

# Hip Hop Naturalism: A Poetics of Afro-pessimism

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## Abstract

This article examines the cross-discursive constellation of hip hop studies, ecocriticism, Black Studies, and literary studies. It proposes the notion of “hip hop naturalism” to come to terms with the way in which current U.S.-American rappers express their social ecologies. Taking its cue from scholars such as Imani Perry, Gregory Phipps, and Kecia Driver Thompson, the article argues for the relevance of literary naturalism in contemporary forms of cultural expression: not merely in the audiovisual archives of TV or film, but in hip hop lyrics. Greve scrutinizes how rap has dealt with themes of social heredity, cultural ecology, and structural racial violence by using similar or even identical diction to that of turn-of-the-twentieth-century American literary naturalists. Furthermore, juxtaposing the essentializing aspects of post-Darwinian discourse with those of Afro-pessimism, the article ultimately argues that what Darwinism was to authors like Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Frank Norris, Afro-pessimist discourse is to major representatives of contemporary rap, including Mobb Deep, Danny Brown, Earl Sweatshirt, and Kendrick Lamar. The writings of Frank Wilderson III and other scholars within current Black Studies thus figure as a social-philosophical grounding on which the given lyricist might map his or her own take on the lived experience of the black individual in contemporaneity. While racial inequality has always been a central notion within hip hop literature and culture, it is this naturalist bent that renders possible a more thoroughly ecocritical reading of how rap songs both underscore and subvert, with critical defiance, the systemic naturalization of black life as inferior.

*Keywords:* Hip hop, American literary naturalism, Darwinism, Afro-pessimism, poetics.

## Resumen

Este artículo analiza la constelación cros-discursiva de los estudios del hip hop, la ecocrítica, los estudios afroamericanos, y los estudios literarios. Propone la noción del «naturalismo del hip hop» para asimilar la forma en que los actuales raperos estadounidenses expresan sus ecologías sociales. Siguiendo el ejemplo de académicos como Imani Perry, Gregory Phipps, y Kecia Driver Thompson, el artículo defiende la relevancia del naturalismo literario en las formas de expresión cultural contemporáneas: no simplemente en los archivos audiovisuales de televisión o cine, sino en el lirismo del hip hop. Se escudriña cómo el rap ha tratado temas de herencia social, ecología cultural y violencia racial estructural usando un estilo similar, o incluso idéntico, al de los naturalistas literarios americanos de comienzos del siglo veinte. Además, yuxtaponiendo los aspectos esenciales del discurso post-darwiniano con aquellos del afro-pesimismo, el artículo finalmente sostiene que lo que el darwinismo fue para autores como Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, y Frank Norris, es el discurso afro-pesimista para los principales representantes del rap contemporáneo, incluyendo a Mobb Deep, Danny Brown, Earl Sweatshirt, y Kendrick Lamar. Los escritos de Frank Wilderson III y de otros académicos dentro de los estudios afroamericanos actuales representan la base socio-filosófica sobre la que los letristas pueden esquematizar sus propias versiones de la experiencia vivida del individuo negro en la contemporaneidad. Mientras que la desigualdad racial siempre ha sido un tema central en la literatura y cultura del hip hop, es esta propensión naturalista la que hace posible una lectura ecocrítica más minuciosa de cómo las canciones del hip hop enfatizan y subvierten, con resistencia crítica, la naturalización sistémica de la vida negra como inferior.

*Palabras clave:* Hip hop, naturalismo literario americano, darwinismo, afro-pesimismo, poética.

“The violence that both elaborates and saturates Black ‘life’ is totalizing, so much as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks. This is not simply a problem for Black people. It is a problem for the organizational calculus of critical theory and radical politics writ large.”

—Frank B. Wilderson III

“Rap music is slave music. ... It’s just a modern day iteration of it.”

—Earl Sweatshirt

How do hip hop cultures think the interrelation of individuals and their environments? What is the connection of this interrelation to the increasingly growing field of hip hop studies and the scholarly consideration of MCs as lyricists and, thus, poets? Consequently, given the recent debates concerning the literary reframing of this most popular among contemporary forms of musical expression, how to read canonical hip hop acts and artists from the perspective of not only African-American or Black Studies, but also an ecocritically informed literary studies? It is against the backdrop of this short series of broad questions that I will examine one of the multiple points of intersection between hip hop studies and the environmental humanities. More specifically, I want to commend the notion of literary naturalism for an examination of a particular way in which U.S.-American rappers express their urban ecologies and ways of being in the world; a way that can be compared to Afro-pessimist thought insofar as it signals sentiments of both defiance and defeat.

In delineating this constellation of hip hop studies, ecocriticism, and literary studies, as well as specific strands within Black Studies, I am following the lead of a number of scholars in these fields who have already pointed out some of the intersections that interest me here. Eric Carl Link, in *The Vast and Terrible Drama: American Literary Naturalism in the Late Nineteenth Century*, has usefully attempted to expand the category of literary naturalism “by suggesting that naturalism is not a phenomenon restricted to the 1890s and beyond” (xiii). Imani Perry, in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, has connected key themes of literary naturalism—such as urban depravity and the resultant constant struggle between individuals who are oftentimes outcasts within society at large—to rap groups such as Mobb Deep and others (97, 165). Kecia Driver Thompson has described what she deems naturalist aspects in HBO’s *The Wire*. She explains how that show depicts the urban experience of Baltimore’s black population by using a naturalist form of storytelling. *The Wire* “has at its heart the limited possibilities the city offers to many of its citizens, the crushing blow of heredity and environment, the lost potential in lives that seem doomed by a combination of fate and chance. It shows us violence, grit, poverty, dirt, blood—the seedy underbelly of human existence” (83).

What Thompson hereby ascribes to the TV show in terms of a naturalist aesthetic and type of narration resonates with turn-of-the-twentieth-century literary genre conventions in which “the subject of determinism overlaps with pessimism insofar as both concepts challenge ideas of free will,” as Gregory Phipps notes. “Read in relation to late nineteenth-century post-Darwinian society, these concepts emphasize the animalistic foundations of human life—the sense that people tend to follow base desires [...] while striving, usually in vain, against forces found in their environments or in nature”

(“Naturalism” 93). In other words, literary naturalism and its narrative set-up generally concerns the tensions between human agency and its negation in the face of external as well as internal forces beyond and beneath the control of the given individual: “These subjects supply aesthetic material for variegated representations of the relationship among the individual, society, and the natural world” (94).

Arguably, this is why what I call “hip hop naturalism” is meaningful in the thematic context of hip hop ecologies, given that, to a certain extent, the question of how the individual relates to its environment and to itself is an essentially “naturalist” issue. More specifically, the notion of ecology employed here will be understood as pertaining to the construction of subjectivity in verse and academic discourse, on the one hand, and to the description of literal households and social conditions, on the other. The present account thus differs from more traditional understandings of ecocriticism as, for example, the analysis of how human beings relate to their non-human environments (Garrard 5) or as the ethico-critical response to a “wild nature [that] exists, first of all, for its own ‘reasons,’ independent of humans” (Moore 196).

Instead of these approaches to ecocriticism, I relate hip hop literature and culture to the reading of literary naturalism outlined above and its philosophical as well as aesthetic implications, according to which the individual is subject to forces outside of its own will, power, and agency. What Thompson has argued vis-à-vis *The Wire* I apply to a reading of hip hop lyrics that reflect the naturalization of contemporary states of social life in urban centers such as Detroit, New York City, and Los Angeles, with reference to what, in the vein of Frantz Fanon, has been called “black lived experience” (Eubanks 17; Fanon 89–119). Naturalism has taken maximally heterogeneous forms and understandings in past literary discourse from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. I will use the term in Thompson’s sense, which underlines a “doomed [...] combination of fate and chance” determined by both “heredity and environment”(83): namely, as a figure of thought that thematizes and problematizes human and non-human existence as dire and marked by an unending struggle—an understanding that is especially pertinent to the existence of black individuals. Such a naturalization, more often than not, entails an essentialist reading of those whose tragic lives are at stake. On numerous occasions, writers in Black Studies and African American literature have conceived of, and continue to conceive of, these lives as tragic because of both their surroundings and their innermost dispositions, their cultural ancestry. In some cases, such a characterization is but a small step away from the notion that black lives are inferior in comparison with non-black individuals. Put differently, the line becomes blurred between a critical theory of the social that describes how black ethnicity is constructed as essentially inferior, on the one hand, and a critical ontology that affirms such an inferiority, on the other.

This brings me to the particular strand within contemporary Black Studies that will be at stake here, namely Afro-pessimism. My claim is that the post-Darwinian (and, at times, social Darwinist) issues proposed in the American naturalist novel resonate in peculiar ways with what I term the poetics of Afro-pessimist discourse. Arguably, the violent and often-times drastic narratives of a Frank Norris or a Stephen Crane about the

changes of human behavior and ways of being in the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century may be usefully compared to the equally essentializing tendencies in Afro-pessimism, especially with respect to the writings of Frank Wilderson III and his autofictional dramatization of the black lived experience in the United States. In this vein, I consider Wilderson’s account a “naturalist” reading of that experience, for example when he suggests in his latest book *Afropessimism* that the only narrative framework available to those whose ancestors have been slaves—that is, black Americans—is that of the “slave narrative,” irrespective of the literary genre at hand: song lyric, critical essay, autofiction, or any other. Furthermore, the discursive intersection of hip hop, naturalism, and Afro-pessimism has an ecological dimension insofar as Wilderson’s writings as well as a number of hip hop lyrics shed light on how blackness, more often than not, has been equated with the realm of the non-human rather than with humanity.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I want to show how crucial aspects within American literary naturalism pervade hip hop literature and culture from street rap artists Mobb Deep to the Pulitzer Prize-winning Kendrick Lamar. While multiple analytical avenues might be taken in terms of hip hop’s richly diverse aesthetics, comprised of the five elements DJing, breakdance, graffiti, rap, and knowledge, I will solely focus on hip hop lyricism and its epistemological aspect. Surely, hip hop cultures think through their social environments via graffiti, too, for example; yet it is by means of reading the lyrics that hip hop’s discursive connection of naturalist themes and issues may be illuminated most fruitfully. This is because the depiction of social injustice in urban cultural ecologies as “natural” in literary fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century resonates with a host of hip hop lyrics when it comes to the question of race. While there have been black writers in the first half of the twentieth century who have more recently been linked to literary naturalism, such as W.E.B. Du Bois or Charles Chesnutt (Dudley 176), the more narrowly defined notion of “hip hop naturalism” will index what amounts to a sounded, or musically articulated, version of Afro-pessimist discourse, due, in part, to that discourse’s radical “naturalization” of racial inequality.

What I will argue in the following is that there is a type of hip hop lyricism that seems to ascribe a certain inevitability to the current social conditions of black subjects in the United States, due to both urban environmental structures and cultural legacies of blackness. This type of lyrical stance shares key characteristics with both the naturalist fiction of the early twentieth century and with arguments about the black lived experience that can be found in Afro-pessimism. Conversely, Afro-pessimism may be regarded as the socio-philosophical grounding of this hip hop naturalism.

### Hip Hop’s Naturalist Strand

I want to start contextualizing my approach to rap lyrics—qua poetic writing and in comparison to the narrative strategies of literary naturalism—by pointing out that hip

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellis, Jackson, and Yusoff for slightly different takes on Black Studies in the context of the environmental humanities and adjacent fields, such as posthumanism and new materialism.

hop has, for some time now, emerged not only as one of the most impactful subcultural phenomena to lastingly change the landscape of popular culture within and outside of the United States. It has also, by way of pioneering figures such as Public Enemy's Chuck D, Chicago's Common, and Compton's currently most famous representative, Kendrick Lamar, become an academically studied phenomenon within Anglophone literary scholarship. Two book publications in particular have promoted the alignment of hip hop studies and poetics scholarship: Adam Bradley's *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* and *The Anthology of Rap*, co-edited by Bradley and Andrew DuBois. The latter volume, which really is an anthology of hip hop lyrics from Afrika Bambaataa to Young Jeezy, from the late 1970s to the first decade of the new millennium, also includes a foreword by Black Studies elder statesman Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who somewhat unsurprisingly claims that "signifying is the grandparent of Rap; and Rap is signifying in a postmodern way" (xxii). That is to say, the polysemically inflected, vernacular traditions of African-American literature—and not just the tumultuous and confrontational version of it, expressed, for instance, in the spoken word performances and political lyrics of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s and 70s—have found its latest representative variant in what Bradley simply terms "rap's poetic identity" (*Book* xviii). And "while it is not quite so simple as to state that the spoken word poets such as Amiri Baraka and the Last Poets were somehow the original rappers," Alice Price-Styles writes, "the influence and similarities between the poets that preceded rap and rap innovators are apparent" (13).

Granted hip hop lyricism's entanglement with the tradition outlined by poets and scholars such as Baraka, Bradley, Gates Jr., or Chuck D, however, I am interested in hip hop's place within American literary discourse more generally. I want to compare the content of rap lyrics with the hitherto most drastic form of storytelling when it comes to the emplacement of human individuals within their environments: literary naturalism. Such a comparative move does not come without its problems—including the category mistake of cross-genre conflation between the intricacies of verse and prose fiction, or between the cultural and historical specificities of the writings and songs at hand. Surely, there have been African American naturalist writers of fiction in the past, even though Thompson importantly notes that "the naturalist canon has traditionally not included African American writers before the 1940s and 1950s; before then, black writers tended to be labeled as local color or regionalist writers" (85). "Hip hop naturalism" therefore must come as a loaded term from the get-go, it seems, because of the troubled histories of canonicity and of racially determined genre conventions.

Nonetheless, in proposing a discursive contact zone between hip hop and literary naturalism, I am actually taking my cue from Perry's aforementioned take on the poetics and aesthetics of New York City's rap group Mobb Deep. According to Perry, this type of "naturalism" can be witnessed on their 1995 album *The Infamous...* and especially on tracks such as "Survival of the Fittest" or "Shook Ones, Pt. II." For her, the structural discrepancies between narrative form in prose fiction, on the one hand, and rap music's approach to storytelling, on the other, do not constitute major problems with regard to cross-genre or cross-cultural readings. As Perry states: "Naturalism as a variation on realism appears when the allegorical exegesis provided by the MC makes conflict

universal and essential. Mobb Deep, who I would call a naturalist group, refrain on one of their songs: ‘We livin’ this till the day that we die / survival of the fittest, only the strong survive’” (97). In a track like this, as well as others, the rap duo, consisting of the MCs Prodigy and Havoc, “asserts itself as being ‘real’ in terms of having been involved in violent conflict and the criminal justice system—as opposed to those who rhyme about it but do not really have the experience to back it up” (98). Interestingly, the category of authenticity—as central to hip hop culture as any—is here read vis-à-vis the notions of literary realism and naturalism. “Naturalism as a variation on realism” in Perry’s sense here arguably indexes the construction of authenticity in terms of the speaker’s verisimilitude concerning the hardship depicted, on the level of form (realism), and, on the level of content, a projected authenticity when it comes to the credibility of the given speaker’s actually knowing such hardship (naturalism). Yet, irrespective of this particular reading of these categories, normally used within literary discourse to discern fiction’s ability to develop a “critique of social conditions” (97), why does Perry revert to them in the first place? What is the function of this discursive correspondence between literary history and hip hop culture?

In the past, West Coast groups such as N.W.A. would fashion themselves within what they called “reality rap,” and the literary category of realism more generally may be useful to come to terms with the highly detailed depictions of social structure, urban poverty, and racial inequality in the majority of hip hop records from “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five all the way to Foxy Brown’s “My Life,” and from Ice-T’s “Colors” to Run the Jewels’ collaborations with Zach de la Rocha. Indeed, Adam Krims’ definition of reality rap from his seminal book *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* hints at that connection. He writes that “the ‘reality’” in reality rap “may designate any rap that undertakes the project of realism, in the classical sense, which in this context would amount to an epistemological/ontological project to map the realities of (usually black) inner-city life” (70). And yet, he cautions,

the realism of reality rap cannot ultimately be held simply as some sort of current-day equivalent of literary realism (or, for that matter, the very different photo-realism to which the latter is often compared). For [...] reality rap departs radically from both literary realism and film documentary in its historical situation and its situation within the social totality (70)

—another affirmation of the site- and time-specificity of hip hop ecologies and the problem of comparing literary forms of expression across genres and periods.

Granted the aforementioned issues when it comes to cross-genre conflation and the transhistorical comparison of fiction and lyrics, the fact remains that the notion of realism has been crucial within the artistic practices of and the scholarship on hip hop. I, too, find the distinction between expanded notions of realism and naturalism useful when reading hip hop lyrics. These notions lead to a perspective that brings to light the entanglement of poetic diction and epistemological concerns; the resonance between rapping and knowledge. My claim is that the conception of literary naturalism, in the context of hip hop, points to a far bleaker and darker understanding of realism’s thematizations of urban ecology and social circumstance. To invoke naturalism, rather than realism, might not only be a productive way for rendering rap’s oftentimes

masculinist construction of authenticity—of the respective MC’s street credibility—even though in terms of the close proximity of issues of gender and genre, we should take note of John Dudley’s helpful reminder that already

naturalists as diverse as Norris, Crane, London, and Wharton, as well as several African-American naturalists, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, and W. E. B. Du Bois, sought to define themselves and their literary endeavors in direct opposition to an ‘unmanly’ vogue of decadent aestheticism. (4)

In other words, the masculinist tradition of literary naturalism itself is one of many aspects that one might explore in order to examine what hip hop naturalism might mean. Yet, more generally, the category of naturalism might also be useful to describe a given MC’s pessimistic reading of urban ecology within a particular track or album, to examine the themes of determinism and heredity, and to trace the internal and external forces exerted upon the individual whose stance and positionality is being explored in the given rap lyric. After all, “the subject of determinism overlaps with pessimism insofar as both concepts challenge ideas of free will” (Phipps, “American” 93).

How does a hip hop version of naturalism work on the level of poetics? When Mobb Deep’s Prodigy raps the following verse on the track “Shook Ones, Pt. II,” it is not exactly a depiction of hardship in the form of lamenting a social wrongdoing, nor is it a political statement against racial inequality per se:

The Mobb comes equipped for warfare, beware  
Of my crime family who got nuff shots to share  
[...]  
You all alone in these streets, cousin  
Every man for theyself, in this land we be gunnin. (454)

This is neither a realist depiction of hardship for the sake of accuracy, nor a poetics of recognition, oftentimes ascribed to rap’s indebtedness to earlier African-American verse forms, such as Langston Hughes’s jazz poetry or the writers of the Black Arts Movement. The bleakness and resignation in Prodigy’s depiction of street life in mid-90s Queens recall the unflinching poetics of literary naturalism dating back to the turn of the twentieth century. The universalization of human greed, the ethnic struggle, and the centrality of the protagonists’ tragic descents into poverty are thematic markers that connect the naturalist novel and gangsta rap record.

I am especially interested in what Mark Seltzer has termed “the naturalist doctrines of determinism and degeneration” (19), and the notion that, according to these doctrines, normative violence and social heredity—in other words, the apparently insurmountable immobility black individuals face in the United States—are actually unchangeable. Tropes of social Darwinist’ ideology have been resurfacing in hip hop recently, in parallel with the discursive emergence of what scholars like Christina Sharpe, Jared Sexton, and Frank Wilderson III have termed Afro-pessimism. Perhaps, the latter constitutes at long last the socio-philosophical grounding of or for the poetics of Mobb Deep and others. But before delving into the social and philosophical implications of Afro-pessimist discourse in the second part of this essay, I want to demonstrate a few exemplary cases of what I call hip hop naturalism in contemporary U.S.-American rap.

In the past decade, artists such as Danny Brown, Earl Sweatshirt, and Kendrick Lamar have each released tracks with the same exact title—"DNA"—which is as naturalist a term as the aforementioned track titles from *The Infamous...* or the album title *Phrenology* (2002), a record on which The Roots collaborated with Amiri Baraka. All of these point to a deterministic and biologicistic rendering of what "the human" might mean, "DNA" being one of the most common popular shorthand expressions in debates concerning social cultural heredity: *you are who and what you are, due to your hereditary set-up*.

In Brown's track, the speaker details a scenario of drug addiction and substance abuse as bleak as that depicted by Mobb Deep's violent storytelling. Yet Brown's scenario demonstrates another seemingly naturalist facet within rap lyrics, namely the suggestion that the social degradation of black life in the United States is effectuated by racially marked social structures in general, and by familial tendencies in particular, that are "naturally" irreversible: "It's in my DNA, cause my pops like to get fucked up the same way / It's in my DNA, cause my moms like to get fucked up the same way / DNA, DNA, cause my fam like to get fucked up the same way." This is not to say that Brown himself strictly adheres to social Darwinism or post-Darwinian ideas concerning the subject being at the mercy of her or his lineage. Rather, it is striking that this lyric negotiates black life in Detroit in similarly bleak terms as naturalist fiction that describes the social ecologies of increasing poverty in urban centers and the mental and material forces beyond the individual's control. Brown's speaker indexes what Dudley terms "the interplay of heredity, environment, and chance in the determination of an individual's fate" (5).

On a purely formal level, the anaphoric repetition of these lines, with minor variations, suggests an irrevocability when it comes to social descent, compared to upward mobility. The fact that Brown and most of the other rappers depicted here have been hugely successful in the past decade does not cancel out the poetics nor the politics of their portrayal of black life in the United States. Conversely, the naturalizing imagery of black poverty in contemporary rap lyrics—post-bling era—may be dialectically related to the MC's commercial success. Hip hop naturalism's originary contradiction consists in the correlation of an aestheticized social poverty (and social death, as we will see) with the notion and goal of upward mobility: social descent may not be redeemable, but it is nonetheless commercially viable, as attested to by the popularity of these arguably naturalist MCs. Put cynically, it seems to pay off in contemporary hip hop poetics to use "a naturalistic idiom to dramatize the economic hardship" of black life, similar to the way in which the Jack London of *The People of the Abyss* had described the London poor in 1903 (Berliner 57).

The first verse in Earl Sweatshirt's track "DNA" depicts a social landscape similar to those related by Mobb Deep and Brown, yet it is a mixture of the former's violent streak and the latter's resignation to addiction: "Intercepting a fifth of whisky and necking it 'til I'm dizzy / I never was defenseless, I never hugged the fence / I pick a side and trust in it, stomach full of drugs and shit." Again, this is not a new kind of diction presented by this particular MC, nor is Brown's earlier track lyrically much different than 1990s rap's chronicles of the black lived experience in large North American cities, such as Los

Angeles, Detroit, or New York City. What is striking, rather, is the framing of these lyrics within the discursive matrix of the laws of heredity. In the hook, Sweatshirt claims that there is no biologically determined weakness in his DNA; a statement that, again, certainly ought to be read with caution, given that Sweatshirt is far from fashioning himself in the niche of gangsta rap. This darker kind of braggadocio—"Bitch nigga, we the train, if you see 'em wave / Ain't no bitch in my DNA"—may be interpreted as a commentary on the carefully crafted personae of some of his peers, such as YG or Schoolboy Q, yet what interests me here is the framing of rap's typical kind of misogynistic boasting along the lines of the naturalist terminology of heredity or biological superiority. Why name this track "DNA"? What, precisely, is the function of naturalist diction within hip hop lyrics such as those by Sweatshirt, which basically reiterate Mobb Deep's notion that in 1990s NYC "only the strong survive"? My reading of Sweatshirt's use of the notion of "DNA" and, hence, my provisional answer to these questions is that the frequency of the use of the notion in the current rap scene itself, together with its correlation with masculinist rap rhetorics, is symptomatic of precisely the poetics and politics in which literary naturalism and hip hop culture meet.

Finally, Lamar's second track from his album *DAMN.* (2017) reiterates some of the themes from the tracks by Mobb Deep, Brown, and Sweatshirt. On Lamar's "DNA," the speaker claims,

I got, [...]  
Loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA  
[...]  
I got dark, I got evil, that rot inside my DNA  
I got off, I got troublesome heart inside my DNA.

In this case, compared to Sweatshirt's "DNA," the speaker's self-ascription amounts to an enumeration of aspects of black life that have been formulated from within and outside of hip hop culture. Such an enumeration—mentioning the ancestry of blackness as well as the speaker's traumatic, and seemingly inherent, relation to affectivity—problematizes what Christina Sharpe has termed "the conventions of antiblackness in the present" (21); it generates a critical viewpoint on the legacy of racial segregation by means of a hip hop aesthetic. Lamar's persona, in other words, wears the darkness ascribed to blackness by antiblack rules and regulations, as well as the capacity to be affected, as a badge of honor because it seems futile to escape the social and cultural determination of blackness. On the level of form, too, Lamar's rhyme scheme, which lets "loyalty" be followed by "royalty" and lets "dark" resonate with "rot," "get off," and "troublesome heart," is semantically consistent with what Sharpe describes as "the semiotics of the slave ship," and its "reappearances [...] in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school" (21). Those whose ancestors are slaves—supposedly West African royalty, coerced into being loyal to their new masters on American soil—have a bond, a solidarity with other black individuals, that seemingly is as essential to the cultural framing of blackness in history as its derogatory and sexualized ascription, in terms of darkness, rottenness, pleasure, and trauma. Arguably, the speaker both questions and affirms the naturalization of blackness in these terms. Naturalization—understood as the fixed determination of

what it is, essentially, to be black and why that state of blackness as it is, is necessarily so—is interrogated and presented as a powerful and structurally violent stance that has had and continues to have fatal consequences for black lives. The naturalization of blackness—you are black, since you got X, Y, and Z in your DNA—recalls what Phipps has said of American naturalist writers, such as Norris, Richard Wright, or James T. Farrell: they “do not set out to prove that their protagonists’ fates are predetermined; rather, they dramatize the conflicts and breakdowns that may lead an individual to adopt a belief in determinism” (“Descendants” xi).

Different from scholarship in which, according to Kevin Eubanks, “Hip hop is said either to effectively challenge the political status quo through various means or to reproduce the terms of its captivity” (6), the present argument holds that the naturalist poetics within hip hop harbors both critique and complicity, defiance and defeat. Flirting with the naturalization of blackness, as it is conditioned by and determined in contemporary society in the United States, these MCs nonetheless imply a wholesale objection to accepting those conditions as fixed once and for all. Instead they demonstrate how “getting off” and having a “troublesome heart” has to be thought through and together at the same time, in the context of blackness. This is supported by theorists like Fred Moten, who in his recent work defines “black study” as an “exhaustive celebration of and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured” (xiii).

### **Afro-pessimism: A Naturalist Perspective**

Hereditary determinism, social ecology, and racial struggle are intertwined in tracks such as “DNA,” “Survival of the Fittest,” and others. This naturalist poetics within contemporary hip hop—and perhaps the genre-specific strategic essentialism of racial pride in hip hop generally—may be seen as analogous to a current form of Black Studies discourse that demonstrates a similar inclination toward simultaneous defiance and resignation: Afro-pessimism.

In the past decade and a half—contemporaneous with Danny Brown’s, Earl Sweatshirt’s, and Kendrick Lamar’s national and international rise to prominence—Afro-pessimism has become a hugely influential, albeit controversial, discourse within Black Studies. Grounded in the work of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death*, Afro-pessimism interrogates the ways in which the lived experience of black subjects in the United States and elsewhere amounts to an existential anxiety vis-à-vis the perpetual event of structural violence in the social realm. According to scholars such as Frank Wilderson III, Jared Sexton, and others, this violence is unique among the marginalized social groups of people of color. It is unique because blackness, according to Afro-pessimists, forecloses the condition of possibility for social participation and recognition in the first place, in contrast to the agency of white subjects as well as other non-black individuals. Patterson’s notion of the social death of enslaved people—the idea of the slave being fundamentally excluded from social interaction—has been taken up by Wilderson, for instance, to argue that the social status of black Americans is beyond and beneath human (225–29). The concept of social death suggests

a life determined by a deracinated form of subjectivity, and thus of no subjectivity worthy of being called human; in other words, black life is conceptualized as a life fundamentally outside of the world in which human subjects come to be and, therefore, are able to participate.<sup>2</sup>

“Blacks [...] cannot claim their bodies, cannot claim their families, cannot claim their cities, cannot claim their countries, they cannot lay claim to a personal pronoun” (Wilderson et al. 8): the logic of a black deracinated subjectivity that implies its non- or inhuman character, delineated by Wilderson’s Afro-pessimism and its sounded variant in the works of Brown, Sweatshirt, and others, is of a piece with what Saidiya Hartman has termed “the afterlife of slavery” (6) or what Christina Sharpe has described as “Black being in the wake” of “the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery” (45, 2)—scholars whose writings have had strong connections with those of Wilderson. The historical experience of the Middle Passage, according to this logic, and the multiple histories of enslavement and racially motivated oppression on the levels of both corporeality and language, extend all the way to the black lived experience of contemporaneity and the police and vigilante violence of four years of “Alt-America” and their aftermath, to borrow a term from David Neiwert.

It is this reading of black subjectivity as deracinated or diminished that echoes the naturalist themes of social heredity, cultural ecology, and personal tragedy in the hip hop lyrics examined in the previous section. At the same time, this discursive constellation links up social Darwinism (and its literary upshots) and Afro-pessimism (and its hip hop variant). This argument is counterintuitive since, in the former case, those who espoused the discourse were non-black subjects, whereas, in the latter case, those who identify as Afro-pessimist are black non-subjects (that is, according to their theoretical premises). Nonetheless, I argue that parallels between these discourses can be found on the level of content. After all, the post-Darwinian society in which literary naturalism emerged and thrived was fascinated by “the animalistic [and therefore non-human] foundations of human life,” and held that human beings struggle “usually in vain, against forces found in their environments or in nature” (Phipps, “Naturalism” 93). Afro-pessimism clearly echoes this interest in non-human foundations and a vain struggle against individual social ecologies, but in focusing these ideas on blackness, it conceives black being as essentially non-human, rather than merely connected to the non-human world of nature.

In this context, Greg Thomas’ highly critical take on Afro-pessimist discourse is insightful. Thomas argues that Afro-pessimism reiterates “Western epistemic frameworks of white academic liberalism,” by its exclusion of histories of African anti-imperialist struggle, “thereby ensconcing the colonialism and neo-colonialism it constantly and symptomatically denegates in text after text” (293). I also hold that the characterization of black life as devoid of agency tout court seems to disregard the way in which the aestheticization of black disempowerment may perpetuate racist, imperialist, and colonialist discourses and sentiments. Certainly, the naturalization of black inferiority

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<sup>2</sup> See Smith 113–18, for a succinct discussion of the logic of deracination in Afro-pessimism vis-à-vis the critical theory of François Laruelle.

with respect to a supposedly white humanity in post-Darwinian as well as Afro-pessimist discourse carries different valences depending on the position from which one speaks, yet the diction of the latter oftentimes mirrors, and thus may perpetuate, the former in uncanny ways.

On this view, the way in which the poetics of rappers such as Danny Brown or Earl Sweatshirt treat of themes within literary naturalism—heredity, chance, violence or degeneration—entails that the notion of a deracinated, diminished, or nearly non-existent subjectivity, in the case of black “subjects,” amounts to a veritable transformation of the context in which naturalist themes become meaningful. From an Afro-pessimist perspective, the speakers in these tracks by Brown and Sweatshirt do not lack their own “free will” due to their allegedly inborn features and acquired character as human beings, but because of their disposition as non-human beings. In a sense, Afro-pessimism amounts to a de-universalization of naturalist themes in terms of humanity and a universalization or totalization of these themes in the context of blackness—that is, in- or non-humanity. It is not the delineation of the human being as one animal among others that is at issue, nor its reliance on its biological heritage and cultural ancestry, on impersonal drives rather than individual decisions. What is at stake is a description of black persons as non-human non-subjects that are at the mercy of their ancestry and environment. What some naturalists in the early twentieth century understood to be salient features of humankind, in the light of the scientific insights and philosophical trends in the late nineteenth century, Afro-pessimism—and, by the same token, the naturalist poetics of contemporary hip hop—seems to reframe vis-à-vis blackness alone.

“The violence that both elaborates and saturates black ‘life’ is totalizing, so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to blacks,” writes Wilderson (226). By narrative he means the discursive structuration of whiteness that potentially enables the self-empowerment and upward mobility of a non-black individual on the social ladder. Conversely, the structuration of social descent, rather than ascent, is unchangeable for the black non-subject fundamentally steeped in his or her slaveness. And yet: “This is not simply a problem for Black people. It is a problem for the organizational calculus of critical theory and radical politics writ large” (226). The irrefutable fact of descent and ancestry, of socio-ecological determination, is a problem for each and every discourse that would posit concepts such as liberation, empowerment, and resistance in the name of those who suffer. For Wilderson, the logic of narrative structuration applied to individual psychic and social life in non-black cultures does not translate to black people, due to the lasting effect or after-effect of their being cast as commodities: as objects, rather than subjects, in the afterlife of slavery.

I argue that these two correlative notions—the concept of the black (non-human) animal that is caught up in the originary violence of its social descent and cultural ancestry, and the impossibility of having recourse to a narrative structure that would potentially redeem the suffering of such an originary violence—are constitutive of what I call hip hop naturalism. This correlation is precisely what is at stake when Perry reads Mobb Deep’s lyrics against the backdrop of literary naturalism, indeed prefiguring the theoretical tapestry of Wilderson’s approach to Black Studies: “Naturalism as a variation

on realism appears when the allegorical exegesis provided by the MC makes conflict universal and essential” (Perry 97). The cross-discursive connections that bind hip hop studies and contemporary Black Studies highlight the linkage between the totalizing impulse of “the violence that both elaborates and saturates black ‘life’” (Wilderson 226) and the given rapper’s storytelling and interpretation of the black lived experience that “makes conflict universal and essential” (Perry 97). An apparently tragic “interplay of heredity, environment, and chance in the determination of an individual’s fate” (Dudley 5), the naturalist variant of hip hop lyrics deals in precisely the same imagery of defiance and defeat Afro-pessimism evokes at every turn; an imagery both critical of and complicit with the structural violence it depicts. Or, as Earl Sweatshirt himself has bluntly stated, when asked about the connections between Afro-pessimism and his approach to writing lyrics: “Rap music is slave music, number one; it’s just a modern day iteration of it” (Blunted Soul 0:45–0:53).

This essay (or any other, for that matter) cannot be the place to decide or judge whether hip hop is really the naturalist, and supposedly “natural,” music of non-subjects caught in ancestry and environment, however strategic an essentialist statement that might be. While Eubanks has argued for the potential of “an unprecedented confrontation with the oppressive productions of anti-blackness” (8) within classical hip hop from Public Enemy to the present, however, my discussion of Afro-pessimism and hip hop naturalism suggests such a potential cannot be realized in terms of empowerment and resistance—what Eubanks terms “counter-performance” and “Hip Hop ‘praxis’” (16). Instead, what hip hop naturalism—one of many potential forms of an Afro-pessimist poetics—presents us with is the defiant regurgitation of disempowerment, the statement of an apparently unchangeable situation in which blackness exists in and “through our suffering” (Moten xiii). Hip hop naturalism is a dual approach to artistic practice that reiterates defeat while projecting defiance at the same time. As Danny Brown puts it: “Murders all the time is all I see / Detroit 187 on you niggas’ TV” (“Detroit 187”). The unbridgeable social gap between those that continue to die and those that will keep on watching, Brown implies, finds its parallel in the gap between experiencing homicides oneself and watching them in a TV series like *Detroit 1-8-7* (2010). For Afro-pessimism and hip hop naturalism, what is fiction for some will remain reality for others.

### **Toward a Poetics of Afro-pessimism**

In the “Acknowledgments” of *Afropessimism*, Wilderson construes his author-narrator as “a Slave” (xi), which results in his book being, essentially, a slave narrative, albeit one of a different kind than what has been called the neo-slave narrative in the realm of fiction. It is by way of framing itself as a slave narrative that Wilderson’s work not only theorizes how blackness as an existential condition prevents black people from choosing between partaking in social conduct or not: this self-ascription takes apart the notion that a monograph such as *Afropessimism* could take part in any non-black discourse concerning race and ethnicity to start off with. *Afropessimism* suggests that black narrative is necessarily and essentially steeped in its own ethnically marked

environment, its culturally marked determinism, and its socially defined personal and political tragedies. Unlike non-black narratives, which arguably, too, are determined, to a degree, by their cultural environments, blackness here is predicated upon its immobility, its fixity within the social. The self-ascription of Wilderson's narrator as slave, in other words, suggests that the only form of narrative black people may have recourse to is *slave narrative*. This is fully in accord with his theory concerning the isomorphism of blackness and slaveness qua ontological condition.

I have argued above that this bleak viewpoint on contemporary black life and culture, its conditions of possibility and impossibility, ties in or resonates with the literary naturalist themes in "rap's poetic identity" (Bradley xviii) of recent times. Of these I have listed and examined social heredity, cultural ecology, and structural racial violence, among others; to be found exemplarily in the works of Mobb Deep, Brown, Sweatshirt, and Lamar. What is more, the reflection of naturalist aspects in contemporary hip hop lyrics suggests that if the latter can productively be read as slave narratives—which will have to be seen in subsequent analyses—then Afro-pessimism may prove to constitute retroactively for artists from Mobb Deep to Kendrick Lamar what post-Darwinian naturalist and materialist philosophies represented in the case of novelists such as Dreiser, Norris, London, or Crane, and the critical legacies of their works. In other words, what Darwinism was to the naturalist novel, Afro-pessimism is to major representatives of contemporary rap: a social-philosophical grounding on which the given writer or lyricist can map his or her own take on the human and/or black lived experience in contemporaneity. As in the naturalist novel, the discursive entanglement should not be seen as a strict dogma that a given MC would adhere to. Rather, it is an important strand in today's thinking about the conditions of historically situated subjectivity on display in the given lyric: the subjectivation, or construction of subjectivity, as determined by the environments surrounding that subjectivity (or, rather, non-subjectivity, according to Afro-pessimist discourse).

Works of hip hop naturalism may be seen as sounded versions of Afro-pessimist discourse, all the while echoing, in the expressions of their speakers or narrative voices, Donald Pizer's notion of "the naturalistic tragic hero": "a figure whose potential for growth is evident but who fails to develop because of the circumstances of his life" (6). Whereas it is true that racial inequality has always been a central notion within hip hop lyricism, it is this naturalist bent that enables a more thoroughly ecocritical reading of how rap songs both underscore and subvert, with critical defiance, the systemic naturalization of black life as inferior.

In his editor's introduction to a recent special issue of *Studies in American Naturalism*, called "American Literary Naturalism and Its Descendants," Phipps asks: "What accounts for the ongoing influence of American naturalism in literature, film, television, and scholarship? Also, how does naturalism speak to contemporary social issues in the United States and beyond? Any attempt to answer these questions," he writes, "must take into consideration the versatility of naturalism as a set of ideas" and demonstrate how "films, television shows, and computer games also display naturalist influences" ("Descendants" vii-viii). The present essay has underlined the currency of

naturalist discourse within and outside academia. It has argued for the pervasiveness of naturalism in hip hop and, by the same token, in Afro-pessimist poetics.

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