# #genre: Reconsidering Popular Music Categorization



Thomas Johnson – The Graduate Center, CUNY RUMS Annual Graduate Student Conferece New Brunswick, NJ – April 9, 2017 @tgj505

tjohnson@gradcenter.cuny.edu

### What's your favorite kind of music?

- Sociology: survey data since 1980s
- Move from "snobbishness" to "omnivorousness"

- Answer with a label or two or three
- Prototypical artists: Clara Schumann, The Rolling Stones, Biggie

## What's your favorite kind of music?

- Sociology: survey data since 1980s
- Move from "snobbishness" to "omnivorousness"

- Answer with a label or two or three
- Prototypical artists: Clara Schumann, The Rolling Stones, Biggie

Elementary school students: Drake! "Hotline Bling"!

### What's your favorite kind of music?

Glenn McDonald (head of Spotify metadata and algorithmic predictions):

focusing on "connections between artists rather than individual songs or albums as a way of organizing the similarity relations on which the company's taxonomies are based." (Brackett 2016)

Maybe not the best idea!

# #genre and Spotify

#### **1.** #genre:

- 1. total interactions, groupings
- 2. genre-thinking or generic episteme
- 3. Experiential
- 2. Focus on:
  - 1. Combination of genre tags
  - 2. Clusters of related aritsts

Tame Impala (2015) – "New Person, Same Old Mistakes"

- Spotify's labels for Tame Impala:
  - australian alternative rock, indie pop, indie rock, indietronica, neo-psychedelic, and psychedelic rock
  - Derived from listening habits and social media activities
  - Reflects common tactic:
    - Artist website: "Parker's resultant record calls to mind <u>contemporary hip hop</u> production, Thriller, <u>fried 70s funk</u>, the irreverent playground Daft Punk presented on Discovery, <u>swathes of future pop and emotional 80s balladry</u>, all filtered through a <u>thoroughly modern psychedelic</u> third eye."

Tame Impala (2015) – "New Person, Same Old Mistakes"

- Spotify's labels for Tame Impala:
  - australian alternative rock, indie pop, indie rock, indietronica, neo-psychedelic, and psychedelic rock
- \* style: "intra-musical". Rockwell (2007): "manner of performance"
- \* genre: "extra-musical". Rockwell (2007): "wider cultural complex"

Rihanna (2016) – "Same Ol' Mistakes"

- Spotify's labels for Rihanna:
  - "dance pop, pop, r&b, and urban contemporary."
- These labels aren't good enough!







Lyrics: I can just hear them now / "How could you let us down?" / But they don't know what I felt / Or see it from this way around... Full lyrics on Google Play Music

Artist: Tame Impala **Album:** Currents Released: 2015

Genre: Disco



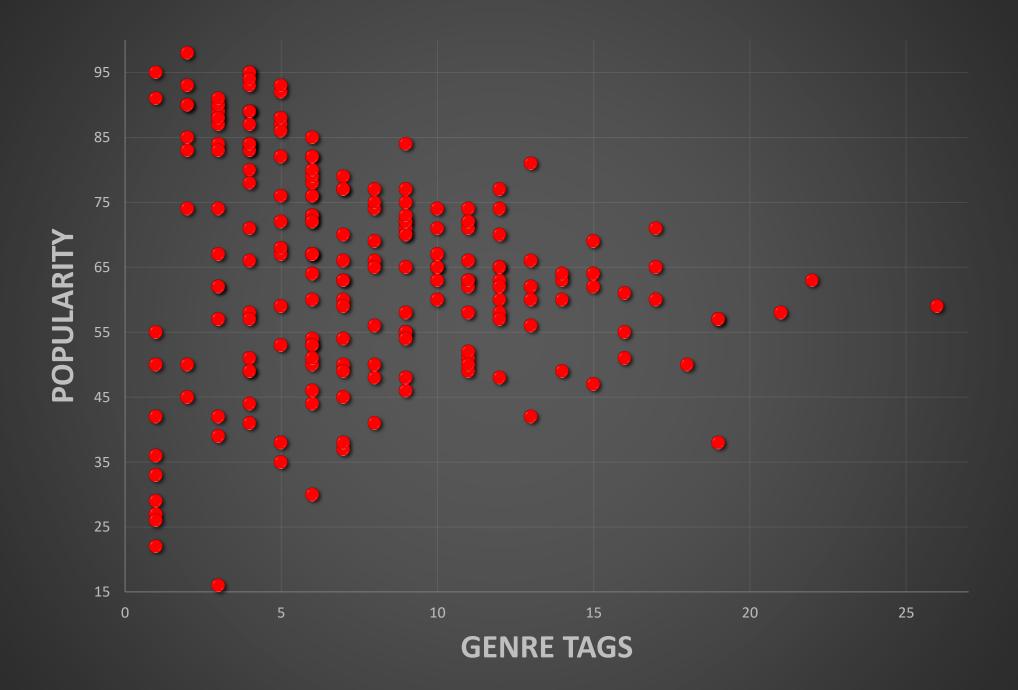
Rihanna - Same Ol' Mistakes (Audio) - YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x57ZM02NhF0

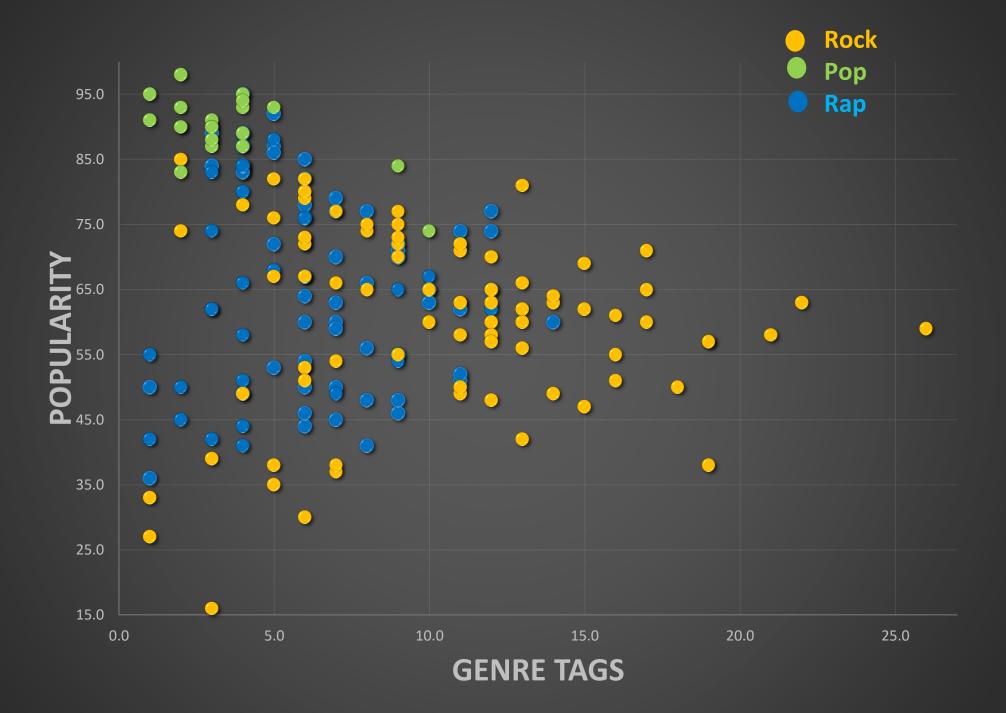


Lyrics: Feel like a brand new person / (But you make the same old mistakes) / Well, I don't care I'm in love / (Stop before it's too late)... Full lyrics on Google Play Music

Artist: Rihanna Album: Anti Released: 2016

Genres: Contemporary R&B, Pop



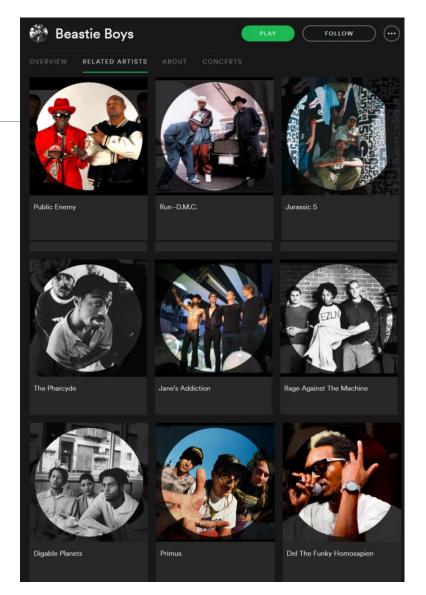


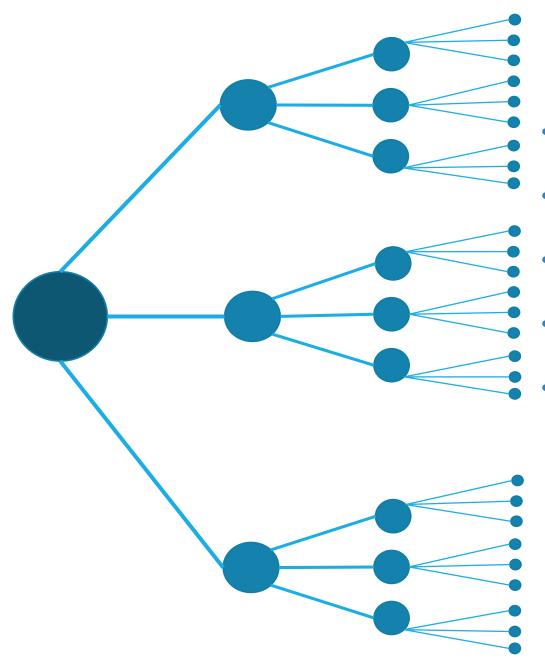
Born (2014):

"I find productive Franco Moretti's thinking about genre, notably his idea of tracing the movements of macro 'textual populations' — such that genre participates in the mobile organisation of a whole population of texts that 'continually deviate, innovate, branch out, flourish for a while, fail and are eclipsed'. This is particularly apt for periods like the present in which every musical assemblage protends a slightly different future, a minor variation—adding up to mobile congeries, fields in flux."

### #genre: related artist clusters

- combination of listener activity, social media activity
- actual habits, not survey data

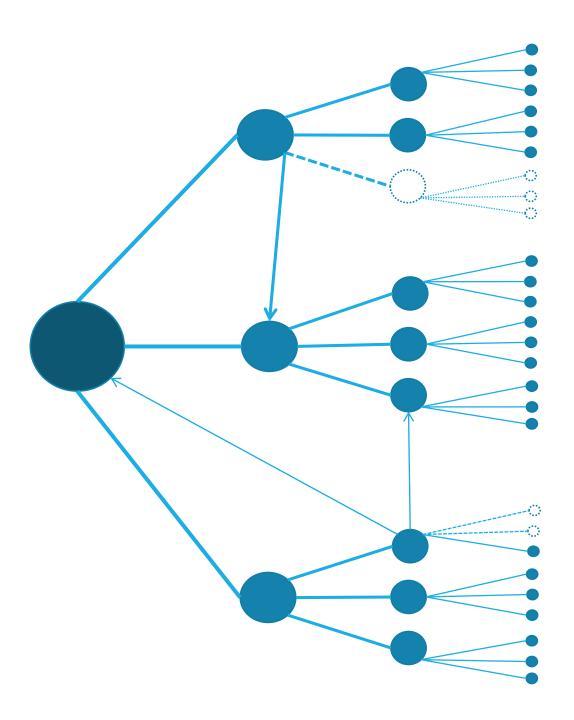




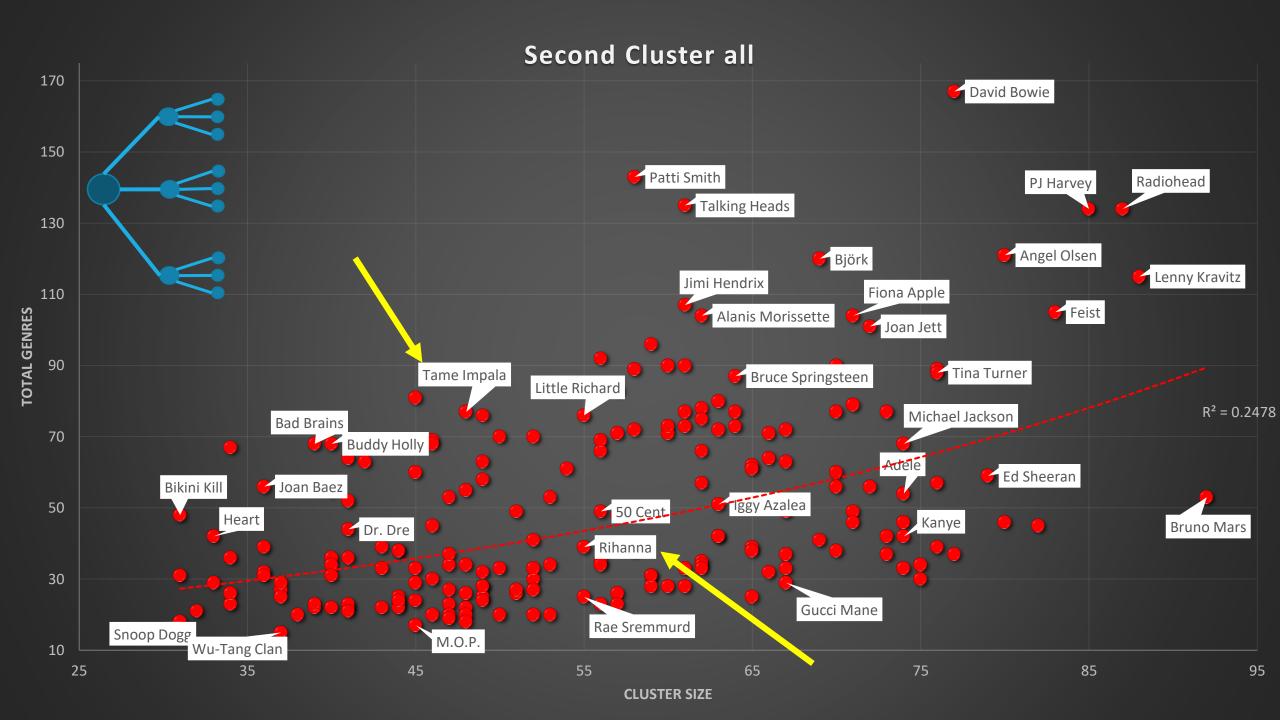
#### Cluster size method

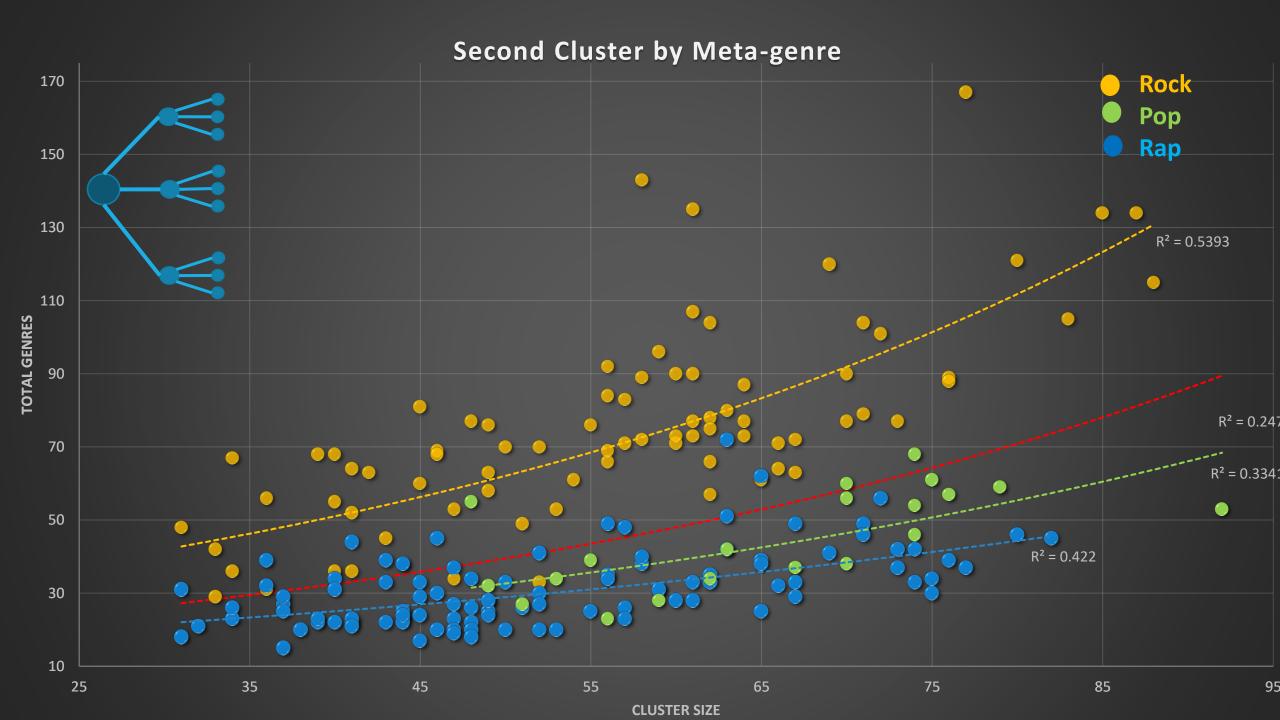
- n = number of related artists (e.g., n = 3)
  - For later examples, n = 10
- First cluster size = (1 + n)
- Possible second cluster size = (1 + n + n²)
- Possible third cluster size = (1 + n + n<sup>2</sup> + n<sup>3</sup>)
- More generally (c = cluster level):

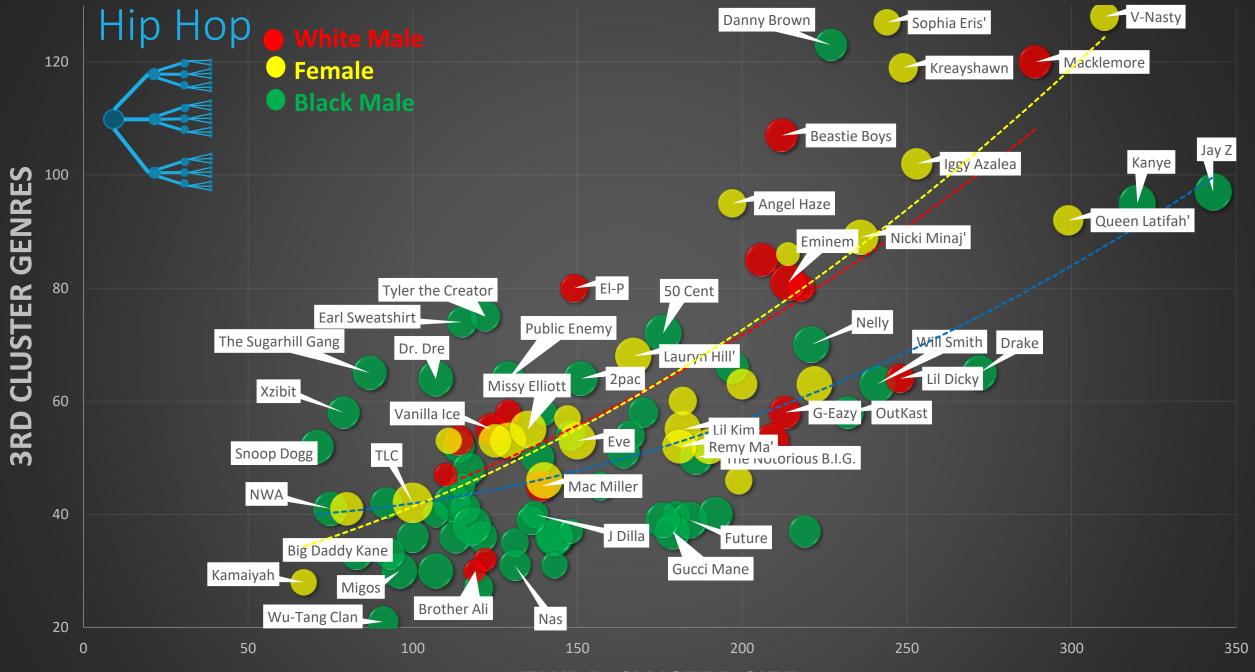
$$\sum_{c=0}^{3} 10^c$$



#### Cluster size method







THIRD CLUSTER SIZE

#### Towards some conclusions

\* Hagstom-Miller (2010): 1880s–1920s, popular music develops a color line

"black and white performers [who had] regularly employed racialized sounds" slowly became expected to "embody [racialized sounds]."



Perry (2014): "Genres are a crutch for incompetent music writers. What do such <u>vague terms</u> as Americana, metal (which has more subgenres than most of us have had hot dinners) or country mean? <u>Do any of those genres convey anything about how the music sounds?</u> Not really."

Hyden (2013): "In 10 years, <u>all pop music genre classifications</u> <u>will be obsolete</u>. ... I'm sure there will still be "rock" music and "country" music and "rap" music in 2023. I just don't think there will be discernible musical differences between them. ... <u>The more you hear, the less genres matter.</u>"

#### Towards some conclusions

❖ James (2017):

"Claims to genre transcendence are credible when they are made by artists who, like [Taylor] Swift, appear free of any particular social identity. In order to sound post-genre, one has to seem post-identity. Beyoncé works all sorts of genres ... but when the idea of her genre-transcendence is floated ... most people still interpret her as operating somewhere within R&B, a black genre. ... Only artists who inhabit the 'non-black' side of the post-identity colour line, artists who appear to have progressed past old-school white racism and love & theft, only they are legible as post-genre practitioners."

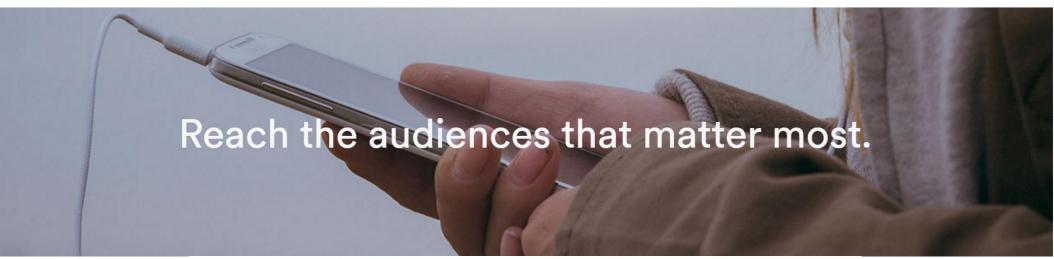
#### Towards some conclusions

- Genres are frequently adjectives or verbs to nouns (nominalization)
  - "jazz," "soul," "rock 'n' roll," "rap"
- Now: all of these (and many more) become (re)adjectivized

Adjectives as weaponized descriptors















Workout

Party

Focus

ommute







Dining







Use demographic targeting to confidently reach your audience across mobile, desktop and connected devices.

#### Thank You! tjohnson@gradcenter.cuny.edu - @tgj505



#### **Selected Bibliography**

- Born, Georgina. 2014. "Time, the Social, the Material: For a Non-Teleological Analysis of Musical Genre." In "Music and Genre: New Directions." McGill University, Montreal.
- ▶ Brackett, David. 2016. *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ▶ Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31.
- Hagstrom Miller, Karl. 2010. Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hyden, Steven. 2013. "One Direction Should Not Be Ignored." *Grantland*. November 26. http://grantland.com/features/one-direction-midnight-memories-review-end-genre/.
- ▶ James, Robin. 2017. "Is the Post- in Post-Identity the Post- in Post-Genre?" *Popular Music* 36 (1): 21–32.
- Lizardo, Omar, and Sara Skiles. 2015. "Musical Taste and Patterns of Symbolic Exclusion in the United States 1993–2012: Generational Dynamics of Differentiation and Continuity." *Poetics* 53: 9–21.
- Perry, Claudia. 2014. "Why Genres Don't Matter." *Medium*. September 23. https://medium.com/@ClaudiaPerryInk/why-genres-dont-matter-dd4bf0253e4#.ekygwdji1.
- ▶ Rockwell, Joti. 2007. "Drive, Lonesomeness, and the Genre of Bluegrass Music." PhD Dissertation, Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Rosch, Eleanor. 1978. Cognition and Categorization. New York: Halsted Press.