Welcome to the Dirty South: Listening to the Politics of Southern Hip-hop in an Ecomusicological Framework

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"Welcome to the Dirty South" was not conceived as an ecomusicological course. Inspired by Ali Colleen Neff's "Crunkology" at the University of North Carolina in the 2000s, I had been thinking about what kind of Southern hip-hop syllabus I might put together for several years—long before I had a sense of ecomusicology as a field.[1] However, when it came time to draft an actual syllabus for a real, live Dirty South class, I decided to approach the content in a manner that would integrate ecomusicological questions with southern hip-hop. I am on record as finding chronology to be too constrictive an organizational tool for course syllabi, so while I could have started with Miami Bass and Houston's Geto Boys in the 1980s (and the blues, funk, soundsystem, and signifyin practices those early hip-hop styles are rooted in) and proceeded to the Young Thug and Bryson Tiller sounds that helped define Southern hip-hop in the mid-2010s, I prefer a more looping approach to time that plugs contemporary artists—the ones my students are most likely to be familiar with already—immediately into the discourse. Other organizational structures were possible: I could have focused primarily on performances of gender, formulations of race, or Southern rappers' often ambivalent attitudes toward the sorts of authenticity debates that can obsess artists and fans stretched across the East Coast/West Coast spectrum. Indeed, gender, class, race, performativity, and even chronology were all central to our discussions during the semester, but the primary organizing structure of "Welcome to the Dirty South" was a regional approach that forced us to consider ecomusicological questions revolving around soundscape: What sounds are most common or dominant in the hip-hop of each region? Which sounds are distinctive to each region? How can we understand politics to be formed by and formative of these soundscapes? In this essay, I demonstrate how ecomusicological questions

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1. Ali Colleen Neff, "Crunkology: Teaching the Southern Hip-Hop Aesthetic," in *Pop-Culture Pedagogy in the Music Classroom: Teaching Tools from American Idol to YouTube*, ed. Nicole Biamonte (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 281–306.

guided my class's analysis of Dirty Southern hip-hop. Furthermore, I argue that posing and answering these questions highlighted the political dimensions of the music, renegotiating the cities and spaces in which that music reverberates. After defining ecomusicology as we used it in "Welcome to the Dirty South," I provide a brief description of our analytic framework and offer three case studies from the course that fold together ecomusicological soundscapes, Dirty Southern hip-hop, and the politics that animate these spaces and sounds.

Each week in "Welcome to the Dirty South," we would "travel" to a different city to hear its music, shifting the backdrop of the soundscape, as Schafer describes it, from a natural environment to a *built* environment. Where skyscrapers soar alongside trees, concrete parallels a neighbor's grass, and air traffic twinkles in concert with stars in the night sky, we traveled into a postlapsarian world not to recover something lost but to hear the sound of cityscapes, focusing specifically on Southern hip-hop music. Our itinerary included six primary stops.

Houston → New Orleans → Miami → Atlanta → Virginia Beach → Memphis

The last few weeks I reserved for locales—Mississippi, Nashville, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Alabama—whose music has not yet taken over the mainstream in quite the way the six primary scenes have, as well as a dive into that mainstream to consider the ways in which Dirty Southern sounds have circulated through several different global and US music genres.[2] The goal of the regional approach was to focus our attention on the sonic and political elements of Dirty Southern sub-genres. Students completed weekly listening assignments outside of class and searched different resources to contextualize what they were hearing, then shared their three best sources on a class spreadsheet each week. Instead of dedicating the bulk of class time to the history of Southern hip-hop, then, I used our sessions together to analyze what we heard and to read accounts of the cities we "visited" in order to learn their social, political, and sonic contexts. The overarching question "what does the Dirty South sound like?," when asked from a regional vantage point, also forces the question "what do these different cities sound like?" Then, crucially, "well, why do they sound that way?" Here, my students and I accessed the Dirty South in the role of what Murray Schafer would call "soundscape analysts."

Ecomusicology tends to conjure images of nature as its primary site of interest (for a literal example, see the banner at the top of the website for

2. Like any syllabus, the one for "Welcome to the Dirty South" isn't exhaustive. It privileges the USA, the urban, and the mainstream, leaving less space for global, rural, and underground practices to resonate. Moreover, the centrality of the six cities not only relegates rural spaces to the sidelines but also catches suburban and small-urban scenes in the larger metropolis's orbits. The B-side of this class—let's call it "What Y'All *Really* Know about the Dirty South??" —would interrogate all of the urban, USA-bound, mainstream assumptions that informed "Welcome."

ecomusicology.info), framing discussion of cities and other built environments in opposition to nature instead of as independent objects of ecomusicological analysis. A perusal of the table of contents of 2016's *Current Directions in Ecomusicology*, edited by Aaron Allen and Kevin Dawe, supports this observation. However, during my time among ecomusicology cohorts over the last few years, I have been drawn to the way ecomusicological questions can be applied to built and urban environments. This is in part because Adam Krims's *Music and Urban Geography* (2000) was my entrée into the discipline, and in part because my interests include hip-hop and dance genres whose scenes have tended to cohere around cities. Schafer's attention to soundscapes includes a link between what a place sounds like and the "social welfare" of that place.[3] His description of this linkage is too simplistic: he treats music as a reflection of existing conditions without acknowledging its critical and futuristic possibilities. Here, I infused "Welcome" with intersectional queer, Marxist, and critical race theory that would tune our ears to these cities neither as stagnant or irredeemably broken locales nor—following Rosi Braidotti's theory of "becoming-earth"—as a place where technology exists in binary opposition to nature.[4] Rather, we considered sites of environmental degradation (cars and roads are the key themes below) as negotiations over power and as a spectrum of natural and built environments. Nature is not absent from a city; it is built into a city. We can understand this not just by thinking about public parks and urban beautification. When an expressway plows through a neighborhood, part of its purpose is to connect suburbs in a way that limits a commuter's time in an urban environment—it strings together environments (the 'burbs) that are considered less built and closer to nature. Those who live under the overpasses and in hearing distance of these busy thruways may rarely—if ever—use them to leave the city, but their lived experience is shaped by ideas of natural and built environments all the same.

Though we do not often think of an expressway constructed in the middle of a city as environmental degradation (since it is usually just concrete on top of more concrete), remembering that cities are environments in both definitions of the word—both one's surroundings or habitat and a place that includes the natural world—can draw our attention to environmental degradation in more local terms. Here, my understanding of ecomusicology is shaped by non-musicological theorists like Rosi Braidotti, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Vijay Prashad, among others, who have each highlighted the fact that environmental degradation tends to be experienced most by those least responsible for its existence;

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3. Murray R. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 7.

4. Rosti Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 81-89.

they have also all problematized the limits of that observation.[5] As Chakrabarty puts it, "Capitalist globalization exists; so should its critiques. But these critiques do not give us an adequate hold on human history once we accept that the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations." The primary goal of "Welcome to the Dirty South" was not to gain "an adequate hold on human history" but to burrow into some of the critiques Chakrabarty permits and to listen for soundscapes that tell us about the political negotiations of environments.

The ecomusicological dimensions of "Welcome" can be summed up as follows:

1. We theorized cities as environments—both habitats and places that include nature.
2. We politicized these environments by remembering that they are not experienced equally: one's race, class, and gender (among other factors) will shape one's relationship with their environment.
3. While we discussed sites of environmental degradation, we also accounted for practices of vitalization and revitalization.

This last point builds on the second, injects critical theory into the discourse of "Welcome" and ecomusicology more broadly, and perhaps takes a step toward Chakrabarty's "adequate hold on human history." Schafer is right: we can hear "social welfare" echoed in a soundscape. But all of his examples involve music that only *reflects* welfare:

> Such a theory would suggest that the egalitarian and enlightened reign of Maria Theresa (for instance, as expressed in her unified criminal code of 1768) and the grace and balance of Mozart's music are not accidental. Or that the sentimental vagaries of Richard Strauss are perfectly consistent with the waning of the same Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Gustav Mahler we find, etched in an acid Jewish hand, marches and German dances of such sarcasm as to give us a presentiment of the political *danse macabre* soon to follow.[6]

5. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Eurozine*, 30 October 2009, http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-10-30-chakrabarty-en.html; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 88; and Vijay Prashad. *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2013), 192. Prashad also shows that the Global South—the "poorer nations" of Prashad's title—has been *blamed* for environmental degradation: "The Brundtland Report saw poverty as the main cause of environmental degradation (not capitalist development), so that it called for countries to achieve their 'full growth potential' by 'high levels of productive activity'" (134).

6. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 9.

Each of these examples involves music that is only capable of sounding like its environment, cutting short the political possibilities music holds, its ability to move out of step with its surroundings, and even its potential to change the contours of its environment. Being able to hear these potentials involves a profound critical reorientation. Sylvia Wynter, in her career-long insistence on reconceptualizing the human, has argued that the humanist subject—the subject at the heart of Western democracy—has "overrepresented" itself as the human.[7] Put another way, the humanist subject opposes itself to blackness, queerness, disability, poverty, and Otherness, and it aspires to totalization so that anything black, queer, disabled, poor, or Other cannot fit into the category of the human. But, Wynter counters, there are ways to exist "completely outside our present conception of what it is to be human"—outside this violently exclusionary version of humanism.[8] My approach to soundscapes in "Welcome to the Dirty South" incorporated ecomusicology by following Wynter outside our present conception of the human. If we hear only the reflection of dominant politics in music, as Schafer outlines, then we are bound up in the totalizing goals of liberal/neoliberal humanism—we are letting that kind of humanism set our discourse. If, however, we listen for sounds that exist in the context of but not in lockstep with dominant politics, we hold open other possibilities for being human, and we access the sound of Southern hip-hop politics engaged with and capable of reshaping its environment. What follows is a description of our listening practices and three examples of how our attention to politicized soundscapes informed our understanding of the Dirty South.

Analysis

If the goal of "Welcome to the Dirty South" is to listen beyond dominant narratives, then it is important to first establish how my classes listen to and analyze popular music. I incorporate popular music analysis into all of my MUS courses, and twelve of the fourteen students enrolled in "Welcome to the Dirty South" had taken at least one prior class with me, which meant we were able to build on already strong listening skills during the semester. When teaching popular music analysis, I encourage students to focus especially on timbre, texture, frequency range, rhythmic motifs, and large-scale structure.

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7. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

8. Sylvia Wynter, interview by David Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 4 no. 2 (September 2000): 136.

With the rise of sampling technologies and digital audio workstations over the last three decades, the timbral possibilities of sampled and synthesized sounds are practically limitless, so being able to describe, for example, what one kick drum sounds like in relation to another—using informal terms (like "boomy" or "muddy") as well as more formal ones (like attack, decay, sustain, and release)—can prove a valuable point of comparison when mapping subtly different styles across regions. Similarly, an ear for texture not only clues students into the instruments playing at any given moment, but also helps differentiate between sampled, synthesized, and live sounds. While traditional music analysis prioritizes melody, harmony, and rhythm, I approach popular music analysis with frequency range and rhythmic motifs in mind. Melody and harmony matter, but the idea is to divide a song like an EQ filter, deciphering what is happening in the low, mid, and high ranges. We similarly consolidate rhythm into larger chunks, focusing on recurring motifs or loops to help separate a classic Miami Bass break from a New Orleans bounce "Brown" beat from a contemporary Atlanta trap figuration. Finally, attention to large-scale structure means fine-tuning our listening habits to genre norms so that we can notice when a section is too long or too short, or when a song departs from conventional structure altogether.

Instead of imposing hard and fast rules that discipline the listening process, I encourage students to approach analysis with all of these elements in mind and figure out as they listen which elements seem most interesting, most important, and most compelling from one song to the next. While this risks missing something crucial—if a student is so focused on timbre that they forget to pay attention to the fact that the second verse is half the length it is supposed to be—it also allows us to move through a lot of music as efficiently as possible. By semester's end, our Spotify playlist included 124 songs; doing a formal analysis on every individual song would have taken more time than we had in the semester. Yet listening to that much music from overlapping sub-genres sets our expectations for a normal range of structural possibilities so that we are more likely to notice when something deviates from that normal range. To further cover for the fact that none of us would exhaustively analyze every song, listening was a collaborative process in which the whole class would discuss what we heard from one week to the next. The more we described what we heard to each other, the more we were able to hear what we otherwise might have missed.

Case Study I: Interstates, New Orleans Bounce, and Miami Bass

I coupled these popular music listening practices with assigned readings that would draw our attention to cities' soundscapes, the sounds that, "either

because of their individuality, their numerousness or their domination," shape one's sonic experience of a city and informed our understanding of the music and politics emanating from each city.[9] In the case of New Orleans and Miami, we listened to the ways their bounce and bass genres, respectively, reverberate through spaces whose contours were shaped by mid-twentieth century interstate construction projects.

Bounce echoes.[10] It bounces off of every surface, a phrase uttered or sample triggered, released into an endlessly reverberant space, at first retreating into the quieter parts of a mix before rebounding back. Big Freedia's vocals on "Explode" are exemplary in this regard. She shouts, "Oooooohhhhhh, let's go!" at 0:51 of the YouTube video, then sets the phrase loose in the soundscape as she layers other (often repeated) vocals on top of it. A minute later (1:52), after a verse and hook have passed, "Oooooohhhhhh, let's go!"—which was quieter but never gone—boomerangs back into the foreground.

In "New Orleans and Kingston: A Beginning, A Recurrence," Nadia Ellis describes the similar way second line brass instruments ring out and clang around the concrete and asphalt spaces opened under the overpass of the I-10 along Claiborne Avenue. The metaphor is irresistible: the sounds of a lively thoroughfare that runs through black neighborhoods are quashed by interstate construction, buried in a mix of high-speed traffic and the sonic residue of urban life that swirls in the overpass's echo chambers, until vibrant black sound in the form of brass bands and drumlines overpowers the din. Echoes, reverberations, and sonic bounces all "*recreate* the space of conviviality, commerce, and promenade that was taken away from them."[11] As soundscape analysts, my Dirty South students marked the way black communities in New Orleans have been shaped by echoes so that we could hear the overwhelming layering of bounce production in conversation with the soundscape of the city that produces it.

The politics of race and space ensured that whenever mid-twentieth century interstate construction projects ran into a heavily populated urban area, as the I-10 did in New Orleans, by default black and brown communities would take the brunt of the construction's disruption. Tricia Rose's foundational *Black*

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9. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 9.

10. Bounce is a New Orleans hip-hop genre that extends back to the 1990s and features insistent vocal repetition atop musical textures that frequently draw on two key sample sources: the "Brown beat" (Cameron Paul's "Brown Beats" (1987)) and the "Triggerman" (The Showboys' "Drag Rap" (1986)). In addition to Nadia Ellis's article cited in the text, a good resource for bounce is Matt Miller's *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), which explores the genre in connection to other New Orleans musical traditions.

11. Nadia Ellis, "New Orleans and Kingston: A Beginning, A Recurrence," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27 no. 4 (2015): 391.

Noise spotlights the Cross-Bronx Expressway as a major influence in the creation of the socioeconomic conditions that would pave the way for Bronx hip-hop's origin story.[12] Meanwhile, at the southern end of I-95, the bypassing of Overtown in Miami "effectively strangl[ed] the neighborhood geographically and economically."[13] The students read David Font-Navarette's description of the isolation of Miami's inner city alongside his account of the pirate radio stations that carried the sounds of Miami bass through those same neighborhoods and heard the genre anew.[14] The music, before it was popular on mainstream channels, lived in a medium that lacked the bandwidth to carry its most integral feature: bass. If the overpasses of New Orleans's I-10 resonate as so many echoes in bounce music, the overpasses of Miami's I-95 are like massive filter bands removing not only vital resources from the neighborhoods they swept over but also the fundamental sound of the music those neighborhoods would produce. Listening to the soundscapes of New Orleans and Miami in "Welcome" meant keying into similar political processes that produced different geographic contours. The reasons bounce and bass sound like they do are not reducible to interstate construction projects, but attending to the movement of I-10 and I-95 through dense urban areas deepens our understanding of the soundscapes where bounce and bass took shape.

Case Study II: Traffic, Trafficking, and Atlanta Trap

Any discussion of Southern hip-hop requires an account of trap, the contemporary hip-hop genre whose boomy bass and busy hihats rattle across the mid-2010s hip-hop and pop radio dial.[15] The opening shot of *Noisey: Atlanta* shows a complex interchange where I-20, I-75, and I-85 all knot together in the music capital of the Dirty South. Vice media host Thomas Morton greets us: "Welcome to Atlanta, the city too busy to hate, the drug trafficking hub of the East Coast,

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12. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 31.

13. David Font-Navarette, "Bass 101: Miami, Rio, and the Global Music South," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27 no. 4 (2015): 494.

14. Miami Bass is genre of hip-hop that, as its name suggests, revolves around heavy bass frequencies. The genre coalesced in the 1980s, and its key sonic features are the percussion sounds of the Roland TR-808 drum machine and a rhythmic motif most directly linked to electro (a dance and hip-hop hybrid whose most well-known song is Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" (1982)). In addition to the Font-Navarrete article cited in the text, there are a variety of Miami Bass resources available for students, including a good website that includes interviews and accounts from practitioners, miamibasshistory.tumblr.com, and a 1994 special issue of *The Source* (no. 54, March 1994).

15. Trap is a genre of hip-hop and is most closely connected to Atlanta. Its primary sonic elements crystallized in the DJ Toomp productions on rapper TI's 2003 *Trap Muzik*. I discuss trap in detail in my book *Posthuman Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

and the home of trap music."[16] The Vice conglomerate—of which the *Noisey* series is just one piece—trades in neocolonial exoticism, traipsing into the cultural wilderness to report on various regional practices its broader viewership may be unaware of. In *Noisey: Atlanta*, Morton's white hipster nebbishness is meant to stand in stark relief to the black subjects and black music that are the film's focus. I've written elsewhere about the complex politics of trap's sonic blackness, but in the hands of *Noisey*, the connection between trap, drugs, and blackness is more journalistic sensationalism than thoughtful critique. The epigraph for the YouTube description of the first episode reads, "When a rapper's rapping, you should be able to smell the dope cooking."[17]

Noisey doesn't have it all wrong. Often credited as the album that, especially through DJ. Toomp productions, defined what the genre of trap would sound like, TI described his 2003 *Trap Muzik* as one that was meant to be heard specifically in the context of the drug game: "whether you in the trap selling dope, in the trap buying dope, or in the trap trying to get out."[18] The genre, in fact, is named for a trap house: a place for cooking dope with a single entry/exit point. While we critiqued the flatness of *Noisey*'s documentary in "Welcome to the Dirty South," we took seriously the connection between traffic and trafficking that Morton and interviewee Curtis Snow lay out in the opening minutes. As a "spaghetti junction," as Snow calls it, a hub for both ground and air transportation, Atlanta has functioned as an ideal place for dispersing drugs along the East Coast and the US South. The trap genre represents a set of aesthetic practices that its artists have explicitly linked to the dope game.

Trap has an easily identifiable sound, with deep kick drums, inhumanly rapid hihats, and a double-time vocal feel highlighting its most recognizable characteristics. However, what we focused on in "Welcome" was the way in which the music moves through the city. Beyond the production aesthetics, what marks trap more than anything else is the incomprehensibly prolific output of its rappers. Young Thug released six mixtapes between April 2015 and August 2016, a rate that would be impressive except for his January-September 2014 run that produced six more mixtapes. Future, perhaps the most mainstream trapper, released a combination of seven mixtapes and studio albums in an eighteen-month span in 2015-16. At the extreme end of productivity is Gucci Mane, with 79 albums and mixtapes (and counting!) to his name since 2005. Fans of most genres often chart the distance from one album release to the next in years; trap fans, meanwhile, are not likely to make it two months without a fresh set of Gucci Mane songs. One reason trap musicians crank out

    16. Andy Capper, *Noisey: Atlanta*. VICE Media, 2015.
    17. Capper, *Noisey: Atlanta*.
    18. Puja Patel, "From T.I. to TNGHT: A Look at Trap Rave," *Stereogum* 6, August 2012, http://www.stereogum.com/1115091/from-t-i-to-tnght-a-look-at-trap-rave/top-stories/.

so much product is because they, like the drug game trap is connected to, operate in an unofficial parallel market, a kind of deregulated shadow capitalism propelled by supply and demand.

While most trap artists are signed to major labels and release studio albums periodically, many also subvert the long bureaucracy of official album production by way of mixtapes. Mixtapes have been around for as long as hip-hop has, often used as demos for unsigned artists, promotional tools ahead of a studio release, or vehicles for songs that use unlicensed samples. Trap mixtapes, though, are finished products, albums by another name that net artists and producers indirect profits from streaming services, YouTube advertising, and perhaps most coveted of all, reputation. Trap explicitly evokes the dope game, and trap mixtapes tap into the ethos of drug trafficking, where new product is at a premium and must be pumped into the city before the old is consumed. And trap confounds the traditional flow of capital. A good deal of the money to be found in trap lines the pockets of major labels, to be sure, but using shadow routes has allowed trap artists to siphon off some of that profit. In a neoliberal context, where capitalist logic governs not just the economy but also the shape of a person's life, redirecting money in this way reshapes the contours of who counts as human.[19] Those who operate in the drug game's shadow economy are meant to be pulled into the mainstream as prisoners—those who no longer count as fully human—who will fuel a prison industrial complex that collects government contracts and churns out products made by virtually unwaged labor. Trap invokes drug trafficking to reroute money to populations the mainstream economy regards primarily as potential prisoners. As noted with bounce and bass, the entirety of trap cannot be contained in its relationship to traffic and trafficking. However, understanding the contemporary Atlanta soundscape entails an account of the constantly renewed stock of trap music cycling through the city each week, a production model that makes use of well-worn channels to move unsanctioned freight.

Case Study III: Tactility, Cars, and Mississippi Sub-Bass

Cities are not the only built environments where Southern hip-hop soundscapes map alternate ways of being. The opening moments of Big K.R.I.T.'s "My Sub" (2011) mark sonic rurality, a retreat from the loud, reverberant cities often associated with Dirty South production. The first eight bars, before K.R.I.T.'s sub begins to vibrate, are sparsely textured with repeated, filtered vocals ("my sub" x3, "I put that on"), the muffled sound of K.R.I.T.'s chains jangling on beats two and four of every measure, and a soul sample on the turnaround of measure

19. Lester Spencer, *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 13.

four. The backdrop is the drone of crickets, a sound that immediately conjures a vast, starlit sky miles from the din of a metropolis. The "sub" in question is Big K.R.I.T.'s ever-expanding subwoofer, which by the time he recorded "My Sub Pt 3 (Big Bang)" (2014), had increased to two fifteen-inch speakers tucked into his trunk. More than just a flexing of sonic muscle, K.R.I.T.'s sub is the built source of deeply undulating infrasonic pulsations that map his country soundscape.

Loud bass in cars is not just a Southern thing. West Coast hip-hop icon Dr. Dre famously produced "Jeep beats" in the 1990s, crafting a finished mix heavy on the low end and attuned to cars' sound systems. Dre and other producers targeting car systems would use exaggerated compression (where the loudest and quietest sounds are squeezed together, creating an overall louder mix) and boosted bass to overcome the ambient noise of highways.[20] Bass heavy styles tend to take hold especially in urban areas with under-developed public trans-portation options, where car owners may compete with cities' noise by ampli-fying and blasting low frequencies at the edge of human hearing through their subwoofers. K.R.I.T.'s three-part paean to his sub moves us out of the city and into the country, a place, as Zandria Robinson describes it, "rooted in dirt and power, and the ability to survive and maneuver in a world that would rather [black southerners] not."[21]

The crickets that open "My Sub" reappear in "My Sub (Part 2: The Jackin')" and "My Sub Pt 3 (Big Bang)." Each track in the trilogy features an introduction (and, in the case of "Pt 3," a first verse) that is sparsely textured, composed pri-marily of vocals, sub-bass, and crickets. Here the subwoofer is not competing with other urban noise; in the country night, it *is* the noise, emitting sub-fre-quencies that rattle "your neighbor's neighbor's neighbor's neighbor's" house ("Pt 3"). In K.R.I.T.'s telling, the rural Mississippi soundscape does not so much shape the sound of his music as it is shaped *by* his music. The hook on "Part 2" is a line borrowed from Dallas rapper Big Tuck, "I done cut up my bang, and I shook up the stars." What could be heard as hyperbolic boast—my subwoofer is so loud it shakes the stars—instead speaks to the tactility of sub-bass. When Big K.R.I.T. cranks his sub, his "neighbor's neighbor's neighbor's neighbor" proba-bly does not hear it but certainly feels it, a deep rumble that produces sympa-thetic vibrations up through the floors and walls. Inside the car, the shook-up stars are the result of a windshield's vibrating glass, itself moving imperceptibly so that those bright country stars go fuzzy with each kick of the bass. Indeed, "My Sub Pt 3 (Big Bang)" finds K.R.I.T. not only shaping the soundscape of

20. Justin A. Williams, "'You Never Been on a Ride like This Befo': Los Angeles, Automotive Listening, and Dr. Dre's G-Funk." *Popular Music History.* 4 no.2 (2009): 173.

21. Zandria Robinson, "Mississippi Prometheus: Big K.R.I.T. and the Southern Black/Rap Snapback," *New South Negress*, 21 May 2014. http://newsouthnegress.com/mississippiprometheus/.

the Mississippi countryside but also, as the "big bang" title suggests, building entire new worlds from the boom in his trunk. Through a series of double- and triple-entendres, K.R.I.T. uses the opening tracks of *Cadillactica* (2014)— including "Pt 3"—to tie his music and masculinity together in an Afro-futurist vision of a world called Cadillactica. His never-ending goal for more bass isn't quixotic but an attempt to shake and bang himself, his town, and his state out of "a world that would rather [black southerners] not" survive and into a more hospitable realm.[22]

K.R.I.T.'s performance of sub-bass is a tactile one that takes advantage of a relatively quiet country space to map a neighborhood in relation to a sound source, to chart the stars and the universe with every thud, and to place listeners in the midst of this cosmic diagram while blasting sub-frequencies at the edge of aural perception up into their feet from the dirt below. On the day we discussed Big K.R.I.T. in "Welcome to the Dirty South," we first filed out to the parking lot where a generous student opened his car so that we could hear and feel his subwoofer from a variety of vantage points—across the parking lot, standing in front of the open trunk, sitting in the backseat. Back in the classroom, we talked through some of the technical points of installation and tuning that K.R.I.T. alludes to in his "Sub" series, but more than anything else, my students focused on what sub-bass feels like. The campus was bustling that day, and we had witnessed a single 12" woofer instead of the "two fifteens" K.R.I.T. boasts, but the soundscape he conjures—rural, expansive, quiet but for crickets and K.R.I.T.'s built sonic environment—felt a little closer after some reflexive time with tactile bass. Cadillactica may be a metaphor, but the means by which K.R.I.T. creates it are not; as soundscape analysts, my students could better comprehend K.R.I.T.'s vision of a somewhere else by listening in the context of where he is.

Conclusion: Built Environments Real and Imaginary

Big K.R.I.T. explicitly straddles the difference between real and imaginary, between rural Mississippi and outer space Cadillactica. In fact, the real/imaginary divide informs everything a soundscape analyst hears. Schafer speaks of "earwitnesses," firsthand accounts of what a particular place sounded like at a particular time.[23] Importantly, Schafer also describes the way we learn to filter out some sounds, and Jennifer Stoever has interrogated this kind of filtering process as one that is socially learned and that reproduces social concepts of

22. Robinson, "Mississippi Prometheus."
23. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 8-9.

race, gender, and heteronormativity, for instance.[24] For every sound an ear-witness reports—even when we're our own earwitness—countless others were ignored, some benignly and some through deeply embedded social structures that inform our perception of the world. Another way of putting this is that all soundscapes are built environments, constructed by a listener: to understand what a place sounds like is an unavoidably anthropocentric pursuit, an imagining of a soundscape.

This is perhaps especially apparent in "Welcome to the Dirty South" when we approach music as an earwitness account. Cadillactica isn't a real place, but neither is the soundscape Big K.R.I.T. crafts as the backdrop for his "My Sub" songs. The sparse texture, empty spaces, and incessant crickets are meant to conjure an idea of Mississippi, but it is an idea K.R.I.T. distills from many different sonic experiences in rural Mississippi, no one of which sounds like any of his "My Sub" tracks. Rural Mississippi is not a real place in the recordings of Big K.R.I.T., but the sonic environment he builds is a direct engagement with the real soundscapes—and the real politics of those soundscapes—that he has encountered over time. This holds true for the other examples included here. Whether it's the echoes-on-echoes-on-echoes in New Orleans bounce, the blunted bass in Miami Bass pirate radio, or the constant turnover of Atlanta trap, the music of the Dirty South is shaped by, responds to, and critiques the soundscapes of the places it comes from while simultaneously embedding itself into those places as part of the soundscape. To listen to the Dirty South as a politicized environment requires the imagination to hear beyond the boundaries of what counts as natural. In part, this involves understanding cities and other built environments as existing within—not just in opposition to—nature. As theorists like Braidotti, Chakrabarty, and Prashad have demonstrated by linking environmental degradation to discourses of race, gender, and class, this kind of listening also involves hearing "outside our present conception of what it is to be human."[25] In "Welcome," our earwitness accounts of Dirty South soundscapes required us to tune our ears—our "listening ears," to use Stoever's term—in the hopes of uncovering sonic politics otherwise hidden in the mix.[26]

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24. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 3-4; Jennifer Stoever, "Reproducing US Citizenship in *Blackboard Jungle*: Race, Cold War Liberalism, and the Tape Recorder," *American Quarterly* 63 no. 3 (2011).

25. Sylvia Wynter, interview with David Scott in "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism," 136.

26. Stoever, "Reproducing US Citizenship in *Blackboard Jungle*," 783.

Appendix
MUS 495—Special Topics: Welcome to the Dirty South

Overview and Method: MUS 495 is a special topics course that, in this itera-tion, explores the music of the Dirty South. Southern rappers and producers have ruled the hip-hop and pop charts since the turn of the century, and their roots push deeper than that. We'll take a regional approach to Southern hip-hop this semester, moving through Houston, New Orleans, Miami, Atlanta, Virginia Beach, Memphis, and Mississippi. We'll also keep our ears open to sounds outside the geography of the US South to hear how nearly two decades of mainstream play have spread the sound of the Dirty South to other regions and genres. We'll be guided more by sonic aesthetics than by chronology, more by gender and race politics than discourses of authenticity or respectability. Over the course of the semester, we'll work toward the following goals:

1). Students will become familiar with the sub-regional sounds of Southern hip-hop through extensive listening, complicating any notion of a mono-lithic South.

2). Students will develop a vocabulary for analyzing and describing the music of the Dirty South with an ear toward drawing comparisons across regions and genres.

3). Students will be able to articulate ways that gender, race, and class poli-tics present themselves in the sound, lyrics, and images of the Dirty South.

4). Students will actively contribute to and periodically lead the class in discussion of the assigned material.

These objectives intersect with the following Popular Music Studies degree learning outcomes:

1). Analyze both the musical and technological elements of music. Com-pare stylistic elements of composition and production across a variety of popular genres.

2). Convey music analysis through writing and conversation to experts and non-experts in an accessible manner, demonstrating a familiarity with technical language as well as an ability to translate technical language into understandable terms.

3). Contextualize music analysis within the broader histories, cultures, and

politics of popular music styles and genres. Pull from multiple disciplinary perspectives to best understand and explain popular music in context.

Required Text: We have no single textbook for the course. We'll read articles and chapters that are available online and through the university library.

You'll need a subscription to Spotify for this course. I'll post a playlist there that we'll add to and listen to each week. Students can subscribe to Spotify for $5/month if you don't want the free version.

Week 1
Introductions, Syllabus, Listening

Week 2—Houston
Read: Regina Bradley, "I Been On: Baddie Bey and Beyonce's Sonic Masculinity," *Sounding Out!* 22 September 2014.

Aisha Durham, "Beyonce, Southern Booty, and Black Femininities in Music Video," *Feminist Media Studies* 12:1 (2012): 35-49.

Listen: DJ Screw, UGK, Geto Boys, Chamillionaire, Beyoncé, Jibbs, Travi$ Scott, Mike Jones, Paul Wall, Slim Thug, Riff Raff, Drastik (Austin), Mike Dean

Week 3—New Orleans
Read: Nadia Ellis, "New Orleans and Kingston: A Beginning, A Recurrence," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27:4 (2015): 387-407.

Tryon P Woods, "'Beat it Like a Cop': The Erotic Cultural Politics of Punishment in the Era of Postracialism," *Social Text* 31:1 (2013): 21-41.

Listen: Lil Wayne, Kevin Gates (Baton Rouge), Big Freedia, Boozy Badass, Juvenile, Master P, Mystikal, Birdman, Mannie Fresh, N.O. Joe

Week 4—Miami
Read: Regina Bradley, "I Like the Way You Rhyme, Boy: Hip-hop Sensibility and Racial Trauma in Django Unchained," *Sounding Out!* (28 January 2013).

Regina Bradley, "To Sir, With Ratchety Love: Listening to the (Dis)Respectability Politics of Rachel Jeantel," *Sounding Out!* (1 July 2013).

David Font-Navarette, "Bass 101: Miami, Rio, and the Global Music South," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27:4 (2015): 488-517.

Listen: 2 Live Crew, Jock Jamz, Diplo's Favela on Blast, Trina, Trick Daddy, DJ Khaled, Flo Rida, Pitbull, Rick Ross, J.U.S.T.I.C.E. League (Tampa), Jim Jonsin, Ace Hood, Infamous, Plies, Streetrunner

Week 5—ATL
Read: Kemi Adeyemi, "Straight Leanin': Sounding Black Life at the Intersection of Hip-hop and Pharmaceuticals," *Sounding Out!* (21 September 2015).

Zandria Robinson, "Honeybabychickeechile: Honey Boo Boo Fierce and the Language of Race and Region," *New South Negress*.

Listen: Outkast, ILoveMakonnen, T-Pain (Tallahassee), Bone Crusher, 2 Chainz/Playaz Circle, Goodie Mob, Future, Migos, Young Thug, Organized Noize, Metro Boomin, Young Jeezy, Maestro

Week 6—More ATL
Read: Zandria Robinson, "Givin Em What They Love: Janelle Monae and the Sonic Aesthetics of Black Womanhood," *New South Negress*.

Zandria Robinson, "What's More Special Than Gold? 'Hustle & Flow,' Trinidad James, and the Southern Gold Standard," *New South Negress*.

Listen for 3/3: Lil Jon, Ying Yang Twins, TI, TLC, Rich Homie Quan, Pastor Troy, Ludacris, Killer Mike, Usher, Gucci Mane, Trinidad Jame$, Janelle Monae, Bangladesh (Iowa), Mr DJ, Shawty Redd, Midnight Black, Dead Prez (Tallahassee), Mike Will Made It

Week 7—Noisey Atlanta

Week 8—Virginia Beach
Read for 3/22: Steven Shaviro, "Supa Dupa Fly: Black Women as Cyborgs in Hip-hop Videos," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 22:2 (2005): 169-79.

Alison Pezanoski-Browne, "Black to the Future: How Women in Pop are Carrying the Mantle of Afrofuturism," *Bitch Media* (16 February 2014).

Dale Chapman, "That Ill, Tight Sound: Telepresence and Biopolitics in Post-Timbaland Rap Production," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2:2 (2008): 155-75.

Listen: Missy Elliott, Timbaland, Pharrell/Neptunes/NERD, Clipse/Pusha T, Wale (DC), Chris Brown, Benny Blanco, Lex Luger, Danja, The Inkredibles

Week 9—Memphis
Read for 3/29: Regina Bradley, "The (Magic) Upper Room: Sonic Pleasure Politics in Southern Hip-hop," *Sounding Out!* (16 June 2014).

Zandria Robinson, "Pioneer Up in This Bitch: Gangsta Boo & Feminist Historiographies of Rap," *New South Negress.*

Zandria Robinson, "Drake Plays the Blues: 'Down South' and the Black Imaginary in 'Worst Behavior,'" *New South Negress.*

Listen: 8Ball & MJG, T-Mix, Yo Gotti, Three 6 Mafia/Juicy J, Gangsta Boo, Drumma Boy, Jazze Pha, Project Pat, Justin Timberlake

Week 10—Mississippi/NC/TN/KY/AL/StL
Read: Zandria Robinson, "Mississippi Prometheus: Big K.R.I.T. and the Southern Black/Rap Snapback," *New South Negress* (21 May 2014).

Ali Colleen Neff, *Let the World Listen Right: The Mississippi Delta Hip-Hop Story.* Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009: 141-68.

Listen: David Banner, Big K.R.I.T., Petey Pablo, Starlito, Nappy Roots, Rich Boy, Rae Sremmurd, St Lunatics

Week 11—Beyond the US South
Read: Adrienne Brown, "Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip-hop Automotivity," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24:3 (2012): 265-75.

Doreen St. Felix, "The Prosperity Gospel of Rihanna," *Pitchfork* (1 April 2015).

Listen: Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, Drake, DJ Mustard, E-40, Tyga, YG, A$AP, Fetty Wap

Week 12—Beyond the US South
Read: Justin D Burton and Ali Colleen Neff, "Sounding Global Southernness," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27:4 (2015): 381-86.

Christina Giacona, "A Tribe Called Red Remixes Sonic Stereotypes," *Sounding Out!* 13 (February 2014)

Listen: A Tribe Called Red, TNGHT, Yogi, Rockwell, Iggy Azalea, Alison Wonderland

Week 13—Final Project Presentations