

Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

Hip Hop Ecologies

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A *New York Times* article published on July 29, 2001, entitled “Hip-Hop and Green,” reports how Michael Diamond, the drummer of the acclaimed US hip-hop group Beastie Boys, just posted on the band’s website a public letter meant to organize musicians to battle the then Bush administration’s energy plan. As the article details, Mike D.—as the musician is commonly known among his fans—viewed the US President’s energy plan as destructive to the environment and therefore decided to act and sent 40,000 signatures to the US Congress to try to stop Bush and his administration to move forward with their policy. The article in question is very short and seems more interested in reporting about a famous New Yorker than in what Mike D. had to say. Yet, it is indicative in its tone, as the author manages to convey an ironic puzzlement regarding the relations between Beastie Boys’ boisterous hip-hop and Mike D.’s environmental call to arms.

Such irony may be justified, as many hip-hop songs appear to celebrate consumerism and its lifestyle, but it is ultimately out of tune, especially if one considers how the corporate industry contributed to developing a warped image of this musical genre. As David Ingram has pointed out in *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music*, since the rise of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s, environmental themes have been represented in popular songs (11). It is then not so unusual that some music artists do not see a gap between their music-making and a more traditional political stance promoting a more ecologically just future. This is especially true for hip-hop music, a genre that has been strongly influenced by the creation of usually segregated post-industrial environments simultaneously reflected and resisted by often young artists of color (Rose 59-60). For instance, despite their stylistic differences and diverging approaches, songs as Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five’s “The Message” (1982) and “New World Water” (1999) by Brooklyn native Yasiin Bey, then known as Mos Def, share a critical take of an economic system that appears to have created only landscapes of urban disaster (Ingram 179-181).

More recently, the deep entanglement between hip-hop and environmental issues has been offering a transformative platform for community building and resilience in response to rampant climate injustice and racial capitalism. Examples of initiatives responsible for bridging political ecology and grassroots activism with hip-hop include the non-profit organization *Hip Hop Caucus* which promotes political activism through campaigns that bridge Black liberation and environmental justice; the *Foundation*, a *women-centered hip-hop collective* in Detroit that uses hip-hop to create spaces of socio-environmental resistance; and the global media company *Hip Hop Is Green*, utilizing the power and influence of hip-hop to spark socio-ecological change, especially in urban settings. Besides representing a powerful vehicle for political expression, hip-hop has also become a crucial eco-pedagogical tool. As environmental science high school teacher Michael J. Cermak pointed out, hip-hop songs can in fact be very useful in addressing the tensions between the history of racism and the natural world. As Cermak writes, “hip-hop songs provide accessible and relevant messages that could simultaneously address ecological issues and racial inequalities” (76). In a similar spirit, Dr. Thomas Easley who performs under the name RaShad Eas developed a philosophy that he defines “hip hop forestry” aimed at using hip-hop to communicate about the discipline of forestry inside and outside the classroom, thus creating a creative and engaging bridge to environmental issues for students (Easley 279-86).

Yet, the ecological value of hip-hop music does not lie exclusively on its critical insight or ability to address the socio-political implications of the current ecological crisis. Instead, some essential elements of hip hop have more direct positive eco-aesthetic implications: as noted by Ingram, “sampling and scratching, for example, can be seen as forms of musical recycling” (177). Pushing such implications even further, Dj Cavem’s latest digital album BIOMIMICZ is the first plant-based, zero-waste, environmental hip hop album that can actually be planted. While the lyrics accessible through a QR code discuss culinary climate action, composting, recycling, soil regeneration, and water conservation topics, the album is issued as a seed pack, thus transforming the words into a vehicle of change that is ultimately incorporated by eating the harvested vegetables and fulfilling the artist’s hopes that “the seeds will be planted, literally” (DJ Cavem).

All these elements are represented in the current issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to *Hip Hop Ecologies*. As stated by guest editors Timo Müller and Alain-Philippe Durand in the original CFP, an environmental perspective on hip-hop can “enrich our understanding of the ways in which popular cultural forms shape and are shaped by environmental concerns.” Our Creative Writing and Art section includes three original pieces that testify to the potential of oral storytelling and lyrical expression to reconfigure how we communicate about the relationships between social justice and the environment. In fact, each contribution deals first and foremost with strategies of communication that may function as a fundamental driver to get people involved in socio-ecological change. Moreover, the three pieces are connected by a desire to embrace an embodied sense of place cognizant of our multispecies entanglements as well as an intersectional understanding of climate justice.

The section opens with an autobiographical piece by Anthony Kwame Harrison, an emcee and cultural anthropologist who teaches in the department of Sociology at Virginia Tech. Harrison leads us readers on a personal journey across meaningful experiences that have informed his environmental approach to hip-hop and offers a critique of hip-hop's presumed urban-rural divide, highlighting instead its longstanding presence in rural communities. In doing so, he reverses the traditional association of hip-hop to urban spaces while emphasizing its ancestral bond with African diasporic tradition. The centering of wilderness in his poetics, symbolically encapsulated in his emcee name—Mad Squirrel—serves to blur the line of separation between culture and nature, between human and animal, thus giving birth to a liminal identity that inhabits the artificial separation between cultural categories of space. Hip-hop, then, when characterized by non-anthropocentric lyricism, functions as a recommitment to land and nature, to a new sense of place influenced by nonhuman beings, landscapes, and communities. To help visualize the systematic marginalization of Black communities from environmental discourse, the piece is accompanied by three images created through stylized free-hand illustrations by digital artist Ahad Pace, whose art appears also on the cover of the issue. The stark juxtaposition of cartoon-like human figures over a realistic forest landscape functions as a space reclamation and a renewed sense of belonging for Black communities who not only have been historically excluded by outdoor recreation but also whose hip-hop culture has been erroneously segregated to the cityscape.

The next contribution, “Même les Tueurs Dorment” (Even the Killers Sleep), is another autobiographical piece—fictional this time—written by Dr. Steve Gadet, a writer from Guadeloupe who resides in Martinique. Even in this fictional text, we have a tension between the urban and the rural, as the intradiegetic narrator, the young drug dealer Taïno, reflects on his street life in Texaco, a poor segregated ghetto in the capital city of Martinique, Fort-de-France, that hosts migrants moving into the city from rural areas of the island. Although not exactly hip-hop, this text shares similar features with the musical genre, as readers are directly addressed by Taïno and urged to listen to his testimony of the degraded socio-environmental conditions of the ghetto. Ultimately, though, the text becomes a eulogy for George-Matilde Firmin, a real social justice activist known by her nickname Man Sicot who not only was the founder of the Texaco neighborhood in the 1950s, but also fought for years so that the area could be more hospitable for newcomers from the rural areas. As Man Sicot becomes the embodiment of a positive social change, whose death can even stop the circle of violence embedded in the ghetto, Gadet's story embraces a style of oral storytelling in which an original linguistic ecology seems to rise directly and somehow organically from the neighborhood, thus bearing witness to life even among urban misery.

The third and final contribution is the poem “Suppose a World” by Leonardo Chinchilla Mora, made up of a sequence of couplets built on the anaphoric repetition of the verb “suppose,” which contributes to its sing-song tone and emphasis on rhythmic style. The poem offers two options for the future of life on Earth: either renewal or annihilation. While the initial utopic tone is soon replaced by ecological devastation and the expansion of racism and poverty, the text still forces readers to imagine possible

futures and to act upon the present. As the poem unfolds, the couplets gradually take over the space of the page, mimicking the imaginative power of narrative form to fill with vibrant vitality the white, empty space of the page caused by the anthropocentric flaw of those “smarter bipedals” unable to leave the world “undisturbed.” While referring specifically to Indigenous hip hop culture, Julie Gorlewski defines it as an “inherently non-conformist art form [that] engenders alternative visions of the social world, such as one that is free from environmental or land degradation, greed, and exploitation” (49). Similarly, through the flickering of possible worlds oscillating between extinction and survival, Chinchilla Mora urges us to rethink our current socio-ecological order beyond human domination of nature.

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