

## Ecojustice Poetry in *The BreakBeat Poets Anthologies*

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### Abstract

Ecological modes of thinking and an awareness of environmental (in)justice are becoming increasingly pronounced in the ethics and aesthetics of hip hop. One area in which the culture's growing interest in ecology as practice and metaphor is particularly visible is hip hop poetry's turn to ecojustice, or an intersectional concern with social and environmental justice, liberation, diversity, and sustainability. This article examines selected works from the first two volumes of anthologies published by Haymarket Books as part of their *BreakBeat Poets* series, focusing on three ecojustice-oriented poems that address animal rights, gentrification, and (un)natural disasters. Their authors—all Black women—draw from African American history and culture to illuminate the intertwined ideological, political, and economic dimensions of some of the most pressing humanitarian and environmental crises of today. Samantha Thornhill's "Ode to a Killer Whale" takes the form of a poetic monologue by the fictional character of Kunta Kinte, revealing similarities between human and animal subjugation and inscribing animal liberation in the Black revolutionary tradition. Candace G. Wiley's "Parcel Map for the County Assessor" re-members and re-creates a culture of place that permeated the speaker's countryside childhood to present the larger-than-human cost of rural gentrification. Finally, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie's "Global Warming Blues" juxtaposes the personal and the elemental dimensions of climate change in a blues remix that advocates for ecojustice for the disenfranchised.

*Keywords:* Eco-poetics, ecojustice, hip hop poetry, African American, Black women poets.

### Resumen

Las formas de pensamiento ecológicas y una conciencia de la (in)justicia medioambiental son cada vez más notables en la ética y la estética del hip hop. Un campo en el que el interés creciente de la cultura por la ecología como práctica y metáfora es especialmente visible es el del giro de la poesía de hip hop hacia la ecojusticia, o una preocupación interseccional por la justicia social y medioambiental, la liberación, la diversidad y la sostenibilidad. Este artículo analiza obras seleccionadas de los dos primeros volúmenes antológicos publicados por Haymarket Books como parte de su serie *BreakBeat Poets*, centrándose en tres poemas orientados hacia la ecojusticia que abordan los derechos de los animales, la gentrificación, y los desastres (no) naturales. Sus autoras—todas mujeres negras—se inspiran en la historia y cultura afroamericanas para iluminar los enlaces entre las dimensiones ideológicas, políticas y económicas, de algunas de las crisis humanitarias y medioambientales más urgentes de nuestros días. "Ode to a Killer Whale" de Samantha Thornhill toma la forma de un monólogo poético del personaje ficticio Kunta Kinte, revelando similitudes entre la subyugación humana y la animal e inscribiendo la liberación animal en la tradición revolucionaria negra. "Parcel Map for the County Assessor" de Candace G. Wiley recuerda y recrea una cultura del lugar que permeaba la infancia en el campo de la autora para presentar el coste más-que-humano de la gentrificación rural. Finalmente, "Global Warming Blues" de Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie juxtapone las dimensiones personal y elemental del cambio climático en un remix blues que reivindica la ecojusticia para los que se ven privados de derechos.

*Palabras clave:* Eco-poética, ecojusticia, poesía hip hop, afroamericano, poetas negras.

“Turntables in the park displace the machine in the garden” (217)—this opening sentence from Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s 1991 essay sets up a visually compelling starting point not only for his foundational discussion of rap’s cultural hybridity but also for rethinking the emergent intersection of hip hop studies and environmental humanities. The statement aptly points to a certain ecological awareness that is inherent to hip hop as an essentially place-conscious art form or, as Debra J. Rosenthal frames it, a “bioregional chronicle” (667). Unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne’s narrator who, in Leo Marx’s proto-ecocritical study, is forced “to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream” (15) by the intrusive machine in the garden, the deejays and emcees behind Baker’s turntables come from a people to whom that “pastoral dream” was, itself, alien. Those predominantly non-white descendants of enslaved and migrant people, some of them immigrants and refugees themselves, are nomadic natives to the always-already hybrid space of the park—an intersection of the urban and the wild. Regardless of the repeated systemic and individual efforts to denaturalize and exclude them, Black and other People of Color continue to barbeque, bird-watch, and turntable in the park, mixing themselves into the urban ecosystem and its elements through emceeing, deejaying, breakdancing, and graffiti painting. While environmental concerns do not necessarily take center stage in all these activities, ecological modes of thinking and an awareness of environmental (in)justice are becoming increasingly pronounced in the ethics and aesthetics of hip hop. One area in which the culture’s growing interest in ecology as practice and metaphor is particularly visible is hip hop poetry’s turn to ecojustice—an intersectional concern with social and environmental justice, liberation, diversity, and sustainability.

In this article, I take an ecojustice-oriented approach to examine a selection of poems from the first two anthologies in Haymarket Books’s *BreakBeat Poets* series. To date, the series includes four volumes of poetry anthologies: the 2015 *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*, edited by Kevin Coval, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Nate Marshall; *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 2: Black Girl Magic*, edited by Mahogany L. Browne, Idrissa Simmonds, and Jamila Woods and published in 2018; *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 3: Halal If You Hear Me*, edited by Fatimah Asghar and Safia Elhillo, published in 2018; and, most recently, the 2020 *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 4: LatiNext*, edited by Felicia Chavez, José Olivarez, and Willie Perdomo. As their very titles suggest, the latter three volumes share a focus on their contributors’ racial, ethnic, and/or gender identities, featuring poetry by Black women, female and (gender)queer Muslims, and Latinx poets, respectively. The first book in the series presents itself more generally (if, perhaps, not entirely accurately) as “the first anthology of poems by and for the hip hop generation.” It includes “more than four decades of poets and covers the birth to the now of hip hop culture and music and style” (Coval xv).

For the purposes of this article, my understanding of “hip hop poetry” follows Kevin Coval’s explanation of what makes the eclectic, culturally and aesthetically diverse body of work showcased in *The BreakBeat Poets* anthologies “hip hop.” As he puts it in the introduction to the first volume, the poems collected therein are not necessarily about hip hop but

these poems *are* hip hop. They are engaged in the aesthetic, cultural, and often public practice of the art form. [...] In ways similar to how blues influenced the Harlem Renaissance or the ways jazz influenced the Black Arts Poets, the music and culture of hip hop shape this moment of American letters and create a generation engaged in similar and variant aesthetic principles and experimentations. (xix)

Coval's introductory remarks offer a flexible understanding of hip hop poetry as not necessarily engaged with hip hop music or culture thematically but, rather, as coming out of a generational shift marked by hip hop's emergence and rise to cultural prominence, both within the United States and internationally. He goes on to explain that, while the "BreakBeat Poets are not all strict hip hop heads and some folks in the collection might not consider what they do to be hip hop cultural practice at all," they all come out of a social, historical, and cultural context where hip hop's "participatory, radically democratic culture" invites poets and critics alike to "blow up bullshit distinctions between high and low, academic and popular, rap and poetry, page and stage" and, instead, embrace a diversity of voices and aesthetics that cannot be contained by such binary categories (xix, xviii, xvii). At the same time, like hip hop culture more broadly, hip hop poetry, too, while "open and comprised of every culture and music," is also "rooted in and part of African diasporic cultural histories and practices. Hip hop is Black, therefore hip hop poetics are Black and are created in part as a response to the historic and currently maintained legacies and realities of white supremacy and institutional racism" (xix). As an anthology, then, *The BreakBeat Poets* captures a cultural moment and a poetic movement—if one can call it that—that, although strongly informed by and respectful of its rootedness in Black culture, is not prescriptive but descriptive; curated and cultivated but also organic in its growth; and diverse rather than homogenous in its aesthetic approaches and thematic concerns.

This diversity, in turn, animates a certain ecological, or ecosystemic, quality of *The BreakBeat Poets* series. Echoing Baker's description of hip hop as a "fiercely intertextual, open-ended, and hybrid" form of cultural expression (224), Nate Marshall asserts that "hip hop music is an ecosystem. Hip hop speaks to multiple artistic media and an entire shifting coda of language, dress, attitude, and political thought" (327). In the same essay, he also refers to hip hop as "shark art" in that "when it stops moving it dies" (329). With these metaphors, Marshall brings to the forefront an essentially ecological way of thinking about both hip hop in general and the *BreakBeat* anthologies in particular: one that sees them as "dwelling places that allow for the juxtaposition and interaction of multiple voices—see[s] them, in other words, as ecosystems," as Katherine R. Lynes puts it (202–3). In her discussion of anthologies as ecologies, Lynes argues that just as the "idea of an ecosystem implies a sense of diversity, overlap, interaction, cooperation and, to some extent, debate or conflict," anthologies are "ecosystems of poetry" in which "responses to and uses of nature are—as in a healthy ecology—varied, or at least, they could be, or should be" (203). In *The BreakBeat Poets*, they definitely are, and include modes of engagement with the larger-than-human world that range from environmental justice activism or a strong sense of place to an engagement of ecopoetics as a more organizational, rather than thematic, principle. This article takes a look at a selection of

works from *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip hop* and *The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 2: Black Girl Magic* that align most closely with the first of these categories. In their work, poets Samantha Thornhill, Candace G. Wiley, and Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie address animal rights, gentrification, and (un)natural disasters as ecojustice issues that affect larger-than-human lives in fundamentally entangled ways. As Black women, these authors draw from African American and Black diasporic histories and knowledges to illuminate the intertwined ideological, political, and economic roots of the overlapping humanitarian and environmental crises we face today.

This dual, relational interest in both the nonhuman and the human—as opposed to the more radically ecocentric approaches that attempt to decenter, or sometimes even displace, the *anthropos* altogether—situates these poems in the tradition of *ecojustice*, rather than environmentalist, writing. As proposed by C.A. Bowers, ecojustice offers a conceptual and moral framework for activism and pedagogy that prioritizes “eliminating environmental racism [...], revitalizing the local cultural and environmental commons [...], and developing an ecological consciousness that respects the right of natural systems to renew themselves” (156). Concerned with biological as well as cultural diversity, ecojustice-oriented approaches urge us to see environmental justice, social justice, sustainability, and ecological conservation as essentially intertwined. Transposing these ideas onto the realm of literature, Melissa Tuckey defines ecojustice poetry as not only “born of deep cultural attachment to the land and [...] born of crisis” but, crucially, also as thematically and politically committed to working “at the intersection of culture, social justice, and the environment” (1). Echoing both Bowers’s coupling of biodiversity with cultural diversity and Marshall’s understanding of hip hop as an ecosystem, Tuckey argues that “cultural diversity is a sign of ecological health” and sees the role of poetry as “an intervention, reclaiming culture and language, and resisting oppressive narratives” that subjugate or discriminate against human and nonhuman Others (2, 9). Consequently, ecojustice poetry promotes ecological intelligence: a way of thinking that departs from the individualist understanding of the self and, instead, “takes account of relationships and contexts, as well as the impact of ideas and behaviors on other participants in the cultural and natural systems” (Bowers 125). Importantly, as the readings below will illustrate, such ecological intelligence in Black ecojustice poetry can often be coupled with fierce, sometimes militant commitment to protect, defend, and liberate these “cultural and natural systems” and their participants from the overlocking forces of societal and environmental exploitation. It is to a discussion of ecojustice-oriented poems by Samantha Thornhill, Candace G. Wiley, and Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie that this article will now turn.

Among the three authors discussed here, Samantha Thornhill’s work stands out as most consistently concerned with larger-than-human relations and ecological imagination. For instance, in “Elegy for a Trojan,” she compares the effects of emergency contraception on the female reproductive system to those of an atomic blast on a landscape, and in “Ode to a Star Fig,” the boundaries between the fruit, human anatomy, and celestial bodies are blurred by their shared elemental materiality. It is from this fluid understanding of the “natural” and the “cultural” as always already enmeshed and

relational that the poem I discuss here, “Ode to a Killer Whale,” unfolds its ecojustice message: it makes a statement for animal and human liberation by employing “the dreaded comparison” between chattel slavery and animal subjugation. In her now classic—although still controversial—book of that title, Marjorie Spiegel argues that “the liberation of animals, while a pressing and worthy goal in its own right, is of importance not *only* to non-human animals,” since a wide-spread adoption of a “philosophy of universal respect for others’ lives” would make “treating anyone—human or non-human—in a cruel manner [...] unthinkable” (27–28). Following a similar reasoning, Thornhill’s poem takes the form of a monologue “from the perspective of Kunta Kinte” (184) addressed to a killer whale identified as “Shamu”—a stage name given to several orcas who “performed” for audiences at the SeaWorld theme park between 1970s and 2016. Sampling the two pop-cultural icons and mixing them into a poetic monologue that reveals similarities between their subjugation, “Ode to a Killer Whale” imagines an act of animal liberation informed by the Black revolutionary tradition. In this, the poem suggests that the ecological consciousness advocated by Bowers can lead to action that goes beyond resistance and restoration and into the realm of radical, militant, and larger-than-human liberation.

The African-born survivor of the Middle Passage and ancestor of the protagonist family of Alex Haley’s 1976 novel *Roots* (and, later, the TV series under the same title), the character of Kunta Kinte is a Black man enslaved yet unbowed, resilient, and proud. As a speaker in Thornhill’s poem, Kunta Kinte also assigns these typically human qualities to Shamu, with whom he claims to share the experiences of captivity, subjugation, exploitation, and objectification. Addressing the orca as “Sambo of the sea” (185), he reclaims the derogatory term to stress the ideological continuities between anti-Black dehumanization and inhumane treatment of animals, with the allusion to the “Chicken of the Sea” canned tuna brand—infamously subject to class-action suits for price-fixing and falsely advertising their fishing practices as “dolphin-safe”—suggesting the role of the profit-driven logic of capitalism in perpetuating both forms of injustice. Describing their journeys to the American continent—his own from Africa, the orca’s from “the dim waters // of Iceland”—as “the same / passage [that] done borned // we to this troubled mass” (184), the speaker downplays the geographic, temporal, and species differences between himself and the animal in order to focus on their shared experiences and a sense of kinship they generate: “they captured you but are / yet to contain the joy // of your rage” (185). Like the enslaved Africans and their American-born descendants, legally designated as chattel and reduced to less-than-human status in the discourses of scientific racism, the orca retains a sense of dignity, agency, and desire for freedom—his joy and his rage—in spite of his captors’ continued attempts at “quelling // all rebellion with rubs / and rewards” but also with “lasso logic and nigger / nets” (185, 184). This “lasso logic” of the oppressors is, crucially, a logic of not only physical but also epistemic capture—another fate shared, and resisted, by both Shamu and the poem’s speaker:

Alas, you signify  
half the name they gave  
you killer—cause bruh  
you ain’t no whale. (185)



Kunta Kinte's focus on the orca's misnaming—killer whales are, taxonomically, members of the dolphin family—clearly echoes his own name being forcefully changed to "Toby" by the American planter who claimed to own him. However, more broadly, it is also reminiscent of the cultural genocide committed against the enslaved Africans through, among others, the separation of families and communities, harsh punishments for cultivating their native linguistic, cultural, and spiritual practices, and imposition of Eurocentric social and epistemic norms.

But the sense of interspecies kinship that the speaker establishes between himself and the orca is rooted not only in their shared histories of capture, exploitation, and dehumanization but, crucially, also in their resistance to those practices. The poem's species-bending opening address to the orca as "Black boy" and "Brother," paired with its reliance on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and hip hop diction ("your mama," "up jump the boogie," "milk / your sperm for the cash / cow you is"), implies that Kunta Kinte's identification with Shamu is not limited to the negative experiences of oppression but also includes their cultural, at times almost familial, affiliation. Thornhill's mixing of contemporary AAVE and references to pop-cultural staples such as the Sugarhill Gang's 1979 hit "Rapper's Delight" into the monologue of a character originally set in the eighteenth century highlights the lasting aftermaths of slavery while, at the same time, suggesting that the orca and the speaker share a fluency in the cultural codes of Black America. By referring to Shamu as a socially gendered and culturally Black "Brother" who might "as well claim // African" (184), the poem effectively humanizes him. In this context, the orca's "signify[ing] / half the name they gave" him also refers to the Black vernacular practice of signifying, or "a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection" and incorporates "a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages" (Mitchell-Kernan 315, 317). Just as a dictionary entry cannot contain all layers of a word's meaning, the name given to him by humans does not contain the orca but rather creates for him an opportunity to signify *on* it: to adapt the ambiguity of its half-truth for his own purposes, keep his true identity concealed, and embrace the moniker to create a rapper-like persona (comparable to Wu-Tang Clan's Ghostface Killah or Run the Jewels's Killer Mike, among others). Thus, the killer whale follows in the footsteps of the signifying monkey and becomes a trickster, a folk hero who outwits his captors by pretending to play by their rules.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing these heroic and tricksterish qualities in the orca, Kunta Kinte closes his monologue with a call to action that inscribes animal liberation into the tradition of Black liberation struggle, suggesting that racial justice and ecojustice share not only the goal of universal liberation but also the sometimes-radical strategies for reaching it. Like the Yoruba trickster deity Eshu-Elegba, who straddles the worlds of the living and the dead,

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<sup>1</sup> The significance of the trope of the signifying monkey to the African American literary tradition, as well as the trickster's transatlantic connection to the Yoruba figure of Eshu-Elegba, was most extensively theorized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his seminal 1988 study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

he relays to Shamu an ancestral message from “Nat” and “sister Harriet”: “you got some dead folk praying / for you! Done seduced your / captors with your kind nets” (185). By evoking the anti-slavery revolutionaries Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman the speaker taps into the “traditions of intergenerational knowledge” that Bowers identifies as crucial to ecojustice efforts (157), and by referring to them only by their first names, he once again assumes the addressee’s cultural competency and familiarity with Black history. Kunta Kinte also recognizes the orca as a trickster who, rather than succumbing to his bondage, “seduces” his oppressors with a façade of kindness that those versed in double-speak and signifying see for what it really is: a subversive strategy of casting “nets” to reverse the captor-captive dynamic. In the closing lines of the poem, the speaker joins the “dead folk” in this prayer and a battle cry for Shamu to “do all we tried / in our ways to do” and “grip this ship / by its sail and drag the whole thing down, / down, down, down, down” (186). Rhetorically shifting the site of his mutiny from SeaWorld to an actual seascape, Thornhill imagines Shamu’s revenge as an act of historical justice for the victims of the Middle Passage, making a connection between the human and nonhuman victims of—but also agents of resistance to—the modern global capitalist logic of exploitation via the image of the ship as a *multispecies chronotope*.<sup>2</sup> By identifying his revenge with what Black insurgents have “tried to do,” she inscribes the orca into the Black revolutionary tradition, making a case for animal and Black solidarity in the struggle for liberation. The political dimension of this revolt is highlighted by the likening of the orca to “a bullet // burning with the president’s name” (186). In terms of its message, the poem agrees with Spiegel’s argument that “it is vital to link oppressions in our minds, to look for the common, shared aspects, and fight against them as one” (24) but also takes it a step further: while Spiegel nuances her analogy between the subjugation of humans and nonhuman animals by pointing that the latter are incapable of “organized rebellion” (24), Thornhill’s capacity as a poet allows her to transcend the limitations of scientific accuracy into the realm of imaginative hyperbole and figurative connections. The resulting vision of a joint human-animal revolution, expressed through the poem’s hip hop diction, effectively and affectively conveys a message of ecojustice for all to the hip hop-literate readers of the *BreakBeat* generation(s).

While “Ode to a Killer Whale” returns to the transatlantic history of the Middle Passage to imagine a future of universal, larger-than-human emancipation, Candace G. Wiley’s “Parcel Map for the County Assessor” (173) takes an intimate, smaller-scale look at a single locale and, in contrast to the hopeful militancy of Thornhill’s poem, nostalgically remembers the possibility of violent resistance against the powers that be as a thing of the past. Sampling from the linguistic register of cadastral surveying, the poem’s title refers to the practice of mapping land for the purposes of legal description and administration of real estate. Also referred to as “property” or “tax” maps, this type of

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to the ship in Thornhill’s poem as a *multispecies chronotope* following Paul Gilroy’s idea of the ship as a chronotope of transatlantic modernity: a “central organising symbol” that focuses “attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts” across the Atlantic Ocean during and after the transatlantic slave trade (4).

cartographic documentation can be used by investors to assess market value of land for property development. Both the language and the objectives of such mapping construe the land as property to be measured, bought, and sold—an inanimate object whose only value lies in the potential of monetary gain it represents to those who claim its ownership. Subverting the expectations set up by this title, the poem speaks against this instrumental, objectifying, and fragmentary approach with an affectionate characterization of the speaker's rural home as an intricate and interactive ecosystem:

Ours was the land of pipe organ roosters, who accorded  
their songs from 4 hours before dawn to 2 hours before dusk.  
Of the hunter's pop echo. Of centenarian pines ricocheting warning  
to deer families crossing backyards.

The speaker's fond, intimate catalog of this bygone place and time goes on to include "horse farmers / who trotted out onto the road, pranced, twirled, and would let us ride / if our granddaddy's home." Where the authorities and business entities—likely users of a parcel map—see real estate, the poem's collective speaker sees a *place*: alive, organic, communal, and familial. However, the past tense, used consistently throughout the poem, implies that the world described therein no longer exists. The poem's only present-tense line is the opening one that suggests a cause-and-effect connection between its title and its largely elegiac mode by asserting that "No one talks about gentrified country in-betweens." As it sets out to remedy this silence, "Parcel Map" also reveals another rarely considered aspect of gentrification: its impact on larger-than-human lives. By remembering and re-creating in her poem a culture of place that permeated her countryside childhood, Wiley frames rural gentrification as an ecojustice issue that affects human and larger-than-human populations alike.

With its attentive, dual focus on the human and nonhuman through the lens of a particular, emotionally meaningful locale, Wiley's poem develops what bell hooks terms a "culture of place." In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, hooks draws from Wendell Berry's writings on place-attachment and spiritual bioregionalism to describe this culture as a process of making "a homeplace in a world rooted in respect for all life, earth and community, where there is spiritual grounding and aesthetic celebration of beauty, where there is a pure enjoyment of simple pleasures" (174). In "Parcel Map," the rural homeplace is steeped in precisely such a culture of place: the collective, communal speaker pays close attention to the minute details of human and nonhuman life in the area, remembering the details of roosters' daily schedules, the "matching mailbox and tires half buried and flanking the gravel drive," and the socializing habits of the "old men who walked The Road on warring hipbones, / a quarter mile to the first neighbor, then on to the next. Visiting" (Wiley 173). Recollecting animals, inanimate objects, and people with the same fondness and careful observation, the speaker channels an inclusive, larger-than-human understanding of community. Living at least partially outside of the capitalist logic of labor and resource extraction, its members—such as "grandads who coated the house sunshine yellow for one decade / and peacock turquoise for another, strictly for the joy of it"—find in their dwelling place a space for leisure time, aesthetic appreciation, and enjoyment of life. Homely, happy, and sustainable, the ecosystem once inhabited by the



poem's collective "we" fosters a "a culture of belonging, a sense of the meaning and vitality of geographical place" (hooks 23). Although remembered with nostalgic tenderness, this community is not idealized into an idyllic, pastoral harmony. To the contrary, the deer are prey to the "hunter's pop," the men's "warring hipbones" suggest their fading health, and the "rusted chainlink knots" in the back of the house hint, perhaps, at financial precarity. And yet, while imperfect, this larger-than-human ecosystem is presented as functional—thriving even—and sustainable rather than exploitative.

In stark contrast to this affectionate survey of land as a place that is both lived and alive stand the surveying practices of the eponymous county assessor, which represent what hooks terms the "culture of enterprise" (45). Because of this cultural logic of for-profit exploitation, what used to be a thriving cultural and environmental commons so fondly recalled by the speaker has been subject to a late-capitalist version of enclosure. In Bowers's definition, cultural commons refers to a local ecosystem that comprises nonhuman nature as well as human-made "forms of knowledge, values, practices, and relationships that have been handed down over generations" to form "the basis of individual and community self-sufficiency" (162). Just as the series of Enclosure Acts in early industrial England deprived commoners of access to land by introducing "private ownership and integration into a money economy, which often led to decision-making being transferred to distant owners" (158), modern-day gentrification monetizes land, displaces the underprivileged, and imposes centralized order on previously organic communities. In the poem, this process extends to nonhuman members of the community, with the "HOAs measuring the width of each blade of grass." The "blade of grass" reference evokes a Whitmanesque understanding of human and nonhuman natures as a continuum operating within a material and spiritual universe that has value in and of itself—an essentially ecological vision shared, among others, by Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Black diasporic conjuring traditions.<sup>3</sup> In the poem, this ecological worldview is contrasted with the controlling approach of the HOA and other administrative, legal, and business authorities that violently impose manmade order on the land by "boxing up" the "hunting and nesting grounds" and replacing them with "readymade, justaddwater houses" (Wiley 173). "Rowed like bottles of Clorox / on store shelves," these forms of housing development are sanitized, standardized, and soulless. More insidiously, they also continue the foundational American settler-colonial project of displacing the land's original inhabitants, both human (the poem's collective "we" of the commons) and nonhuman (the animals who used to nest and hunt in the area).

Replaced by a gentrified, enclosed, and soulless landscape, the commons as mapped by Wiley have been all but erased. Yet, they remain alive in the vernacular memory of the poem's collective speaker whose culture of place, it turns out, includes a

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<sup>3</sup> For discussions of indigenous TEKs, see e.g. essays collected in *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability* (2018), edited by Melissa K. Nelson and Dan Shilling. While, to my knowledge, no studies of African American and Afro-diasporic practices of conjuration and rootwork as forms of TEK have yet been published, recent work by Kinitra Brooks, Kameelah L. Martin, and LaKisha Simmons lays excellent groundwork for a reconsideration of conjure as spiritual and ecological epistemology (see e.g. their 2021 editorial note to vol. 36 of *Hypatia*, "Conjure Feminism: Toward a Genealogy").

culture of militant resistance to the powers that be. In the final stanza, the speaker considers the correlation between gentrification and generational change that entails the passing of community elders and, possibly, younger people's city-bound migration. As they observe, the new developments might have appeared

when the old men crossed over. The vigilantes who paced the pavement  
checking in, patrolling the woods, when possible  
wheezing a belly laugh all over you, when needed  
toting a rifle.

With this ending, the poem's semi-independent "community of care" is revealed to have been made possible by its members' capacity for and commitment to self-defense. The "old men," previously described as horse farmers, house painters, visiting neighbors, and "granddadd[ies]," were also "vigilantes" equipped to turn away hostile outsiders with mockery or armed force. The absence of these renegade-defenders has, as the speaker speculates, at least partially enabled the gentrification that has taken place and, consequently, the breakdown of the (larger-than-human) community. However grim this conclusion may sound, one may argue that the inclusion of the poem in the *Black Girl Magic* anthology is, in itself, a discursive and spiritual counter-measure to the systemic erasure of the "gentrified country in-betweens". The preservation and circulation of memory in the form of the poem constitutes an act of "re-membering [as] an alternative to extinction," to use Lauret Savoy's phrasing (186). The foreword and introductions to *Black Girl Magic* describe it as infused with conjuring powers, "not an anthology of verse [but] a manual of glorious sorcery" (Smith xix), and a collection of "mantras, prayers, and promises of our survival" (Browne xxiii) that celebrate and inspire the agency of Black women. Rooted in the tradition of Black women's everyday resistance to the systemic erasure of their historical memories and lived experiences, the anthology's ecosystem of diverse and synergic poetic voices announces itself as, essentially, a cultural commons. From this perspective, the verbal conjuration of Wiley's poem puts the history of Black rural life back on the map, broadening hip hop's perceived bioregional concern beyond what Rosenthal sees as an "urban environmental discourse" (661) and towards a more complex and comprehensive understanding of a historically and culturally Black sense of place.

Where Wiley's poem is concerned with the fate of displaced communities and disrupted ecosystems at a local level, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie's "Global Warming Blues" (104) approaches the problem of sacrifice zones and disposable lives from a perspective that shifts between the personal and the global.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the fate of rural commons in the American South, global climate change has been—despite decades of documented corporate and political efforts to distort the scale and origins of the threat—widely and increasingly present in public discourses and popular imagination, certainly so by the time of the poem's first publication in 2014. Yet, as Rob Nixon observes, the long-term

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<sup>4</sup> For an extended discussion of sacrifice zones—areas disproportionately exposed to environmental damage and inhabited by populations whose lives are deemed disposable within the racial capitalist economic framework—see Robert D. Bullard's foundational publication on environmental justice, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990).

violence of climate change is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive,” and thus difficult to represent in its full magnitude through the conventional narrative and visual modes characteristic of the (post)modern Western imagination (2). Consequently, Nixon argues, to make this unprecedentedly colossal threat visible and to conceptualize it for their reader in a way that can lead to an increased “planetary consciousness,” an engaged writer must “give figurative shape” and a sense of “dramatic urgency” to otherwise “amorphous calamities” (15, 10). At the same time, it is imperative that such art helps “counter the layered invisibility” of “people whose quality of life—and often whose very existence—is of indifferent interest to the corporate media,” big business, and racist environmental and economic policies at (inter)national levels (16). Tallie’s poem performs all of the above, juxtaposing the personal and the elemental in a blues remix that brings home the realities of climate change and advocates for ecojustice for the disenfranchised.

As an aesthetic and epistemic framework for Tallie’s poem, the blues represents a lived tradition and a cultural perspective from which the climate crisis is presented as a threat to both the speaker and the broader community she represents. Constituting an aspect of the cultural commons and of intergenerationally transmitted knowledge, lived traditions are, in Bowers’s definition, culturally determined “forms of understanding that have been encoded in the patterns that underlie current experience” within a particular group or population (17). True to its title, “Global Warming Blues” draws heavily from the musical structures, images, and themes characteristic of this foundational African American musical genre. The poem’s first stanza introduces the line pattern, diction, imagery, thematic focus, and ethos typical of the blues aesthetic. Its opening couplet, “The ocean had a laugh / when it saw the shore,” is followed by the following lines:

I said the ocean had a big big laugh  
when it saw the shore  
it pranced on up the boardwalk  
and pummeled my front door

In a traditional twelve-bar blues stanza, the first, expository line is repeated—often with a slight difference, known as “worrying the line” (Williams 546)—and then followed by the third, final line that offers a resolution, conclusion, or a twist. The stanzas in Tallie’s poem, visually broken into six lines, sonically and structurally follow the three-line pattern, although the resolution does not appear until the final stanza, repeated twice for emphasis: “seems like for Big Men’s livin / little folks have got to die.” This folk-wisdom-like conclusion, led up to by a call-and-response exchange between a “Mama working two jobs” and the oceanic water that floods her house, embodies what Sherley A. Williams identifies as “the primary thematic characteristic of all blues songs”: an “individual experience rooted in a common reality” and shared history of Black hardship and survival in the United States (546). It also offers “a profound recognition of the economic inequality and political racism of america” that, according to Kalamu ya Salaam, when “clothed in metaphorical grace,” becomes a key element of the blues aesthetic and its ethos of humor and resolve in the face of despair (14). Accordingly, the humor in Tallie’s poem—for instance, in the woman’s plea to the flood to spare her house: “*Please water, I*

*recycle / got a garden full of greens,* “global warming ain’t my fault”—comes out of the realization of the almost ludicrous insignificance of individual actions in the face of the force of nature but, significantly, also the global industrial, military, and capitalist forces that alter the Earth’s climate.

This juxtaposition of scales and agencies—those of everyday, often poor and nonwhite, people versus the colossal powers of both “Big Men” and the elemental powers of nature personified by the ocean—is the main device through which Tallie alerts her reader to the immediacy of global warming as a tangible, rather than abstract, threat. Representing the “little folks,” the woman in the poem sees her home and her town turn into “a river / bodies floatin” with a sense of immense helplessness. Knowing that “there’s no bargaining with water / so full of strength and salt,” she can only watch the tragedy unfold while feeling “too damn mad too cry.” The water, fully aware of its physical force, moves around like a bully, enjoying the almost absolute advantage it has over the townspeople. However, for a brief moment, the floodwater and the woman are presented as equally susceptible to—if not both victims of—an even greater force. When, in response to the woman’s plea for mercy, the water-as-speaker states that “*big men drill and oil spill / we both know what that means,*” it establishes between itself and its human interlocutor a shared knowledge and suggests that the flooding is not as much an act of its own volition but rather a reaction to the ecocidal operations of extraction capitalism. Consequently, the initially dualistic power dynamic between the “little folks” and the ocean is complicated by the invisible yet immensely powerful presence of a third actor: the “Big Men,” representing large-scale industrial and technological capitalists and governmental decision-makers whose profit-driven actions lead to climate change that manifests itself in (un)natural disasters such as this one. The woman and the ocean, though operating on different scales (the intimate/personal versus the planetary/elemental), are briefly in a position of shared vulnerability to the world-shaping forces of not so much the Anthropocene but, more precisely, of what Françoise Vergès terms the “racial Capitalocene”: a larger-than-human world fundamentally reshaped not by a monolithically-construed humankind but by “an economic system that privileges profit and fabricates racialized, disposable beings” and that relies a “on an endless access to nature as excess” for both multiplication of this profit and preservation of unequal power dynamics among various sectors of humanity (77–78). Through this layered juxtaposition, the abstract idea of climate change introduced in the title is, by the end of the poem, given a concrete source (the “Big Men,” or the most powerful business and governmental actors of extractive racial capitalism), tangible consequence (the flooding), and a relatable, personalized story that, together, help the reader grasp and conceptualize the previously vague scientific concept.

As a blues, Tallie’s poem functions not only as didactic literature, although it certainly meets the objectives of giving climate change “figurative shape” and “dramatic urgency” that Nixon sets out for the environmentally-engaged writer-activist. Like a hip hop sample, which often introduces listeners to musical pieces from other eras or cultures, “Global Warming Blues” updates the blues genre to respond to the contemporary challenge of climate change. With the traditional blues trope of the flood, Tallie inscribes

this planetary catastrophe into the long catalogue of disasters that Black people have faced, survived, and documented with their blues, including Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues" and Memphis Minnie's "When the Levee Breaks," among many others. Through her use of recognizably blue formal and thematic elements, she establishes a rapport with the readers that share the cultural background out of which the poem emerges and invites them to rethink their individual and collective experiences in a broader, planetary context. In other words, the poem opens a conversation about global warming and its disproportionate impact on Black and other marginalized populations. However, as Williams argues, the "internal strategy of the blues is action, rather than contemplation," and "the impulse to action is inherent in any blues which functions out of a collective purpose" (544). Tallie's poem, too, can be interpreted as a call to action on behalf of those disenfranchised communities that are most vulnerable to the immediate effects of planetary climate changes, thus contributing to the broader work of environmentalism of the poor with its culturally-rooted and ecojustice-oriented message.

One shared thread that surfaces in a comparison of the poems by Thornhill, Wiley, and Tallie is their tendency to—implicitly or explicitly—frame ecojustice as a goal whose obtainment may require action that is not only protective and restorative but also resistant, militant, and, at times, violent. Of all three, Thornhill's poem advocates for revolutionary action most explicitly, with Kunta Kinte calling on Shamu to fully embrace the "killer" part of his identity and "drag the whole thing down" (186). The ship, to which "the whole thing" in the poem refers, can also be read to metonymically stand for the larger, globally genocidal and ecocidal system of anthropo- and ethnocentric racial capitalism that historically extends from the transatlantic slave trade to the fishing and entertainment industries of the modern day. Encouraging the orca to follow in the footsteps of Turner and Tubman, the speaker suggests that neither Black nor animal liberation from the racial capitalist order can be achieved without justified violence—just as the slaveholding plantation system was not overthrown by peaceful means. More subtly, suggestions of militancy and resistance are also present in Wiley and Tallie's poems. In the former, the memory of local rifle-carrying vigilantes as possibly the last line of defense from gentrification implies that reviving this tradition of armed self-defense might be one path towards restoring the local cultural and environmental commons. In contrast to the two other poems, "Global Warming Blues" does not advocate for revolutionary violence or militant resistance; it does, however, contribute to consciousness-raising efforts that might lay the groundwork for radical activism. Through its community-rooted cultural framework of the blues and its reframing of individual tragedy in global, systemic terms, the poem invites a critique of extractive capitalism as a force that needs to be resisted in what may be a zero-sum game: if "for Big Men's livin / little folks have got to die" (104), then saving the lives of the latter may entail possibly violent action against the former. Importantly, in all three poems, violence is not hypothetical but already a constant presence in many lives, from the brutality of chattel slavery and animal subjugation to the dispossession and uprooting of communities as a result of economic (gentrification) and/or environmental (flood) violence. In this context, counter-violence of the oppressed and disenfranchised against the oppressive powers



that be emerges as not only justified but possibly restorative of a different world order, one built around the ecojustice notions of cultural and environmental commons.

Finally, an ecojustice-oriented discussion of these three authors would be incomplete without mentioning how their ecologically intelligent praxis extends beyond the page and into the communities in which they work and live. Thornhill's "public art experiment," Poets in Unexpected Places, arranges poetry readings and performances in everyday spaces in the NYC area. These include subway trains as well as "the Staten Island Ferry, Times Square, Victoria's Secret, Whole Foods, [and] a Brooklyn laundromat" (*Poets in Unexpected Places*). Wiley is a founder of The Watering Hole, a creative writing initiative that "builds Harlem Renaissance-style spaces in the contemporary South" and works to "cultivate and inspire kinship between poets of color from all spoken and written traditions" (The Watering Hole). Tallie, in turn, authors children's books, teaches herbal healing workshops, and creates "self-care posters and healing herbal potions with her daughters" (*Home page*). All three poets see their work as not only rooted in their everyday lives as Black women but also as inextricably interwoven with their local and larger human and nonhuman communities and environments: other writers, students, poetry listeners, environmentalists, advocates, green and built environments of metropolitan city, and particular locales of New York and South Carolina. In their poems, they draw from the archives of Black cultural and political traditions to imagine human and animal liberation, remember cultural and environmental commons, and explore the implications of climate change. They combine poetic craft and social engagement to protest injustice, re-member ecological ways of living, and open up conversations about vital ecojustice concerns. When seen in the broader, ecosystemic context of their educational, outreach, and community-building efforts, their poetry becomes an element of ecojustice activism and pedagogy that not only looks for the language to "address the deep cultural roots of the ecological crisis" (Bowers 1) but also participates in the creation of spaces and communities where this language can be put to action.

While the particular poems discussed in this article are, as I have argued, concerned with ecojustice, it must be noted that the *BreakBeat Poets* series is not a programmatically environmentalist, eco-literary, or ecojustice-oriented project. Most of the poems collected in the anthologies do not make explicit political statements about environmental justice as such nor put the larger-than-human environment at the front and center of their interest. However, especially when viewed in the light of Marshall and Lynes's comments on the ecosystemic qualities of both hip hop and anthologies, the rhizomatic diversity of the styles, themes, politics, histories, and identities featured in the series invites an exploration that sees ecopoetics as a *poetic enactment of ecological intelligence*: a way of thinking and writing that disrupts binaries and hierarchies and privileges relationality and exchange not only among various cultures but also between "nature" and "culture," challenging the very foundations of such dualism. Poet Forrest Gander offers such an understanding of ecopoetics when he describes it as "less interested in 'nature poetry'—where nature features as a theme—than in poetry that investigates—both thematically and formally—the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception" (2). Much like the sonic techniques of hip hop such as sampling (a way of

“recycling” music), scratching (underscoring the materiality of the vinyl disc), beat mixing (which juxtaposes multiple perspectives and unearths the connections between them), or the break itself (which, arguably, combines all these functions), this type of eco-poetics, as poet Marcella Durand explains,

recycles materials, functions with an intense awareness of space, seeks an equality of value between all living and unliving things, explores multiple perspectives as an attempt to subvert the dominant paradigms of mono-perception, consumption and hierarchy, and utilizes powers of concentration to increase lucidity and attain a more transparent, less anthropocentric mode of existence. (118)

Similarly, the *BreakBeat* poets often enact or perform an eco-poetics understood as a modality of poetic thinking that is guided by relations, processes, and variations, and that manifests itself not necessarily through explicit thematic references to nonhuman nature and environmental issues but, rather, at the level of language, form, sound, and imagery.

The continuously expanding poetic ecosystem of the *BreakBeat Poets* anthologies and single-author volumes in the series certainly deserves further critical exploration. That most of those works are not overtly engaged with ecojustice does not preclude their eco-poetic, or ecocritical, reading. To the contrary, the diverse and often non-obvious ways of ecological thinking that manifest in the *BreakBeat* universe invite a nuanced critical approach that embraces the layered, expansive, transdisciplinary, and often experimental definitions of eco-poetics as proposed by Gander or Durand. All four anthologies feature a significant number of poems about place, emplacement, and place-consciousness. Some of them take a close look at landscapes of urban decay, often celebrating communities and cultures that thrive in spite of hardship and degradation. Others—particularly in the third and fourth volumes, where writers with migrant experience are broadly represented—explore a diasporic sense of place(lessness) and life across borders and in the cracks of the American empire. Many poems engage with the materiality of language and the human body, focusing on the racialized, gendered, and sexualized “natures” of both as well as on the myriad ways in which human and nonhuman bodies interact with one another to form “interdependent systems, where no organism or action exists on its own” (Bowers 125). At the same time, these material interactions are always negotiated by their cultural signification, ultimately coming together in what Bowers might have imagined as an “ethnically diverse cultural commons” (110). In a true hip hop spirit, many poets represented in the anthologies remix the cultural traditions they come from—Native American, Chicana, South American Latinx, Middle-Eastern, and African, among others—to explore how the increasingly flexible categories of nationality, gender, sexuality, race, and religion allow for a radical rethinking of our relationship and responsibilities toward one another and the larger-than-human world. Further critical analysis of such hip hop eco-poetics can open up exciting new avenues for culturally relevant scholarship, pedagogy, and activism guided by ecological intelligence and ecosystemic thinking.

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