . . Louisiana . . . Atlanta . . . Florida . . . plus a host of other artists from Tennessee, Arkansas, and all southern points between!!!"

OverTime's post also introduces the much contested idea of authenticity to the debate on the Dirty South. In addition to complaining about the commercialization of rap music from the established centers of production, he excoriates those who use the term "hip hop" to describe their music, prefacing his criticism with general praise for the diverse styles employed by southern artists:

The south coast has a huge diversity of artists, from gangsta to bass, and everything in between. Some even do 'hip hop' which to me is a code word for commercialization of the industry, just like the phrase 'keep it real' anyone who says this is a commercialized fake artist.

For OverTime, the Dirty South represented a space that had not yet been colonized by corporate forces interested in commercialization. If the Dirty South embodied some sort of underground authenticity, however, it would not do so for long.

Soon after the release of Goodie Mob's song, other rap artists began to appropriate the phrase "Dirty South." In 1996, the group Southern Playas released an uptempo dance song called "Dirty South Bass Track," while a compilation released in September of 1998 on the Memphis, Tennessee-based Dirty Harry Productions label featured a group calling themselves "The Dirty

South Boyz.” These two examples are relatively obscure in terms of sales, but the term was gaining currency among big-name rappers as well. In November of 1998, New Orleans-based rapper Mystikal released his album *Ghetto Fabulous*, which debuted at number five on the *Billboard* pop chart and number one on the R & B chart and which featured a collaboration with New Jersey-based rappers Naughty By Nature called “Dirty South, Dirty Jerz.” This use of the term especially highlights its potential to help locate southern artists within rap music’s imaginary landscape of regionally based identities. By 1999, the phrase had spread beyond the purely musical realm and started to be attached to businesses associated with the rap music subculture such as record and clothing stores, tattoo parlors, and hair stylists; it was also employed as a nickname for a high school football team in Riverdale, Georgia.

Dirty South—From Subculture to Pop Culture

At the same time that the Dirty South was being absorbed by the popular imagination on a grassroots level, the rap music industry in the South seemed to shift into high gear. Rappers and producers based in the urban centers of the South were making deals with national record companies and penetrating further and further into the *Billboard* charts and radio playlists all over the U.S. and beyond. The pent-up creativity of previously marginalized rappers and producers combined with the new economic possibilities introduced by the involvement of major labels and distributors like Universal, Atlantic, Loud, and BMG, among others, with the result that artists like OutKast and Mystikal were soon thrust into the forefront of commercial radio and retail sales. Meanwhile, the national press was beginning to take notice. Although Cooper had employed the term in its generic sense (i.e., not in specific reference to Goodie Mob’s song) in July of 1998 in the *Village Voice*, more mainstream newspapers and magazines (including those located in the South) did not begin to follow suit until several years later. By the year 2000, articles in the national press had begun to portray the Dirty South as both a region and as a “new movement” within the rap genre. In that year, a *Billboard* writer observed that “radio has been embracing all the ‘dirty South’ it can get its hands on” (“Rap”). In 2002, a writer combined the aesthetic with the economic in the following statement about Atlanta rapper Ludacris, who parlayed his role as a local radio DJ into a successful career as a rapper: “[He] is part of the hip-hop movement bubbling up and boiling over from the Dirty South the last several years with an inescapable ‘bounce’ sound that’s paying off for anyone involved” (Johnson).

For the majors who had established relationships with southern artists or labels early in the game (Arista/LaFace and Columbia/So So Def, both based in Atlanta), this trend paid dividends and drove their competitors to seek out new talent in the South. New Orleans was the next city to benefit from major label interest, with Priority teaming up with Master P’s No Limit in 1993 and Universal striking a deal with Cash Money in 1998. The new economic opportunities posed by the “Dirty South” have led others, such as New York mogul P. Diddy, to forge artistic and economic relationships with the creative communities based in the large cities of the South. The investment in southern rap on the part of large entertainment corporations, which had previously been restricted to early centers of production such as Atlanta and New Orleans, was spreading to other cities like Houston, Richmond, and Memphis.

A March 5, 2001 article by Wartofsky in the *Washington Post* indicates a burgeoning national awareness among followers of rap music that something of economic and creative importance was going on in some of the South’s major cities. Wartofsky sketches out the ownership and power centers of this new artistic region:

The Dirty South belongs to the rappers who record for No Limit . . . It belongs to another New Orleans powerhouse, Cash Money Records . . . Atlanta rappers like OutKast and Goodie Mob are of the Dirty South, and so are Memphis-bred pioneers Eightball and

MJG and the rest of Houston's Suave House, as well as Rap-a-Lot and Atlanta's Organized Noise.

The article goes on to cite sales figures of these artists, most notably the quadruple-platinum status of rapper Juvenile's album, *400 Degreez*, on Cash Money Records. The years preceding the article were certainly groundbreaking in terms of the level of success that southern artists enjoyed. In the five years following the 1993 signing of a multi-million dollar manufacturing and distribution deal with New York-based Priority records, New Orleans' "visionary underground capitalist" Master P released 20 albums on his No Limit label, all of which went platinum (Cooper). At the height of its success in 1998, the company was valued at \$230 million. Meanwhile, in 1998, No Limit's up-and-coming competitor Cash Money Records entered into a three-year distribution and manufacturing agreement with Universal Records worth \$30 million (Forman 338). A 2001 article in *Billboard* notes that "Cash Money/Universal and No Limit/Priority represent the main success stories of independents joining forces with majors and their efforts skyrocketing. However, these joint ventures are not guaranteed to transform a regional success story into a national one" (Kenon 26).

In Atlanta, the mixture of major labels and southern talent was producing similar results to those in New Orleans, albeit with very different styles of rap music. The establishment of Atlanta as a center of music industry infrastructure, which began in the late 1980s, both aided this process and was itself accelerated by the growing market for southern rap music. LaFace Records, which had initially focused on R & B artists, brought several Atlanta-based rap acts into the national spotlight. The duo OutKast, who, according to David Mays of *The Source*, "began to change ideas about what southern rappers could do" (Murray, "The Poet and the Playa"), brought the label unprecedented success in the genre, selling over three million copies of its 2000 album *Stankonia*, which was named the "best album [in all genres] of 2000" in the *Village Voice's*, annual "Pazz and Jop" poll of several hundred music critics ("Best Bets"). In 2001, they were named by *Spin* magazine as "the lead contenders for world's greatest living hip-hop act" (Lester). Meanwhile, in 2000, Jermaine Dupri's So So Def renewed its deal with Columbia Records, marking "the continuation of an eight-year relationship between the two labels" (Mitchell, "The Rhythm, The Rap and The Blues"). By 2002, it was estimated that "hip-hop music pumps an estimated half a billion dollars a year into Atlanta's economy" (Lovel).

Still, despite this success, Wartofsky's *Washington Post* article contains intimations that all was not well in the Dirty South. Some southern artists and producers expressed frustration that their colleagues from other parts of the country subscribed to stereotyped conceptions of the South as a culturally backward part of the country which had little commercial or creative potential within the context of rap music production. Cash Money's in-house producer Mannie Fresh observed, "We always did have tight songs coming from the South, but the West Coast and the East Coast never acknowledged them" (Wartofsky). This lack of acknowledgment was compounded by the structural and economic realities of the rap music industry. In a *Billboard* interview in late 1999 (just before his company abandoned Atlanta for Los Angeles in 2000), Antonio "L.A." Reid complains that the location of his company (LaFace) in Atlanta rather than in New York or Los Angeles

[is] still one of the biggest obstacles. And, while I love living and working in Atlanta—and we've certainly made some impact by being here—it's still not necessarily the choice of most people working in the recording industry. They would much rather live in New York, Los Angeles or Nashville.

Reid continues, "the distribution companies are not here. Of course, everybody has a branch office, whether it be in sales or A & R, but they're not based here" (Mitchell, "Antonio 'L.A.' Reid")

26). As Reid's comments illustrate, in terms of the industrial infrastructure of rap music production Southern cities continue to lag behind the power centers established early in the genre's history.

These structural realities are compounded by another area of friction between the Dirty South and the rest of the nation, which has its origin in the historically negative stereotypes and generalizations perpetuated about the South, its inhabitants, and their music. The conception of the South as an economic and cultural backwater is evident in a statement made by New Orleans-based rapper Juvenile in *Rolling Stone*: "RZA [a producer and rapper from New York and member of the group Wu-Tang-Clan] said that in the South, we was still livin' like it's 1985 . . . At first I was pissed off, but you know what? In a way, it's kinda true" (Reynolds). Again turning to Goodie Mob, some of their statements after the release of "Dirty South" indicate a similarly defensive posture towards "big-city visitor[s]" in response to their perceived attitudes about the South and its inhabitants:

[Rapper Big] Gipp remembers many a big-city visitor looking down on the Mob's homeland, its accents, rural landscapes, and country ways. 'They used to come down here before the Georgia Dome and a lot of other things were built down here,' he says. 'It was a little bit more country than it is now, and people would always say, 'Man, you guys are so country. Why do y'all talk like that?' (Vognar).

As the above comments suggest, historically rooted negative stereotypes about the South persisted within the culture of rap music. In his 1991 recording, "Straight Up Nigga," Los Angeles-based rapper Ice T compared himself to "a watermelon, chitlin-eatin' nigga down South," reinscribing the image of a shuffling, passive, and ultimately feminized southern black. This negative association of "southernness" with rurality is evident in a 2000 interview with Jacksonville, Florida-based director of urban programming for Clear Channel Radio Doc Wynter. In his description of the reaction among radio programmers to the rise of "Dirty South" rap artists, Wynter claimed, "a lot of stations in big markets wouldn't play 'em. They felt like it was country bamified hip-hop. Yet it kept selling and selling and selling and by virtue of radio exposure, people started calling those radio stations saying 'Hey—play it!'" (Beecher).

These observations about the persistence of stereotypes and generalizations about the South and the resulting anti-southern bias within the rap music industry are echoed in Wartofsky's 2001 article. She frames the new music coming out of Atlanta and New Orleans as a departure from the past, when "the southern rap acts that sold nationally, like 2 Live Crew, performed 'booty music': sex-obsessed lyrics set to accelerated beats for jiggling rear ends, part of a genre dismissed by *The Source* magazine as being too much about 'country pork-chop-eatin' individuals." Speaking from Florida in 2000, 2 Live Crew front man Luther Campbell imagined a South which was persecuted, disrespected or misunderstood by outsiders but united across racial boundaries by its cultural distinctiveness: "We in the South are a bunch of outcasts; nobody really respects us," he points out. "We speak a different language in the South, and it's not a black-white thing; it's South versus New York or California" (Madera).

This brings us to another important aspect of the "dirtiness" of the South, that which relates to its perceived sexual culture. As illustrated by Big Boi's verse in "Dirty South," with its references to "pimpin'" and "fuckin' around wit hoes," rap from the South does seem to have a strong association with strip clubs and sexually explicit lyrics. In part, this association hearkens back to the phenomenal success of Miami's 2 Live Crew in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Significantly, the interpretation of the "dirty" in Dirty South as sexual has become increasingly prevalent in the press as rap music from the South has become more of a commercial force to be reckoned with. Writing in a Toronto newspaper in 2000, a reviewer of the soundtrack from the film *Big Momma's House* lamented the inclusion of "the wash-your-mouth-out up-and-comers of southern rap"

("Old Tricks Are the Best Tricks"). A 2002 article about child rapper Lil Bow Wow explains that he

now considers himself part of the Dirty South sound epitomized by OutKast. That, too, is strange, because the Dirty South sound is so named because of its profanity, violence and sexual crudity. Meanwhile, Bow Wow's music remains innocent and clean. 'It makes sense to me, because I'm living in the South, and it's dirty,' said Bow Wow. 'There's a lot of dirt.'

But 'Dirty' in Dirty South refers to the trashy music and lyrics, right?

'Nah,' he said. (Baca).

A few weeks later, Burr reviewed a performance by Atlanta-based rapper Ludacris in the *San Antonio Express-News* and praised "his fluency with Dirty South rap, which projects a laid-back vibe and incorporates humorous asides while retaining explicit sex-and-violence-themed lyrics."

Signifying Southernness

Within this framework, it is not surprising that rap artists who claim that the Dirty South seems to have a love/hate relationship with the South, both on a thematic and on a stylistic level, often bristle at what they perceive as unfair stereotypes and prejudices held by outsiders, while simultaneously rejecting the traditional symbolism of the white South. But they also walk a fine line between refutation and celebration, as the forces that have helped to marginalize them are the very same ones that can now make them distinctive (and marketable) within the context of the rap music industry.

To begin with, there is what Alona Wartofsky calls "the southern way with words: the drawl," a feature which evidently appeals to music critics from outside the South. Tate wrote admiringly in the *Village Voice* in 1998 that "Atlanta's long-drawling Goodie Mob sound about as Black and country as you can git [sic]," while in the same year Robert Christgau wrote of the Goodie Mob that their "drawls [are] as thick as their funk" ("Consumer Guide"). The idea that southern rappers should drawl, that they should sound distinct from rappers from other places, was not only projected from outside the South but also asserted by southern rappers themselves. Andre Benjamin from OutKast, cited in Wartofsky's 2001 article, illustrates this tendency when he claims that:

I think it's harder for somebody from the South to rap ... You really have to work your mouth. We never say the whole word, so it's hard to understand sometimes, especially if you're rapping quickly ... Sometimes when you're really feeling it, and you just don't give a damn, that's when you really play it up. You just get a real draaaaawwwwwl.

Wartofsky then turns to New Orleans' Juvenile, who adds a political dimension to the idea of a distinctive southern (black) way of talking while at the same time acknowledging its market value:

The way I rap, my accent is a must ... People love my accent because it's so different. I'm from the South, and you from way up north, and you hear the way I talk, that flip you clean out. You like, 'Damn, he just rappin' like that, it's all ghetto and he don't say his words right, and I don't care.' Because black people was brought to this country, and the language our

ancestors had to learn wasn't our language. So we will never speak correctly . . . My style is ghetto, project, off-the-porch flowing, that's what I call it.

In addition to the value placed on "drawl" by critics and artists alike, there is a tendency on the part of both groups to employ traditional stereotypes about the South. Rap music journalists often display a weakness for timeworn stereotypes about the poverty and backwardness of southerners, as evidenced by the way they collectively received the Kentucky-based group Nappy Roots. Even though members of the group made statements explicitly denying association with the Dirty South, the fit was too good to pass up: more "black and country" than Goodie Mob, they presented an image which, in its familiarity, proved to be irresistible to many writers in national media outlets. Although they do not claim the Dirty South, the group still relies heavily upon images associated with southernness; the title of their 2002 release *Watermelon, Chicken & Gritz* (Doolittle) combines traditional southern foodways with stereotypes of both southerners and African Americans.

Whatever playfulness or irony is present in the "hillbilly hustla" image that they put forth seems to be lost on most reviewers, who are generally bowled over by the powerful combination of "wild hair, beans and pork chops, beat-up overalls, and . . . weed" (O'Connor). Doolittle, writing in the Allentown, Pennsylvania *Morning Call*, correctly observes that "Hip-hop's so-called 'Dirty South' has been primarily defined by an urban perspective" and lauds Nappy Roots for their ability to be "in the milieu without making them appear to be pawns of it," but he is no less susceptible than most reviewers to the pull of their "southern black take on Dukes Of Hazzard roguishness" (Gill). In March of 2002, Reines, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, saw a new trend emerging: "with 9/11 (at least temporarily) stunting the rap world's urge toward materialism—to say nothing of the minor mudsplash made last year by über-hick Bubba Sparxxx's *Dark Days, Bright Nights*—well, it looks like Nappy Roots' time has come."

Reines refers to another recent artist to openly exploit the "hillbilly" Southern stereotype, Bubba Sparxxx, a white man who, according to Sinclair of the *Times* of London, "grew up on a cabbage patch 15 minutes north of the tiny rural town of LaGrange, Georgia," and who raps in a "hayseed voice that would seem to be the product of several generations of southern inbreeding." Although he seems to approve of Sparxxx's persona and music, Sinclair's prejudices about the South become evident when he claims that the artist "doesn't lack in either the Dirty or the South department," referring to "sexually regressive lyrics" as his justification for this statement. Artists like Nappy Roots and Bubba Sparxxx would seem to be manipulating traditional southern stereotypes in order to stand out in the crowded rap music market, profiting from preconceptions on the part of journalists about what southern rappers should look, act, and sound like.

These preconceptions are sometimes framed within the context of an imagined historical southern culture. An article in the *Dallas Morning News* by Vognar begins by invoking the names of "William Faulkner and Ray Charles, Robert Johnson and Flannery O'Connor," proceeding to make the profound observation that "the South has never been at a loss for grief, humor, soul, or artistic genius." To his credit, Vognar acknowledges that "southern hip-hop is hardly new," but, like many in the media, displays a fondness for southern stereotypes, describing the members of Goodie Mob (from urban-suburban East Point) as "more than a little bit country, and damn proud of it." Some writers seem to be aware of the ways in which this southernness is an artificial construction. Wartofsky observes that "images of the region have been defined by a range of cultural exports," citing as examples the fiction of William Faulkner and the music of Robert Johnson. Both Vognar and Wartofsky reduce the cultural contributions of the South to a handful of well-known Mississippians, while ignoring the degree to which outside influences have also shaped "southern" culture. Christgau, writing about OutKast in the *Village Voice*, was one of the few writers to fully grasp the way that "southernness" is not an innate identity, but rather something that is constructed in conversation with those outside of the South:

Their southernness signifies, evoking Booker T., endless Gregg Allman ballads, humid afternoons with horseflies droning over the hog wallow.

Catch is, I'm not sure I've ever seen a hog wallow, certainly not in the South, and I doubt many OutKast voters have either. For Northern whites, the Dirty South is exotic in an all too familiar way—whenever pop fans seek 'tradition' they flirt with exoticism, which often leads them south. (Christgau "La-Di-Da-Di-Di?")

The geographic meaning of the term "Dirty South" would initially seem to be the most straightforward one—if a person is from the region formerly known as "the South," they are now from "the Dirty South." Philadelphia resident Ollison writes in a letter to the *Village Voice* that he is "a 23-year-old black man and a son of the 'Dirty South.'" But it is imperative to bear in mind here Rogoff's claim that "geography [is] as much of an epistemic category as gender or race, and ... all three are indelibly linked at every stage" (8). The geographic creation of the South/Dirty South is a highly contested process that involves deep-rooted patterns of thinking about geography and race. A statement by rapper Big V of the group Nappy Roots demonstrates the difficulty involved in matching the imaginative region of the "Dirty South" to an actual map of the U.S.:

We're not in the Dirty South, we're from the top of the South. Kentucky's the first state in the South, and we're too north to be southern and too southern to be north. So we're trapped right in the middle. It's a filter, you know? We connected with Tennessee, Virginia, Ohio, Indiana [not to mention West Virginia, Missouri and Illinois]. So Kentucky's a filter, and a lot of music runs through here (Reines).

The reluctance of Big V to see Kentucky (long viewed as a border state) lumped in with the Dirty South speaks to the obliteration of differences that occurs when "Dirty South" is used as a catch-all category for any artist or producer from the South. Nevertheless, their correspondence with older southern stereotypes of rurality and poverty seem to appeal to many critics as particularly representative of the Dirty South.

Despite the seeming dominance of Atlanta and New Orleans, the economic geography of the Dirty South is also conceived as flexible. In 2001, a reviewer observed that North Carolina-based rapper Petey Pablo's debut album "may signal a power shift in hip-hop's Dirty South ... New Orleans ... is no longer the commercial center of gravity ... the pendulum may be swinging toward the Mason-Dixon line" (Chang). "Dirty South" often seems to refer specifically to commercially successful southern rap economies. A 1999 article in the *St. Petersburg Times* claimed that "when members of the hip-hop community use the phrase 'dirty South' to describe the phenomenon of popular artists from the southern U.S., they're talking about Georgia (Goodie Mob, OutKast) and Louisiana (The No Limits [sic] crew)," an understanding which underscores the fact that "Dirty South" can have a more specific meaning than just the geographic South. This is a fluid Dirty South, the composition of which can change over time. The same author, in an article about rapper Funkghost, writes, "Florida has yet to fly under hip-hop's 'dirty South' flag" (Welch).

For many critics and industry insiders, the Dirty South represented an economic and creative shot in the arm for an ailing art form. Writing in the *Times* of London, Sinclair claims, "the geographic and spiritual relocation of rap to the southern heartland breathes fresh life and not a little good humor into a genre that has become increasingly prone to self-parody." DJ Shadow, explaining in 2002 the sentiment behind the title of his track "Why Hip Hop Sucks In '96," claims that "since then, the barriers have been broken down with producers like the Neptunes [from Virginia] and those from the Dirty South, like OutKast" (Pearson). A *Los Angeles Times* writer combined this idea of "Dirty South" as creative renewal with the economic impact of the genre:

"The Dirty South is rising, and OutKast is leading the way. The Atlanta rap duo is at the fore of the Dirty South sound that has become a true force in hip-hop. It's not just the fans who are noticing" ("Best Bets").

While the importance of the Dirty South has often been situated in terms of the shifting geography of rap music production and the cultural impact of some of the rap music coming out of the South, it has also been imagined as a set of distinct aesthetic practices. Wartofsky correctly observes "because southern hip-hop developed organically out of various regional music scenes, there is no single sound of the South," but goes on to claim that "there is [still] something—something that's almost intangible—that links the various southern styles." This intangibility has proved frustrating to various attempts on the part of journalists to put their hands on the true aesthetic meaning of "Dirty South." Aesthetic claims have been made regarding tempo, timbre, and instrumentation ("the Dirty South's languid bass hits and flitting, double-time cymbals" (Keast)), as well as more abstract qualities like "attitude" ("the mean-spirited confrontation of Dirty South-style thug rap" (Moon)) and (as we have seen) "nastiness" in the sexual sense.

Some find a special rhythmic or syncopated quality in southern rap, citing "the groove-centric ethos of the Dirty South" ("Hip-Hop") or "tight Dirty South-style beat[s]" (Jones). Descriptions such as one referring to "bumptious, grimy Dirty South grooves" (Sterdan) seem to employ "dirt" as an updated signifier for "funk." A comparison of two descriptions of a Dirty South aesthetic illustrates the impossibility of reducing it to any one set of practices or qualities; while one author wrote in 2000 of OutKast "cement[ing] its position as standard-bearer for the new, soulful hip-hop sound of what's come to be called the Dirty South" (Guzman), another warned readers in the same year of "a southern form commonly known as the 'dirty south' style and exemplified by fast, bouncy beats and crass, trashy lyrics of acts like Juvenile and Master P" (Carter). The fact that many of Master P's songs are done over very slow tempos (reminiscent of the "g-funk" style associated with Los Angeles and environs) reveals the hazards of overgeneralizing, even within one city's musical culture.

Within the "Dirty South" construct, important variations among the styles of the cities of the South are often overlooked in pursuit of an aesthetic unity. Asked in 2001 to "explain the southern rap style to hip-hop fans who aren't already accustomed to it," Memphis-based rapper Project Pat responds,

You know, the South has got different styles. I'm gonna break it down to you. Memphis doesn't sound like Atlanta, and Atlanta doesn't sound like Memphis, and Atlanta don't sound like Miami, and Memphis doesn't sound like Miami. The only thing that the South has that's a similarity is the up-tempo. But our sounds are totally different. A Memphis-type sound, it's more scary music or some real fancy bass and some wild-type, medium laid-back type. It's part of the club scene. That's mainly what's going on down in Memphis (Friedman).

The establishment of a definitive set of rules for the southern rap aesthetic has remained an elusive but alluring possibility for music journalists. For each proposed element, counterexamples abound. The use of more rapid tempos by southern producers has been associated with the South since the time when Miami bass was the only nationally recognized style from any city in the South. While southern rap, in general, tends toward faster beats-per-minute (bpm), to make this a defining characteristic would fail to account for the significant amount of slower rap that also comes out of the South, as well as the existence of high-bpm music in cities located outside the South (the Detroit-based style called Ghetto Tech, promulgated by artists such as DJ Assault, relies on speeds of 145–160 bpm). The use of a simplified rap style and call-and-response lyrics has been a prominent feature of New Orleans bounce rap and the more recent "crunk" style emanating from Atlanta, but this description does not fit many important southern rappers (for

example, OutKast). Still, in very general terms, it can be asserted that southern rap music tends to be slightly faster than rap from other places, and that it is more likely than rap from other places to rely heavily upon call-and-response in its lyrics.

While OutKast is often cited as representative of the Dirty South, part of the success of the duo seems to be in their departure from regional preferences. In a 2003 interview, producer Rico Wade claimed that his interest in the duo was heightened by the fact that “they weren’t no ghetto Atlanta niggas—no gold teeth. They were hip hop.” (Sarig 37). This impression seems to be confirmed in the early history of the group; they were drawn together by “their admiration for New York rap groups A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul, when other [local] kids were cranking local bass music acts” (Murray “OutKast ‘Growing Up, Not Growing Apart’”). OutKast’s success could thus be said to relate more to their lack of identifiable “southern” characteristics than to any regional representativeness that they might have displayed in their music. In fact, many critics feel that the latest developments in southern rap music—the “crunk” style of artists such as Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz and the Ying Yang Twins—represents a breakthrough in acceptance of southern rap styles. A 2003 article claims that “Arista finally did embrace southern street rap this year [when] it broke Bone Crusher nationally” (Penrice). From these comments, it becomes apparent that the Dirty South aesthetic is still a work in progress, as artists like Lil Jon attempt to build careers upon a rap style that is more faithful to the club-based regional southern music that has been locally popular since the days of 2 Live Crew.

In its passage from subculture to the larger sphere of popular culture, the idea of the Dirty South lost much of its initial meaning as a critique of the racist legacy of the South. However, this view still persists among some southern artists. A compilation released in 2000 by Swirl Records (location unknown) in collaboration with the Atlanta-based 404 Music Group, LLC entitled *The South Will Rise Again—This Time It Won’t Be the Same: A Dirty South Compilation*, could be said to represent the apotheosis of the Dirty South as originally envisioned by Cool Breeze, Big Boi, and Big Gipp in 1995. The cover of the CD features three men, two in ski masks and one wearing a gas mask, holding up the Confederate battle flag, which is depicted in flames. This ensemble is bordered by a collage of images of U.S. currency and platinum-encrusted watches and necklaces, creating a dissonant combination of political militancy and ostentatious materialism. The content of the CD includes artists from all of the Dirty South hot zones—Atlanta, New Orleans, Memphis, and Houston.

The CD begins with a spoken introduction by an unnamed African American man: “The Confederate flag—a symbol of heritage, or hate? The year is 2000, and the flag has come down. But now it is our turn. The South will rise again, but this time it won’t be the same.” The appropriation and qualification of the neo-Confederate slogan “the South will rise again” demonstrates an engagement with prior, white-defined incarnations of the South in the process of claiming a new African American southern identity. The statement is voiced over an aural backdrop of sirens, gunshots, and the chirping of birds and crickets. This seemingly absurd combination of sounds representing violence and social disorder with natural sounds that one might hear in a rural setting results in an expression of a violent, revolutionary cleansing giving way to a peaceful natural order.

An interlude halfway through the CD consists of collaged excerpts of interviews with black and white residents of South Carolina recorded during the summer of 2000, a period which saw the tension over the presence of the Confederate battle flag atop the Capitol building in that state come to a head—on July 1 of that year, a legislative compromise reached in May went into effect which resulted in the flag being moved to a less prominent location on the grounds. The interviews conducted by a man who identifies himself as “Brother Kashim” appear to have taken place both before and after this compromise was reached. In the interviews, he asks respondents “what [they] think about the Confederate flag.” Several young white men who by their speech appear to be conversant with the conventions of rap music culture nevertheless defend the flag and its

appeal with the clichéd “heritage, not hate” rationale. Black interview subjects contributed uniformly negative comments about the flag, which range from consummately rational arguments—“They wouldn’t want me to hang a Black Panther flag on top of the Capitol building, right?”—to more tangential statements such as one made by a female respondent on the subject of interracial sex—“I do not put cream in my coffee.” An interview subject identified only as a resident of “the hood” sums up the general sentiment of the African American respondents: “Bunch of bullshit, dog, that’s all it is. They need to take the motherfucker down.”

Regarding the musical content of the CD, few if any of the songs included could be said to engage in the same level of confrontational and explicit politics represented by the cover art, the introduction, or the interviews. Instead, these highly politicized engagements with the legacy of the racist South are juxtaposed with articulations of the most regressive and stereotypical dimensions of the Dirty South. The spoken introduction mentioned above is immediately followed by the track “Welcome to the South” by T Mac (associated with the Memphis-based Powermove Entertainment), which uses violence and misogyny in its signification of southernness: “Welcome to the South/where the bitches is stacked and haters get they brains blowed out.” Other tracks, like Houston-based Boonie Loc’s “Dime a Dozen,” depict the player’s lifestyle in the most demeaning terms possible to women. Some would argue that the presence of these more exploitative elements of the Dirty South neutralizes any political critique offered in other parts of the CD. However, this is not a burden unique to Dirty South rap or even to rap music in general; as Rose points out in *Black Noise*, “attempts to delegitimize powerful social discourses are often deeply contradictory, and rap music is no exception” (103).

A similar combination of anti-confederate imagery and generally apolitical music has been put forward by Atlanta-based group Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz. On the cover of their 2001TVT Records release *Put Yo Hood Up*, Lil Jon is pictured with a confederate battle flag draped over his shoulders, with two similar flags in the background starting to burn from the top down. In September of 2003, Lil Jon was featured on one of two covers (the other cover featured OutKast) of a *Source* magazine issue devoted to the Dirty South scene—“the dirtiest dirty issue ever”—which shows Atlanta-based rapper Bone Crusher holding a burning confederate flag. Also featured on the cover is Mississippi-based rapper David Banner (who often burns confederate flags at his concerts). As debates over the presence of confederate symbolism in official contexts continue in various southern states, we can expect this to be a continuing issue of concern to rappers based in Southern cities.

Conclusions

What, then, is the ultimate significance of the Dirty South? For the rappers of Goodie Mob and those they could be said to speak for, the Dirty South is a space that young African Americans from the South inhabit and have helped create. Unlike the business-oriented boosters of the New South, the southern urbanites who imagined the Dirty South did not wish to sweep the legacies of slavery and racism under the carpet. Instead, they combined a frank critique of this legacy with a celebration of their own perceived cultural distinctiveness, investing the space with the dual legacies of African American cultural production and resistance to white racism. Through the medium of rap music, southern artists and listeners have attempted to collectively redefine the South in their own terms. Allegiances to housing projects, neighborhoods, cities, or states are subsumed into a fluid imagined community that is tied to the geographic South but also linked to a larger, trans-regional African American cultural identity. But as quickly as the rappers of Goodie Mob and likeminded others could imagine the symbolic destruction of the old plantation South, the national media was writing them back into it. In their treatment of southern rappers, journalists often seemed intent upon forcing these artists and producers into a constraining

construction of stereotypes—which often originate in anti-black and anti-rural prejudices—about the South.

Like other imagined spaces or communities (e.g. “America”), the Dirty South defies simple attempts at definition. It is many things to many people, and these meanings often come into conflict, even within a particular individual’s understanding. These threads of meaning are hopelessly tangled and co-dependent: the interpretation of Dirty South as meaning “strip club music” cannot be fully understood without considering the long-standing association, mainly on the part of Europeans and white Americans, of blacks with unbridled sexuality. The interpretation of the Dirty South as referring to a breeding-ground for drug-dealing gangstas is impossible to separate from the legacies, economic, judicial, and otherwise, of white supremacy within the region and in the larger national context.

However, such contradictory and complex meanings do not play well in a sound-bite media economy. Writers and critics from both within and outside the South have had trouble grasping the multiply-determined nature of the Dirty South. Whether by accident or design, many journalists—encouraged by major label marketing strategies, and, at times, the artists and producers themselves—have ignored the complexity of the term and reduced its meaning to a purely sexual one. This result owes as much to the commodification of both popular music and journalism as it does to the persistence of interwoven stereotypes about the sexual culture of the South and that of African Americans in general. The understanding of the Dirty South concept is clouded by a weakness for stereotype and a lack of tolerance for seemingly contradictory meanings, problems which seem to increase with distance—geographic, economic, and generational. Some artists have been able to turn this dynamic to their advantage; no doubt, others have suffered because of it.

With its complex and often contradictory identity, the Dirty South clearly represents an important stage in the evolution and development of rap music. Having originated in New York, the music established an association with that city that should be viewed as normative: there was no need to call it “New York rap,” because, in the beginning, all rap music was by definition from New York. When rappers and producers from Los Angeles became a force to be reckoned with, the idea of “the West Coast” was born. The concentration of industry infrastructure in New York and Los Angeles combines with the cultural politics of rap music to make it extremely difficult for those outside those areas to establish a career, a state of affairs which speaks to “the persistent bi-coastal bias inherent in almost all cultural and intellectual production in this country” (Howard 38). This bi-coastal bias was strengthened by the fact that rap music is, in terms of its emergence and early development, one of the least southern of American musical genres. Additionally, rap music places a very high premium on issues of place and authenticity. Where an artist comes from, what place he or she can claim, becomes intensely important in this genre where lyrics often describe the immediate environment. The Dirty South, with all of its conceptual limitations, allowed southern artists to participate in the production of rap music outside of the East Coast/West Coast structure that had previously dominated the art form.

Like “the West Coast,” the Dirty South extrapolates a larger region from the urban centers where the music is actually produced. As “West Coast” is little more than shorthand for “Los Angeles,” so the musical production coming out of the Dirty South is really tied to two or three major cities, not evenly spread across the South. While rappers from the South still express their affiliations in terms of their neighborhood or city, the idea of a Dirty South gives them a larger regional identity to work with. Furthermore, specific political and economic realities informed the ways in which the Dirty South was imagined as a space, a community, and a subgenre of rap music. These realities included, but were not limited to, the spatial division of power within the rap music industry and its sub-cultural community, the debate over Confederate symbolism and the legacy of southern racism, and national shifts in attitudes toward issues of racism and discrimination. Ultimately, the meanings are personal—the ways that people define and describe

the Dirty South tell us more about their ideas about the South than they do about any actual place or the people who live there.

The development, marketing, and consumption of the Dirty South came about as a result of the geography of the rap music industry, and built upon pre-existing ideas about the South and its inhabitants. What remains to be seen is whether the concept will continue to have currency, or whether it will fade into the background as rappers and producers from the South are drawn closer to the mainstream of rap music production. For many artists and record labels, the Dirty South has served its purpose, providing a backdrop against which they can develop their careers. Although the term is still used and is penetrating ever deeper into the world of advertising and marketing, it seems to be fading into the background in the context of rap music. As the Dirty South has become an accepted division within the rap music landscape, we can expect other imagined regions to follow in its footsteps.

Study Questions

1. What are the meanings and relevance of the designations "Third Coast" or "South Coast"?
2. In what ways does regional location benefit or constrain Southern hip-hop artists?
3. How do Southern rap artists acknowledge and resist the stereotypes associated with a Southern cultural identity?

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