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*808's and Lyrical Landscapes: An Investigation of Hip Hop's Diversity Through Lyrics*

Music has, since time immemorial, served as a vehicle for human expression. Instrumentals and spoken word make for a robust conduit for everything from communicating personal experience, resisting oppression, providing a means of escape for listeners, inspiring change, to simply letting oneself lose. While listeners often reflect on these phenomena in the moment, the wealth and diversity of music today makes it intractable to get an all-encompassing picture of any one genre through listening alone. With the help of the Natural Language Toolkit, I propose to look at the lyrics for one genre I hold particularly dear, hip hop, to present a portrait of what that landscape looks like today, the subgenres that currently flourish, how they've changed over time, what distinguishes one from another, what similarities exist across subgenres, and what kinds of features, if any, are common to the most popular music across the board.

Hip hop's rise to mainstream prominence in the last two decades has been precipitated by the carving out of many topographical enclaves in the musical landscape. A cursory list of some of the most influential flavors of hip hop would include old-school rap, gold-school, new-school, soundcloud rap, east-coast-vs-west-coast, southern hip hop, crunk, hyphy, drill, trap rap, mumble rap, pop rap, alternative/experimental hip hop, conscious rap, emo rap, and many more that I've undoubtedly left out.

By taking a sample of some of the most popular artists today within a subset of these subgenres, we will endeavor to define a set of uniqueness criteria that identify one category's lyrics from another. To do this, we can look at lexical diversity, collocations of specific terms (e.g. regional slang, geographical locations, particular brand-names), egocentricity and varying descriptions of wealth, frequently mentioned drugs or illegal paraphernalia, density and variation on rhyming schemes, references to temporal or cultural landmarks, as well as sentiment across a subgenre's discography. Some relationships we'll be considering within a subgenre are the

effects of “going mainstream”; whether, for example, the subgenre’s lexical diversity declines after a rise to prominence, along with other commonly associated changes symptoms of going mainstream. How does a subgenre change over time? What role does geography play in establishing concrete boundaries in subgenres? Does one artist’s popularity impact the popularity of other artists within their subgenre? If so, how?

Additionally, we will be on the lookout for *similarities* across subgenres. Some features we will check for are sentimental similarity (i.e. are there ‘moods’ that are shared across some subgenres exclusively?), topic similarity, similarity in lexical diversity as well as shared levels of braggadociousness. Looking across the various types of hip hop, we’ll consider questions like what common threads exist amongst the most popular subgenres in hip hop? How does a spark in popularity for one musical style influence the others? How does geographic distance strengthen or weaken that influence? How do some of the tropes and themes from older varieties of hip hop become reshaped and reimagined in newer subgenres? What kinds of tumultuous world events triggered a similar commentary from otherwise disparate subgenres?

Using these details, we can assemble together an intriguing story of the current landscape of hip hop, honing in on what specific styles thrive today, what the rise, fall and spread of a style looks like, how they interact with one another, and how they have been shaped by preceding subgenres. This will not only give the uninitiated a helpful guide into the myriad and landscape of this musical community, but can help highlight some higher-level trends and subtle patterns that even some of the most impassioned musical listeners might find insightful.