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Source: *African American Review*, Spring 2013, Vol. 46, No. 1, Special issue: Hip Hop and the Literary (Spring 2013), pp. 101-115

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of African American Review (St. Louis University)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23783604>

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The Roots of “Wilding”: Black Literary Naturalism, the Language of Wilderness, and Hip Hop in the Central Park Jogger Rape

What we call wildness is a civilization other than our own. —Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, Volume XI (16 Feb. 1859)

“Wilding”

On the night of April 19, 1989, a white, twenty-eight-year-old investment banker named Trisha Meili was attacked while exercising in New York’s Central Park. Jogging alone along the 102nd Street Cross Drive, Meili was bludgeoned, raped, and sodomized. When she was discovered later that night, Meili had entered class IV hemorrhagic shock, with nearly eighty-percent blood loss. Her body temperature had dropped to eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit, and her blood pressure was so low that the emergency room staff was unable to get a reading of her diastolic rhythm. Every part of her body was bruised, except for the soles of her feet. Ultimately, she would remain in a coma for twelve days.¹

The horrific crime quickly captured the imagination of the public, garnering extensive press coverage about the randomness of the attack, the accused assailants, and the fear engendered by both.² The attack turned into a cultural and political spectacle for several reasons, some more obvious than others. With its simple narrative—the sexual violation of a wealthy, educated white female at the hands of poor, uneducated, nonwhite males—the crime seemed designed to push the familiar social hot buttons of race, class, and gender. However, the crime did not occasion a social panic solely because it was jarring or unusually violent. In fact, other horrific rapes in Central Park occurred that same month, including one that seemed worse (insofar as it is possible to make judgments about such things), having ended in the victim’s murder. This popular imagination, though, largely ignored this other rape. The Meili attack became a spectacle in part because it spoke to a different set of cultural topoi: the social function of Central Park, the language of wilderness, and the social impact of hip-hop culture.

Ultimately, five boys—aged fourteen through sixteen, all African American or Latino—were found guilty of crimes associated with Meili’s attack and were sentenced in 1991. The boys charged and convicted with the 1989 rape of Trisha Meili, though, were innocent of that rape. In 2002, a man named Matias Reyes, already imprisoned for a separate crime, confessed to raping Meili. DNA evidence confirmed his guilt, and the convictions of the five teenagers were voided.

In the meantime, the Central Park Jogger rape case became a media spectacle because it exceeded conventional criminal acts, however horrific. It ignited a particular set of cultural fears in part because of a public inability to read critically a word with a complex racial and cultural history, a word that eventually came to signify the entire crime: wilding.

In the aftermath of the attack, New York Chief of Detectives Robert Colangelo said that the crime was “unrelated to money, race, drugs, or alcohol,” and that several of the boys under investigation had identified the attack as “the product of a pastime called ‘wilding’ ” (Pitt 1). Almost everyone who heard the term found it unfamiliar, a terrible word from a strange new language. It served to further distance the crime and the accused from the standards of white “civilization.” It took words like “savage” or “uncontrollable” and turned them into a single verb, pregnant with race anxiety. Nonwhite boys had gone wilding and maimed a white woman. Applied to the sort of horrific violence suffered by Meili, wilding seemed to radically reimagine the logic of crime, implying an irrational, fundamentally savage eruption of violence without motive.

The term was new to everyone in the law enforcement, journalistic, and academic communities. Colangelo confessed that none of the police were familiar with it. New York journalists embarked on a series of articles attempting to divine what, exactly, the word even meant.³ Among the first scholars to notice the term, John Algeo and Adele Algeo included it “among the new words” of 1989, identifying it as “an innocuous-sounding word for a barbarous activity,” but could not place it in any broader cultural context (136).

Indeed, most scholarship on the term wilding has been willfully vague or inadvertently wrong. The word actually has its immediate roots in hip-hop culture and connotes the black performative to a degree heretofore ignored. Perhaps more significantly, the word wilding and the Central Park Jogger rape offer a unique opportunity to examine the complex ways in which African American vernacular performance interacts with the language of wilderness and the historical function of the parks. I argue that wilding is best understood as a strategic performance of wilderness. To perform wilderness is to employ the language of wilderness—based on purportedly natural binary oppositions such as savage and civilized, evolved and primitive, and settled and wild—for rhetorical, political, or aesthetic effect. In a broader sense, contextualizing wilding makes apparent the ironic disconnect between the brutal horror of Meili’s 1989 suffering and what Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park, viewed as the park’s socially progressive influences, which he felt would “make life in the city healthier and happier” (qtd. in Barlow 25). The use of the word wilding belongs to a cultural tradition that can be traced to early twentieth-century black literary naturalism, as evidenced by writers Charles W. Chesnutt and Richard Wright. These authors made strategic use of the language of wilderness in order to contest its role in sustaining racist discourse. Properly understood, wilding acts as a site of hermeneutic confluence, illuminating the degree to which both the historical language of wilderness and the contemporary cultural construction of postindustrial urban spaces inform American racialist discourse.

Wilding stands as an affront to classical conceptions of wilderness, to modern liberal selfhood, and to common perceptions about the genteel, civilizing function of Central Park. However, as Chesnutt and Wright demonstrate, the term also represents a strategic performance of wilderness, one with a long tradition in African American culture. Seen in this light, the wrongful convictions reveal a miscarriage not only of justice but also of interpretation. In its proper historical, racial, and cultural context, the word wilding contains an important, and long overlooked, critique of the hegemony of white, “civilized” liberal selfhood and the social construction of wilderness.

Black Naturalism and a Failure of Hermeneutics

The nineteenth-century discourse of the parks employed the language of wilderness to sustain the primacy of white, liberal “civilization.” Later, a number of

black naturalist authors used this same discourse in order to critique that very primacy. To literary scholars, American literary naturalism has always been a fraught discourse, with sufficient ambiguity in its definitions, qualities, and intellectual heritage for Edwin Cady to conclude that “there really are no naturalists in American literature” (45). Such ambiguity, though, does not preclude the possibility of tracing a discursive genealogy, and it is useful to delineate the relationship between the word *wilding* as used in 1989 and in earlier literary representations of primitivism. Identifying the discursive and cultural links between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century uses of the language of wilderness underscores the performative nature of *wilding* as used in the Central Park Jogger case and, more important, the cultural panic it engendered.

American literary naturalism presents an obsession with the primitive and how the primitive Other can usurp the autonomy of the liberal self. As Gina M. Rossetti notes, naturalism “rebukes the primitive for his or her debasement” while simultaneously reifying “a privileged class and confirm[ing] that class’s elite status” (5). In the work of many white naturalist authors, the primitive served as a symbolic repository for a host of racial, national, and economic anxieties. This primitivist logic extended to spaces as well as persons. Occasionally, those spaces were unconquered wilderness, as in the work of Jack London, but more often, they were inner-city spaces.⁴ Literary naturalism, then, is interested in how qualities considered Other in the broadest sense—qualities outside the agency of the liberal self, such as race, class, urbanicity, genetic heritage, and irrational urges (greed, rage, or lust)—influence the autonomy of that self. Typically, naturalism’s interest in the primitive Other manifests itself in an exploration of what June Howard calls the brute, a figure often seen battling for its own agency and, in the end, nearly always overcome by qualities extrinsic to the self. The rhetoric of the brute, Howard argues, “can be seen as a transformation of the powerful ideological material that has long surrounded the idea of the savage” (78). By using the word *wilding*, the suspects in the 1989 attack can be seen as deliberately representing *themselves* as savage subjects, as brutes. The brute, much like the word *wilding*, offers a performance of wilderness in a trope rooted in the binary opposition of savage and civilized. Literary naturalism thus links the logic of the classical wilderness—via the savage or untamed wildness—to modern productions of race, class, and city.

If literary naturalism generally evinces a fascination with the primitive, the racial politics of that fascination become clearer when examined through the lens of African American literary naturalists. The meaning of brute, like that of wild, can depend on the race of the person using the word. A critical appraisal of some ways in which African American literary naturalists engaged the primitivist language of savagery offers new insight into the 1989 linguistic performance of *wilding*. Black naturalism reappropriates the tropes of primitivism and wilderness through ironic destabilization of the links between savagery and blackness. Historicizing this use of the language of wilderness emphasizes the degree to which the 1989 use of the word *wilding* was also an ironic performance, albeit one tragically not understood as such.

In his 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnut wed the naturalist myth of linear evolution—in which persons progress from savagery to civilization—to a strong sense of dramatic irony. A subplot in the novel deals with an African American man, Sandy, wrongly accused of a murder that a white man, Tom Delamere, committed while impersonating Sandy. At one point, a newspaper reporter named Ellis watches Tom dancing while disguised as Sandy, and unaware, concludes that Sandy is representative of “a crude and undeveloped race” (Chesnut 119). Ultimately, Ellis thinks, one cannot tell “at what moment the thin veneer of civilization might peel off and reveal the underlying savage” (119). Until later, though, neither the reader nor Ellis realizes the subversive irony at play: it is not Sandy who is savage, but rather Tom. Once so easily applied to a white male, the signifiers of savagery

are exposed as fatuous. Indeed, once Tom is revealed as the murderer—that is, once the “thin veneer of civilization” is stripped away—the language of naturalism becomes self-critical, dismissing “the flattering unction that [whites] were making of barbarous negroes civilized and Christian men” (211). As John Dudley notes, the Tom-Sandy confusion “reenacts on a smaller scale the hypocrisy of the white supremacists who decry the bestiality of blacks even as they incite white mobs to violence” (148). Much like the suspects in the Central Park Jogger case, Sandy is wrongly identified as a savage, primitive criminal. In the novel, Chesnutt fuses the logic of naturalism—in which brutal savagery brings down an otherwise civilized person—with the logic of classical racism, to ironic effect. In doing so, he uses the language of primitivism to perform wilderness, exposing the socially constructed nature of savagery and illustrating how easily it is misapplied. Over the course of Chesnutt’s naturalist project, words like savage, brutal, wild, and undeveloped become detached signifiers, decoupling savagery from blackness and so Signifyin(g) on and re-presenting them as ironic performance.

The word wilding participates in this cultural work. A chief project of black literary naturalism uses the naturalist obsession with atavism to interrogate stereotypes about savagery and skin color. The language of wilderness, of course, is an integral part of this undertaking. The critical and ironic lens of black naturalism reveals ostensibly neutral binary descriptors of the natural world, such as wild, settled, savage and civilized, to be implicated in the history of racist discourse. Wilding, as used in hip-hop culture, works similarly to destabilize the discursive bonds between race and the language of wilderness. Wilding thus enacts a proleptic performance of wilderness that becomes all the more fraught once contextualized with the performance of criminality undertaken by the 1989 suspects in the Central Park Jogger case.

Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son* explores the discursive nexus of criminality and the language of wilderness in greater detail. Although it engages similar naturalistic tropes as *The Marrow of Tradition*, Wright’s novel presents a more complex approach, in part because the protagonist Bigger Thomas actually *is* a murderer, unlike Chesnutt’s genial, obviously un-savage Sandy Campbell. In *Native Son*, Wright ironically evokes white expectations of black savagery and simultaneously exposes that same savagery to be a consequence of racist urban geographies. In the novel, the discourse of primitivism originates with a racist white journalist who, in reporting on the disappearance of Mary Dalton, announces that he is “slanting this [story] to the primitive Negro who doesn’t want to be disturbed by white civilization” (Wright 214). Later, once Bigger’s guilt has been determined, the prosecuting attorney paints him as a “demented savage” and a “treacherous beast” (414, 412). Both before and after he is assumed to be guilty, Bigger is framed as a subhuman savage, yet Wright’s use of the tropes of naturalism demands that that savagery be interrogated.

For example, Bigger’s rational agency is often usurped, and his lawyer Max asks readers to attribute his actions to “the complex forces of society”—a society which is itself interrogated, using a naturalist framework, as a “sick social organism” (382, 383). Does crime occur, Wright asks, because of an essential savagery inherent in individuals and races, or does it occur because of a racist urban geography? Through the language of wilderness, Wright encourages the reader to conclude the latter. When pondering the geography of the “Black Belt,” Bigger concludes that “[t]hey keep us bottled up here like wild animals” (249). Wilderness here is circular. White perceptions of the “primitive Negro” produce the segregated Black Belt, yet the same primitivist logic classifying African Americans as “wild animals” sustains that environmental racism. This circularity produces an ironic net effect: if particular social practices create the “primitive Negro,” then the language of wilderness is exposed as a social construction, which makes the discourse of primitivism an effect of modernity, not atavism. Similarly, Max locates Bigger’s actions in the modern

history of white conquest, appealing to the nineteenth-century cultural narrative in which whites must either “subdue this wild land or be subdued by it” (389). Much as in Chesnut’s novel, words like wild and savage become detached from race as an essentialized phenomenon and are exposed as constructions of a historically white power structure.

Literary naturalism ultimately allowed Wright and Chesnut to employ the language of wilderness as a discursive performance to achieve particular social or aesthetic effects. As used in hip-hop culture, wilding joins that discourse of wilderness. This argument does not imply a causative or influential relationship (it is irrelevant whether any rappers or criminals actually read Chesnut or Wright before uttering the word wilding), but rather a discursive one. The strategic performance of wilderness embodied by the word serves as a cultural maneuver that evokes preexisting stereotypes about black savagery or wildness only to undermine them. Literary naturalism provides an imaginative space in which this performance of wilderness can be harnessed to questions of social or natural determinism. In this space, Chesnut and Wright present strategic performances of wilderness that decouple discourses of race from discourses of “savage” wilderness.

The Language of Wilderness

Fifty years after Wright chronicled the segregated city spaces of Chicago, New York had become a city fraught with racial tension. As white flight accelerated over the second half of the twentieth century, the African American population of New York steadily increased from 6.1 percent in 1940 to 24.0 percent in 1980 and 28.7 percent in 1990, around the time of the rape (Macek 14). Not coincidentally, this population change occurred alongside an increase in the urban poverty rates for black Americans. Thirty-four percent of the African American poor lived in urban areas in 1968; this number had increased to fifty-nine percent by 1990 (Beauregard 225). Consequently, the postmodern ghetto—a postindustrial space constructed by and through the marginality of a racially and economically dispossessed people in the historical core of a city—became a space characteristic of the racial and geographic makeup of New York City in the 1980s. As Michael Keith and Malcolm Cross write, race acts as a “metaphor through which the confused text of the city is rendered comprehensible” (9). Race, in short, serves as a key metonym for understanding the economic and spatial transformations of postwar urbanicity. The emergence of the postmodern city meant that black bodies and black culture began, in the 1980s, to stand as perceived threats to the newly restructuring, postindustrial, capitalist, urban economies.⁵ The white fear driving this threat can be seen in brief eruptions of urban bourgeois panic and the mass media fascination with race- and class-charged episodes such as the Central Park Jogger rape. Accordingly, the production of wilding must be located in this social and racial context.

Once the word was published, use of animalistic language to describe the crime and its perpetrators ticked up sharply.⁶ Reports had detailed the horror and cruelty of the crime but did not employ the language of wilderness to nearly the degree seen after the publication of the word wilding. It can thus be reasonably assumed that the emergence of the word heavily influenced how the popular imagination understood and the popular press analyzed the crime. The same article that first published the word wilding also branded the act as “savage” in its lead sentence and took pains to point out the “full moon” that lit “the northern reaches of the park” that night, as if the attackers were somehow affected by the same forces as werewolves (Pitt 1). Charles B. Rangel, African American Congressman from New York,

said he had “never seen such an animalistic attack,” and that “calling [the criminals] animals and wolfpack [*sic*] is an insult to animals and wolves” (qtd. in Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson 10). Donald Trump spent \$80,000 on a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* that called for the reinstatement of the death penalty so as to execute the “roving bands of wild criminals” who committed the crime (Trump A13). In short, the language of wilderness—words such as wolf, savage, and animals—became omnipresent in the media once the word wilding was published. A 1989 study of the news coverage of the Central Park rape concluded that nearly half of all the “strongly negative words or phrases [used] to denigrate the attackers” in the popular media consisted of “animal imagery” (Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson 10). This wellspring of animal imagery engaged some central tropes of the language of wilderness, evoking the specter of a fundamentally lawless, uncontrollable populace, not from the world of the human and civilized but from that of the bestial and savage.

But what does wilding actually mean? Wilding seemed to speak of a random, atavistic crime outside the transactional logic of burglary or robbery, possessing a structure ungraspable by its bourgeois victims.⁷ Indeed, so elusive was the term that the central narrative of its definition became, in an odd twist, the narrative of its elusiveness. As the initial shock of the crime faded, a number of journalists and academics began to argue that the word did not exist at all before the night of April 19, 1989. Less than a month after the rape, J. Anthony Lukas first set down this hypothesis, writing that the youths perhaps had not said wilding at all and had actually “told police they were after ‘the wild thing’—a euphemism for sex—from the rap song of that name” by rapper Tone Lōc (E15).⁸ By 1990, Terry Teachout could write that “[e]very New Yorker who reads the papers knows that the teenagers who allegedly raped and brutalized a woman jogger in Central Park last year entertained themselves by collectively chanting the lyrics to ‘Wild Thing’” (60). Although it might seem there should have been a greater tension between, on the one hand, the widespread public terror and confusion over the crime and, on the other, the apparently credulous acceptance of wilding to explain that terror and confusion, this “Wild Thing” hypothesis quickly extinguished any potential dissonance. It became the new, dominant explanation of the crime, which soothed the white bourgeoisie by reassuring them of their essential liberal virtue. There was no need to be terrified of spontaneous eruptions of savagery from a nonwhite underclass. Instead, this story held, the phenomenon of wilding was a misunderstanding, nothing more. The boys were rapping the words to Tone Lōc’s “Wild Thing” and were simply misheard.

In a relatively short period of time, wilding went from a terrifying new criminal practice to a hip-hop-related mishearing.⁹ The dominant etymological and cultural history shifted, declaring that the word did not exist in the black vernacular before the night of the rape. Instead, this new narrative went, wilding resulted from misapprehending a then-new cultural form: hip hop. Houston Baker codified the prevailing understanding of the term in his book *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*. He identifies the emergence of wilding as “a mishearing rife with significances” (49). Regarding the claim that the boys rapped the song “Wild Thing,” Baker writes that the police and others “heard not ‘wild thing’ but ‘wilding.’ They thus became hermeneuts of park panic, connecting such phrases as ‘roving bands’ and ‘wolf pack’ to a cultural phenomenon for which they held no adequate public hearing” (49). At this point, the critical discourse on both the etymology and the cultural history of wilding all but ceases. Virtually no additional scholarly or historical attention has been given to the word. Susan Fraiman’s speculative treatment of the word begins, “From what I can remember and imagine, [wilding] originated something like this . . .” and then proceeds to provide a history of the term that is, in fact, imaginative (70). Similarly, Helen Benedict decries the “fuss over the discovery of the word wilding” but does not bother to interrogate or historicize that “fuss” (199). On the balance, the scholarly understanding of wilding is flimsy and largely limited to “mishearing[s],” “fuss[es],” and speculative attempts to “imagine” its genesis.

Consequently, the lone established narrative for the emergence of the word links it to hip-hop culture but only in the most cursory of ways. In this narrative, hip hop, via Tone Lōc's "Wild Thing," provided the impetus for one massive mishearing. By this logic, the police's lack of familiarity with a racialized and thus alien cultural discourse inadvertently produced a term equally alien and even more deeply enmeshed in the history of racist discourse: wilding. According to Baker and others, neither the word nor the practice existed before April 19, 1989 and existed afterward only because media scrutiny could literally inscribe it into existence.

This narrative is surely a persuasive one, especially as it seems to speak to the ease with which white power figures root their understandings of crime and criminal motivation in centuries-old stereotypes about nonwhite savagery and fundamentally wild black children. It also grasps the important historical link between Central Park and crime. Olmsted, for instance, felt that the park, as a stylized production of nature, would decrease crime in New York City. However, Baker's narrative is also not entirely correct. The word *did* exist before April 19, 1989, and its direct links to hip-hop culture belie a much more complex literary and cultural heritage.

Hip Hop and Social Critique

Despite the assumption that the word's very existence was due to a mishearing, wilding quickly gained official recognition as a new part of the English language. In 1993, it was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

wilding, n.: The action or practice by a gang of youths of going on a protracted and violent rampage in a street, park, or other public place, attacking or mugging people at random along the way; also, an instance of this.

The *OED* lists the first known date of use as April 22, 1989, when journalist David E. Pitt initially referenced the "pastime called 'wilding'" (1). The etymology of the term, too, refers to the mishearing of Tone Lōc's "Wild Thing," quoting the *Sunday Correspondent*: "Because one of the defendants muttered something about *Wild Thing* . . . [there arose] a possible new phenomenon known as 'Wilding'" (*OED*). The *OED* mirrors the larger cultural dynamic, giving the imprimatur of lexicographical authority to the production of discourse. Hip-hop culture, in the *OED*, has marked the neologism as fundamentally racialized, inseparable from crime and random violence.

Jesse Sheidlower, editor-at-large of the *OED*, acknowledged in 2002 that "'wilding' was first used in the same sense [to refer to a multiperson, semistructured social disruption] at least a year or two before the 1989 attack" but offered no direct textual evidence for this assertion (qtd. in Worth B4). In fact, an earlier recorded use of the term does exist. The 1988 song "Radio Suckers" by rapper Ice-T, which predates the Central Park Jogger rape by at least a year, includes the lyrics:

Cruisin' down the street, what do I see?
 Crash Task Force, L.A.P.D.
 Gangs illin', wildin', and killin'
 Hustlers on a roll, like they got a million.
 Girls on the strap and you know that
 You know that the guys will stop wildin' if you stop that crap.
 But you can't, you want money so bad
 You'll jock anything with the Gucci tag.
 You gotta have it, so the men go get it
 Robbin' and stealin', soon to regret it.

Here, wilding, of course, is not clearly explained, but its definition seems different than that offered by the *OED*. It is an act distinguished from simple murder (as suggested by the otherwise repetitive “wildin’ and killin’”) and, significantly, financially motivated. Wilding would stop, it is implied, were it not for something that “you” do or have done. The use of the second person here, while a common device in popular music, seems particularly salient when coupled with the antimaterialist and antipatriarchal sentiment of the line in full. That is, wilding is not only a response to capitalist or consumerist desire; it is also a response to traditional gender roles. The second-person character, who is clearly a woman, has “to have it,” so the “men go get it” and resort to crime in order to procure the luxury item (presumably, anything with a “Gucci tag”). Under a system of capitalist patriarchy, the unnamed female has been turned into a purchasable commodity, albeit one arguably in control of her own sale. In the song, wilding occurs because males, in their stereotypical gender roles as protectors or providers, resort to criminal acts in order to cater to the female’s stereotypical role as ornament or commodity. In the logic of the text, wilding happens because women “want money so bad.” It is a reaction to both the limitations of traditional gender roles and to the value the consumer marketplace places on visible indicators of social status and wealth. For Ice-T, the act of wilding is a *response*—the criminal outcome of capitalist or consumerist aspiration. To that end, wilding here is employed as a kind of strategic defense: were it not for certain socioeconomic inequities creating materialist desire, wilding would not occur.

Given this usage, wilding can be defined more broadly as the purposeful creation of a type of social disorder. It offers an ironic performance of the language of wilderness in order to frame criminal acts as considered responses, rather than as essential characteristics of a “wild” racial selfhood. Although the online *Rap Dictionary* states that the term means “to act without rational thought,” this definition misses the degree to which deliberative action shapes the language and practice of wilding (“Wilding”). That is, the *intent* implicit in the use of the word—in both the Ice-T song and the structured, prearranged nature of the Central Park Jogger rape—suggests that wilding is in fact a performance of the absence of rationality, rather than its actual absence. That performance, too, has a history, rooted in black literary naturalism and the cultural construction of the parks. Perhaps most importantly, Ice-T’s use of the term also stands as evidence that the term existed in hip-hop vernacular culture before the Central Park Jogger rape of 1989 and was not necessarily misheard on that night.

The genealogy of wilding is not only useful as an etymological corrective, though. It also speaks to the relationship between academic hip-hop studies, the popular press, and the racialization of urban space. As Tricia Rose writes, “the way rap and rap-related violence are discussed in the popular media is fundamentally linked to the larger social discourse on the spatial control of black people” (125). Indeed, much of hip-hop scholarship has focused on the relationship between space and race as performed in hip-hop culture. However, this emphasis has inevitably meant attention to *urban* space at the expense of other types of space or modes of spatial experience. According to the dominant critical narrative of academic hip-hop studies, hip-hop culture and urban spatiality have a contested relationship; hip hop combats spatial hegemony by providing critical counternarratives of urban materiality.¹⁰ Hip hop has been theorized as a largely reactive cultural phenomenon that takes as its primary text the postmodern urban spaces where it was born while offering a creative street journalism of those same spaces.

That journalistic interpretive framework, in which rappers problematize conventional media crime narratives via purportedly realistic narratives of urban poverty, though, often ignores the topological continuities between hip hop and previous literary manifestations of black selfhood. As wilding might suggest, African American culture has a tradition of engaging the tropes and language of wilderness, and this

engagement nearly always takes the form of black authors Signifyin(g) on those tropes. Referring to Gates's call for a vernacular-based literary criticism in *The Signifying Monkey*, Russell A. Potter has suggested that "[S]ignifyin(g) operations . . . constitute the core of hip-hop practice" (64). This claim is true, but little research has focused on the continuities between Signifyin(g) in hip-hop culture and earlier iterations of black Signifyin(g), such as the ironic reappropriation of the language of wilderness seen in black naturalism and the wilding case. Historically, when black authors and artists fulfilled their expected roles as depictees of the exotic or the primitive, they incorporated ironic representations of savagery. Ice-T's "Radio Suckers" linguistically presents wilding as an essentialized practice: literally wild, uncontrollable. The narrative logic of the song, though, also reveals it as a constructed and controllable phenomenon: a response to consumer culture and the strictures of traditional gender roles. Imani Perry writes that this verbal dexterity, in which Ice-T evokes tropes of fundamental wildness only to undermine them, is characteristic of hip hop:

Signifyin(g) also manifests itself in the previously mentioned multiple registers of hip hop. . . . Sometimes the various registers conflict, so that the first level of text may actually affirm stereotypes of black men, for example, or appear to be misogynistic. Yet a deeper register of the text may then challenge the assumptions, describe feeling locked into the stereotype, reinterpret it to the advantage of the artist, or make fun of the holder of the stereotype. (61)

Obviously, there is a disconnect between the sense of play and irony found in Ice-T's use of the word wilding and the raw, unmitigated horror that accompanied its use on April 19, 1989. It is also worth stating the obvious: "a deeper register of the text" of wilding, as it was used on that fateful day, does nothing to change the fact that Trisha Meili was the victim of a terrible crime.

Wilding, as a practice, though, is not new. Used to describe a loosely structured, group activity of moderate-to-severe random violence and mischief-making, the practice existed before 1989 as "punch-out" and today as "happy slapping" in England.¹¹ The term became uniquely terrifying in 1989 for two main reasons. First, it played on a preexisting set of fears regarding race, class, gender, and urbanity. Second, it engaged a longstanding set of cultural assumptions about the nature of wilderness and the function of the parks. That is, the crime was spectacularized largely because it occurred in a city park and was named wilding. Central Park, from its beginnings in 1873, was conceived of as a civilized simulation of nature: a landscaped *repudiation* of the wilderness, not its distillation.

Ultimately, the idea of wilding is inseparable from tropes of urban wilderness. As geographer Yi-fu Tuan argues, as cities grew in economic and cultural importance over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they increasingly became the repository of anxieties once reserved for wilderness and began to be "seen as a jungle," wild, treacherous, and dangerous (9). The imagined locus of wilderness thus began to shift from untamed rural spaces to inner-city urban spaces.

The urban wilderness is a common contemporary trope, familiar from many twentieth-century American cultural products: Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Wright's *Native Son*, as well as films such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood*.¹² In a figurative discourse thick with race and class anxiety, the trope of the urban wilderness often shows the ravages of untrammelled capitalism: the creation of a marginalized people eking out a subcivilized existence in a degenerating urban core.

This trope is omnipresent in hip-hop culture, perhaps best exemplified by the self-conscious primitivism espoused by market-savvy "gangsta" rappers, as in Ice-T's "Radio Suckers." Generally, tropes of urban wilderness in hip hop undercut pre-existing racist tropes of savagery by affecting a hyperbolic theater of the ghetto, a performance of the imagined postmodern city born of Reagan-era urban policy. In *Blaming the Victim*, William Ryan critiques this conservative, culture-of-poverty

approach to racial and social inequality, which identifies poverty or crime as emerging from small-scale, cultural patterns of behavior like laziness, rather than structural causes such as economic policy. Blaming the victim, Ryan writes, depends on a “process of identification . . . whereby the victim of social problems is identified as . . . a barbarian, a savage” (10). Therefore, the performance of primitivism suggested by the emergence of wilding in hip-hop culture stands as an ironic critique of the idea of identifying savages. The tropes of urban wilderness used to construct the ghettos of the 1980s here are reappropriated and literally sold back to the white power structure that produced that very racialized geography.

However, the relationship between race, class, and geography in New York City—especially as that mixture erupted violently on that night—engaged the history of Central Park, the language of wilderness, and black literary culture in a way that has not been analyzed heretofore. It is important to historicize the social construction of wilderness and the parks and how wilding, like the discourse of literary naturalism, engaged with these particular conceptions of nature and wilderness.

Central Park and Liberal Selfhood

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century view of wilderness is of a tangible, material space in negative opposition to civilized space. Civilized persons can recognize wilderness as a space fundamentally dissimilar to the mundanities and comforts of the urban domestic, or what Gaston Bachelard calls “really inhabited space” (5). In this classical view, civilized spaces and persons emerge from conquered wild spaces and the savage inhabitants of those spaces. By this logic, the wilderness and civilization have a linear relationship driven by a particular cultural and racial hierarchy: white persons live in civilized spaces, which are market capitalist, monotheistic, and urban. Nonwhite persons live in wild spaces, which are nonmarket capitalist, pantheistic, rural, and thus axiomatically savage. Through conquest, wild spaces and persons can ultimately become civilized. According to this ideological formulation, Central Park was designed as the paragon of conquered wilderness—a space that assumed the trappings of nature and deployed them toward particular liberal social-civic ends.¹³

Wilderness, though, must exist as an idea before it can exist as a place. Uninhabited space—and even natural space, as seen in Central Park—is not necessarily wild. William Cronon writes that wilderness is “entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny” (79). This post-structuralist critique suggests that wilderness is socially constructed and, therefore, represents the power of one group to dub its own space civilized and another space wild. The majority, then, uses *wild* to discursively render subordinate particular persons and places. As a result, the term wilding caused a social panic in 1989 partly because minority group members employed it ironically to characterize their *own* behavior. Reviewing the social, rather than ecological, ideology of Central Park in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can yield a better grasp of why the word wilding contrasted quite so jarringly with the stylized natural space of Central Park.

Discussions concerning a park in New York City began as early as 1848. In mid-century New York, an anxious middle class was becoming increasingly concerned about the dangers posed by a poor and violent underclass.¹⁴ Public debate over the park assumed its benefits to be largely civilizational: deploying particular qualities of romantic nature in order to sustain the preeminence and safety of white civilization. The poet William Cullen Bryant, who was among the first to call for a municipal park, argued that such a space would promote “good morals and good order.” Similarly,

Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, suggested that parks would lead to more “civilized” manners among the populace (qtd. in Rosenzweig and Blackmar 26). In 1853, the city acquired an initial 778 acres through eminent domain, transferring the private property of roughly 1,600 residents to itself. The displaced residents were largely poor, unskilled laborers living in multiethnic communities composed of German immigrants, Irish immigrants, and African Americans. Even though the area that would eventually become Central Park was obviously populated—dotted with hundreds of small, one-story dwellings—these communities were still classified as wild because of the presence of an immigrant and nonwhite underclass. As one commentator noted in the late 1840s, many whites viewed the area as a “wilderness,” filled with “the habitations of poor and wretched people of every race and color and nationality” (qtd. in Rosenzweig and Blackmar 67). Although the city compensated the residents for their property, the displacement of a poor and nonwhite wilderness to construct a genteel, natural space says much about how race and the language of wilderness conspired to produce modern, civilized parks. As the genteel public’s sentiment overwhelmingly came to favor a park, the city held a design contest to plan what would eventually become Central Park. In 1857, Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux won the contest, sketching a design that would lead to the park’s official completion in 1873.

Olmsted, the most significant nineteenth-century theorist of and advocate for public parks, repeatedly stressed the curative functions of the park and the ways in which it would improve the body politic.¹⁵ In Olmsted’s view, groomed landscapes such as parks historically were the province of the aristocracy and contributed to the gentility that nineteenth-century Americans associated with the manner born. Olmsted stressed that the park would exercise “a distinctly harmonizing and refining influence upon the most unfortunate and most lawless classes of the city” (96). By virtue of being conquered wilderness, he felt, parks contributed to the construction of civilized persons and behavior. The 1989 crime and its atavistic threat of wilding undermined this foundational myth of Central Park. If wilderness had not been fully conquered—if indeed, conquered wilderness had violently reemerged—then the Central Park Jogger crime stood not only as an affront to contemporary social mores but also, potentially, to civilization itself.

That is to say, Olmsted did not coincidentally evoke the “liberality of nature” in his arguments for the park, for natural space and the emergence of liberal individualism have significant theoretical links (qtd. in Rosenzweig and Blackmar 135). The philosophers of natural law whose writings laid the groundwork for modern liberal selfhood also located individual liberality in a discourse of wilderness. John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, for example, argues for a relatively benign vision of nature in which the natural world is “a state of perfect freedom” (18). Ultimately, for Locke, the state of nature means that “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions” (19). Under Lockean classical liberalism, natural individual liberality means equality between individuals and, following natural law, freedom from harm. This conception is quite similar to the vision of nature Olmsted evoked in his theories of Central Park. However, the 1989 Central Park Jogger crime ruptured this liberal narrative equating natural space with freedom from harm. For Locke and Olmsted both, nature itself has a liberalizing and harmonizing effect on individuals and so is conducive to the construction of a liberal public. Therefore, wilding must be understood as a word fundamentally resistant to the preeminence of liberal selfhood. In 1989, its threat lay in its potential to confront white, urban modernity with its own metanarratives, exposing the fragile historicity of liberal civilization.

If Central Park was designed as a bulwark against the imagined threats of a savage wilderness lurking just below the conquered landscape of civilized modernity, then the word wilding, and the criminal act to which it referred, destabilized those master

narratives. As one white woman said in reaction to the crime, “I thought the term wilding was chilling. . . . It’s partly because it’s an idyllic place that makes the violence that more stark [*sic*]” (qtd. in Kaufman, “New Yorkers” B2). It is not merely that parks suggest “idyllic” spaces; it is that those spaces historically are viewed as conducive to an idyllic, liberal-republican selfhood. The threat of wilding posed a risk to the very existence of that selfhood. The long tradition of equating civilized nature with liberal selfhood, seen in Locke and Olmsted alike, meant that many understood the Central Park Jogger rape not only as a criminal transgression but also as a cultural assault, an affront to the perceived security of idyllic city space.

However, this understanding still does not fully account for the wrong convictions of the boys who used the word wilding. If it held a connection to individual liberality in a theoretical sense, it also held a very literal connection to the physical liberality not only of Meili but also of the five boys. If wilding should be located in an African American discursive practice of irony, play, and reappropriation, how might that cultural performance be connected with the horrific violence suffered by Meili in 1989? The answer to that question involves less the attack itself and more the way in which the attack was perceived. A word like wilding, and an inability to read that word as a cultural production, can cloud a public’s judgment. Matias Reyes’s 2002 admission that he alone raped Meili, along with the DNA evidence confirming his guilt, makes clear that the convictions of the five boys were a miscarriage of justice. Although it is impossible to identify any single reason for the false convictions, further research may be able to establish that the cultural panic engendered by wilding measurably contributed to the verdicts.¹⁶

Circumstantial and physical evidence strongly suggest that the five boys imprisoned for the crime were guilty of *something* that night, but it was not rape. Given that the word wilding definitively existed before April 19, 1989, as demonstrated by Ice-T’s “Radio Suckers,” it is highly likely that the boys really did claim to have gone wilding and that they were not, in fact, misheard. The wilding spree that night was connected with various several other crimes—petty theft and random assaults—and it seems plausible that the boys were associated with some or all of these crimes, which were then subsumed, in the public imagination, into the horror of the rape.

The Central Park rape became a spectacle due to the word wilding and the connotations of savagery it carried. Engaging a number of myths and discourses, including the historical function of the parks and the evolution of modern liberal publics, wilding, as applied to criminal acts in Central Park, suggested a sweeping social and political failure: not only of the social progressivism of Olmsted’s original vision for the park but also of modern liberal selfhood. However, the language of wilderness, as it existed in hip-hop culture before 1989 and in black literary naturalism of the early twentieth century, was first used critically, ironically, and strategically. The Central Park Jogger rape began as a horrific crime but became a multivalent spectacle in part because of an interpretive failure on the part of the broader public: an inability to read the word wilding critically, as a part of an ironic discourse interrogating the primacy of white civilization.

Notes

1. This account of Meili’s attack and injuries was compiled from contemporary newspaper accounts and from Meili’s interviews with Dr. Robert S. Kurtz, as published in her 2003 memoir (Meili 1-56). Kurtz was director of the Surgical Intensive Care Unit at Metropolitan General Hospital and supervised Meili’s care in 1989.

2. A 1989 media study of only five newspapers and six television stations revealed a near obsession with the story in the media. The authors found 406 news items about the crime in the first two weeks after its occurrence, amounting to 3,415 column inches of print coverage and 4.25 hours of television coverage (Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson 18).

3. One fifteen-year-old boy interviewed at the time described wilding as “getting your anger out at somebody. It’s like stealing fruit. It’s not ‘cause you are hungry” (Kaufman, “Park Suspects” A1). Youths in

the South Bronx, also interviewed in an attempt to define the term, characterized wilding as a crime in which “[a]nybody could be the victim—black, Hispanic, white, rich poor,” noting that wilding is “animal, but it’s beyond animal acts” (Sturz A17). In the immediate aftermath of the attack, the central journalistic tactic seemed to be to find children, presumably of color, and ask them if they were familiar with the word wilding.

4. Giles, for example, writes that for “naturalists, the inner city ceased to be primarily a physical place; it assumed, instead, the status of an idea or image of something sordid and dangerous . . . it came to represent for them the world of the Other” (4).

5. For more on urbanity and postmodernity, see Jameson, 1-54 and 97-129; Soja 22-248; and Harvey.

6. Before the mass media published the word, many initial reports of the crime used coded language to evoke the nexus of race and space in Reagan-era New York. In a *New York Times* article published immediately after the attack, Wolff alluded to the fact that the attackers were from “northern Manhattan” (*i.e.*, Harlem) before intimating that the park itself had somehow become tainted by its location, noting that the “northern reaches of the 840-acre” space had “not yet seen the vast rehabilitation that has touched many other sections of the park” (B1). The immediate attempt to understand the crime was in terms of geography. However, once the term wilding was published and instantly gained traction in the imagination of the white middle class, understanding the crime in terms of *literal* geography rapidly shifted to understanding it in terms of geographical *metaphors*: in a figurative language derived from the outdoors.

7. The randomness implied by the word wilding existed in uneasy tension with the apparent structure of the spree and the degree of planning reported in newspaper accounts of the attack. The same article that first published the word also spoke of the “preparations for the crime spree . . . when 17 youths gathered outside the Taft Houses project at 117th Street and Madison Avenue” and included a quotation from Deputy Police Commissioner Alice T. McGillion identifying those preparations as a “prearranged meeting” (Pitt 30).

8. Prosecutor Elizabeth Lederer maintained that while being held for questioning the boys had rapped the words to “Wild Thing,” a hit song by then-popular rap artist Tone Lōc (Sullivan 51). S. Baker and Gore made an argument along the same lines, linking the criminal practice of wilding to the boys “singing a high-on-the-charts rap song about casual sex: ‘Wild Thing’ ” (6).

9. Barry Michael Cooper provided evidence for this “Wild Thing” hypothesis when he interviewed some teenage rap fans in “El Barrio” who claimed “there’s no such word as ‘wilding’ ” (qtd. in H. Baker 48-49). The idea that the term did not really exist at all quickly became crucial to the mythology of wilding. Attorney Alton Maddox even went so far as to suggest that there was no Central Park Jogger and that Trisha Meili was a figure invented by the government in order to imprison more young African American males (Sullivan 56).

10. For example, Forman argues that “[r]ap music takes the city and its multiple spaces as the foundation of its cultural production” and, in much of hip-hop music, creates a product which recasts race, class, and cultural identification into a discourse relying on “the spatial construct of ‘the hood’ ” (xviii, xix). Kelley has similarly stressed the ability of particular hip-hop artists to create a “street ethnography of racist institutions and social practices,” a sort of “street journalism” (121).

11. An article in the May 2, 1989 *Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, PA) quoted a sixteen-year-old Brooklyn youth who seemed bemused by the term wilding: “We don’t say no ‘wilding,’ ” he said. “We say we’s goin’ to play punch-out” (qtd. in Algeo and Algeo 144). Clearly, the practice implied by wilding existed before April 19, 1989, and only because of the severity of the attack, as well as the fears of a fundamentally savage youth implied by the word itself, did “wilding” ignite the national imagination in a way that *punch-out* or *happy slapping* did not.

12. See Light on the trope of the urban wilderness in Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* and the Hughes brothers’ *Menace II Society*, as well as Mexal on the trope of urban wilderness in hip-hop music.

13. For Americans in the nineteenth century, wilderness also signified spaces resistant to, or uncontrolled by, the hegemony of civilized spaces. The linear progression from savagery to civilization always presented the imagined danger that contact with wilderness could cause an otherwise-civilized person to revert to savagery. As Nash has argued, “in the morality play of westward expansion, wilderness was the villain, and the pioneer, as hero, relished its destruction” (24). This classical view of wilderness, which held sway throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, assumes the materiality of wild spaces.

14. As Barth notes, the city was increasingly seen as a “congested, disease-ridden social organism” in need of improvement (35). See also Boyer, 89.

15. Olmsted always emphasized the republican virtues of the park. Olmsted wrote in 1870 that in Central Park one finds “all classes largely represented, with a common purpose, . . . each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each” (75). For Olmsted, parks served the public good because they created individual happiness, and they created individual happiness because they served the public good.

16. Although DNA evidence was relatively new in 1989, it was an established evidentiary method of assessment. Prosecutors knew in 1989 that DNA evidence did not link any of the youths found guilty of the rape to the actual rape. Furthermore, they knew that another, unidentified perpetrator likely had gotten away. As Timothy Sullivan wrote in 1992, test “results proved conclusively that the semen in the victim’s cervix did *not* come from her boyfriend or *any of the six defendants charged with rape*” (147; emphasis added). These circumstances suggest that the decisions to prosecute and convict occurred in the face of clear exculpatory evidence, meaning that those decisions were arguably driven by extralegal—that is, cultural or prejudicial—concerns.

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Discography