

Global Hip Hop Studies
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ABSTRACT

The contribution shows how rap music in Chile is related to the changes in music production and the relationship between cultural industries and self-management processes due to technological advancements. Based on Howard Becker's concept of art worlds, it analyses the collaborative networks in the rap music scene, including musicians, record labels and media. The contribution also examines the impact of technology, musical instruments, and spaces on music production, consumption and distribution. Lastly, it emphasizes the importance of different meeting points in Santiago, the capital city and the center of the country's hip hop scene, from 1983 to the present day.

KEYWORDS

rap
reggaeton
trap
música urbana
digitalization
technology
cultural industries
self-management
processes

Rap music in Chile is a paradigmatic cultural practice which shows how technological transformations afford changes in music making, and the relationships between cultural industries and self-management processes. Drawing on Howard Becker's (2008) concept of art worlds, I will concentrate on the formation and transformation of collaborative networks in rap music including musicians, records labels and media. Furthermore, this contribution examines the impact of technological advancements, musical instruments and spaces (Born 2005, 2013; Hennion 2002). Emphasized here are issues around producing, consuming and distributing music; and the relevance of different kinds of meeting points from 1983 to the present in Santiago, the country's capital and hip hop epicentre.

As in other Latin American countries, hip hop arrived in Chile in the 1980s via mass media and breaking. This dance form originally appeared on television (*Sábado Gigante*, 1984), in movies and in cinemas (*Beat Street*, 1984; *Breakin'*, 1984). Furthermore, the arrival of hip hop in Chile was fostered

NOTABLE GRAFF WRITERS AND MURALISM ARTISTS

- Aislap
- Anis
- Fisek
- Inti
- Zeckis

NOTABLE BREAKING CREWS AND DANCE SCHOOLS

- Daio Gonzalez
- Dillas
- Doyoh Escuela
- Gravedad Cero
- Tormenta en Ataque

by an aesthetic fascination, specifically represented in clothing or body movements and material culture, such as sneakers, flat surfaces and portable radios, which were required for its staging (Meneses 2015; Olguín 2018; Poch 2011).

The class membership of early hip hop practitioners was primarily made up of young people from the working class, especially those in Chilean slums. In this sense, breaking was a 'safe place' during the Pinochet dictatorship which was marked by state repression, drug addiction, delinquency and lack of job opportunities. On the other hand, many young middle-class Chileans who lived in other countries (including Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the United States) due to political exile, work or educational opportunities for their parents, were interested in hip hop culture.

An important element for the expansion of hip hop was its development in various neighbourhoods in Santiago. In these hoods, different crews challenged each other in breaking battles. One of the most emblematic places was Bombero Ossa, a pedestrian passage in downtown Santiago. In this space, music collectors (as DJ Zamzi) and young people who lived abroad brought their knowledge, objects (such as cassettes, vinyl and magazines), and moves, inspiring local hip hop (Meneses, 2015; Poch 2011; Rodríguez 2020).

Regarding rap recordings, there is a wide consensus among artists and journalists in Chile that the first professionally recorded song was 'Algo está pasando' (1988) by the group De Kiruza. This group was not a rap band per se, but combined funk, soul, reggae and Latin sounds. Its vocalist Pedro Fonca was interested in Afro sonorities and therefore used to go to Bombero Ossa to interact with hip hoppers, whom he met in the late 1980s.

The 1990s began with the return to democracy in Chile and important transformations in hip hop, foremost among them a fascination with breaking that led to the expansion of rap. After De Kiruza, the Chilean rap's recording trajectory continued with *Lejos del Centro* (1991) by Panteras Negras. Influenced by Public Enemy, this group used a political discourse and hip hop aesthetic. Their debut album was recorded with the label Liberación which belonged to the Communist Party. Later on, Panteras Negras signed with Alerce, a label that also produced the first works of La Pozze Latina, and Los Marginales recorded their only album with Prodisc. All these groups had little commercial exposure in the mass media, but they were important in consolidating the first generation of the *vieja escuela* ('old school') of Chilean rap. The artists of these records used drum machines, sequencers and samplers, which were expensive and complex to obtain especially for Chile's working-class youth. Against the grain, the relevance of the cassette enabled experimenting with the instrumental elaboration, recording and distribution of songs by many soloists and groups that did not record with labels (Muñoz-Tapia and Rodríguez-Vera 2022).

Notably, in their beginnings between the late 1980s and early 1990s, rap groups in Santiago shared the stage at rock, punk or metal events. Some rap groups participated in events, festivals, meetings, demonstrations and recitals associated with leftist ideas (Meneses 2015) and folk and fusion bands. Thus, in the early 1990s, there were not many specific venues or recitals for rap music, since it was a music genre with a small audience and without significant economic resources. By the mid-1990s, rap became popular, boosted by the interest of multinational record labels and a strong investment in Chilean music (González 2022). The milestone of this development was the album *Ser humano* (1997) by Tiro de Gracia, released by EMI Music. Other examples

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of this tendency include Makiza, La Frecuencia Rebelde, Rezonancia who released with Sony Music, La Pozze Latina who released with BMG and Tapia Rabia Jackson with EMI Music. The confluence between hip hop artists and the recording industry was decisive for the social, artistic and cultural legitimization of rap in Chile (Rodríguez 2021).

In the last five years of the twentieth century, economic stabilization and greater democratic freedoms converged with a booming record market and the emergence of large live music concerts (González 2022). The labels took advantage of these concerts to promote Chilean artists as opening acts for famous rap and crossover groups such as Control Machete, Cypress Hill and the Beastly Boys. Music channels such as MTV Latino or Vía X emerged in the wake of the gradual expansion of cable television as well (also seen in Argentina [Muñoz-Tapia 2018a]). These channels, with a particular focus on youth audiences, played a pivotal role in the dissemination of music videos featuring a diverse range of genres, including rock, grunge, indie, Eurodance and rap from both the United States and Europe. Moreover, these channels also showcased Latin American artists who specialized in these particular genres, but typically excluded genres such as salsa, cumbia or folklore that are typically associated with Latin American music.

As the popularity of Chilean rap grew, shows dedicated to this musical genre were spreading across Santiago. At the same time, other meeting points appeared, such as the esplanade of the Mapocho Train Station, whose novelty was the realization of freestyle rap battles (Corbalán and González 2021). Thus, what was commonly called the *nueva escuela* ('new school') emerged, where people practising the different elements of hip hop would converge in Santiago. The local hip hop community combined forms of artistic expression, exchange of information about hip hop culture and materials (cassettes or magazines) with instances of self-reflection, some of them politically motivated. The organization La Coalición, for example, was dedicated to youth and community education.

During the 1990s, only a few artists had access to high-quality recording studios and self-production in home studios was not widespread. However, some bands, as for example, SQB, Calambre or FDA, managed to record music through independent labels or self-release. Independent labels such as La Calle and Kalimba Records also emerged during that time. Even though they had a limited budget and outreach, they were relevant in distributing underground rap groups' recordings, such as Trovadores Tales, Guerrillero Okulto and Legua York. These initiatives helped create a small but significant underground music scene. Likewise, as rap began to gain momentum in traditional mass media, some admired its novelty while others stigmatized the working-class youth audience. However, specialized media outlets started to produce rap artists themselves, such as the independent *Kultura Hip Hop* magazine. Newly opened stores, such as La Otra Vida or shops in the Eurocentro mall and the Biobío market sold music, clothing and graffiti and quickly became important meeting points for artists and fans alike.

Since the 2000s an important change has taken place: multinational labels stopped investing consistently in Chilean rap music while computer and internet use spread rapidly. Thus, the crisis of the record industry mixed with new possibilities of digitalization. Access to new music thanks to MP3 download platforms Napster, AudioGalaxy, Soulseek and Ares renewed the knowledge of and interest in Chilean rap references, making it easier to

1. See <https://www.instagram.com/fmschile/>. Accessed 4 September 2023.

listen to rap from Spain, France or underground rap from the United States. Specialized websites, forums and communication channels such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Microsoft Messenger and later Fotolog or MySpace, one of the first streaming platforms which became popular in Chile, served as new digital meeting points for Chilean hip hop enthusiasts. Artists increasingly used music production software Cool Edit, Fruity Loops, Reason and Digital Audio Workstation, which were almost always pirated. In short, computers as a meta-device (Prior 2012) enabled various aspects: making instrumentals, recording vocals, mastering and also distributing and publicizing music through the internet.

During this period, rap distanced itself from major record labels, radio and television. At the same time, there was a proliferation of more experimental, hardcore or softer styles and sub-styles. Among all these expressions, an 'underground popularity' and a gradual form of artistic professionalization were consolidated. Self-productions in home studios and independent labels multiplied, audio interfaces became more and more accessible and plug-ins made it possible to emulate what was done in professional studios. Thus, emblematic self-produced albums were made: *Entre lo habitual y lo Desconocido* (Hordatoj 2007), *Poblacional* (Salvaje Decibel 2007), *Soldados del Guetto* (Movimiento Original 2008), *No Me Olvides Tan Pronto* (Mente Sabia Crú 2008) and *Maapakn* by De Killtros (2010).

Remarkably, Hip-hología, a network of educational and political collectives in several towns of Chile, emerged (widely discussed by Poch 2011), which continued the path of La Coalixion. Massive protests in the field of education in the mid- and late 2000s advocated for a transformation of the exclusionary nature of the Chilean model. This exclusion was characterized by a significant gap between upper-class private schools and other schools in terms of their educational quality, as well as the high cost of attending universities. A part of rap activism was linked to these processes of politicization of youth, where the collective Red de Hip Hop Activista was formed. Political or conscious rap, which was highly critical of neo-liberalism, played a prominent role in these years and became the soundtrack of social demonstrations, according to some accounts.

In 2004 and 2005, the new social media outlets Facebook and YouTube became popular platforms to promote music, live concerts and develop audio-visual content, thanks to low-cost HD cameras. Thus, the popularity of rap music was consolidated and expressed in a series of self-organized concerts of great popularity, such as Planeta Rock or El Sur es Hardcore. At the same time, freestyle battles began to spread in popularity in Chile, similar to those happening in several Latin American countries and Spain (Muñoz-Tapia 2018b). They took place in public squares as well as in multitudinous events such as those organized by Red Bull or Ibero-American battles such as Freestyle Master Series (FMS).¹ Since 2015, the use of laptops and smartphones has also increased, which has individualized internet access and boosted streaming. Rap musicians increased their song uploads to Spotify and YouTube, linked directly with audiences on Instagram and then on TikTok, and gradually became aware of the possibilities of monetization through digitization.

New generations of rap fans began to listen to and make more and more trap music since the mid-2000s. Downzouthkingz, predecessor of Nacion Triizy, started to create trap music which originated in US cities Memphis, Atlanta and Chicago. Nonetheless, it was not until 2016 that it began to

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inspire young people born in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Until that time, the boom-bap sound reminiscent of 1990s New York rap was predominant. Although there were odes to beer, alcohol or marijuana in rap songs, there were few references to the dream of becoming a millionaire, bling, clothes, sexual pleasure or crime. In many cases, trap music addressed these topics and introduced themes which were previously marginalized in Chilean rap music.

As Freddy Olguín (2018) demonstrates in *100 Rimas del Rap Chileno*, this music is much more diverse than is commonly recognized. One only need to compare the danceable 'Chica Eléctrica' by La Pozze Latina (1999) with the political song 'Escribo Rap con R de Revolución' by Portavoz (2012) to observe a range of experimental and unclassifiable rap groups such as FDA, Demencia Local or Colectivo Etéreo or take note of the vast difference between Bronko Yotte's alternative rap and 'El Sur es Hardcore' scene. Despite this aesthetic and lyrical diversity, broader interpretations of rap tended to reduce it to the boom-bap sound and a countercultural trend. In this sense, trap music divided the discourse in Chile: from one side, the new sound separated itself from hip hop and betrayed its culture; from the other side, journalists and artists affirmed that trap music meant the new as opposed to the old-fashioned (Molina 2021).

Puerto Rican musicians mostly linked to reggaeton, favoured the expansion of trap because they started to experiment with its sounds. Among them were key figures such as Arcángel, Ñengo, Anuel and Bad Bunny who managed to popularize trap all over Latin America beyond certain niches. Thus, local artists and journalists claimed the trap category, grouping very diverse characters such as Pablo Chill-E or Paloma Mami. In this way, what in Chile was called trap became a type of music increasingly transversal in the new generations, generating a contrast with older forms of rap. Indeed, this development is different from countries like the United States and France where trap is considered a subset of the broader hip hop universe, like boom-bap, G-Funk, Miami-bass or alternative rap.

However, the word trap has recently begun to fall short. Since 2020, new rhythms began to permeate the music of artists and reggaeton made the streams burst during the global COVID-19 quarantine. Marcianeke, Jordan 23, Cris MJ, Pailita, Standly, Julianno Sosa, Dainesitta and AK420 are some of the local figures who, during the pandemic, managed to mobilize a widespread fan base via YouTube and Spotify, which until then remained limited to Puerto Ricans and Colombians. Reggaeton has been very popular in Chile at least since the early 2000s. Nonetheless, Chilean artists such as Croni-K, Rigeo, Los Reggaeton Boys, La Secta, at first and later Tommy Boysen or the musicians of Desafío Music, were scarce. Despite some flashy hits ('Nadie lo Sabra' by Croni-K, [2004] or 'Que La Azote' by Reggaeton Boys [2005]), they did not have a sustained popularity. The increase of these new pandemic figures broke this pattern and gave rise to a new generation of Chilean musicians.

In addition, a style called mambo chileno became popular, which mixes tropical sounds with different forms of rapping and singing. Some associate it with 'merengue hip hop' from artists such as Proyecto Uno, Sandy y Papo, Fulanito and the Ilegales of the 1990s or Dominican and Puerto Rican artists of the late 2000s (Omega el Fuerte, Julio Voltio, Fuego, Ñengo Flow, Cosculluela). Explicit allusions to 'street life' abound, as well as reclaiming the concept of *flaite*, a word that was traditionally used in a derogatory manner to refer to young people from the working class who were associated with crime, poor taste or bad habits. The active participation of children and young people

2. Such as 'Mambo pa los presos' by Yordano Ignacio, 2018 (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfKjUEX-6bY&ab_channel=Yordanolnacio) or 'Masita por siempre' by Roman Gang, 2020 (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVAuGLd2CsE&ab_channel=JulianoChieffTV). Accessed 4 September 2023.
3. It is interesting to note that in the last Grammy Awards (2023) the category *música urbana* (in Spanish, not Urban Music in English) was recognized as a genre distinct from US hip hop, grouping together a group of Latin American artists. The worldwide popularity of artists like Bad Bunny is showing the relevance of music in Spanish that comes to compete directly with artists from the so-called first world.
4. See <https://www.instagram.com/coordinadora-socialshishigang/>. Accessed 4 September 2023.

in an environment marked by guns and violence is surprising in the *mambo's* videos circulating on YouTube.² But not everything is an apology for the criminal underworld: progressively, these narratives have given way to discourses on personal effort, upward mobility, envy and love.

Finally, since the onset of the 2020s discourse has turned its focus towards *música urbana*.³ A large part of the success of the *música urbana* concept is its ability to operate as a catch-all genre or a meta-genre (Drott 2013), bringing together a diversity of sounds. For some, it includes mainly trap, reggaeton and mambo. For others, it extends to what in Chile is called rap or freestyle. This is happening in an accelerated musical field, characterized by the extreme and immediate quantification offered by digital media and by the series of transformations in the music industry. The expansion of streaming brought about an unstable truce between artists with popular, multinational labels and new digital distributors (DistroKid, CD Baby, ONErpm, The Orchard, among others), generating royalties for each other (How fair? How clear?).

Música urbana was consolidated on a set of work teams that operated collaboratively. There are not only musical artists in those networks: it is a complex field where managers, photographers, video clip makers, sound engineers and independent journalists coexist, who with the boom of this music were able to make a career out of it. Some of them allied with multinational labels, distributors or large event production companies; others developed the path of self-management, taking advantage of new digital possibilities. *Música urbana*, in this context, began to attract a new generation to whom higher education was not fulfilling its promises. Since the 1990s, the exponential enrolment in tertiary and university education produced a saturated, narrow and precarious labour market. Thus, among many young people, *música urbana* began to be seen as an alternative way of life, further enhanced by the various forms of self-education that came with new technologies.

What does *música urbana* tell us about the new generation? First of all, in a social model such as the Chilean one, marked by aspirations of consumption and, as a counterpart, debt, it seems to crystallize forms of collaboration closely linked to a desire for autonomy and social ascent that resonates for many young people. The fascination with certain luxurious objects or money must also be placed in the context of the difficulties arising from accessing these consumption practices with underpaid formal jobs. On the other hand, it is not trivial that some of the most relevant milestones in *música urbana* revolve around mental health issues, as is the case of 'Ultra Solo' by Polimá Westcoast and Pailita (2022), 'Paz mental' by Cris MJ (2022) or 'La Terapia' by Young Cister (2022). What it sees is an overwhelmed youth, who nevertheless dream of sexual liberation and economic autonomy. The direct allusions to politics as a way of realizing their desires are, broadly speaking, limited: perhaps some songs by Pablo Chill-E point in this direction, just as it is possible to find certain 'anti-police' references or rebellion against authority.

Furthermore, even when everything indicates that distance and distrust of institutional politics prevail, we also observe the emergence of novel forms of militancy in Chilean *música urbana*. Such is the case of the *Coodinadora Social Shishigang*,⁴ a collective characterized by carrying out charitable actions or the relevance acquired by class vindication, where the transformation of stigma into emblem is observed through discourses of 'flaite' pride and practices of subaltern solidarity.

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