

## "New World Water": The Hydrocentric Imagination of Hip Hop

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### Abstract

Water has provided hip hop with a variety of central metaphors by which the genre has enriched its poetic terminology of the flow, denoted spiritual purity, or discussed political and police corruption. Over the last two decades, water-related environmental concerns and catastrophes have prompted hip hop artists to develop a more literal approach. This article showcases how selected songs of black conscious and indigenous rap—Yasiin Bey's "New World Water" (1999), Common's "Trouble in the Water" (2014), Taboo's "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" (2016), and Supaman's "Miracle" (2018)—develop hydrocentric perspectives in order to participate in the negotiation of the cultural and material meanings of water. These songs discuss the relationship between the human and water by working with images of water as "modern water" (Linton), "global water," or "Anthropocene water" (Neimanis), which allows them to address the nexus of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, anthropocentrism, and ecological crises. True to conscious rap's agenda of socio-political criticism, they not only unravel but also indict anthropocentric, racial capitalist, and settler-colonial ideologies and practices as they pertain to water. They further negotiate alternative cosmological approaches that conceive of the human/nonhuman relationship as interconnected and thus unfold "hydrosocial" perspectives (Linton). All the while, they advertise rap music as an important aesthetic tool of political-environmentalist intervention. This becomes particularly evident from the fact that all of them are connected by a specific activist impetus and framing.

*Keywords:* Hip hop, water, Anthropocene, racial capitalism, settler colonialism.

### Resumen

El agua ha proporcionado al hip hop una variedad de metáforas centrales gracias a las cuales ha enriquecido su terminología poética del *flow*, ha destacado su pureza espiritual, o ha debatido la corrupción política y policial. En las últimas dos décadas, las preocupaciones y las catástrofes medioambientales relacionadas con el agua han motivado a los artistas del hip hop a desarrollar un enfoque más literal. Este artículo resalta cómo ciertas canciones de rap de conciencia negra y de rap indígena—"New World Water" (1999) de Yasiin Bey, "Trouble in the Water" (2014) de Common, "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" (2016) de Taboo y "Miracle" (2018) de Supaman—desarrollan perspectivas hidrocéntricas para participar en la negociación de los significados culturales y materiales del agua. Estas canciones hablan sobre la relación entre el humano y el agua a través de imágenes del agua como "agua moderna" (Linton), "agua global," o "agua del Antropoceno" (Neimanis), lo que les permite abordar la conexión entre el capitalismo racial, el colonialismo de asentamiento, el antropocentrismo, y las crisis ecológicas. Fiel a la agenda consciente del rap de la crítica sociopolítica, no sólo descifran los nexos, sino que también acusan a las ideologías y prácticas antropocéntricas, del capitalismo racial y colonialistas en lo que concierne al agua. También negocian enfoques cosmológicos alternativos que conciben la relación humana/no-humana como interconectada y, por lo tanto, revelan perspectivas "hidrosociales" (Linton). Al mismo tiempo, promocionan la música rap como una herramienta estética de intervención político-ecologista. Esto se vuelve especialmente evidente por el hecho de que todas están conectadas por un ímpetus y marco activista específico.

*Palabras clave:* Hip hop, agua, Antropoceno, capitalismo racial, colonialismo de asentamiento.

In his 2020 autobiography *Vibrate Higher: A Rap Story*, Talib Kweli discusses the notion of vibrations as central for his own understanding of the creation of hip hop music. In this context, he recounts one of his friends gifting him the best-selling book *The Hidden Messages in Water* (2005) by Japanese "science hobbyist" Masaru Emoto, which records its author's experiments with ice crystals that formed within different acoustic environments:

His experiments reveal that water exposed to positive energy such as classical music [...] creates beautiful, well-formed crystals, and water exposed to negative energy such as [...] heavy-metal music creates ugly, malformed crystals. He suggests that since human beings are 70 percent water and the earth's surface is 70 percent water, and because water combines with and takes on the properties of everything it comes in contact with, we can purify ourselves by purifying the water on this planet and in our bodies. [...] What was interesting to me was that the concept of vibration kept coming up. Everything in the universe creates its own vibration. Since vibrations create sound, they can be measured by water. (7)

Like many critics, Kweli generally dismisses Emoto's book as pseudoscience. He admits, however, that Emoto's experiments and conclusions still "made sense to [his] spiritual mind" (7). Notably, Kweli takes inspiration from Emoto's work to explicate the aspiration and effects he identifies as typical of his own as well as of all hip hop music: the creation of (positive) vibrations that affect an audience in a specific way. Kweli thus employs water as a central metaphor for his reflections on the poetics of (his own) hip hop, and he is far from being the only rapper who unfolds his ideas by thinking with water.

In fact, water has provided hip hop with a wide variety of central tropes. It has served as a metaphor for techniques of rapping encompassed in the term 'flow,' the "rhythmic delivery of MCing" (Kautny 103; Level). It has enriched the vocabulary used to discuss the impact of rap's delivery, as emphasized by GZA's album *Liquid Swords* (1995) and the eponymous title track on which orally produced gushing sounds symbolize the 'swishing' sounds of swords, communicating the idea that rap's social power is as great as swords are lethal. Water has also come to signify the overpowering structures and effects of an oppressive white supremacist social environment, for example, in Talib Kweli and 9th Wonder's "These Waters" (2015), and it denominates the all-encompassing and life-threatening effects of poor, black, urban existence, for instance, in Lil Bibby's "Water" (2013): "Said I gotta keep my head above water / I been goin' hard gotta go a lil harder [...] Catch me in the kitchen I be whippin' with the water / Family over niggas, blood thicker than water." Furthermore, hip hop's negotiations of water bodies like the Atlantic and the Mississippi River often resonate with the historical reality of the Middle Passage and Paul Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic, as can be observed in Yasiin Bey's "New World Water" (1999). Songs like Kanye West's "Water" (2019) invoke water as biblical metaphor to discuss spiritual purity, whereas tracks like ScHoolboy Q's "Water" (2019) employ it to foreground the purity and hence value of expensive jewelry, thereby negotiating one of hip hop's most dominant themes: conspicuous consumption. Finally, water has provided and aided a plethora of sexual metaphors, as in Young Dolph and Key Glock's "Water on Water on Water" (2019) and famously in the lyrics and visuals of the video of Cardi B's "WAP" (2020).

This article represents a first attempt at discerning how rap has concerned itself with water more literally: as nourishment and threat, as material and agential force, and as geographical location, particularly in light of increasing ecological crises. The article studies a selection of black and indigenous rap songs which participate and intervene in contemporary political and ecological discourses on water. In his introduction to the anthology *Writing on Water* (2001), philosopher David Rothenberg purports that "water does not divide; it connects. With simplicity it links all aspects of our existence. We feel its many meanings" (xiii). The tracks under consideration in this article all share this sentiment, echoing Rothenberg's idea that water illustrates human/nonhuman interconnectedness. They suggest that human and nonhuman survival depends on humanity's recognition of human/nonhuman interdependencies and its willingness to reevaluate its ethical perspectives and to act accordingly. At the same time, however, their examinations of humanity's relationship with water forcefully showcase divides. Their hydrocentric perspectives allow these rappers to discuss how the dualist-hierarchical logics of anthropocentrism and racism interlock and engender (racial) capitalist and settler-colonial practices of environmental exploitation and destruction.

Studying the work of Yasiin Bey, Common, Taboo, and Supaman, this article analyzes how hip hop lyricists have created environmentally conscious and environmentally activist music in response to the contamination and shortage of fresh drinking water and to global issues of climate change as they pertain to and affect the world's water bodies. It resorts to concepts and frameworks developed by the emerging field of the Blue Humanities in order to demonstrate how the songs under consideration think with and through water to highlight the imbrication of the nonhuman and the human and to attack the logics of Euro-American anthropocentrism, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism. Following Jamie Linton and Astrida Neimanis, this paper engages rap songs as addressing the question of "what is water, in this place and at this time?" (157). It studies Yasiin Bey's "New World Water" (1999) and Common's "Trouble in the Water" (2014) in order to discern how hip hop music participates in the rethinking of anthropocentric perspectives. Readings of Taboo's "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" (2016) and Supaman's "Miracle" (2018) illustrate how indigenous rap reveals and protests against settler-colonial control claims over water on and around Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota.

Establishing themselves as a prolific field of transdisciplinary inquiry within the last decade, the Blue Humanities have drawn attention to humanity's (including ecocritical scholarship's) terracentrism. In order to dismantle and challenge terra- and anthropocentric patterns of thought, Blue Humanities scholars have reconceived Euro-American modernity as intricately connected to water—more specifically, the sea (Gillis)—and they have shifted their focus toward "ontologies of the sea and its multispecies engagements" (DeLoughrey 32). The rap songs discussed in this paper point out the relationship between central phenomena of Euro-American modernity—above all, slavery and settler colonialism—and bodies of water such as the Atlantic and the Mississippi River. Their hydrocentric perspectives further draw attention to the increased commercialization of water bodies rendered "economic battleground[s] to meet the

global demands for new energy sources and as waste dumping sites" (457–58), and they lay bare Euro-American "understandings of water as an exchangeable and instrumentalizable resource" (Neimanis 4). Their discussions of water thus add to dominant telluric perspectives on the nexus of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, anthropocentrism, and ecological crises by foregrounding a specifically hydrocentric perspective that negotiates water as "modern water" (Linton 14), "global water," or "Anthropocene water" (Neimanis 155–56).

In *What is Water? The History of Modern Abstraction* (2010), geographer Jamie Linton discusses the emergence and components of a specific complex of ideas on water within Euro-American modernity and globalization. His central argument is that human access to water is defined by both the various material shapes of water and the discursive: "every instance of water that has significance for us is saturated with the ideas, meanings, values, and potentials that we have conferred upon it" (5). Together with Jessica Budds, Linton channels his central ideas into a concept they call the "hydrosocial," by which they respond and contribute to an intellectual "shift from regarding water as the object of social processes, to a nature that is both shaped by, and shapes, social relations, structures and subjectivities" (170). Astrida Neimadis's *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017) uses Linton's propositions as a springboard for the discussion of what she terms "Anthropocene Water" (160). She proposes this concept to draw "attention to the hydrosphere as the ([...] oft-overlooked) fascia that lubricates and connects the Earth's lithosphere to its biosphere and atmosphere, those more popular players in this Anthropocene drama" (160). She highlights that the "current epoch's radical terraforming is often explicitly the work of water—and that these are labours in which we humans are variously entangled" (161). Comprehending water as "Anthropocene water," she argues, allows us to better understand how the current relationship between the human and water is characterized by either human "attempts to control water (damming, irrigation)" or by "out of control response[s] by water to these attempts at control (storms, sea levels)" (161).

This paper shows that Hip hop, too, has begun to discuss the relationship between the human and water by foregrounding the human aspiration to and loss of control over water in light of fresh-water shortages and climate change. In its amplification of the indigenous community's fight for access to fresh, clean drinking water, indigenous rap has discerned that the anthropocenic aspiration to control water is intricately connected to settler-colonial practices and ideology. It pits these against indigenous cosmologies that do not conceive water as an object of exploitation but as part of a complex "socio-natural assemblage" (Linton and Budds 176) that also includes "spiritual dimensions" (174). Indeed, all four songs under consideration in this article point to the necessity of addressing anthropocentric, racial capitalist, and settler colonial ideologies and their material consequences from a hydrocentric and aesthetic perspective. They are further brought together by their—in most cases—explicit motivation to inspire environmental and political activism.

## Yasiin Bey and the "New World Water"

Rap began to formulate its political and ecological concerns via water as early as 1999. On Yasiin Bey's (formerly Mos Def) first solo album, *Black on Both Sides*, the song "New World Water" develops its indictments of anthropocentrism and racial capitalism through a hydrocentric lens. Its mid-speed, driving beat is complemented by five brief sequences of notes played on a xylophone, each progressing down the tonal scale note by note, arguably mimicking the sound of water flowing downstream. This sample is omnipresent throughout the song, echoing the message of its title: rendered a homophone of the phrase 'new world order' by Bey's performance, the phrase "New World Water" establishes a hydrocentric perspective. If understood as the song's thesis, "New World Water" can be read as an appeal to recognize the central significance of water to planetary existence. Indeed, Bey's song points to water as a vital resource on both a local and a global level, a fact which the song alleges is becoming particularly evident because of the increasing scarcity of water due to events such as droughts: in the "New World Water [...] every drop counts." The song illustrates the irreplaceability of water not only as life-sustaining liquid but also as essential daily good used for cooking or cleaning, and it discerns that social survival, too, is dependent on water as a protective resource for infrastructure threatened by fire and as a medical resource to treat illnesses. Its increasing scarcity, the song further claims, has turned water into a geopolitical variable to the particular detriment of the Global South (Rosenthal 670) whose peoples are "desperately seekin it" while U.S. Americans are "wastin it." The song further links humanity's unequal access to water to water's commercialization and its contamination with the pollutants produced by Euro-American societies, and it reveals the cynical practices of corporate capitalism: those contaminating the world's water bodies purify it in order to sell it for profit.

"New World Water" thus imagines water as what Neimanis calls "Anthropocene water" (160). For Bey, the contemporary relationship between water and the human is coined first and foremost by humanity's striving for and loss of control over water. While corporate capitalism appears to be able to reverse water contamination for profit, the song emphasizes the various omnipresent and irreversible effects of anthropogenic impact on the world's water bodies. Toxic waste contamination has reached a point at which "the water table" is turned "lopside," and it has rendered oceans, lakes, and rivers the breeding grounds of contagious diseases. Water thus becomes an agential force that is not merely subject to human exploitation but that severely threatens human survival.

With specific focus on the Mississippi River, "New World Water" combines its ecological critique with anti-racism, arguing that the slave trade "upset the Old Man River," because slave traders forced him to "carry slave ships and fed him dead niggers." Significantly, nonhuman nature considers slavery to be a crime so severe that it upsets the balance between the human and the nonhuman: "Now his belly full and he about to flood something." Bey's song generally refrains from linking water with active verbs, attributing the agential potential of water to the chemical toxins and biological agents humans contaminate it with. The song's personification of the Mississippi River, however,

imbues the river itself with clear motives and hence agency. "Rebelling against racial injustice" (Rosenthal 669), water threatens to "[c]ome inland and make your house go 'Bye' (My house!)" ("New World Water"). Bey's performance underlines the potential threat of flooding by putting emphasis on all words in this line except "and," and the choice of simple, infantile language in the second half of the line underscores the anxiety of those whose livelihoods are at a high risk of being flooded. This is complemented by the multivocal delivery of the word "Bye" and the delayed exclamation "My House!" which indicates that specific individuals have already been affected by flooding. In this instance, water is aesthetically—lyrically and sonically—confirmed as an agential force that withdraws from human control and that responds to racist atrocities such as the slave trade with punishment.

In "Hoods and the Woods: Rap Music as Environmental Literature," Debra Rosenthal discusses "New World Water" as a predominantly "urban aesthetic [...] narrated in terms of its connectedness to the water supply" that "envisions water as a national commodity" (669). While "New World Water" indeed critiques United States history and politics specifically, Bey's hydro-imaginary is more explicitly interested in creating an image of what Linton has termed "modern water" (14) and what Neimanis calls "global water" (155). The song corroborates this by forgoing the clearly local urban settings that characterize the rap genre. It unfolds a national perspective that invokes cities like New York and L.A. as well as unspecified, presumably rural geographical denominators such as "Way up North" or "Down South," and even a global perspective that reiterates the fact that the survival of all humans is dependent on access to clean and fresh water. "New World Water" concludes with a reiteration of its anti-capitalist position by the mantric tenfold repetition of the line "Said it's all about gettin that cash (money)," and it ends by putting an anti-materialist spin on one of the Wu-Tang Clan's most iconic lines from their song "C.R.E.A.M.": "Cash rules everything around me / Move!" The song does not clarify whether or not the imperative it adds ("Move!") to the Wu-Tang Clan's original line is a call to activism, but in light of hip hop's position as a political genre and the activist impetus this article notices in all other songs under consideration, it very well may be understood as such.

### The "New World Water" Revisited

Sixteen years after the release of Bey's "New World Water," the rapper Common, together with Malik Yusef, Kumasi, Aaron Fresh, Choklate, and Laci Kay, recorded a song titled "Trouble in the Water," which positions itself in the direct lineage of Bey's song by virtue of its first line: "water moves, new world order rules." In contrast to Bey's, Common's song was explicitly framed as musical climate activism. It appeared on the collaborative album *HOME* (2014)—an acronym of *Heal Our Mother Earth*—which was marketed as the "soundtrack for the climate movement" in its liner notes. The album was produced and marketed by the Hip Hop Caucus, a music-activist collective that was formed in 2014 and that, according to its website, aspires to "connect [...] the Hip Hop community to the civic process to build power and create positive change." *HOME* features

original hip hop and R and B tracks by Malik Yusef and others as well as covers of songs that have become emblems of environmentally conscious music, among them Michael Jackson's "Earth Song." The involvement of rapper Common, whose renown and reputation as a founding and leading figure of conscious rap, rendered the song and the album significantly more marketable as climate activism. Focusing on "Trouble in the Water," this section examines how the hydrocentric imagination of rap has gravitated toward an activist approach in light of exacerbating environmental crises. It argues that the song discusses water as "Anthropocene Water" (Neimanis 155–56) by relying on popular narratives and binary dualisms of human and nonhuman nature, whereby "Trouble in the Water" hopes to convey the necessity and urgency of environmentalist action more clearly.

True to *HOME*'s climate-activist agenda, "Trouble in the Water" unfolds a general criticism of how humans are innately prone to engendering environmental crises such as climate change:

In the beginning was the word  
[...] then He made water  
Then He made man  
And then came the slaughter.

The song thus reverts to a biblical framework to invoke a popular environmentalist narrative that rests on the Book of Genesis: God created nonhuman nature for humans to dominate and to use as resource. Driven by greed however, humans prove themselves irresponsible. They practice wastefulness by engaging in profane leisure activities such as the "ice water challenge," and they display exploitative behavior like fracking, contaminating the world's water bodies. In its rhetoric, the song shifts repeatedly between a Disneyfication and an apocalyptic dramatization of the effects of ecological crises as caused by humans. It claims that toxic waste contamination turns water both turbid—so that it's impossible to "find Nemo"—and lethal.

"Trouble in the Water" thus elaborates on how humans are responsible for bringing 'trouble into the water.' It is their efforts to control water that have produced ecological crises that threaten survival on earth. The song also uses the image of "Anthropocene water" (Neimanis 160), to raise awareness of the lack of human control over water. "Trouble in the Water" emphasizes this by depicting water as having the properties of a living organism and material agent which becomes "ill" and, as a result, "kill[s] the fish" in response to human waste dumping. This perspective is undermined, however, by the song's personification of nonhuman nature as a passive female and maternal figure, over which humans are able to exert dominating control and whose care they are responsible for: "Trouble in the Water" decries that humans are "messin' with mother nature's ovaries" and demands corrective action in accordance with the imperative that is the album's title, *Heal Our Mother Earth*. The third and last verse frames the song itself and the situation it addresses as an emergency call: "it's the 911 with no ambulance." Here, the absence of an ambulance seems to suggest that responsibility to undertake action and come to the rescue of "*Mother Earth*" lies with the listener.

In its shifting attribution of agency, "Trouble in the Water" appears to pursue a double-sided strategy: on the one hand, it highlights the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman nature and the agency of nonhuman nature. On the other, it not only underlines anthropocenic impact but also suggests that humans alone are capable of and responsible for preventing and undoing environmental destruction and disasters. It thereby runs the risk of overemphasizing human agency and human capabilities and of reinforcing notions of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. Arguably, the song refrains from developing a deeper ecological critique and instead consolidates anthropocentric dualist hierarchies of nature versus the human as well as human exceptionalism, in order to back its activist message. "Trouble in the Water" thus speculates that its (human) listeners' sense of control over the nonhuman is directly linked to their sense of responsibility to participate in climate activism. It also hopes to attract the attention of a wider audience by reverting to Disney movie plots and a basic Christian mythology which mainstream listeners may be familiar with.

The use of relatable, popular tropes and narratives goes hand in hand with the song's and the artists' performative tendency toward didacticism. In its consternation with general and individual human conduct, the song switches between the different voices of the featured rappers who stylize themselves through their lyrics as public critics. All the while, they in turn assume the rhetoric of the biblical passages they reference and thus claim for themselves unchallengeable authority. They thereby strike a tone that appears particularly reprimanding because, in many instances, they identify *all* of humanity as "messin' with mother nature's ovaries," including the listeners. What is more, the song prominently features a chorus that is repeated four times, in which it further patronizes its addressees by identifying them as "children." Thus, it does not seem to recognize its listeners as fully responsible adults, while simultaneously holding them accountable as adults in imperative statements that ask them to "Heal Our Mother Earth." Differently than "New World Water," "Trouble in the Water" eschews explicit identification of the exploitative and racist practices of capitalism, merely referencing an ominous "they" as responsible for practicing fracking and contaminating drinking water. It thus further confuses its listeners on the question of accountability by equating, for instance, the inappropriate disposal of waste by an individual with environmental destruction on a national and on a global scale.

After it became known that government officials in Flint, Michigan, had allowed the use of aging pipes that caused the contamination of Flint's water with lead, the Hip Hop Caucus gathered the artists featured on "Trouble in the Water" to create a music video in order to draw attention to what would become known as the Flint Water Crisis. The video reiterated the song's activist message, stating that "Trouble in the water is now," and it called upon its viewers to sign a petition to "demand" that Michigan Governor Rick Snyder "establish a compensation fund for victims of the Flint water crisis" (Camacho 3:43). More than the song, the video thus puts an emphasis on the political failure that caused the water crisis in Flint and by extension other environmental crises, emphasized by shots of what appears to be US civilians who have to draw their fresh drinking water from a well (1:01). It also underlines the urgent necessity for the general public to act, showing

images typically connected with the Anthropocene: images of human-made climate change and environmental disasters such as industrial landscapes with factories and chimneys blowing exhaust fumes (0:46), contaminated wet-lands (1:44) and rivers (1:45), and melting icebergs (2:42). Yet, visually, "Trouble in the Water" continues to enforce a dualist perspective on human and nonhuman nature, for while these images capture anthropogenic impact on the nonhuman, they do not feature humans, and only three of them include human-made objects (1:44, 1:45, 2:43). Furthermore, none of these images blends in with the rest of the visual narrative that foregrounds an unidentified yet specifically urban space. Instead, they are shown as mere props that serve as illustrative material for the song's lyrics. When Kumasi claims water to be agential, "kill[ing] the fish" in response to contamination, the image of a stranded fish carcass is shown for a brief second only (2:02–3).

The video's main focus rests on the artists themselves and other members of the Hip Hop Caucus who are presented as a "water revolutionary pirate gang" ("Making of" 1:25–26). The video is shot in what appears to be the gang's headquarters where they are shown devising strategies and collecting clean, bottled water they have stolen and which they prepare for distribution to those in need. Making use of the Robin Hood motif, the video thus portrays Hip Hop (activism) as a voice of those in need, and it seeks to demonstrate to the public the readiness and capability of hip-hop artists and the Hip Hop Caucus to work toward necessary political change when elected officials would not. This is somewhat counteracted by shots of the "water revolutionary pirate gang" celebrating with champagne bottles filled with water that is spilled lavishly in celebratory gestures. Overall, by mixing its message of political urgency with the mainstream hip hop trope of conspicuous consumption, the video appears more juvenile than other recent video productions of water-activist hip hop, such as Taboo's "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" and Supaman's "Miracle." Both convey a more concrete sense of urgency by focusing on real-life footage of on-site protest—images that underscore the credibility of each song's activist message by creating an acute sense of place.

### **"Water is life"**

Between April 2016 and February 2017, protest formed against the pending construction of the so-called Dakota Access Pipeline. The pipeline was opposed by indigenous communities living on and around Standing Rock Indian Reservation, since their clean, fresh water supply was threatened by a pipeline that was to transport oil from North Dakota to Illinois, crossing below the Missouri River. Several thousand people came together to stop the construction work, and their protest drew significant media attention as well as the on-site appearance of then Green Party presidential nominee Jill Stein and democratic members of Congress Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders. While the Obama administration eventually ordered construction to come to a halt and demanded proper consultation of the resident indigenous community, the Trump administration allowed for its continuance and completion by April 2017 via executive order (Crane-Murdoch; Kassam and Smith). The protest against the pipeline continues to this day,

including celebrity support (Lakhani), particularly since it became known that the pipeline already leaked before it was officially put into operation (Levin).

On December 4, 2016, Shoshone rapper and Black Eyed Peas member Taboo, together with the indigenous rap collective Magnificent 7, Apsáalooke rapper Supaman, and other indigenous musicians, released a song entitled "Stand Up / Stand N Rock." The song's release was backed and marketed as activism by the Hip Hop Caucus, and the accompanying video ends with a call to "sign the petition and learn more" on the Hip Hop Caucus's website (5:05). This is echoed above all by the song's chorus which formulates a rallying cry to inspire further activism, especially among and across indigenous communities: "to all the original people, to all my indigenous people [...] Stand up, [...] / For Standin' Rock." This is furthered by the song's reference to major events of protest and activism by African American and indigenous peoples: "We're hassling before water has gasoline in it / Malcolm X moment, Martin Luther King with a dream and war bonnet / Wounded Knee and Alcatraz." Wounded Knee is of course remembered for the atrocities committed by U.S. American soldiers against the Lakota in what became known as the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890), which left over 200 Lakota people dead (Greene xiii). In 1973, it was occupied by the American Indian Movement in order to express their protest against the United States government's treatment of indigenous peoples—a move which attracted wide media attention (Reinhardt 3–4). Invoking the impactful lives of Malcom X and Martin Luther King, who—by wearing a "war bonnet"—becomes a spokesperson for the common struggle of black and indigenous Americans, the song seeks to conjure up the protest movement's historical significance and success.

The song thereby presents the conflict at Standing Rock between the United States government, corporate capitalism, and the indigenous community as a pivotal battleground for indigenous rights and survival. Indeed, Shaun A. Stevenson observes that

from the ongoing mercury contamination of the English-Wabigoon River systems effecting the Grassy Narrows (Asubpeeschoseewagong) First Nation and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations in north-western Ontario, to the decades-long boil water advisories ongoing in dozens of First Nations communities across Canada, to the Standing Rock Sioux and fellow water protectors' fight to protect their waterways from pipeline development south of the border, Indigenous peoples' relationships to water have been a fundamental site of asserting Indigenous rights in Canada and beyond. (94)

"Stand Up / Stand N Rock" thus undertakes two things: first, it draws attention to the disparities with regard to access to clean, fresh drinking water, discussing water as "modern water" (Linton 18), that is, as a site of affirmation for settler-colonial structures of capitalist commercialization. Second, the song negotiates the relation between the human and water via the notion of "Anthropocene water" (Neimanis 160), that is, water as a site of human control and loss of human control over the nonhuman. Stevenson's "Decolonizing Hydrosocial Relations: The River as a Site of Ethical Encounter in Alan Michelson's *TwoRow II*" examines how video art by Mohawk artist Alan Michelson employs a hydrosocial perspective in order to unfold a perspective of decolonializing ethics. "Stand Up / Stand N Rock," too, proposes both a "decolonial hydrosocial relational ethics" (Stevenson 95) and cosmology, highlighting that anthropocentrism and settler colonialism must be viewed as connected issues that both need to be overcome.

The song draws acute attention to the Dakota Access pipeline's disastrous effects on the survival of the indigenous communities living on and around Standing Rock reservation ("they poisonin' the waters for our sons and our daughters") as well as to the indigenous communities' struggle against the government and major corporations for access to clean, fresh water: "We're hassling before water has gasoline in it." In a brief snippet from an interview that is interspersed within the song's video, Taboo accentuates the song's and the movements hydro- and ecocentric impulses: "it takes a group of people who actually care about, you know, Mother Earth, and life, and water being sacred, and the land being sacred to say we stand up" (2:46–55). Taboo thus suggests the baseline for the development of a "decolonial hydrosocial relational ethics" (Stevenson 95) and cosmology: anthropocentrism and human self-interest are to be relinquished, and, more vaguely, he refers to an indigenous cosmology that elevates the nonhuman by imbuing it with spiritual significance. While this is not taken up further by the song, it would become a more central concern in Supaman's "Miracle" (2018). Notably, "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" concludes with a brief poetic statement: "Take a vow for your sacred grounds / Make a sound that'll shake 'em out." Music, and hip hop more specifically, is thus identified as a proper medium to amplify the decolonial ethics and cosmology and the political-activist message of the protesters at Standing Rock. The Hip Hop Caucus's website reiterates this idea, proclaiming the song's and video's release as a political success: "The day we released the video in December [of 2016], the Army Corps of Engineers under President Obama denied the easement Energy Transfer Partners needed to continue building the pipeline under the Missouri river, effectively stopping the project. It was a tremendous movement victory" (Hip Hop Caucus, "Stand Up / Stand N Rock.").

Among the artists featured on "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" is rapper Supaman, who has become known for renegotiating (urban) indigenous identity by combining indigenous music with hip hop, often performing traditional dance in full regalia. He contributed a verse to "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" in Apsáalooke, and he continues to engage with the Dakota-Access-Pipeline artistically, most notably in his 2018 song "Miracle." The song was not officially supported by the Hip Hop Caucus, but its music video is framed by an introductory comment that clearly connects the song with the protest at Standing Rock: "The Water Wars continue! Many think that the movement at Standing Rock has come and gone, not knowing that was only a wake up call to what is happening around the world!" Supaman thus also follows Yasiin Bey in connecting local with global issues of clean, fresh water supply. The song's chorus repeats the slogan of the protesters at Standing Rock, "water is life," by highlighting that the lack of sufficient clean, fresh water supply is threatening human survival on a global scale: "all around the world / My sisters and my brothers hurt." It substantiates its message's credibility by framing the struggle addressed as various local struggles of poor(er) communities sharing similar fates: "from Flint, Michigan / To my Egyptian friends." Like "New World Water," "Miracle" therefore unfolds a critique of American and global capitalism as a racist and exploitative system that threatens the survival of the less fortunate by commercializing water.

The song's historical perspective connects water more specifically to settler colonialism and the struggle for survival of indigenous people, by reiterating that it was

cross-Atlantic travels that brought Europeans to the American continent. With reference to the xenophobic rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration, the song expresses its desire for reversing history, imagining to have confronted white colonialists "at the border" and "with a travel ban, pushed them back into the water." This is contextualized visually by the music video which presents shots of the end of the border wall between the United States and Mexico which runs into the sea (4:17–20). The song thus discusses a hydrosocial image formed by past and present settler-colonial structures and indigenous peoples's struggle for rights and survival. Supaman further connects the struggles of indigenous peoples and black Americans symbolically by teaming up with black-indigenous rapper Maimouna Youssef, uniting the voices of those communities historically marginalized by white Euro-Americans.

More elaborately than "Stand Up / Stand N Rock," "Miracle" intermixes its political and historical realism with a "decolonial hydrosocial relational ethics" (Stevenson 95) and cosmology that is decidedly spiritual. It discusses the contemporary political struggle for indigenous rights to clean, fresh water supplies via reference to the Ghost Dance movement, a 19<sup>th</sup> century religious movement through which several indigenous communities protested the United States government's cutting their food rations. The protests highlighted that these cuts were part of the larger campaign of indigenous eradication; for simultaneously, the most significant food sources for many indigenous communities, the American Bison, was hunted close to extinction (Smoak 3; Estes). The construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline is thus proclaimed, in "Miracle," as a contemporary instalment of settler-colonial practices of cultural and physical eradication of indigenous communities which is to be countered by spiritual protest.

What is more, "Miracle" thereby advocates protest in the form of musical practice. Dancing was believed to have cosmological significance in the Ghost Dance movement's protest against settler imperialism. Similarly, "Miracle" proclaims music, and more specifically hip hop, as an adequate and necessary political tool: "I started to fight, started with mics." In the song's chorus, Maimouna Youssef appeals to an unnamed higher force to ignite the "prayer grass" she carries. She is referring to sweetgrass, a plant used in many indigenous cultures as a "ceremonial plant" in rituals, including praying; its use symbolizes human/nonhuman interconnectedness (Kimmerer 5). Rapping thus becomes a spiritual ritual akin to praying, and music is arguably presented as both a political and a cosmological force that can "affect perceptual transformations, ideological shifts, and amendments in knowledge production" (Oppermann 450). Rap songs like "Miracle" achieve this not only through their hydrocentric lyrics but also through their performative and sonic-material properties as well as their music videos.

Both sonically and visually, "Miracle" propagates a hydrosocial perspective that acknowledges water as an integral and agential element within human-nonhuman relationships, rather than as an object of commodification. The song's music video commences with a shot of a maritime coastal strip at Turtle Island for seven full seconds during which only the sounds of the ocean waves can be heard. These images and sounds are combined with a quote by Chief Plenty Coups that challenges human claims to the nonhuman: "The ground on which we stand is sacred ground. It is the dust and blood of

our ancestors" (0:00–5). The quote itself remains terracentric, but paired with both the visual and sonic material presented, the song extends its meaning to water. This is further corroborated by the last shot of the video. Here, the music cedes and images and sounds of the waves of the sea take over. Again, a quote proposing human-nonhuman interconnectedness is superimposed on these images and sounds, in this case, a quote by Black Elk: "All things are our relatives / What we do to everything / We do to ourselves. All is really one" (4:42–47). Other than "Trouble in the Water," whose video shows Common, Kumasi, and Malik Yusef rapping in distinctly urban spaces, "Miracle" consistently foregrounds its hydrosocial perspective of interconnectedness by showing both Supaman and Maimouna Youssef rapping by the side of a lake. Finally, and in the spirit of Yasiin Bey's "New World Water," "Miracle" visually emphasizes the connectedness between the local and the global hydrosocial by transmitting real-life footage of on-site protest for access to water at Standing Rock as well as in Tegucigalpa, Honduras (1:06–10), and Egypt (1:51–52).

## Conclusion

A close study of Yasiin Bey's "New World Water" (1999), Common's "Trouble in the Water" (2014), Taboo's "Stand Up / Stand N Rock" (2016), and Supaman's "Miracle" (2018) discloses how hip hop has actively participated and intervened in contemporary political and ecological discourses on water. These songs do not only realize rap's distinct potential to challenge dominant anthropocentric, racial capitalist, and settler colonial ideologies and practices, but they also explicitly advertise rap music as an important aesthetic tool of political-environmentalist intervention. This becomes particularly evident from the fact that all of them are connected by a specific activist impetus. While the activist message of Yasiin Bey's "New World Water" is rather implicit and limited to the song's lyrics, Common's "Trouble in the Water," Taboo's "Stand Up / Stand N Rock," and Supaman's "Miracle" are unequivocally framed as activism through their lyrics, their various paratexts, and, in the cases of "Trouble in the Water" and "Stand Up / Stand N Rock," the context of their production.

Scholarship, too, has called upon the hip hop community to create environmentally-activist art. In his 2020 essay "How Hip Hop Can Bring Green Issues to Communities of Color," Thomas Easley argues that by concerning itself more explicitly with environmental issues, hip hop could contribute significantly to the diversification of environmentalist movements, which he still identifies as a "disproportionately white 'green insiders club.'" Easley also lists Common's "Trouble in the Water" as a song that might function as a template for contemporary environmentalist hip hop. Common has released three more albums after "Trouble in the Water," two of which feature many socio-politically conscious tracks that address racism and sexism, but none of the songs formulate an ecological critique. In his 2016 song "The Day Women Took Over," for instance, "The New World Order is fathers lovin' their daughters" not "water moves" as it is proclaimed in "Trouble in the Water." Thus, at least in his work, environmentalism still seems to be understood as a separate issue or perhaps just a fleeting trend. However,

there is a growing number of rappers who address political and environmental issues through a hydrocentric lens. This includes not only Yasiin Bey's 2006 song "Dollar Day," which discusses the disproportionately more severe impact of Hurricane Katrina on African Americans, but also Snotty Nose Rez Kids' "The Water," whose negotiation of climate change shares concerns with both Yasiin Bey's "New World Water" and Supaman's "Miracle." These and other songs further confirm that hip hop provides a diverse field of interest for the Blue Humanities.

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