



## Hip Hip Ecologies

## **Mad Squirrel Keeping it Rural: Reflecting on Twenty Years of Hip Hop Environmental Awareness and Advocacy**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2022.13.1.4571>

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### **Abstract**

In this autobiographical piece, I reflect on my twenty-year history as an emcee working at the intersection of hip hop and environmental awareness. Since summer 2000, I have recorded and performed environmentally situated hip hop music under the moniker “Mad Squirrel.” This includes co-founding two groups—the San-Francisco-based Forest Fires Collective and Washington DC’s The Acorns—as well as releasing various solo projects and taking part in a handful of performances. In what follows, I explain the origins of my nature-based performance identity by, first, recounting my experiences growing up as an avid hip hop fan in a rural New England (USA) mountain village and, then, expounding on how Mad Squirrel’s forest narratives marked a return to the Black diasporic tradition of animal stories that align with my West African heritage. I go on to describe how this identity and approach became the springboard for a small circle of Bay Area artists to produce a series of critically heralded releases in the early 2000s. After relocating to the East Coast of the United States, I continued to create nature-based hip hop and, notably, performed at several fundraisers and political rallies organized around the movement to stop Mountain Top Removal coalmining in Southern Appalachia. Underlying these narrative accounts, in this piece, I critique hip hop’s presumed urban-rural divide by highlighting its longstanding presence in rural communities; I compare and contrast the effectiveness of using didactic versus coded environmentalist lyrics/themes; and I draw attention to the underappreciated connections between environmentalism and anti-racism. While acknowledging hip hop’s failure to thoroughly embrace an environmental justice agenda, through this personal case study, I draw attention to some of the groundwork that has been done in alternative hip hop spaces and advocate for fruitful directions through which to move forward.

*Keywords:* Hip hop, environmentalism, animal stories, Black aesthetics, social movements.

### **Resumen**

En esta pieza autobiográfica reflexiono sobre mis veinte años de historia como rapero trabajando en el cruce entre el hip hop y la conciencia medioambiental. Desde el verano del 2000, he grabado y presentado música hip hop con temática medioambiental bajo el alias «Mad Squirrel» («Ardilla Loca»). Esto incluye co-fundar dos bandas—Forest Fires Collective, con sede en San Francisco, y The Acorns de Washington DC—así como lanzar varios proyectos en solitario y formar parte de un puñado de actuaciones. A continuación, explico los orígenes del sesgo medioambiental de la identidad de mi obra: en primer lugar, relatando mis experiencias como un entusiasta fan del hip hop creciendo en un pueblo de montaña de la Nueva Inglaterra (EEUU) rural, y explicando después cómo las narrativas sobre los bosques de Mad Squirrel marcaron un retorno a la tradición de la diáspora negra de las historias de animales que se alinean con mi herencia del África occidental. Continúo describiendo cómo esta identidad y enfoque se convirtieron en el trampolín de un pequeño círculo de artistas de la región de la bahía de San Francisco para que produjeran una serie de lanzamientos anunciados críticamente a comienzo de los 2000. Después de trasladarme a la

Costa Este de los Estados Unidos, seguí creando hip hop centrado en la naturaleza y, de manera notable, actué en varios actos políticos y de recaudación de fondos organizados en torno al movimiento para poner fin a la minería de remoción de cima en los Apalaches del sur. Bajo estas explicaciones narradas, en este trabajo analizo la supuesta división urbano-rural del hip hop recalando su duradera presencia en las comunidades rurales. Comparo y contrasto la efectividad de usar letras/temas moralizadores frente a usar letras/temas con un mensaje ambientalista cifrado, y centro la atención en las conexiones infravaloradas entre el ecologismo y el anti-racismo. Mientras reconozco el fracaso del hip hop a la hora de abrazar la justicia medioambiental, a través de este caso práctico personal, llamo la atención hacia parte del trabajo preliminar que se ha realizado en espacios alternativos de hip hop y propongo unas direcciones fructíferas a través de las que ir hacia delante.

*Palabras clave:* Hip hop, ecologismo, historias de animales, estética negra, movimientos sociales.

Natural environments are under attack. Our enduring commitments to our current lifestyles are the chief culprits. The devastating effects of climate change are already here—most visible through the frequency and intensity of heatwaves, floods, droughts, uncontrollable wildfires, “hundred-year storms,” species extinctions, and the like. Experts are pivoting from forecasting what is already occurring to predicting the unpredictability of what is yet to come. With this catastrophic future lurking, other social ills persist. Highly visible incidents of anti-Black racism have led to renewed calls for accountability for past and present racial injustices, which join other calls to address the rampant social inequalities expanding throughout the world.

Hip hop, as a grassroots mode of late-modern Black aesthetic expression that reverberates within marginalized communities and often speaks truth to power, has emerged as the voice and musical catalyst for multiple movements—from the local to the global—against a vast range of societal injustices. Yet, perhaps owing to its common association with urban landscapes or to the fact that its contradictory existence includes generous doses of commercialism, misogyny, and take-no-prisoners capitalist accumulation, those who embrace hip hop as a powerful political force have been slow to acknowledge its potential for calling attention to environmental justice concerns. Similarly, activists, artists, and musicians aligned with environmental movements are only gradually coming to embrace hip hop as an effective contemporary channel for their messaging.

As these connections begin to take root, I want to take a moment to reflect on my twenty years working in such spaces as both a recording and performing artists. The public record of these activities includes over a dozen music releases (CDs, vinyl, cassette tapes, and digital releases) and nearly as many performances at benefits, fund-raisers, and rallies in opposition to Mountain Top Removal (MTR) coalmining and aligned environmental causes. While I should be careful not to overstate the impact of these activities, the fact that, for two decades, my music has been appreciated by listeners on both sides of the hip hop/environmental-justice divide foretells the yet-to-be-realized possibilities for hip hop to develop into a leading aesthetic-political force in response to the most urgent crises of our times. Hip hop music and the expressive traditions that surround it should rightfully be embraced as important voices against environmental

destruction; advocating for the communities that will most directly be impacted by it. The racial/social justice issues that hip hop has most effectively spoken against are intricately entwined with global and local concerns about the environment.

In April 2000, when I arrived in San Francisco to begin a year-long fieldwork stay, many people were puzzled by my decision to “study” hip hop there. As an anthropology doctoral student from Syracuse University (located in central New York), wouldn’t it make more sense to look at hip hop in New York City? I had various reasons for choosing the San Francisco Bay Area. But the answer I routinely gave, in large part as a way to move beyond the question, was that I would ideally love to study hip hop on a dirt road if I thought it was feasible. In other words, New York hip hop had been well studied. I was interested in alternative sites of hip hop activity, and the more alternative the better. Whereas the “dirt road” reference was strategic hyperbole, in many respects it was both revelatory and prescient.

I had known hip hop on dirt roads, perhaps too many to remember. One was Howes Road, located just outside the village of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts—a one-time logging trail that sometime during the 1980s, amidst a flurry of newly built homes, became a serviceable dirt road. Howes Road marked the midway point between my house and my friend Eli’s. Being two of the more avid hip hop fans in our high school, both rhyme-writers, we sometimes met on Howes Road to talk shit and to talk hip hop. When I mentioned dirt roads to my Bay Area inquisitors, I would often think of these get togethers.

Shelburne Falls may seem as distant from a hip hop mecca as one can imagine. But starting in the 1960s, it developed as a hub for artists, intellectuals, and other creatives choosing to reside in the progressive hills of Western Massachusetts. Less than thirty miles from the quintessential college towns of Amherst and Northampton, growing up I regularly tuned in to the UMass Amherst, Amherst College, and even the University of Connecticut radio stations—not to mention smaller stations housed at various New England prep schools in the area. One of the lesser told stories surrounding hip hop’s 1980s emergence is how, prior to the arrival of *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1988, the music was largely promoted and sustained through college radio. Whereas Columbia University’s “Stretch Armstrong and Bobbito Show” has been recognized as an important institution in the history of New York City hip hop, throughout the 1980s and even into the 1990s, rurally situated universities and colleges played a major role in bringing hip hop to the American hinterland. In 1988, when I arrived as a freshman on the campus of the University of Massachusetts, my knowledge of the latest hip hop music releases was comparable to that of the friends I was making from cities like Boston, Springfield (MA), New Haven (CT), and New York.

Sometime in the early 1990s, looking out from a mountain vista above Shelburne Falls on a July-Fourth Sunday morning, I first conceived of what years later would become my performing name.



Fig. 1: Illustration by Ahad Pace. Photographic background by Anthony Kwame Harrison.

It was a relatively random statement, made to a small group of friends: “If I ever release an album, I’ll go by the name Mad Squirrel.” At the time, I recall that the dance hall rapper Mad Lion had a popular song out. But other than that, there was no particularly notable or insightful reason for saying this; just a silly comment to pass the time as we watched the sun come over Massamet Mountain. Seven years later, however, after spending several months around Bay Area hip hop artists, my reasons for resurrecting the name were more thought out.

Despite explicitly stating that I was not embarking on my (participant-observation) dissertation fieldwork with aspirations to rap, I found myself continually encouraged to get on stage at open microphone events or to record music in people’s bedroom studios. When I eventually made the decision to embrace the opportunity to

perform and record as an aspect of my research,<sup>1</sup> I felt the need to come up with a performance identity.

My decision to rhyme as Mad Squirrel parallels the transition from imitation to mastery common in many movements of music across social, geographic, and formative lines. For instance, many early examples of non-New-York hip hop—whether on the American West Coast, Europe, or Asia—can be characterized as imitative. Similarly, novice practitioners of a craft often imitate prior to putting their personal stamp on their work. Despite my rural upbringing, the raps I wrote in high school took place in urban settings and included fanciful adventures of crime, violence, and machismo. Years later, with new sensibilities—informed in no small part through graduate coursework on folklore and African orature—I sought to create a hip hop identity that aligned more with my personal background. Squirrels, to me, straddle the line between rural and urban. They are part of the animal world but do well in urban spaces. This paralleled my own self-conception as someone raised on a country road who was capable of thriving in urban music scenes.

Yet I was also a child of Africa, born in Kumasi, Ghana. My Black cultural heritage included growing up with Asante animal stories told to me by my mother and published as children’s books by my Auntie Peggy. With an advanced understanding of hip hop as an African diasporic tradition—references to emcees as “modern day griots” are common enough—I reasoned that my hip hop roots were as much in the stories of Anansi the trickster spider, as they were in the Black American oral traditions that are more commonly thought of as forbearers to rapping. I thus conceived of Mad Squirrel as primarily narrating animal stories, with the social interactions of animal characters reflecting the behaviors of human actors. In line with the Black diasporic practice of Signifyin’—most formidably theorized through the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr.<sup>2</sup>—in order to take offense at the telling of a story, one must acknowledge that they in some way recognize themselves in it. As I discuss below, this politics of misdirection through coded language and gesture became a key aspect of Mad Squirrel’s environmentalist interventions. I was fortunate that the recording artist I had worked most closely with in San Francisco not only supported the idea of a rapping Mad Squirrel, but was eager to join me in constructing a forest-based hip hop Eldorado.

To help support my research, I had landed a job working at Amoeba Music’s San Francisco store—at the time, the largest independent record store in the U.S. Feller Quentin was a Virginia transplant and recent Wesleyan University graduate who started at Amoeba the week before me. On my first full workday, he introduced himself as an emcee, explaining both his music-making practices and ambitions. As a white rapper, who was part of an interracial circle of recording artists that embraced the Do-it-Yourself ethos of Bay Area hip hop, Feller embodied everything I was interested in as a researcher. Beyond this, I liked his music. We quickly settled into a regular routine where I would go to his apartment after work and hang out. I soon became familiar with others in his

<sup>1</sup> Details surrounding this precise moment are recounted in the opening pages of my first book, *Hip Hop Underground*.

<sup>2</sup> See Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*.

musical orbit, including his producer/deejay roommate Eddie Vic, an emcee who lived on the next block named “Prego with Zest,” and a handful of other artists and industry friends. Feller and Eddie Vic had a hip hop duo called “The Latter,” Prego guest appeared on several Latter songs, and another emcee named “Simile” was beginning to record in their apartment studio.

For several weeks, Feller and Eddie Vic had been encouraging me to record some of my old high school raps with them. Thus, when I first shared my idea about rapping as Mad Squirrel with Feller, he immediately ran with the idea—coming up with a partnering forest character named “Smif Carnivorous.” Smif was essentially a woodsman, who lacked social graces and subsisted by hunting animals. Feller also came up with the name “Forest Fires Collective” (FFC) for our project.

From the outset, Feller hoped to bring Eddie Vic, Prego, Simile, and possibly others onboard. In line with the name and the qualities of his Smif Carnivorous character, he also constructed the plotline that ran through many of our early recordings: to satisfy his gluttonous appetite, Smif devised a plan to start a giant forest fire that would effectively roast all the animals for him to consume. As such, he and Mad Squirrel were natural adversaries. Where Mad Squirrel interacted with nature as a member of an anthropomorphized animal community, “Smif C,” as a forest dwelling human, represented a villainous destructive force. The opposition generated a healthy creative tension in our lyric writing.

Clearly, we were not keeping it “real” in any empirical sense. Rather we operated in the realm of the fantastic. Between rapping animals and massive forest-fire cook-outs, our creative endeavors had a cartoon-like quality that was the antithesis to a lot of urban reality-based hip hop. Initially, there was a tension in the apartment between our madcap forest-based musical antics and what I characterize as more-conventional hip hop songs. The Latter had notable industry connections and it was not outside the realm of possibility that at some point these could flower into a recording or distribution deal. Thus, where Eddie Vic and even Prego tolerated the FFC—indeed, Prego’s efforts mainly involved saturating his braggadocio rhyming with nature metaphors—they were hesitant about having something so random, childlike, and experimental encroach on their developing reputation as serious artists. Retrospectively, I appreciate how this allowed both Mad Squirrel and the FFC project to develop outside of the more conservative pressures to create hip hop in a specific way. It also spawned an inclusive approach to bringing other artists onboard—including Simile (now going by “Sim the Drunken Owl”), an old college friend of theirs who happened to be sleeping on the apartment couch at the time (“Dr. Lester”), and even Feller’s middle-aged father who recited zany Marxist poetry over hip hop instrumentals (“B-Bird”).

In February 2021, at the Hip Hop Ecologies Workshop that preceded this special issue of *Ecozon@*, a recurring theme surrounded artists’ uses of didactic versus more nuanced and coded environmentalist messaging. Drawing from theories on graffiti-writing, I offer a continuum of politics/aesthetics marked by highly legible writing at one extreme and stylized, largely illegible writing at the other. Following this model, the

former embraces recruitment to a particular cause or message (i.e. someone might stencil “Stop Global Warming”); the latter, in contrast, only speaks to audiences with the requisite knowledge to decipher its symbolic codes. Accordingly, the most effective hip hop for awakening people to environmental concerns should use easily understandable, didactic messaging.

Yet people are drawn to art, music, and hip hop in particular, for the deep visceral pleasures that producing it and consuming it provide.<sup>3</sup> It therefore might be better to imagine hip hop’s environmentalist messaging along a continuum of more or less writerly approaches. Drawing from the work of literary theorist Roland Barthes, *writerly texts* beckon readers to take active roles in constructing meaning. Familiar, linear conventions are destabilized, giving way to generative and perpetually unfinished interpretations. Hip hop lyricists, in this formulation, recognize the intelligence of their audiences and craft songs that cultivate multiple, often intuitive and yet-to-be-fully-grasped understandings—with each additional listening, new insights may arise. Accordingly, effective environmentalist hip hop should guide people’s thinking toward environmental topics by engendering an experience—involving emotions, tacit understandings, and the like—where discerning listeners are inspired to make unanticipated and perhaps previously unrealized connections pertaining to environmental awareness, sustainability, and justice.

This second, more-writerly model, in my view, accurately reflects both the Forest Fires Collective’s and Mad Squirrel’s environmentalist aspirations. You are not likely to find an FFC song stating, “Stop Climate Change.” However, Smif Carnivorous’s tales of overconsumption and ecological destruction have the potential to stimulate thinking about environmental protections, responsible stewardship, and the consequences of humans’ efforts to dominate nature.

Who gives a fuck about your natural habitat community?  
What’d a few trees ever do for me?  
Set a couple fires, that’s just to feed my mouth.  
It ain’t based in sheer malice, I can’t afford to eat out[. ...]  
Fuck Nature. All you preservationists I hate your guts.  
I turn your soft muscle to choice cuts.  
To me shrubbery just conceals my gubbery  
I got a chainsaw. Go ahead and hug a tree, and fuck with me.  
(from “Smif’s Theme”)

Mad Squirrel, on the other hand, typically detailed his imperfect relations with forest neighbors:

Now the bees and mees was enemies  
Well to be exact, they didn’t like my rap  
And beyond that they didn’t like the way I acted  
Jumped off the top branch and landed  
On their hive and I’s like “Damn It!” and “Shit!”  
Sting-sting, they’re after me but luckily  
I have mastery of the tree, lovely  
Can it be? Mad Squirrel racing through the canopy  
And a bee and a bee and a bee

<sup>3</sup> See Robin D. G. Kelley *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*.

And a swarm, it ain't that warm  
But off the top branch into a lake I made my escape  
The next day, honey in my cup, they said, "what's up?"  
At the local tree stump, sucking on a fermented grape.  
(from "Go Find the Blaze")

While cataloging the thematic range of FFC songs is beyond the scope of this piece, suffice to say that the above lyrics typify the kinds of environmental themes that dominated our releases between 2001 and 2003. During these early years, we had notable success as an up-and-coming Bay Area underground hip hop group. For example, our first album was an "Amoeba Music Hip hop Pick" for 2001 and a later 12-inch record reached Number One on the University of California, Santa Barbara's KCSB "Urban Beatbox Top 30" chart.<sup>4</sup> Longtime Bay Area hip hop aficionado Billy Jam described the group as "In the true West Coast indie tradition," going on to explain that the FFC represented "an assembly of talented emcees and DJ/producers who are dedicated to the art of hip hop."<sup>5</sup>

The question remains, what made our music well received? I agree with Billy Jam that the core members were talented. Yet I also think that our departure from trite hip hop conventions and our palpable playfulness (i.e. the quality of sounding like we were having fun) led many listeners to experience our music as refreshing and intriguing. Beyond this, centering the wilderness, giving animals voices and having a marvelous villain—too preposterous to take literally—tapped into childhood memories of learning about the animal world and the often fantastic (even fictitious) creatures that reside there. Of course, the Smif Carnivorous satire carried undeniable environmentalist undertones. Pondering this, I am left wondering, was the FFC more successful in turning hip hop fans toward more environmental justice concerns or in attracting non hip hop environmentally-oriented people to a form of non-commercial hip hop that they could wrap their arms around? The answer probably lies somewhere in the middle.

Shortly after leaving San Francisco and taking a position at Virginia Tech, I connected with Washington DC based hip hop producer and Candlewax Records founder, Blake Nine. I met Blake during my first summer in San Francisco. He was actually the first visitor to the city that I recall taking out in a hosting roll. With the 2001 American Anthropological Association meetings taking place in DC, I reached out to Blake to see if I could stay with him. Since that first visit, we've been collaborating in making music under the group heading "The Acorns." Through several Acorns' releases (and Mad Squirrel solo efforts), I have continued the theme of forest-based hip hop—although minus Smif C's partnership, the number of animal stories has gradually decreased. Still, living in Southwest Virginia, in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains, my references to specific places and experiences in nature have, if anything, become more pronounced.

Relocating to Blacksburg, I immediately befriended a group of local musicians and activists. Though they mostly played folk and old-time musics, they welcomed my nature-based hip hop—in at least one instance describing it as "insightful."

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<sup>4</sup> Some of this success is detailed in *Hip Hop Underground*.

<sup>5</sup> See the liner notes to *Independent Sounds: Amoeba Music Compilation Vol. III*.

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Fig. 2: Flyer Design by Ash Devine.

As this group of twentysomethings became more active in the movement against Mountain Top Removal (MTR) coalmining, they invited me to perform at several fundraising and awareness-raising events. Thus began a string of performances, most occurring between 2003 and 2008, where I was usually the lone hip hop artist and often simply used a microphone with instrumental tracks played off of a CD-R. At some of the larger events—for example, an all-day rally against Massey Energy in the state capitol, Richmond—I was especially touched by how warmly activist-crowds and other musicians took to the lone guy rapping about nature with a microphone and boom-box.

More than ten years have passed since I last performed at an environmental justice event. For some time, I remained relatively active in releasing music but, entering 2020, I had only released one cassette-single and one “musical essay” (as part of an arts-based research project) since 2015. Though I wasn’t consciously aware of it, noting my declining activity, it seems possible that my emceeing career was nearing its end. Then COVID hit.

My summer 2020 experience sheltering-at-home included finding daily sanctuary in the small woodlands park across the street from my apartment and finding weekly recreation in hikes with activist-environmentalist-musician friends. At the same time, the murder of George Floyd sparked a summer of racial reckoning that affected me profoundly—even if largely in isolation. Early into the summer, one of my Candlewax Records label-mates reached out to me with stories of marching in the streets of Los Angeles and using his emcee skills to speak up and speak out at several rallies. With a near dizzying series of anti-Black racial violence (largely at the hands of law enforcement) dominating the news headlines, I felt compelled to join him. But my medium would be music. In collaboration with Blake Nine, who enthusiastically supplied a bundle of entrancing hip hop instrumentals, in 2020 I composed and recorded the Acorns third full-length album, *Oak Strong*. In the staid space of a summer without leaving Blacksburg, hip hop’s lyrical poetry provided me with a means of putting racial justice headlines in conversation with Appalachian trail-ways. The creative process was simultaneously grounding and exhilarating—thus giving meaning to an otherwise unsettling summer. Indeed, I consider *Oak Strong* my best and most environmental-justice-oriented project to date.

The relationship between hip hop and environmentalism has been historically fraught, in part because the Black and Brown people and communities most associated with hip hop in the U.S. have been systematically marginalized and symbolically alienated from both nature and the most prominent movements to preserve it. It doesn’t help that hip hop’s supposed urban epicenter and its complex connections to capitalism are often regarded as antithetical to environmental sustainability. Yet these antiquated (dis)associations of people, places, and social practices are beginning to erode. Emerging from a history of valuing urbane sophistication ahead of being “back on the farm,” there are increasing calls among Black people to recommit to land and nature; and new movements within environmentalism both transcend and challenge notions of its traditionally white face. While all of this is happening, the pretense of hip hop’s urban exclusiveness is beginning to be questioned.



Fig. 3: Illustration by Ahad Pace. Photographic background by Ash Devine.

Black aesthetics, most recently expressed through hip hop, have been remarkably effective in informing people about, recruiting people to, and catalyzing action within social justice causes. The importance of preserving our planet and the places on it where people live is as much social, political, and ethical as it is environmental. The sooner we realize that responsibility for and enjoyment of the environment should be the purview of all people, the sooner we recognize that calls for social change are wedded to ideas about our changing relationship with nature. The burdens of environmental destruction will likely fall most immediately and powerfully on marginalized, largely Black and Brown communities; places where access to clean water, healthy food, and other life resources are lacking and where threats of toxic contamination are abundant. In many of these communities—from West Africa to the U.S. Gulf Coast—hip hop is regularly embraced as a vehicle for speaking to, for, and through the concerns of collective youth. As the case of the Forest Fires Collective illustrates and the example of my most recent project, *Oak*

*Strong*, affirms, the partnership between hip hop and environmental justice is ripe with possibilities. This music has a vital role to play in our ongoing efforts to save the planet and to save ourselves.

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