

Hip Hop Ecologies: Mapping the Field(s) An Introduction

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Hip hop was not born in Kansas. It was not born on a farm or a ranch, in a forest, or in the jungle. Hip hop was born in the South Bronx, New York, in the United States—a predominantly urban environment. From its origins, and as it kept spreading to new places, images of hip hop have always been closely associated with urban environments, marginalized areas, and housing projects, often at the outskirts of large cities. For example, in France and Germany, where the editors of this *Ecozon@* special issue grew up, hip hop did not first appear in the countryside; it took off in Paris, Hamburg, and Frankfurt's suburbs. Against this background, when the vast majority of people think about any of hip hop culture's elements—rap music (emceeing and Djing), b-boying, or graffiti art—they do not usually associate them with environmental issues such as sustainability, ecology, global warming, water preservation, deforestation, melting icebergs, pollution, displacement of indigenous peoples, or wildlife conservation, nor with people like Henry David Thoreau, Jane Goodall, or Greta Thunberg.

This mental separation, which digital artist Ahad Pace calls out in the cover art for our special issue, can also be observed in the academic field of hip hop studies. Scholars have focused on social debates around race (Jeffries), class (Harkness), gender (Rose), public safety (McCann), urban space (Forman), nationality (Tiongson), and a range of other issues. The artistic development and aesthetic features of hip hop have also been the subject of comprehensive studies (Barret; Bradley; Wolbring). One topic that is rarely discussed, meanwhile, is the relationship between hip hop and the environment.

When one pays closer attention to classic hip hop productions, such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" (1982) ("It's like a jungle sometimes"), A Tribe Called Quest's "Green Eggs and Ham" (1990), Dead Prez's "Be Healthy" (2000), Doc Gynéco's "Dans ma rue" (1996), MC Solaar's "Jane et Tarzan" (2017), Fettes Brot's "Gangsta Rap" (1995) or Sammy Deluxe's "Weck mich auf" (2001) to only name a few, it becomes clear that hip hop has from its origins been concerned with environments, places and spaces, ecologies, and their effect on humans. Nevertheless, as far as we know, there was not a consistent, clearly identified and claimed style of

environmental hip hop. This may be changing with the arrival of artists like Ietef Vita, also known as DJ Cavem, an ex-Black Panther known for coining the term “eco hip hop” in 2007, who focuses his art on food and environmental justice. Originally from Denver, Colorado, DJ Cavem describes himself as a rapper, activist, educator, organic gardener, and vegan chef. His 2012 album *The Produce Section* is “part album, part curriculum,” and offers “lessons on organic gardening, plant-based recipes and alternate uses of energy.” DJ Cavem founded the Vita Earth Foundation, a non-profit organization “dedicated to promoting wellness, eating healthy and environmental awareness” (Chef Ietef).

It is this relationship between hip hop, well-being, sustainability, and the environment that our special issue sets out to examine. Hip hop does not pursue an environmentalist agenda in any narrow sense. Its focus is traditionally on urban rather than natural life, on the city rather than the country. Nevertheless, an environmental perspective on hip hop promises to enrich our understanding of the ways in which popular cultural forms shape and are shaped by environmental concerns. In this spirit, *Hip Hop Ecologies* situates itself at the intersection of two innovative, fast-growing fields: hip hop studies and environmental studies. Such an approach can direct our attention to important dimensions of hip hop that have been neglected in public and scholarly debates. Conversely, hip hop offers unconventional vistas that challenge narrow conceptions of the environment and its academic study.

The following articles highlight various aspects of hip hop that have remained at the margins of scholarship: its depiction of nature; environmental dimensions of the urban spaces it negotiates; the growing significance of rural hip hop both inside and outside the United States; the environmental dimension of hip hop aesthetics, which manifests in such concepts as ‘flow’ and ‘realness’; the many metaphors rap music takes from the environment; hip hop that enters into dialogue with more established environmental genres such as nature writing; the material and semantic environments of hip hop culture (such as the ‘concrete jungle’); the material conditions of hip hop production and reception; the structures of environmental in/justice in which hip hop is entangled on scales ranging from the local to the global; and the growing use of hip hop for environmentalist activism.

Discussion of these issues has remained limited to a handful of articles and book chapters, most of which are predicated on the concept of urban ecology (Mexal; Rosenthal; Ingram; Balestrini). These publications already indicate that the relationship between hip hop and environmental studies works both ways. On the one hand, ecocritical approaches promise a more comprehensive understanding of hip hop. Ingram’s survey of environmental issues in hip hop, for example, ranges from environmental justice discourses in ‘conscious’ or ‘reality’ rap all the way to the appropriation of hip hop for corporate greenwashing. Since Ingram finds few examples of the former, he widens the scope to include artists like Arrested Development and Michael Franti who combine hip hop with other genres that speak more directly to mainstream environmentalism.

On the other hand, hip hop expands the purview of academic study in that it challenges culturally and conceptually limited notions of the environment. This corrective

impulse already made itself felt in Debra Rosenthal's pioneering article, "Hoods and the Woods: Rap Music as Environmental Literature" (2006), which brings Lawrence Buell's classic criteria of environmental literature to bear on rap music. Rosenthal's impulse is exploratory: she wants to identify rap songs that speak to mainstream environmentalism. Her findings are limited in number, partly because she confines her scope to chart-breaking rappers, partly because she relies on Buell's relatively narrow conception of the environmental: he asks for "ethical" descriptions of the nonhuman environment that foreground ecological processes and human-nonhuman entanglement (7). The examples Rosenthal does find—Grandmaster Flash's "The Message," Black Star's "Respiration" (1998), and Mos Def's "New World Water" (1999)—already present a challenge to this definition. Only "New World Water" fits the classic ecocritical framework comfortably, while the two other songs highlight the environmental dimensions of urban space—a realm that was only beginning to draw ecocritical attention at the time.

Both environmental activism and ecocritical scholarship emerged in the predominantly white, educated middle classes of North America and Western Europe. Accordingly, these movements were predicated on environmental experiences shaped by leisure rather than labor, by aesthetic pleasure rather than existential necessity, by the country (or the leafy suburb) rather than the city, and by possession rather than exclusion. Hip hop offers a different perspective by articulating the experiences of racially and socially marginalized groups. These experiences are marked by exclusion from policed middle-class environments, especially in white neighborhoods, wealthy suburbs, and many rural regions. Hip hop negotiates ecologies that lie outside the pale of white environmentalism, especially urban and ethnic ones. It draws attention to issues of unequal access, exploitation, and environmental (in)justice that often remain invisible or underestimated in mainstream environmental discourse. Humans seldom appear as sovereign spectators in these ecologies; on the contrary, their lives and livelihoods depend on their material environment and their knowledge of how to act in it.

As an aesthetically inventive and politically resistant art form, hip hop thus challenges and expands the very meaning of terms like "the environment," "nature," and "ecology." The case studies in our special issue trace how hip hop negotiates human and nonhuman agency, non-dualistic understandings of human-environment interaction, the social practices and cultural knowledge manifest in material environments, and the interdependence of environment and identity. In working through these questions, hip hop challenges conventional understandings of natural but also of cultural environments. The case studies present hip hop that revises historical manifestations of environmental thinking such as Darwinism and literary naturalism; hip hop that weaves ecological principles into cultural assemblages; hip hop collections that work like ecosystems; and hip hop that predates and expands the new materialist recognition that social structures are enmeshed with and shaped by the material world.

Alexander Rüter's "Politics that Matter in Nas's *Illmatic*" starts the issue off with a rereading of an all-time classic. Rüter draws on actor-network theory and new materialism to trace how Nas's *Illmatic* explores the urban ecology of New York's housing projects. The more capacious conceptions of the environment offered by these theories

enable Rüter to demonstrate that the ecology of *Illmatic* is one of built environments as well as the social practices of its inhabitants. His reading pivots on the term “concrete,” which draws out the interdependencies among the material, social, and mental dimensions of Nas’s urban ecology. The concrete used to build the housing project shapes the social opportunities and the mental landscapes of those who inhabit them. From this perspective, *Illmatic* emerges as an early negotiation of the systemic incarceration of African Americans, not only in prisons, but in the material, social, and mental containers of black urban environments.

The range of hip hop’s environmental scope becomes evident when Rüter’s article is complemented by our second contribution, Stefan Benz’s survey of “The Hydrocentric Imagination of Hip Hop.” Ranging across two decades of rap music, Benz demonstrates the usefulness of classic ecocriticism for highlighting a neglected side of hip hop: its environmental activism. Benz’s case studies, songs by Yasiin Bey, Taboo, and Supaman, all address specific water crises in their music. What is more, all of them reveal how racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and anthropocentrism have combined to foment these crises. Benz positions these songs in a longer history of water thinking in hip hop that manifests in such poetological metaphors as the flow. He shows that hip hop not only indicts the systemic inequalities that surface in water crises, but that it actively develops alternative, “hydrosocial” approaches that account for the entanglement of human and nonhuman elements.

Another set of elements integral to hip hop’s aesthetics comes to the fore in the third article, Dominik Steinhilber’s “Smoking Weed for the Planet.” Weed had long been a prominent substance in gangsta rap but became ubiquitous in the lyrics and imagery of Snoop Dogg after his conversion to Snoop Lion. At first sight, Snoop Lion may seem to glorify marihuana use much as he glorified various other gangsta accessories in his earlier career. Steinhilber shows, however, that Snoop’s conversion album *Reincarnated* (2013), and especially the track “Smoke the Weed,” negotiates the human-environment relationship in a complex, surprising manner. The track draws on metaphors of seeds, weeds, and plant growth to discuss how social and environmental life relate, and how they can be changed for the better. Based on a nuanced close reading of track and album, Steinhilber shows that the quirky environmentalism of Snoop’s recent oeuvre opens up new perspectives not only on hip hop but also on key categories of environmental discourse such as nature and the natural.

Such categories are shaped by specific cultural practices and their interaction with the land. The next article, Nassim Balestrini’s “The Cultural Ecology of Alaskan Indigenous Hip Hop,” therefore steps out of the mainstream of American hip hop and examines rap music by Indigenous youth from Juneau, Alaska. Not only do these rappers act on the margins of the music business, Balestrini shows, but their Indigenous heritage provides them with an understanding of human-environment relations that goes deeper than most mainstream rappers’ or environmentalists’. Rather than treating the environment as mere setting, these rappers treat it as a source of cultural and historical knowledge that affects their own relationships with their families, tribes, and societies. Balestrini traces this environmental knowledge with the help of ecocritical approaches such as cultural

ecology, which that she innovatively combines with Indigenous scholarship on the interrelations among place, language, knowledge, and cultural identity. She offers close readings of three rap songs and videos by a group of rappers around Arias Hoyle and Chris Talley to trace how they combine critiques of settler colonialism with the recovery of locally rooted Indigenous knowledge.

Traditionally a voice of the marginalized, hip hop is excellently suited to articulate concerns about environmental justice. The Indigenous perspectives Balestrini traces are among many that challenge the nexus of social and environmental exploitation. Julius Greve's contribution, "Hip Hop Naturalism: A Poetics of Afro-Pessimism," examines the intersections of hip hop and Afro-pessimism to elucidate the theoretical implications of this challenge. Starting from the observation that many rappers deploy a vocabulary of biological determinism, Greve inquires into the affinities of hip hop with literary naturalism on the one hand and Afro-pessimism on the other. Both of these movements conceive sociality, and indeed the human itself, as predetermined by forces beyond the individual's control. Greve reads rappers such as Mobb Deep and Kendrick Lamar against the Afro-pessimist writings of Frank Wilderson III to argue that Afro-pessimism can be regarded as the philosophy of this naturalist hip hop—much like Darwinian thought was the philosophy of nineteenth-century naturalist literature. This surprising insight will enable researchers to elucidate more thoroughly the ways hip hop negotiates ecological discourses and ideas, especially as they pertain to naturalizations of anti-black racism.

The concluding article, Marta Werbanowska's "Ecojustice Poetry in *The BreakBeat Poets* Anthologies," takes us beyond rap music and beyond the boundaries of the United States to explore how hip hop has shaped the articulation of environmental perspectives in new areas of cultural expression. Werbanowska offers a pioneering analysis of hip hop poetry, an innovative genre that has emerged at the intersection of rap lyricism, written poetry, and performance poetry. The genre was codified by the appearance of *The BreakBeat Poets*, an anthology of hip hop poetry that has inspired a series of four volumes to date. Even more so than rap music, hip hop poetry foregrounds questions of ecology and environmental justice. In close readings of hip hop poems by black women, Werbanowska identifies a range of poetic strategies that these poets employ to reveal the structural inequalities underlying environmental crises: a dramatic monologue that discusses analogies between human and animal exploitation; a childhood memory that restores a culture of place erased by rural gentrification; and a blues poem that forges bonds of kinship between disenfranchised humans and a nature that has never been granted a voice to begin with—but acquires one in this poem.

These poems expand the scope of environmental justice, and thus of hip hop poetry, to the transnational interrelations of human mobility, global capitalism, and the planetary ecosystem. This transnational perspective is underrepresented in our issue, which focuses mostly on hip hop from and within the United States. While hip hop emerged in American inner cities, as we noted in opening this introduction, it was shaped by migrants in its very beginnings and spread quickly around the world. Hip hop is today a global voice of the marginalized and oppressed—that is, of those groups most affected by the environmental damage created by industrialized countries in North America,

Europe, and Asia. Our issue begins to explore these transnational entanglements by incorporating postcolonial and indigenous perspectives that puncture the boundaries of the nation state, including the English language. Further research into hip hop ecologies will no doubt expand this transnational scope. After all, the environment does not heed national or cultural boundaries. In an age defined by global environmental crises, hip hop is primed to become a voice of the environmentally marginalized and oppressed as well.

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