

## Panel Proposal

70th Annual Meeting of the DGfA/GAAS: May 23-25, 2024, Oldenburg University

“American Soundscapes”

Organizers: Anthony Obst (Freie Universität Berlin), Michael L. Thomas (University of Amsterdam)

### **Beyond ‘Black CNN’: Hip-Hop Soundscapes between Lifeworld and Art World**

Though often attributed to Public Enemy rapper Chuck D circa “Fight the Power” (and later included in his 1997 memoir), the oft-cited description of hip-hop as the “Black CNN” began as apocryphal. When contrasted with its original appearance, the phrase reveals something telling about rap audiences’ troubling preoccupation with realism. In a September 1988 interview with Spin Magazine, Chuck D is cited as calling rap “Black America’s TV station”. The slippage from TV channel, in general, to *news* channel, specifically, is a function of how hip-hop figures as a soundscape in the American imaginary: Rap music is often viewed as a window through which the experiences of Black Americans can supposedly be perceived realistically. Listeners’ expectations routinely posit a zero degree of separation between the lifeworld and the art world—to the extent that rap lyrics have been used as incriminating evidence in US courts.

However, hip-hop is not journalism, it is an artform. Its expression is creative and interpretations require attention to metaphor, flow, rhythm, and layers of meaning that do more than deliver realistic content. In other words, making sense of hip-hop soundscapes requires aesthetic sensibilities at least as much as it requires knowledge and awareness of the social, spatial, and historical lifeworld(s) in which these soundscapes unfold. This panel aims to develop a notion of the soundscapes of hip-hop as a concept for tracing the movements of sound, language, location, and forms of consciousness expressed in its aesthetic forms.

We can think, for example, of the capacity of hip-hop to generate a sense of place through its regional characteristics, facilitating movement in and through communities. New York boom bap, California G-Funk, and the Chopped and Screwed aesthetics of Houston establish a regional character drawn from the influences and cultural practices of artists, territorializing the genre. West Coast hip-hop was also highly influenced by Chicano culture, most visibly in the form of lowrider cars and gang fashion, but rarely part of the popular narrative. In turn, Chicano rap emerged as a response to African American gangsta rap and incorporates Black music from Motown to G-Funk. On the East Coast, Caribbean and Latinx artists have increasingly determined the soundscape of New York, fusing traditional Caribbean music styles with hip-hop, collaborating with Puerto Rican and Panamanian artists, and contributing to the explosion of genres such as reggaetón in the process.

We can also hear the political, interpersonal, and psychological sensibilities generated in the sonic spaces of hip-hop, as artists develop album and song structures that replicate forms of experience (Thomas 2019) that aim to contribute to or disrupt the sensibilities of their audiences (Skitolsky

2020), in response to the numbing of the senses generated by forms of (US) liberalism and the anesthesia of whiteness.

These functions of hip-hop show the significance of its flows through the American landscape as it involves itself in the world-building project of the transformation of American (and global) identities. Its postures, vocabulary, enunciations, and sonics are embedded in practices that produce novel mythologies and ethics, which transform the character of American life. We thus invite presentations that explore the functions of hip-hop as a source of representations that shape the (re)production of American social space.

**Potential paper topics include:**

- Regional sounds: from G-Funk, Chicano rap, and hyphy in the West; to Chopped and Screwed, Memphis horrorcore, and New Orleans bounce in the South; to narco-rap and narco-corridos in the Mexican Borderlands; reggaetón and dancehall in the Caribbean and up along the East Coast, where boom bap takes on hyper-local forms (e.g. Queensbridge); into New Brunswick, Canada, where Indigenous hip-hop has entered a “golden age” (Complex)
- Shifts in territorialization in the digital era: travelling or dislodged regional sounds; the internet as social terrain on which hip-hop soundscapes unfold in distinct ways
- Hip-hop and mobility: cruising music and car culture; public transportation, buskers/b-boys and girls at subway stations, graffiti trains; boomboxes, the Walkman, and the iPod
- Affect, feelings, and sensibilities in lyrics, performances, and music videos as forms of hip-hop consciousness
- World-building through alternative mythologies like the teachings of the Five-Percent Nation, or Kemetic influences e.g. in *The Underachievers* and *the Raider Klan*
- Hip-hop as a soundscaping device in film and other media, such as TV and advertising

**Confirmed speaker:**

Dianne Violeta Mausfeld, Universität Bern: “Sounds of the Barrio: The Spatiality of Chicano Rap in TV & Film”

Please send abstracts of around 300 words to [anthony.obst@fu-berlin.de](mailto:anthony.obst@fu-berlin.de) and [m.l.thomas@uva.nl](mailto:m.l.thomas@uva.nl).