

**John Carroll University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Debra Rosenthal**

---

2006

# 'Hoods and the Woods: Rap Music as Environmental Literature



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/debra-rosenthal/>

# 'Hoods and the Woods: Rap Music as Environmental Literature

DEBRA J. ROSENTHAL

**M**Y TITLE, WITH ITS IRREVERENT RHYME LINKING THE HIP HOP neighborhood to the green world of woods and forests, intends to suggest that juxtaposing rap lyrics to canonical environmental literature can extend our ecological literacy. Rap, with its bioregional emphasis on urban space and its attachment to locale, constitutes an urban environmental discourse hitherto overlooked by scholars of environmental literature. To read rap lyrics ecocritically is to position rap at the crossroads of African American literature and the predominantly white literary and critical field of environmental literature. Since the major studies of environmental literature pay little or no attention to African American writers,<sup>1</sup> inserting rap as an African American literary production into an ecocritical conversation can open new directions for discussion of the interaction between humans and their nonhuman surroundings, particularly in the city.

I do not mean to suggest that rap music is a monolithic whole that describes the natural history of place;<sup>2</sup> indeed, various artists and sub-genres narrate different regions and urban spaces: 2 Live Crew in Miami, Notorious B. I. G. in New York City, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony in Cleveland,<sup>3</sup> Common in Chicago, The Geto Boys in Houston, Eminem in Detroit, Tupac Shakur, Ice-T, and N. W. A. in Los Angeles, etc.<sup>4</sup> In his important study, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, Melvin Dixon examines “the ways in which Afro-American writers, often considered homeless, alienated from mainstream culture, and segregated in negative environments, have used language to create alternative landscapes where black culture

---

and identity can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed 'place'" (Dixon 2). Studying rap music as such a language of alternative landscape reveals the genre's ability to narrate a "metaphorical geography of Afro-American expression" (2). Thus, rap, ecologically informed and informative, constitutes an urban environmental discourse that both analyzes and comments on the built environment. Studying rap music ecocritically can offer a counterpoint to foundational views of environmental literature and raise important questions about cultivating a sense of place that both resonate with and challenge such canonical place-based figures as Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, who usually dominate environmental syllabi, literature conference panels, and scholarly publications.

Since rap deemphasizes harmony and melody and instead emphasizes rhythm and rhyme, rappers, as with all poets, pay strict attention to the beat of words. Hip hop lyrics are rapped, a "form of sonic bricolage with roots in 'toastin,' a style of making music by speaking over records" (Samuels 25). As author of perhaps the most important study of rap music, *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose describes rap as "polyvocal conversations" and "a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music" (2). Rappers often speak in the first person and "tell long, involved, and sometimes abstract stories with catchy and memorable phrases and beats . . . Rap tales are told in elaborate and ever-changing black slang and refer to black cultural figures and rituals, mainstream film, video and television characters, and little-known black heroes" (3). Rap is rooted in the black oral culture of call and response and its "verbal sorcery" (Perkins 2) asserts pressure on the English language, changing it in dynamic ways. While the artistic quality of rap varies, as some novels and poems are better than others, the more artistic rappers lyrically engage internal rhyme, vivid imagery, personification, compelling word choice, complicated structure, and can evoke a certain tone or mood. Michael Eric Dyson holds that "[a]t their best, rappers shape the tortuous twists of urban fate into lyrical elegies" (177). Underscoring the verbal virtuosity of rap lyrics, Cornel West maintains that in rap "a tremendous *articulateness* is syncopated with the African drumbeat, the African funk" to produce a unique combination of "the black preacher and the black music tradition" (Stephanson 280). For these reasons and others, rap lyrics can justifiably be considered alongside works more easily recognized as environmentally oriented.

Historically, African American writers have both embraced and distrusted the city. An important symbol in African American literature and culture, the city at once represents black opportunity and disenfranchisement. Rap, as a genre of African American literary production and performance, presents complicated views of the city: some rap lyrics voice a boastful, celebratory attitude toward the “crown of the metropolis” (as articulated by Black Star in “Respiration”). Yet the city also challenges urban youth “To Live and Die in L.A.,” as Tupac Shakur raps in the song of the same title. To frame a discussion of rap as both rooted in pro- and antiurban impulses in African American literature and yet coextensive with ecologically informed American literature, we can turn to several examples.

In Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the city stands as a refuge for slaves from the horrors of rural plantation life. In closer proximity to roaming neighbor’s eyes, slaves were whipped less often in the city than in the country, and city slaves received more food than their country counterparts. According to Douglass, few urban slave masters “are willing to incur the odium attaching to the reputation of being a cruel master; and above all things, they would not be known as not giving a slave enough to eat.” City life affords Douglass the opportunity to acquire basic literacy skills. In general, Douglass finds the advantages of living in Baltimore to be so superior to living at his master’s Great House Farm that he claims a “city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on a plantation” (Douglass 58).

Another slave autobiographer, Harriet Jacobs, similarly suggests that the city is more desirable than nature: when Jacobs initially flees from her master in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she takes refuge in a swamp where she is bitten by mosquitoes and a poisonous snake. As Ann Gelder points out, the few positive pastoral analogies in *Incidents* “conceal cultural violence with images of nature and culture in harmony,” especially in descriptions of homely, cultivated vines around slaves’ quarters (255). Jacobs most readily tricks her slave master when, from her hideout in her grandmother’s garret, she arranges for her letters to her master to be mailed from New York City. Thus, for Jacobs, the city represents a place where she can authorize herself as free, and an imagined space into which she can project a strategic, knowing self who can battle her master in a “competition in cunning” (the title of one of her chapters).

Both Douglass and Jacobs choose to live in northern cities when they attain freedom, a decision that Michael Bennett rightly calls part of an “anti-pastoral African American literary tradition” that “both draws on and calls into the question the conventions of American nature writing” (195, 198). While agreeing that images of the wilderness and the mountaintop, so prevalent in African American spirituals and sermons, appear as important symbols in black literary production, Bennett nonetheless points out that these topographical landmarks inhere as metaphors, not as actual desired bioregional spaces. For example, Bennett argues that slaves and free blacks would not agree with Henry David Thoreau’s famous dictum that “in wildness is the preservation of the world,” and that preachers who exhort figurative visions of mountaintop spiritual salvation have little in common with Aldo Leopold’s famous essay “Thinking Like a Mountain” (Bennett 197). Robert Butler argues along similar lines: “Douglass experiences Baltimore as a kind of liberating frontier, an urban equivalent to the pastoral space which frees traditional white heroes such as Cooper’s Natty Bumppo and the persona of Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’” (23–24).

While Douglass and Jacobs represent the antebellum effort to escape plantations and the countryside into the comparative safety of the city, many twentieth-century African American writers likewise portray the city and urban life in positive terms. Hakutani and Butler discuss the enthusiasm toward the city expressed by W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Claude Brown, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Morrison (Hakutani and Butler 9–17). More recently, Terry McMillan normalizes the pulsing city life of Phoenix for her four professional women characters in *Waiting to Exhale*.

Yet many African American writers extol the virtues of nature or the pastoral. For example, in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), Langston Hughes uses the metaphor of a mighty river to describe the trans-Atlantic diasporic experience of black Americans. In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Janie finds more happiness working on the muck than living in town in southern Florida. In her classic essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden” (1972), Alice Walker recovers black women’s proscribed spirituality and creativity, especially by recalling her mother’s botanical self-expression. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) is infused with nature imagery.

But more often, black writers express ambiguity toward the city, seeing it as a place of both prospect and despondency. Mos Def, as part

of Black Star, describes New York City in "Respiration" as "the Shiny Apple is bruised but sweet." James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" eloquently evokes the energy of the "black and bouncy" sounds of Harlem and the rich cultural heritage of the street revival meeting. But the narrator lives in housing project that "hasn't been up long. A few days after it was up it seemed uninhabitably new, now, of course, it's already rundown." The streets that make the "amen corner" possible are the same "killing streets of our childhood." In *Native Son*, Richard Wright also forcefully articulates African American ambivalence toward Chicago: "There were many empty buildings with black windows, like blind eyes, buildings like skeletons standing with snow on their bones in the winter winds" (163). Because white real estate investor Mr. Dalton "would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot" (164), Bigger Thomas thinks whites "keep us bottled up here like wild animals" (233). Yet the city is also a transformative place of expansive possibility for some blacks. For example, Mr. Green, who held Bigger's job previously, has the chance to go to night school and secure a government job.

The above brief discussion of the importance of the city to black *belles lettres* intends to historicize and contextualize my claim that rap music is generically related to a long history of black urban discourse. Rap, however, complicates this discourse with its racialization of place that territorializes sexuality, violence, and criminality. For example, in "Changes," Tupac Shakur represents much of the genre when he raps, "I'm tired of bein' poor and even worse I'm black . . . And as long as I stay black I gotta stay strapped." According to Robin D. G. Kelley, "these very stereotypes of the ghetto as "war zone" and the black youth as "criminal," as well as their (often adolescent) struggles with notions of masculinity and sexuality, also structure and constrain their efforts to create a counternarrative of life in the inner city" (118). Yet, as Tricia Rose warns, "Without historical contextualization, esthetics are naturalized, and certain cultural practices are made to appear essential to a given group of people. On the other hand, without esthetic considerations, black cultural practices are reduced to extensions of socio-historical circumstances" (Rose, "Black Texts").

With this admonition in mind, we can apply a contextualized black urban discourse to working definitions of what constitutes mainstream environmental discourse. In his important book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American*

*Culture*, Lawrence Buell proposes a “checklist” of four characteristics that can be used to gauge the environmental tilt of a work.<sup>5</sup> According to Buell, in most environmentally oriented works:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history . . .
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest . . .
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation . . .
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text . . . (7–8)

Clearly, not every rap song falls into these categories, but I am interested in examining some that do. While rap retains a more anthropocentric viewpoint than most “green” writing, it is nonetheless a literary art form that represents the built environment and theorizes notions of emplacement. When discussing rap music’s applicability to Buell’s checklist, Buell’s first and second characteristics might fruitfully be grafted together for a discussion of emplacement and the ghetto landscape, and his third and fourth characteristics can be linked for a consideration of issues of preservation and conservation.

Buell’s contention that environmentally oriented works should include or describe the nonhuman environment “not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” can be seen in some rap pieces’ concern with place and space (7–8). If “[t]urntables in the park displace the machine in the garden” (Baker 217), rap music and lyrics generate from and respond to black urban life, and thus constitute an indigenous US musical and literary form that speaks eloquently about the condition of the built environment and an African American “ecological way of seeing.”<sup>6</sup> According to Mtume ya Salaam, before 1989, rap music was recorded mainly by independent labels. After 1989, major record labels understood the vast market for rap and signed numerous artists, including those originally signed with independent labels. As the main concern of major labels was profit, they encouraged rappers to focus on what sells best—violent and sexualized narration of urban space (Salaam 303–04).

Murray Forman analyzes what he sees as the “spatial discourse of rap,” that is, the “gradual shift within rap from a concern with broad, generalized spaces, to the representation of specific named cities and “hoods” (66). Forman maintains that in rap, “the city is an audible presence” (67) and that rappers have “powerful ties to place that both anchor rap acts to their immediate environments and set them apart from other environments and other “hoods” (68). Even the subgenre of gangsta rap articulates “narrative descriptions of spaces and places [that] are absolutely essential to an understanding of the ways that a great number of urban black youths imagine their environments and the ways that they relate those images to their own individual sense of self” (83). In his book, *The Sound of the City*, Charlie Gillet even includes an appendix entitled “Location-based compilations,” a discography organized geographically.

The contribution of rap, as a bioregional chronicle, to the field of environmental literature can most clearly be illustrated by studying some specific lyrics. The early rap piece “The Message” (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five compares in interesting ways to the more recent songs “Respiration” by Black Star, and “New World Water” by Mos Def. A brief reading of these three songs in light of Buell’s checklist and current ecocritical concerns can suggest new ways of thinking about rap as environmental literature.

Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five demonstrate that an urban environmental discourse inheres from the genre’s inception. “The Message” invokes a metropolitan environmental esthetic of hip hop akin to a regional realist movement in that it explores the specificity of relationship between humans and their nonhuman environment. Its opening line that “It’s like a jungle sometimes” invokes not the rain-forest jungle so predominant in the minds of environmental activists, but the urban jungle that remains unvisited by much of white America. This racialized urban jungle forms a toxic environment antithetical to the survival of its inhabitants, so much so that it makes Grandmaster Flash warn, “Don’t push me ‘cause I’m close to the edge/I’m trying hard not to lose my head” as well as it makes him “wonder/How I keep from going under.”

“The Message” is particularly eloquent in its evocative description of the physical environs with such lines as, “Broken glass everywhere/ People pissing on the stairs,” and “Standing on the front sloop, hanging out the window/Watching all the cars go by, roaring as the breezes



blow.” With as keen an observer’s eye as that of Barry Lopez on the snowscape in *Arctic Dreams*, Edward Abbey on heat and sand in *Desert Solitaire*, Henry David Thoreau on Walden pond, Sarah Orne Jewett on the lush Maine landscape, or other great naturalist writers, Grandmaster Flash observes the indigenous species of his ecosystem: “Crazy lady, living in a bag/Eating outta garbage pails,” and he enumerates the “Smugglers, scramblers, burglars, gamblers/Pickpockets, peddlers, even panhandlers” and the “Thugs, pimps, and pushers and the big money makers.” The song ends with a dialogue with police officers who mistake the rappers for yet another undesirable local genus: the gang.

Echoing such foundational ecocritics as John Haines, who forcefully asserts that “Place makes people” (Haines 7) Grandmaster Flash similarly links emplacement to identity: “A child is born with no state of mind/Blind to the ways of mankind . . . You grow up in the ghetto, living second rate/And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate.” Further, the lyrics suggest that the ghetto determines criminal personhood via a direct line from the urban jungle to the jail cell: “Being used and abused to serve like hell/Til one day you was found hung dead in the cell.” “The Message” enacts its title by eloquently communicating a memorandum about the lived experience of a particular place and its importance in determining identity.

Black Star shows just as much artistry as Grandmaster Flash in its rootedness to a sense of place. As the rappers “take the L, transfer to the 2,” “Respiration” portrays New York City as alive: Mos Def can hear “la ciudad respirando/ . . . the city breathing . . . Breathe in, inhale vapors from bright stars that shine/Breathe out, weed smoke retrace the skyline.” The song similarly describes a speaker who “stood lookin at my former hood” and notices that although the moon rides “high in the crown of the metropolis,” the “back streets stay darkened” in a “dog-eat-dog world.” Rappers Mos Def and Talib Kweli feel dispossessed as real estate investors want to raze the ghetto to establish more lucrative condominiums: “Outta the city, they want us gone/Tearin down the ’jects creating plush homes.” Further, they experience the city as alienating: “Skyscrapers is colossus, the cost of living is preposterous/Stay alive, you play or die, no options.”

“Respiration” also shares with “The Message,” and, indeed, with rap songs in general, an atmosphere of violence. The song poetically bemoans “Blastin holes in the night til she bled sunshine/ . . . I can feel the city breathin/Chest heavin, against the flesh of the evening/Sigh

before we die like the last train leaving.” The city constitutes “Places where you could get murdered over a glare.” The violence often leads to prison: “Getting knowledge in jail like a blessing in disguise.”

In an interesting metaphoric turn, “Respiration” at moments reaches to nature imagery to describe the built environment: “My eagle talons stay sharpened . . ./For trees to grow in Brooklyn, seeds need to be planted” and, invoking the “concrete jungles” of “The Message,” Talib Kweli observes “ghetto birds where waters fall.” The “ghetto birds” resonate with Makaveli’s “ghetto bird helicopters” in “To Live and Die in L.A.”

It is in a similar turn to conventional nature imagery that I find “New World Water” so compelling. Readers of American literature are familiar with innumerable literary associations with water, but Mos Def envisions water as a national commodity that reacts to or reflects the black American experience of being usurped, corrupted, and poisoned. For example, in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), Langston Hughes imagines water corporeally as a mighty river that narrates black history as it flows from Africa to America (“I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins” [Hughes 88]). However, Mos Def historicizes water as rebelling against racial injustice: “Fools done upset the Old Man River/Made him carry slave ships and fed him dead nigga/Now his belly full and he about to flood somethin/So I’m a throw a rope that ain’t tied to nothin/til your crew use the H<sub>2</sub>O in wise amounts since/it’s the New World Water and every drop counts.” Hughes’s proud aqueous legacy from Old World Africa now flows into Mos Def’s New World America as a polluted inheritance. Mos Def does not portray water as an isolated pond in Concord through which a writer such as Thoreau can achieve transcendence. For him, water is not a source of grace or sport (fly fishing) as in Norman MacLean’s *A River Runs Through It*, nor is the flowing water a measure by which one can trace maturity, as in Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*.

In “New World Water,” the urban aesthetic is narrated in terms of its connectedness to the water supply, illustrating Buell’s first tenet that “human history is implicated in natural history.” Mos Def raps water as “a cool, crisp, clean glass of water” that one can enjoy “On a warm summer’s day (That cool refreshing drink).” Yet, he realizes water is not an unlimited resource: “But it don’t rain for four weeks some summers . . . You be buying Evian just to take a bath.” The song

further shows an ecological outlook in its understanding of the competing demands for water. As a resource, water must be allocated between citizen's daily demand and firefighter's requirement of water to battle forest fires in Southern California: "The sun is stirring in the treetops burning the woods/And as the flames from the blaze get higher and higher/They say, "Don't drink the water! We need it for the fire!" Water is, after all, "Four carbons and monoxide/Push the water table lopside."

Mos Def clearly understands water's possibility to be a transcendent unifier: "The rich and poor, black and white got need for it (That's right)/And everybody in the world can agree with this (Let em know)." In an accommodating gesture that resists rap's East–West divide, Mos Def sings "New York is drinkin it (New World Water)/Now all of California is drinkin it (New World Water)." Mos Def brings the larger national picture to a more local focus by stating that, "Your moms, wife, and baby girl is drinkin it/Up north and down south is drinking it."

Yet despite the universal commonality of water, Mos Def critiques America's unequal domination of the world's supply: "Americans wastin it on some leisure shit (Say word?)/And other nations be desperately seekin it (Let em know). Mos Def further laments that water "Used to be free now it cost you a fee" because of commercialization and exploitation. He rails against the fact that "foreign-based companies go and get greedy/The type of cats who pollute the whole shore line/Have it purified, sell it for a dollar twenty-five." In what can be perhaps read as an apocalyptic vision not uncommon to ecologically conscious writers, Mos Def links humans' mistreatment of the water supply to a toxic environment: "Bacteria washing up on they beaches (Say word?)... Epidemics hoppin up off the petri dish (Let em know)/Control centers play it all secretive (Say word?)/To avoid public panic and freakiness (Let em know)/There are places where TB is common as TV."

This apocalyptic vision, and rap's general violent aesthetic, complicates the genre's alignment with the third and fourth items on Buell's checklist. Human accountability to the environment, which, in Buell's terms should convey a sense of "process" rather than a "constant," can be framed in terms of the oscillation between description and prescription found in much of canonical environmental literature. In other words, to what extent does a text's description of place serve not only an aesthetic purpose, but a preservationist one as well?

In much green writing, the discourse of landscape description implicitly acts as a political agenda for preservation. For example, in *Arctic Dreams* and *Desert Solitaire*, when Barry Lopez and Edward Abbey, respectively, detail the hostile, life-threatening nature of the tundra and the desert, they simultaneously advocate the preservation of these very places. Lopez's scientific description of the Arctic differs greatly from Abbey's rebellious attitude, yet both celebrate harsh bioregions and their lengthy descriptions double as a plea to resist change, development, or "improvement" of the locale. Thoreau's ecstatic account of nature atop Mt. Ktaadn ("the *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we?" [Thoreau 113]) does not necessarily convey a preservationist memo, chiefly because massive deforestation and widespread environmental degradation were unimaginable in the rural mid-nineteenth century mindset, but his writings convey an earnest, passionate desire to unite with the landscape.

It is also in these prescription/description and "urge to merge" tendencies that rap music so compellingly compares to mainstream environmental literature. As rap frequently musically describes a violent and nihilistic vision of the built environment, the rapper has a complicated relationship with his or her place. What is the status of description of place in rap music? Does the rapper detail the ghetto with the intent of environmental preservation? Or do the rapper's descriptions serve to invite change, development, and improvement? A consideration of these questions requires us to read place-based texts differently, for it demonstrates that an environmental discourse does not always imply a preservationist agenda; rather, the artist's description of his or her indigenous locale can be a plea for environmental and social transformation.

Certainly, some rappers derive their vitality from the streets: Lauryn Hill sings an ode to the city, that, Wordsworth-like, occasions nostalgic reflection: "Every ghetto, every city and suburban place I been/ Make me recall my days in New Jerusalem." Yet most rappers do not express a romanticized desire to live in harmony with their environment or express an urge to merge with killing streets. Instead, they try to escape from the very sense of emplacement that has formed them and to which they still have strong ties of family and friends. Grandmaster Flash explains his failed attempt to leave the city: "I tried to get away but I couldn't get far/'Cause the man with the tow truck repossessed

my car.” These last two examples make Wendell Berry seem almost naïve. In “The Peace of Wild Things,” Berry writes that “[w]hen despair for the world grows in me/. . . I go and lie down where the wood drake/rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds./I come into the peace of wild things” (Berry 69). Rappers do not celebrate such a space of solace nor a place in the built environment to harmonize with the wild.

The rap artist is no journal-toting naturalist trying to observe an environment objectively. If, as Rose maintains, “the politics of rap music involves the contestation over public space” (*Black Noise* 124), then perhaps we can see another link between rap music and mainstream environmental literature. Examples abound of canonical nature writing participating in a “contestation over public space,” particularly over public wilderness space. One needs only to think of *The Book of Yaak* and *The Roadless Yaak*, Rick Bass’s works on the Yaak Valley in northwestern Montana. Bass’s loving descriptions of the Yaak Valley are motivated by an urgent desire to save the bioregion from loggers. He hopes his nature writing will serve as political writing that heightens awareness of the biodiversity and beauty of the Yaak Valley, and thus rescue it from destruction. Similarly, some rappers use their music to participate in a contestation over public space: rap songs can delineate territory, making public space a marked ‘hood. Some rap videos even visually narrate a sense of place, a strategy intended to convey a sense of credibility and belonging.

With its emphasis on the built environment and humans’ relationship to the nonhuman world, rap music can indeed fulfill Buell’s requirements for ecologically oriented literature. If, as Wallace Stegner writes, “no place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments,” then rap, through its pounding descriptions of the streets, constitutes the ghetto as a place. If rap music can be contextualized as not only part of African American literature in general, but as part of a more historicized black urban writing, then it makes sense to include rap in a discussion of environmental literature. Some readers may object to such an inclusion. While a case cannot be made that rap is “green” writing, many rap pieces can be seen as participating in an urban environmental discourse that extends our ecological literacy and redefines received ideas of what constitutes ecologically oriented writing.

## NOTES

I am indebted to my student Christopher Zeppenfeld, who shared his wealth of knowledge and advice. Many thanks to Glenn Starkman for his continual encouragement, and to Santina Protospapa, formerly of the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame, for directing me to certain rap songs.

1. I'm thinking of Armbruster, Branch, Coupe, Gilcrest, Glotfelty, Kerridge, Love, Mazel, Murphy, Rosendale, and Slovic.
2. While Buell uses the term "environment" "to apply, in principle, to the world outside the observer regardless of how it is perceived, and to reserve 'place' for environment as subjectively located and defined, I will use the two terms interchangeably in keeping with rap's convention.
3. Writing this article in Cleveland, I am particularly interested in Bone Thugs-N-Harmony's calling out of such Cleveland city streets as St. Claire, 145th, 152nd, etc.
4. Notorious B. I. G. raps about a larger East Coast – West Coast split in "Going Back to Cali": the song opens with an exchange of information about an airplane flight leaving Kennedy airport in New York City and arriving at LAX airport in Los Angeles and in the second verse, Notorious raps that "If I got to choose a coast I got to choose the East/. . . But that don't mean a nigga cannot rest in the West." This East – West distinction was further polarized when Tupac Shakur, from California, who recorded with the West Coast label Death Row Records, was shot and killed in September 1996. Six months later, in March 1997, New York rapper Notorious B. I. G., who recorded with the East-Coast company Bad Boy Records, was gunned down in Los Angeles. No one has been found guilty of either of these murders, and industry watchers suspect rivalry between the opposite-coast record companies.
5. In addition to Buell's checklist, Thomas J. Lyon provides a useful chronological history of "the invasion and transformation of a portion of the New World" and a "Taxonomy of Nature Writing."
6. Lyon defines an "ecological way of seeing" as: "'ecological' here is meant to characterize the capacity to notice pattern in nature, and community, and to recognize that the patterns radiate outward to include the human observer" (x). I am extending the word "nature" to include the built environment.
7. The lyrics to all of the above-mentioned songs can be found at [www.ohhla.com](http://www.ohhla.com).

## Works Cited

- Armbruster, Karla, and Kathleen R. Wallace, ed. *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001.
- Baker, Houston. "Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy for the 1990s." *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (Fall 1991): 17–228.
- Baldwin, James "Sonny's Blues." *Going To Meet the Man*. NY: Dial P, 1965.
- Bass, Rick. *The Book of Yaak*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- . *The Roadless Yaak*. Guilford CT: Lyons P, 2003.
- Bennett, Michael. "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery." *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2001.

- Berry, Wendell. *Collected Poems, 1957–1982*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995.
- Branch, Michael P., Rochelle Johnson, Daniel Patterson, and Scott Slovic. *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the Environment*. Moscow, ID: U of Idaho P, 1998.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Butler, Robert. "The City as Liberating Space in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*." *The City in African American Literature*. Ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Robert Butler. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1995.
- Coupe, Laurence, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Dixon, Melvin. *Ride Out the Wilderness*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1993.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Forman, Murray. "Represent: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music." *Popular Music* 19.1 (2000): 65–90.
- Gelder, Ann. "Reforming the Body: Experience and the Architecture of Imagination in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science, and Literature, 1650–1865*. Ed. Susan C. Greenfield and Carol Barash. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1999.
- Gilcrest, David W. *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics*. Reno: U of Nevada P, 2002.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, ed. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Haines, John. "The Writer as Alaskan: Beginnings and Reflections." *Living Off the Country: Essays on Poetry and Place*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1981.
- Hakutani, Yoshinobu, and Robert Butler, ed. *The City in African-American Literature*. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1995.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Langston Hughes Reader: The Selected Writings of Langston Hughes*. New York: George Braziller, 1958.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. "Kickin' Reality: Kickin' Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles." *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996.
- Kerridge, Richard, and Neil Sammells, ed. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. London: Zed, 1998.

- Love, Glen. "Et in Arcadio Ego." *Western American Literature* 27 (1992): 195–207.
- Lyon, Thomas J. *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2001.
- Mazel, David. *American Literary Environmentalism*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000.
- Murphy, Patrick D. *Literature, Nature, Other: Ecofeminist Critiques*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.
- Perkins, William Eric. "The Rap Attack: An Introduction." *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture*. Ed. William Eric Perkins. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996.
- Rose, Tricia. "Black Texts/Black Contexts." *Black Popular Culture*. Ed. Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992.
- . *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1994.
- Rosendale, Steven, ed. *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2002.
- Salaam, Mtume ya. "The Aesthetics of Rap." *African American Review* 29.2 (1995): 303–15.
- Samuels, David. "The Rap on Rap." *The New Republic* 11 Nov. 1991: 24–29.
- Slovic, Scott. *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Barry, Barry Lopez*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1992.
- Stegner, Wallace. "The Sense of Place." *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*. NY: Random House, 1992.
- Stephanson, Anders. "Interview with Cornel West." *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism*. Ed. Andrew Ross. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau*. Ed. Lewis Hyde. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2002.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Row, 1940.

## DISCOGRAPHY<sup>7</sup>

- Black Star "Respiration." *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*. Rawkus, 2002.
- Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. "The Message." *Message: The Best of Grandmaster Flash and the Sugarhill Gang*. Rhino, 1998.



- Hill, Lauryn. "Every Ghetto, Every City." *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Sony, 1998.
- Mos Def. "New World Water." *Black on Both Sides*. Rawkus, 2002.
- Notorious B. I. G. "Going Back to Cali." *Life After Death*. Bad Boy, 1997.
- Shakur, Tupac. "Changes." *Greatest Hits*. Interscope, 1998.
- . "To Live and Die in L.A." *The Don Killuminati*. Death Row, 2001.

Copyright of *Journal of Popular Culture* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of *Journal of Popular Culture* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.