

Hip-Hop and Resistance: The United States, South Africa, and African Identity

By

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Introduction

In 1989, pioneering African American hip-hop artist and DJ, Afrika Bambaataa, produced “Ndodemnyama (Free South Africa)”.¹ “Ndodemnyama”, meaning watch out or beware in isiXhosa, was a strong condemnation of South Africa’s apartheid regime by some of American hip-hop’s most prominent artists including Soulsonic Force, X-Clan, Brand Nubian, Grand Puba, Queen Latifah, Lakim Shabazz, and the Jungle Brothers. The chorus of the upbeat track is an ensemble of voices singing, “Ndodemnyama Mr. Botha, Ndodemnyama South Africa,” while on verses rappers assert black unity against apartheid, “The time to tolerate apartheid is over and done, so watch the world say the black man won.”² Bambaataa’s beat sampled the legendary South African protest song, “Ndodemnyama we Verwoerd (Beware, Verwoerd!)”, an anthem of the anti-apartheid movement since the 1950s.³ In 1963, the song’s composer, Vuyisile Mini, was arrested for his leading role in the armed wing of the African National Congress, called uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK). Following his refusal to cooperate with South African authorities and give evidence against his accomplices, Mini was sentenced to death for treason, in 1964. According to a fellow prisoner, as Mini approached the gallows to be executed, he sang his famous protest song.⁴ Mini became a martyr of the freedom struggle and the song was later recorded in 1965 by famed South African activist and musician, Miriam Makeba, who, living in exile performed it for audiences around the world. “Ndodemnyama we

¹ Themodeone. 2011, “Free South Africa Hip Hop Against Apartheid – Ndodemnyama,” YouTube video, 8:54, March 29, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kleLfGbdWmA>.

² Ibid.

³ Lee Hirsch, *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (2002; New York: ATO Pictures, 2002), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdZlaBenOhc>.

⁴ Ibid.

Verwoerd” served as an organizing tool for generations of activists in South Africa.⁵

Bambaataa’s decision to sample Mini’s protest song illustrates a process of cultural engagement that recognized the South African struggle against apartheid through one of the forms of resistance employed by anti-apartheid activists. Meanwhile, when Bambaataa released “Ndodemnyama”, hip-hop’s success in the United States had already been exported globally through audio and video recordings, and South Africans had begun to create hip-hop music of their own, very conscious of its African-American roots.

This thesis will explore representations of Africa and African identity in American and South African hip-hop during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fans and scholars alike often consider these years to be a time in which American hip-hop was more political and more “conscious” than from the mid-1990s onward, when it is thought that hip-hop became more commercialized. With the emergence of Afrocentric theory in American academia and its subsequent dissemination into broader African-American culture during the 1980s, many American hip-hop artists at the time incorporated Afrocentric themes in their music to affirm African identity. However, Afrocentric hip-hop primarily focused on Egyptian antiquity and West African aesthetics. Although these categories were used to empower African-American youth, they often reproduced essentialist imagery of Africa historically used to justify the oppression of black people. At the same time, hip-hop in South Africa emerged during the violent death-throes of the apartheid regime. Despite contradictory representations of Africa in Afrocentric hip-hop, “coloured” South African hip-hop artists drew on hip-hop aesthetics and ideas of race from the South African Black Consciousness Movement to challenge coloured

⁵ Khondlo Mtshali and Gugu Hlongwane, “Contextualizing South Africa’s Freedom Songs: A Critical Appropriation of Lee Hirsch’s Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony,” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 6 (2014): 515.

constructions of race. In both countries, hip-hop expressed popular anti-white political ideologies thought to empower people of colour. Exploring how African Americans affirmed African identity and how South Africans challenged constructions of race through an African-American art form allows us to engage with one of the ways Pan-Africanist sentiment manifested during the 1980s and 1990s.

Scholars of hip-hop often stress the genre's importance as an African American art form that represents the social and political concerns of its creators. Hip-hop emerged from the specific historical circumstances of 1970s New York, in which Caribbean immigrant culture and African American urban culture combined with concerns over neighbourhood identity and security to form grassroots party music.⁶ According to Tricia Rose, since its birth, hip-hop has expressed important features of black life in post-industrial urban communities. Hip-hop became an avenue by which African Americans could articulate themselves against mainstream media narratives that often neglected or demonized them.⁷ In his book, *Hip Hop's Inheritance*, Reiland Rabaka argues that hip-hop's social critique derives from the cultural aesthetics and radical politics of generations of black socio-political movements in the United States, from the artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s to the assertive ideologies of the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ Perceived by many as an authentic form of

⁶ Eric S. Charry, ed., *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

⁸ Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Inheritance: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Hip Hop Feminist Movement*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 3-8.

African-American expression and resistance, hip-hop appealed to consumers in South Africa, who sensed a shared experience of racial oppression.

Since at least the late 1800s, shared patterns of racial domination in the two countries contributed to the affinities that black South Africans felt with black America. George M. Fredrickson identifies national and regional policies of forced segregation of black communities in South Africa and the United States as notable similarities in the histories of the two countries.⁹ Although leaders of freedom struggles in the U.S. and South Africa recognized critical differences in the histories of African people in both countries, such as culture and different understandings of race, activists on both sides of the Atlantic engaged with similar ideologies and debates over oppositional strategies to legalized racial discrimination and segregation.¹⁰ Although black South Africans and black Americans protested racial oppression in similar ways, Robert Trent Vinson illustrates that conversations about liberation among black South Africans often referred to black America.¹¹ He argues that from the late nineteenth century onward, black South Africans would modify for their own purposes ideas of liberation that emerged in black America, from the “up from slavery” narrative of African American success to the Pan-Africanist politics of Marcus Garvey.

Intersecting with political and ideological exchange was musical and cultural exchange. In the United States, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power Movement were accompanied by black popular music such as blues, jazz, rhythm and blues,

⁹ George M. Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 135.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Robert Trent Vinson, *The Americans Are Coming! Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 2.

rock and roll, soul, and funk, all of which were politicized and used as tools of resistance.¹²

Similarly, black South Africans used song and music as anti-apartheid cultural material since the 1940s.¹³ By the time hip-hop was adopted by South African artists, African-American and black South African music already had a rich history of cultural exchange, notably through jazz, beginning as early as the 1930s.¹⁴ Also politicized, South African jazz music played an important role in the anti-apartheid movement throughout the twentieth century and engaged with American styles of music in its evolution.¹⁵

The discussion of political and cultural transmission between black communities in South Africa and the United States is inherently a discussion of Pan-Africanism. Black people in both countries recognized their respective experiences of oppression as tied to their racialized identities as Africans. Jon Michael Spencer argues that black music, religion, and dance throughout black cultures in the New World and Africa enforce a “rhythmic confidence” in black people.¹⁶ Akin to a “soul”, rhythmic confidence is described as a proclivity to challenge the powers and principalities of racism, colonialism, and slavery, as well as a clarifying factor in the cultural relationship between people of African descent. Although open to contestation, Spencer’s argument invites the study of the modern music industry’s biggest phenomenon: hip-hop. How does hip-hop in South Africa and the United States challenge and affirm the cultural relationship between people of African descent?

¹² Rabaka, *Hip Hop’s Inheritance*, 3-8.

¹³ Hirsch, *Amandla: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*.

¹⁴ Christopher Ballantine, “Music and Emancipation: The Social Role of Black Jazz and Vaudeville in South Africa between the 1920s and the Early 1940s,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991): 135.

¹⁵ Gwen Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music, and Politics in South Africa* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

¹⁶ Jon Michael Spencer, *The Rhythms of Black Folk: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism* (Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press, 1995), ix.

Hip-hop has been widely appropriated by non-black cultures all over the world, from Japan to Amsterdam.¹⁷ The genre has been shaped by international capital and local cultures alike. The glorified wealth and seemingly successful lifestyles led by commercially successful artists have no doubt lured many to engage in hip-hop culture. However, according to Adam Haupt, similar circumstances of racial discrimination, unemployment, and violence often expressed in American hip-hop were the primary inspirations for coloured South African youth.¹⁸

This thesis will contribute to existing scholarship on hip-hop by producing a comparative cultural history of South African and American hip-hop during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Through selected songs, videos, and artists, the aesthetics and lyrics of artists in both countries will be analyzed to explore representations of African identity in different socio-political contexts. Afrocentrism was prevalent in 1980s American hip-hop music. At the same time, hip-hop emerged in South Africa at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle and into the beginnings of South African democracy. In both countries, hip-hop was a genre that expressed aspects of black life and engaged in political discourse. In South Africa, hip-hop deliberated with changing meanings of race, nationalism, and social identity. While Afrocentric American hip-hop artists weren't necessarily aware of South African hip-hop, ongoing political issues within South Africa did invite commentary. On the other hand, South African hip-hop artists saw appeal in American hip-hop and its cultural aesthetics and sought to use the genre to engage with the anti-apartheid

¹⁷ Patrick Neate, *Where You're at: Notes from the Frontline of a Hip Hop Planet* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

¹⁸ Adam Haupt, *Stealing Empire: P2P, Intellectual Property and Hip-Hop Subversion* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council, 2008); Adam Haupt, 2014, "Hip Hop Activism Lecture 1," YouTube video, 57:57, April 16, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAJ40evBvCk>; Neate, *Where You're At*, 120.

struggle. The nuances of hip-hop in both countries allow us to explore the cultural relationship between people of African descent and forms of Pan-Africanism in different contexts.

Thesis Organization

Chapter 1 provides historical context in South Africa and the United States in order to highlight the dominant themes in black life in both countries. During the 1980s, racialized violence persisted in both countries: in the War on Drugs in the United States, and in the apartheid repression in the townships of South Africa.

Chapter 2 illustrates the emergence of hip-hop in the United States and dominant themes of “conscious” hip-hop. Present within these themes was Afrocentrism, which seeped from academia to popular culture and eventually into hip-hop where artists often centred African identity and history in their music. African American hip-hop artists such as X-Clan, Brand Nubian, Queen Latifah, and KRS-One expressed Afrocentric sentiments and showed awareness of the apartheid struggle; however, Afrocentric hip-hop also expressed contradictory understandings of Africa and neglected major aspects of African history by glorifying ancient African civilizations.

Chapter 3 explores the advent of hip-hop in South Africa through an analysis of renowned South African hip-hop group Prophets of Da City. As the apartheid regime was under local and global attack, South African coloured hip-hop artists appropriated American aesthetics in their critique of the regime. Coloured artists expressed anti-apartheid sentiment by challenging pre-existing notions of race during the final years of apartheid and into the democratic era.

Finally, the Conclusion probes the advent of hip-hop across Africa and the implications of the globalization of hip-hop culture.

Chapter One: Youth and Violence During the 1980s and 1990s

I. The United States

All you wanted to be, a soulja, like me,
They cuttin' off welfare,
They think crime is rising now,
You got whites killing blacks,
Cops killing blacks, and blacks killing blacks,
Shit just gon' get worse,
They just gon' become souljas,
Straight souljas.¹⁹

- 2Pac, "Soulja's Story" (1991)

Released in 1991 on his album, *2Pacalypse Now*, 2Pac's "Soulja's Story" was inspired by Black Panther Party member George Jackson. Jackson was initially imprisoned in 1961 under false accusations of stealing money from a gas station. After a decade in prison at California's San Quentin prison, his book, *Soledad Brother* was published in 1970. Dedicated to his younger brother, Jonathon Jackson, *Soledad Brother* highlighted the political aspects of incarceration and encouraged prisoners to participate in movements for social change as leaders and intellectuals.²⁰ Soon after the book's publication, police shot and killed Jonathan Jackson after he had raided a courtroom during a hearing for three black San Quentin inmates, demanding the release of his brother, and in protest of unjust incarceration of black Americans. A year later, George Jackson was also shot and killed by prison guards for allegedly attempting to escape. 2Pac's "Soulja's Story" recounts Jackson's narrative by framing it with the voice of "hustlers" instead of a Black Panther. In the first verse, 2Pac (also known as Tupac) speaks as a gang member and drug dealer

¹⁹ 2Pac, *2Pacalypse Now*, Santa Monica: Interscope Records. 1991.

²⁰ Lee Bernstein, "The Age of Jackson: George Jackson and the Culture of American Prisons in the 1970s," *The Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 3 (September 2007): 310.

who is imprisoned after murdering a police officer. In the second verse, 2Pac speaks as the younger brother of the inmate in the first verse, shot while trying to free his brother from prison. 2Pac's mother, Afeni Shakur, was a leading member of the New York chapter of the Black Panther Party and inspired him to use George Jackson's legacy in his music. Whilst influenced by his mother's politics, 2Pac's own experiences growing up in East Harlem, Baltimore, and Oakland during the 1980s also included encounters with gang violence and the many facets of the crack epidemic: "I grew up in the Panthers but in my teenage years, I grew up around hustlers. So this is my way of telling their story while also letting my mother know that I understand where I came from."²¹ During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the experiences of many African-American youth were similar to 2Pac's. While the symbol of George Jackson is important as it highlights ongoing concerns in black communities regarding unjust incarceration, the "soulja" symbol in the song positions young African-American men as soldiers engulfed in wars against law enforcement, poverty, drugs, and gangs.

During the 1980s, African-American communities throughout the United States were heavily impacted by the introduction of crack-cocaine onto the drug market. A crystallized, smoke-able form of cocaine, crack became increasingly affordable during the late 1970s. Packable for single hit quantities, it became even more affordable, and as such, a wider, more impoverished demographic had access to the drug. Cheap, strong, and addictive, crack was increasingly used among the urban poor, primarily by lower class African Americans, Hispanics,

²¹Vicky Tobak, "2Pac - 2Strong?!", *Beat Down Magazine*, 1992. <https://medium.com/@VikkiTobak/when-tupacs-mom-answers-the-door-2bdbed0ed95d>.

and youth.²² The expansion of the crack-cocaine market, combined with a lack of legitimate employment opportunities in inner cities, increased incentives to sell drugs. A decline in manufacturing jobs during the 1970s and an increase in suburban jobs within technological and service industries resulted in unemployment among male minorities in inner cities.²³ During the 1980s, “ghetto” poverty among African Americans grew in terms of absolute numbers of black people living in ghettos as well as a percentage of the black population.²⁴ In inner-city neighbourhoods where poverty rates were 40 percent or higher, residents endured challenging socio-economic conditions such as lack of infrastructure, overcrowding, and low education rates.²⁵ Ghettos additionally had negative effects on individuals’ economic prospects. The drug market provided a source of income, and, although drug trafficking criminal organizations existed prior to the 1980s, others were founded to service the booming crack-cocaine market. The introduction of crack into the drug market coincided with the increase of violence associated with drug dealing. Presumably drawn to the potential of crack as a highly addictive drug with potential to make extraordinary profits, gang members in inner city communities were more likely to be involved in drug trafficking and violence.²⁶ As a result, drug and gang violence linkages that were previously more tenuous or conditional may have intensified into violence

²² Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, “Crack in Context: Politics and Media in the Making of a Drug Scare,” *Contemporary Drug Problems* 16, no. 4 (1989): 535.

²³ Larry K. Gaines and Janine Kremling, eds., *Drugs, Crime, & Justice: Contemporary Perspectives*, Third Edition (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2014).

²⁴ Paul A. Jargowsky, “Ghetto Poverty Among Blacks in the 1980s,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 13, no. 2 (1994): 288.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁶ Gaines and Kremling, *Drugs, Crime, & Justice*, 252.

over territorial and economic interests.²⁷ The use of firearms, assault, and homicide were all commonplace in the arsenals of drug dealers and gangs in inner city black communities throughout America. Spiraling poverty, crack use and sale, and intra-racial violence became major concerns of black residents, community leaders, and law enforcement alike.

The proliferation of crack throughout the United States, combined with sensationalist media and political discourse, contributed to a public frenzy surrounding crack cocaine.²⁸ In 1972, President Richard Nixon had declared drugs “public enemy number one” and placed considerable funding towards the War on Drugs.²⁹ This “War” became a primary feature of the Republican party’s agenda and, despite the attempts of presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter to step away from the hysteria surrounding drugs, the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1981 elevated them to a place of primary importance. Soon, anti-drug rhetoric in politics and the media exaggerated the prevalence of crack use in America and became highly racialized. Although *freebasing*, a dangerous way of smoking powder cocaine, had been in practice for some time, politicians and the media demonized crack due to its association with urban minority populations. Consistently referring to the increase in crack use during the 1980s as an epidemic, politicians used crack as a scapegoat for serious and challenging social issues such as unemployment, homelessness, mental health, and education.³⁰ Media coverage of “the drug problem” continuously portrayed African Americans as enemies of the War on Drugs by

²⁷ Jeffrey Fagan and Ko-Lin Chin, “Initiation into Crack and Cocaine: A Tale of Two Epidemics,” *Contemporary Drug Problems* 16, no. 4 (1989): 582-583.

²⁸ Ben Fabens-Lassen, “A Cracked Remedy: The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 and Retroactive Application of the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010,” *Temple Law Review* 87, no. 3 (2015): 646.

²⁹ Paula Mallea, *The War on Drugs: A Failed Experiment* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014), 12.

³⁰ Reinerman and Levine, “Crack in Context,” 562.

overwhelmingly focusing on racist tropes of “crack whores”, “welfare queens”, and “crack babies”.³¹ Yet the blame was primarily placed on black men that were criminal drug dealers or gang members in African-American communities. Caught in the middle of the drug trade and anti-drug rhetoric were black residents, homeowners, inner-city churches, and community organizations that sought solutions to gang violence and drugs in their communities, but who were nonetheless affected by social policies criminalizing and stereotyping black men and women.³²

The reality of drug use and sale in black communities, combined with sensationalist public discourse on the drug war, meant all interested parties were in favour of enacting laws to regulate the increase in crack use. A bipartisan solution with support from black politicians and leaders seeking to staunch the crack crisis was the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. The Act federalized drug crime and restructured drug sentencing from rehabilitative to punitive. Between 1986 and 1990, federal spending on drug control went from under \$3.9 billion to \$11 billion.³³ Federal funding and military style weaponry approved under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act incentivized local and state pursuit of the War on Drugs. This included a militarization of policing, which would emphasize the criminalization and control of black and brown youth.³⁴ The Act also treated crack and cocaine differently despite the fact that they possess the same active ingredient. Possession of five grams of crack was punishable by a five-year mandatory

³¹ Kathleen R. Sandy, “The Discrimination Inherent in America’s Drug War: Hidden Racism Revealed by Examining the Hysteria over Crack,” *Alabama Law Review* 54, no. 2 (2003): 683.

³² Reinerman and Levine, “Crack in Context,” 566.

³³ D.M. Gorman, “The Irrelevance of Evidence in the Development of School-Based Drug Prevention Policy, 1986-1996,” *Evaluation Review* 22, no. 1 (February 1998): 121.

³⁴ Michelle Alexander and Cornel West, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012)

minimum sentence, while possession of any other substance, including powder cocaine, was considered a misdemeanour offence and punishable by a maximum of one year in prison.³⁵ Immediately following the enactment of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, incarceration rates skyrocketed in the United States. Disparate sentencing policies combined with racial profiling and military excess on behalf of law enforcement led to a severe overrepresentation of African Americans in prisons throughout the United States. Although studies show that people of all races used and sold drugs at exceptionally similar rates, between 1983 and 2000 three quarters of all people imprisoned for drug offences in the United States were black or Latino.³⁶ Furthermore, by 2000, African Americans were imprisoned at a rate more than twenty-six times that in 1983.³⁷ In her seminal work, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander rightfully equates the overrepresentation of African Americans in prisons to racial segregation: “Young black men today may be just as likely to suffer discrimination in employment, housing, public benefits, and jury service as a black man in the Jim Crow era- discrimination that is perfectly legal because it is based on one’s criminal record.”³⁸ The Anti-Drug Abuse Act became the backbone of the prison industrial complex and further entrenched the trauma of institutionalized racism in the United States.

The demonization of street drug dealers and drug users in the media and in government alike resulted in rampant police brutality and violence in black communities. For example, beginning in the mid-1980s, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) often used helicopter

³⁵ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2008), 49.

³⁶ Alexander and West, *The New Jim Crow*, 96-97.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 175-176.

surveillance and tanks equipped with battering rams in the working-class black neighbourhood of South Central Los Angeles.³⁹ The issue of police brutality in black neighbourhoods received national attention when in 1991 an African-American motorist by the name of Rodney King was chased and pulled over by police in Los Angeles for speeding. Following the car chase, King was severely beaten by three white police officers, whilst seventeen other police officers, including a sergeant of the LAPD, gathered and watched.⁴⁰ Unbeknownst to the officers, an amateur cameraman filmed the event and sold the film to a local television station. The video depicting the brutality of white officers towards an African-American victim was played thousands of times on television stations throughout the United States. As the incident received increased press and television coverage, the LAPD was scrutinized for its brutality, deceitfulness, and motives.⁴¹

Although media coverage of the Rodney King incident was critical of the LAPD, on April 29, 1992, four LAPD officers charged in the King brutality case were acquitted. Citizens in South Central L.A. erupted in protests that would escalate to assault, arson, and looting throughout the Los Angeles area. The L.A. riots disrupted the entire city: LAX was shut down, public transportation came to a halt, the mayor imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew, and the president sent in the Army and the Marines.⁴² During the L.A. riots, 54 people died, 2,328 were injured, and almost \$900 million in damages had been done.⁴³ The riots came as a direct

³⁹ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 49.

⁴⁰ Ronald N. Jacobs, *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 81.

⁴¹ Ibid, 86.

⁴² Joseph Darda, "MLK at the LA Riots: Civil Rights, Memory, and Neoliberalism in Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 60, no. 2 (2014): 198.

⁴³ Ibid.

response to continued unchecked violence towards black communities at the hands of law enforcement. Due to similarities with the 1965 Watts riots, observers equated the 1992 riots with the racial tensions of the Civil Rights Era. According to the White House under President George H. W. Bush, however, “the brutality of a mob” could not be seen as legitimate demand for political and social reform.⁴⁴

The mass incarceration of black men and women in the United States altered black communities and black family life. In addition to a perpetuation of harassment by police officers, those released from prison came home to far fewer job opportunities and faced social exclusion.⁴⁵ Often times, individuals returned from prison having forfeited their rights to vote and serve on juries. The tremendous proportion of black men in prison also meant that black children were increasingly likely to be raised in single parent households. Although presidential candidate Bill Clinton vowed in 1992 to reform drug policy by supporting drug education and treatment, his administration mimicked his Republican predecessors, notoriously rejecting a U.S. Sentencing Commission recommendation to eliminate disparities between crack and powder cocaine sentencing.⁴⁶ Without any reform, police brutality and mass incarceration remained characteristic of black life in the United States into the 1990s and beyond.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Alexander and West, *The New Jim Crow*, 138.

⁴⁶ David G. Savage and Paul Richter, “Clinton to Sign Bill Preserving Stiff Penalties for Crack: Drugs: It Would Block a Move to Treat Powdered Cocaine Violations Equally. Opponents See a Bias, since Most of Those Facing the Tougher Terms Are Black.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1995, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-10-27/news/mn-61788_1_crack-cocaine.

As African Americans became increasingly pessimistic about their prospects in American society, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed resurgence in black nationalism in the United States.⁴⁷ As a response to media distortions of black communities, increasing tensions in race relations, and the development of the crack cocaine economy, Afrocentric black nationalism proposed a transformation in African-American cultural values as the solution. Instead of race and class inequality, Afrocentrism understood the problems of the black “underclass” to stem from a lack of proper values and the failure of American schools to educate black youth.⁴⁸ Afrocentrism, therefore, saw “traditional values” of ancient African civilizations as a way to instill African pride in black youth and prevent a whole host of social problems. Afrocentrism became part of popular black culture, manifesting itself in the hairstyles, clothing, and music of the era. As we will see in the next chapter, Afrocentrism was also prevalent in hip-hop.

II. South Africa

Although written to highlight his own experiences with poverty, gangs, drugs, and violence as a young black man in the United States, 2Pac’s depiction of normalized violence, intra-racial and interracial, was highly relatable to black and coloured South African youth. Born in 1973 and raised in Cape Town’s Cape Flats, ex-gang member Ernesto de Almeida was nicknamed 2Pac for his matching tattoos with the rapper. However, de Almeida also attested to the importance of 2Pac’s music to black and coloured youth similarly affected by violence, “I’m

⁴⁷ Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 130.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

a product of what had happened to us- specifically, apartheid... Tupac is my friend in the struggle. Tupac is the voice within my head... [he is] a prophet... because he speaks reality.”⁴⁹

2Pac’s lyrics, “You got whites killing blacks, cops killing blacks, and blacks killing blacks” resonated in South Africa equally as in the United States. While the 2Pac quotation at the opening of this chapter frames the dominant theme of violence that encapsulated the lives of black youth in the United States, in South Africa, black youth were often literal soldiers against the apartheid regime under which violence was inescapable during the 1980s and 1990s.

Although structural violence and repression were central and normalised features of the apartheid state, political violence accompanied conflicts between different factions within the vigorous anti-apartheid movement and exacerbated the role of violence in everyday black life in South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁰ These decades were characterized by pervasive racism, socio-economic instability, and state-sanctioned violence that disproportionately affected people of colour in both countries. Violence in South Africa mobilized youth engagement in politics and established a culture of activism among youth.

In 1948, the Nationalist Party introduced South African apartheid through a system of laws that categorized all residents into one of four racial categories: black (African), white, coloured (mixed-race), and Asian. These categories strictly dictated the opportunities and rights available to South Africans, legalized white supremacy, and caused prolonged social and economic inequality. In addition to segregated public amenities and service, the apartheid

⁴⁹ Dariusz Dziewanski, “Twenty Years Later, Tupac Lives In The Cape Flats,” *The Daily Vox*, September 13, 2016, <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/twenty-years-later-tupac-lives-cape-flats/>.

⁵⁰ N. C. Manganyi, ed., *Political Violence and the Struggle in South Africa* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

government denied black and coloured people the right to vote in national elections and prohibited sexual relations between black and white South Africans. Apartheid also enforced mass relocations of black, coloured, and Asian people, stripping them of their assets and forcing them into segregated urban communities known as townships. Located at the peripheries of major urban cities, such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, townships housed work forces in highly controlled and policed regions. While mining companies and large employers built rudimentary housing, transportation, and health facilities, living conditions in townships were deplorable. Typical township homes were described as being “matchboxes” with basic plumbing, while streets went unpaved and lacked lighting and road signs.⁵¹ Apartheid laws also dispossessed Africans of self-subsistent incomes by forcing them into industrial and labour class jobs reliant on wages. Furthermore, private businesses such as restaurants, bars, and music venues were made illegal. As a result, poverty was rampant among black communities, and economic mobility was impossible for a vast majority of township residents. Black men and women additionally experienced daily violence and trauma through harassment, “disappearances”, arbitrary arrests, and detention at the hands of apartheid law enforcement.⁵²

Non-white South Africans protested the enactment of oppressive laws throughout the twentieth century; however, protestors were continuously met with violent repression. Following a period of crushing political repression of anti-apartheid movements that had begun in the 1960s, the Soweto Uprising of 1976 marked a turning point in the anti-apartheid movement.⁵³ On

⁵¹ Owen Crankshaw and Susan Parnell, “Interpreting the 1994 African Township Landscape,” in *Blank--: Architecture, Apartheid and After* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 1998).

⁵² Brandon Hamber, “‘Have No Doubt it is Fear in the Land’ An Exploration of the Continuing Cycles of Violence in South Africa,” *Southern African Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 12, no. 1 (2000): 6.

⁵³ Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination*, 174.

June 16, 1976, ten to fifteen thousand students gathered to protest Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools. Before the protestors reached their final destination, South African police opened fire on the crowd and killed at least 25 students.⁵⁴ Although the Soweto Uprising was one instance in an immense legacy of racial violence in South Africa, the government's use of fatal and severe brutality towards black youth reinvigorated anti-apartheid movements and received global condemnation.⁵⁵ Anti-apartheid protests immediately surged in cities across South Africa, and between June 1976 and February 1977, approximately six thousand people were arrested, four thousand injured, and seven hundred died.⁵⁶ Many were youth.

Adamant on maintaining white supremacy, the apartheid regime under Prime Minister P. W. Botha granted superficial political representation to marginalized groups by introducing the Black Local Authorities Act in 1982 and the Tricameral Parliament in 1983. The Black Local Authorities Act was meant to allow the establishment of local communities, village councils and town councils for black communities in particular areas. To some people of colour, concessions of political power were seen as opportunities to expand political representation and gradually improve socio-economic conditions for the non-white demographic in the country. For much of South Africa's black majority population, however, and those skeptical of the government's divide-and-conquer method, both the Black Local Authorities Act and the Tricameral Parliament further entrenched apartheid and hindered full political, social, and economic liberation.

⁵⁴ Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC & the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London; Bloomington; J. Currey, 1992), 81.

⁵⁵ Ruth Kerkham Simbao, "The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Soweto Uprisings: Reading the Shadow in Sam Nzima's Iconic Photograph of Hector Pieterse," *African Arts* 40, no. 2 (June 2007): 52.

⁵⁶ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 162.

Increasingly frustrated with conditions of poverty, violence, and lack of political equality, urban black youth chose to spearhead a movement of political violence against the apartheid state. Political commentators often identified these protestors as ‘youths’, while they were also known as “‘comrades’, ‘*amabutho*’ (warriors), or ‘young lions’” within activist circles.⁵⁷ On the eve of the first black local council elections in 1983, protestors detonated a petrol bomb at the home of the former deputy mayor of Soweto. As the elections proceeded, protestors also waged attacks on the homes of five election candidates in townships surrounding Port Elizabeth.⁵⁸ Intrigued by the youth protestors, the African National Congress (ANC), then operating underground and through its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), tracked down and recruited many black youth involved in the protests. During the violence of the 1980s, youth in several places across South Africa participated in vigilantism through people’s courts. Militant youth were known for severely punishing criminals or those considered to be deviant in townships.⁵⁹ Although self-regulation and community discipline were aspects of rural and urban communities in South Africa long before the 1980s, execution and violence became increasingly common during the mid 1980s as a response to the government’s attempts at launching counterinsurgencies that had “collaborators” in townships. The exile or arrest of many township activists contributed to ruthless vigilante justice, notably through the severe act of “necklacing” in which the criminal, collaborator, or deviant was burned alive with a fuel-soaked car tire around his or her body.⁶⁰ As youth groups in townships attempted to challenge and replace the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Lars Buur and Steffen Jensen, “Introduction: Vigilantism and the Policing of Everyday Life in South Africa,” *African Studies* 63, no. 2 (December 2004): 142.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 150.

apartheid regime's authority, the apartheid regime used imagery of violence in townships to depict young black groups as inherently immature, at risk of political agitation, and prone to violence.⁶¹

In attempts to delegitimize banned anti-apartheid organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the UDF, the South African government claimed township protests and riots were deliberately violent. In a group of townships known as the Vaal Triangle, located 45 miles south of Johannesburg, members of the Vaal Civic Association agreed to boycott high rent charges. On September 3, 1984, stay-away protests from work and schools became violent in the townships of Sharpeville, Sebokeng, and Evaton as protestors barricaded streets, set fire to buildings, and stormed police with petrol bombs and bricks. By the end of the week, over 40 people, including the black deputy mayors of Evaton and Sharpeville, were dead.⁶² Although the strikers were demonstrating against rent hikes, the South African government accused the ANC, the SACP, and the UDF of using rent increases as an excuse to rouse a revolutionary climate.⁶³ The South African government continued to promulgate the narrative of deliberate and organized riots and responded aggressively to the alleged role of the of the ANC, the SACP, and the UDF in the glorification of violence.

In response to the wave of youth attacks, the South African Defence Force (SADF) and the South African Police conducted a series of raids on townships and detained hundreds of youth activists. On July 21, 1985, due to continued violent clashes between protestors and law

⁶¹ Ibid., 144.

⁶² Thula Simpson, "'Umkhonto We Sizwe, We Are Waiting for You': The ANC and the Township Uprising, September 1984 – September 1985," *South African Historical Journal* 61, no. 1 (March 2009): 159.

⁶³ Ibid., 163.

enforcement, the South African government declared an indefinite state of emergency in 36 townships around Johannesburg and the Eastern Cape. The state of emergency was declared in response to constant violence since 1983, which justified the increased use of military force by the police and the militia. Townships in the Transvaal and the Eastern Cape were placed under martial law, and during the first week of the emergency sixteen died as police detained 1000 dissidents from various townships. Riots, looting, school boycotts, and continued violent confrontation between black youth and police characterized the following months. In the nine years after January 1985, the annual average of fatalities from political violence was over 1,850. This was over a hundred times that of the rate between 1976 and 1985. Violence in townships was characteristic of the apartheid regime, anti-apartheid resistance, and the black youth experience in South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s.

Amongst some of the most intense violence in South Africa from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s was violence that took place between supporters of two different anti-apartheid organizations in Natal and Zululand: Zulu nationalist supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and supporters of the UDF-aligned ANC. The conflict between the two groups began in the early 1980s following the murder of local UDF leader Victoria Mxenge.⁶⁴ Those involved were mostly men; however, women and girls were eventually expected to declare their loyalty to either group. The IFP was thought to be mostly adults with a strong youth component, while the ANC was believed to be mostly youth.⁶⁵ As both sides sought to recruit members and force

⁶⁴ Debby Bonnin, "Legacies of Political Violence: An Examination of Political Conflict in Mpumalanga Township, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 62, no. 1 (2007): 59.

⁶⁵ S. Nombuso Dlamini, "The Construction, Meaning and Negotiation of Ethnic Identities in KwaZulu Natal," *Social Identities* 4, no. 3 (October 1998): 476.

youth to declare their allegiance, schools were a primary site of contestation. Scholars often describe the conflict as a civil war and attribute the source of the conflict either to political factors such as rivalries at the national or regional level, or socio-economic factors such as the politics of identity and culture of various communities in the regions.⁶⁶ Despite a diversity of explanations for the violence, the form in which the violence took place was especially harsh. The violence encompassed the whole community and involved killing, arson, and rape. In the Mpumalanga Township, most schools closed in 1987 as young men were being targeted and killed on both sides. School closures, however, only gave youth more free time in which to target members of the opposing faction. Although violence initially targeted individuals, if youth could not find the person they were targeting, they would attack other members of the person's household. This led to the perception of entire families sharing political affiliations of a single family member who was involved with a given party. As a result, violence against women and those previously uninvolved in direct political conflict became common.⁶⁷ To protect their households and avoid repercussions from concerned or angry family members, many young men fled from home, however, opposing groups still attacked families, raped women, and set fire to homes.

Since the Soweto Uprising, the spread of violence throughout South Africa in the 1980s included coloured communities. These communities had created their own political organizations to express assimilationist aspirations as far back as the 1880s, however, it was not until the 1970s when the popularization of Black Consciousness ideology became a politically contentious issue

⁶⁶ Debby Bonnin, "Gender, Age and the Politicisation of Space during the Time of Political Violence in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa," *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 5 (May 28, 2014): 556.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 557.

again. Following the increased momentum behind the anti-apartheid movement during the 1980s, along with the non-racial ideologies of the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front (UDF), coloured rejectionism was reinvigorated.⁶⁸ According to official South African census reports, between 1980 and 1996 coloured people composed roughly 11 percent of the South African population.⁶⁹ During the anti-apartheid movement, recognition of coloured identity was seen as a concession to apartheid thinking. The peak of coloured rejectionism, however, occurred during the late 1980s and mostly among a vocal and politicized minority.⁷⁰

The 1990s in South Africa seemed to be filled with reform and change for black South Africans. The South African government was urged to reform apartheid as anti-apartheid organizations continued to protest and international governments imposed economically debilitating trade sanctions. Media, news outlets, music, and popular culture in the United States also expressed condemnation of segregation in South Africa. In 1989, widespread defiance campaigns of civil disobedience challenged segregated government-controlled facilities. The government and anti-apartheid organizations reached a stalemate, and both parties considered negotiations to be beneficial. In December 1989, newly elected President F. W. De Klerk met with Nelson Mandela, and an agreement was made to secure the release of Mandela from prison. In 1990, the government lifted bans on major apartheid organizations and negotiations between the National Party and the ANC led to the Multilateral National Peace Accord (MNPA) in 1991. However, violent conflict between IFP supporters and ANC supporters continued after 1990

⁶⁸ Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 6.

⁶⁹ Tukufu Zuberi, Amson Sibanda, and Eric O. Udjo, *The Demography of South Africa* (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 2005) 12.

⁷⁰ Adhikari, *Not White Enough*, 160.

when the government announced that the ANC would be unbanned. During this time, the repressive forms of social control utilized by the apartheid government became increasingly ineffective, and between 1990 and 1994 conflict between political parties seeking to prioritize their agendas heightened.⁷¹ The apartheid government, which orchestrated massacres to draw focus from apartheid to “tribal animosities,” further provoked the violence.⁷² During the negotiations between anti-apartheid organizations and the South African government that lasted from February 1990 to April 1994, nearly fifteen thousand people were killed due to political violence, whereas during the five years prior the South African Institute of Race Relations reported 5,387 deaths.⁷³ Although the apartheid regime was formally eliminated by 1994, the country continues to carry the legacy of racial violence that took place under apartheid.

The end of legalized apartheid was no doubt a momentous occasion for people of colour in South Africa. Following agreements to hold elections, on May 10, 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa’s first black president. The realities of urban black life, however, could not change as fast as government legislation. In addition to the loss of life and instability derived from the apartheid regime, violence continued to affect black communities after apartheid’s end. Furthermore, tensions between black and white communities were not eradicated with legalized apartheid. The memory of government and political violence occupied the minds of many South Africans despite the restorative work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and impoverished black communities continued to encounter the highest rates of

⁷¹ Hamber, “‘Have No Doubt It Is Fear in the Land,’” 6.

⁷² Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946-1994*, Blacks in the Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 158.

⁷³ Ibid., 7.

violent crime after 1994.⁷⁴ Following constitutional reform and elections in 1994, three of the first ANC governments struggled to address issues of poverty and income inequality inherited from the apartheid regime. Between 1995 and 2000, people with incomes below U.S. \$1 per day increased by 1.8 million while those earning less than U.S. \$2 per day increased by 2.3 million.⁷⁵ Those most affected by the deepening of poverty were those already underprivileged under the apartheid regime: poorer, working class people of color. The significance of the dismantling of the apartheid regime should be commended and celebrated; however, it is extremely important to recognize the persistent legacy of apartheid in South Africa, and how it continues to characterize the urban black experience.

⁷⁴ Oscar A. Barbarin and Linda M. Richter, *Mandela's Children: Growing up in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 89.

⁷⁵ Ian Shapiro and Kahreen Tebeau, eds., *After Apartheid: Reinventing South Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 25.

Chapter Two: “The Motherland”: Afrocentrism and Pan-Africanist Discourse in American

Hip-Hop

I. Introduction

Since the dominance of gangsta rap beginning in the mid 1990s, fans and critics of hip-hop often criticize the subgenre as a superficial, sellout form of hip-hop due to its glorification of violence, drugs, and sex. On the other hand, Afrocentric and black nationalist hip-hop music produced prior to the mid-1990s is labelled “conscious” and praised as the real and authentic form of the genre for its seemingly nuanced political and social commentary. One only has to drift into YouTube comment sections, hip-hop artists’ social media pages, and hip-hop media outlets to see fans and critics claim authenticity and “realness” for artists they support. This chapter will illustrate how African-American hip-hop artists, in an attempt to depict an empowering African history, used conflicting imagery of Africa. Deriving from Afrocentric theory, Afrocentric hip-hop artists during the late 1980s began to portray certain symbols and narratives that were thought to be representative of African culture and African diaspora communities. Most prominently, artists drew on glorified narratives of ancient Nile Valley civilizations of Egypt and Nubia, while adopting the textiles and visual aesthetics of a variety of West African societies. Afrocentrism and representations of Africa in Afrocentric hip-hop sought to contest Eurocentric narratives of African history. The emphasis on glorified ancient Nile Valley civilizations, however, largely abandoned and ignored aspects of African history that didn’t operate within the framework of “civilization”. Hip-hop artists that chose to adopt Afrocentric ideas of an African past therefore still relegated a large majority of Africa and its history to the confines of Eurocentric and white narration. Although hip-hop artists engaged with

limited notions of African history in Afrocentric ideas, the symbols and narratives employed by artists were highly important in fashioning a new form of African identity for a generation of African-American youth in the context of racialized violence and poverty during the 1980s. Exceptions to the tendency of hip-hop artists to emphasize an ancient African past were references to the ongoing apartheid movement in South Africa. References, however, were rare and indicated a lack of engagement with Africa and African culture beyond the popularized theories of Afrocentrism.

According to historian Ronald Walters, the independence of African countries during the 1960s and 1970s led to a reassessment of blackness in the United States. As a result, African-American youth began to explore cultural heritage in Africa and adopt Pan-African identities, sparking affinity with other black people.⁷⁶ The emergence of Afrocentrism among African-American academics in the 1980s also contributed to the reassessment of African-American identity. According to sociologist Patricia Hill Collins,

Afrocentrism reinterpreted African-American ethnicity by developing African-influenced cultural referents that prescribed the overall values of African diaspora communities, provided social cohesion based on those values, and facilitated the emotional healing of African Americans.⁷⁷

As the coming of age of the hip-hop generation aligned with the dissemination of Afrocentrism outside the academy, hip-hop artists presented specific ideals through the instruments, lyrics, clothes, and symbols that they chose to adopt.

⁷⁶ Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, 69.

⁷⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 83.

Sociologist Tricia Rose argues that the evolution of commercial hip-hop since the mid 1990s “represents a new fascination with old and firmly rooted racial fantasies about sexual deviance (pimps and hoes) and crime and violence (gangstas, thugs, and hustlers).”⁷⁸ She attributes the nearly 40% increase in hip-hop record sales between 1990 and 1998 to the sale of black ghetto life to white youth.⁷⁹ Whereas earlier gangsta rap discussed gang life and street crime as troubling last resorts for black youth, the more that hip-hop became a mainstream, commercial success, the more the complex and ambivalent characters of the gangsta and the street hustler featured in gangsta rap devolved into apolitical, simple minded, comic stereotypes; music about black violence and sexual excess proved profitable.⁸⁰ Alongside artists’ willingness to satisfy the consumer demand of a fantasized black ghetto life for financial gain, corporate say in which artists were played regularly on corporate-owned radio stations marginalized subgenres, such as party, political, and Afrocentric rap, out of the corporate-promoted mainstream.⁸¹

According to Rose, prior to the “hyper-gangsta-ization” of hip-hop, overt political messages and imagery in popular hip-hop music were common and derived from various social movements.⁸² For example, hip-hop group Public Enemy often sampled speeches and images of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. in their songs and videos.⁸³ Against the dominance of

⁷⁸ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 229.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁸¹ Ibid., 219-220.

⁸² Ibid., 3, 100.

⁸³ Public Enemy, *Party for Your Right to Fight*, New York: Def Jam, 1988; PublicEnemyVEVO, 2010, “Public Enemy - Can’t Truss It,” YouTube video, 5:29, October 22, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=am9BqZ6eA5c&feature=youtu.be>; PublicEnemyVEVO, 2010, “Public Enemy - By The Time I Get To Arizona,” YouTube video, 5:46, August 27, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrFOb_f7ubw&feature=youtu.be.

commercial gangsta rap, subgenres featuring proclamations of black history and society were identified as “conscious” hip-hop,⁸⁴ a term applied to hip-hop that is political or *conscious* of social issues and phenomena in some way.⁸⁵ Although the complicated figures of early gangsta rap were representative of social and political issues, gangsta rap was criticized for its alleged celebration of a culture of violence, crime, prison culture, and sexual deviance.⁸⁶ Where later forms of gangsta rap were labelled superficial, Afrocentric hip-hop that was critical of white supremacy, classism, and racial exploitation were labelled conscious.

Conscious hip-hop still existed after the mid-1990s and American hip-hop artists continued to take inspiration from 1960s nationalist movements and Afrocentric ideas. Conscious hip-hop is very much alive and favoured among many within the growing hip-hop fan base; artists such as Immortal Technique, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and Common are quintessential conscious hip-hop artists that have had long and successful careers. After the mid 1990s, however, Afrocentric and 1960s nationalist derived themes in hip-hop were increasingly excluded from the corporate promoted mainstream of hip-hop music, yet often continued to be praised as the authentic form of the genre by hip-hop fans.

The tendency of hip-hop artists to emphasize an ancient African past was disrupted by a few references to the ongoing anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Although Afrocentrism affirmed racial unity with Africans, it was selective in its definition of African. As argued by Kwame Anthony Appiah, Pan-Africanist notions that understood Africans to share general

⁸⁴ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 28.

⁸⁵ “40 Rappers Who Have Been Socially Conscious in 2016,” *XXL*, August 18, 2016, <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2016/08/rappers-socially-conscious-in-2016/>.

⁸⁶ Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 62.

commonalities were inherently racist as they operated on the white imposed category of the “Negro”.⁸⁷ Although Afrocentrism understood African Americans as African, its lack of inclusion of African cultures and people beyond ancient Egypt in its definition of influential blackness indicates an exclusive definition of African in its Pan-Africanism.

During the 1980s, Pan-Africanist movements within the diaspora were keenly aware of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. African-American academics, politicians, and activists had been actively engaging with South African anti-apartheid movements since the mid-1960s, organizing conferences and demonstrations, and even visiting Africa to survey prospects of change in white-minority-ruled countries.⁸⁸ As the apartheid regime became increasingly violent towards activists during the late 1970s onwards, condemnation of apartheid entered global discourse. Critical references to apartheid in Afrocentric hip-hop, however, remained few and far between.

II. Hip-Hop and Afrocentrism

In 1990, New York based hip-hop group Brand Nubian released their debut studio album, *One For All*. On the album cover, the four members of the group, Grand Puba, Lord Jamar, Derek X (also known as Sadat X), and DJ Alamo, posed in colourful attire wearing large beaded and wooden jewellery (see fig. 1).

⁸⁷Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸⁸ Ibid., 75.



Figure 1. Brand Nubian's *One For All* album cover.⁸⁹

The image of the group is bordered with purple, green, and red parallel zig zags, customary of art from Burkina Faso.⁹⁰ One track on the album was named after the group, “Brand Nubian”, and sampled a mix of rhythm and blues, soul, and jazz, records from the 1970s. On the outro of the song, Derek X, Lord Jamar, and Grand Puba each speak over the beat:

Nubian, a native or inhabitant of Nubia,
 Nubian, A member of one of a group of African tribes that formed a powerful empire,
 between Egypt and Ethiopia from the 6th to 14th century,
 Nubian, any of several languages spoken in the central and northern Sudan,
 And that's why we call ourselves Brand Nubian.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Sha Be Allah, “Today in Hip-Hop History: Brand Nubian Drops Their Debut Album ‘One For All’ 27 Years Ago,” *The Source*, December 4, 2017, <http://thesource.com/2017/12/04/today-hip-hop-history-brand-nubian-drops-debut-album-one-27-years-ago>

⁹⁰ Christopher D. Roy, “Signs and Symbols in African Art: Graphic Patterns in Burkina Faso,” The University of Iowa Museum of Art, <https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/38?start=11>.

⁹¹ Brand Nubian, *Brand Nubian*, New York: Elektra Records, 1990.

This short segment of the song and the name of the group itself represents one of the primary aspects of Afrocentric theory: ancient African civilization. Although it is unclear whether Brand Nubian themselves were reading and directly engaging with the works of Afrocentric theorists and academics, the group was espousing a powerful aspect of Afrocentrism from within African-American popular knowledge.⁹² Afrocentric theory positions the ancient Nile Valley civilizations of Egypt and Nubia as central to African-American identity. According to prominent Afrocentric theorist Molefi Kete Asante, “The anteriority of the classical African civilizations must be entertained by any Africological inquiry, simply because without that perspective, our work hangs in the air, detached, and isolated, or becomes nothing more than a subset of the Eurocentric disciplines.”⁹³ The theories proposed by Afrocentric scholars sought to refute Eurocentric knowledge systems in academia while creating unifying notions of blackness for African Americans. Though the works of Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop predated the emergence of Afrocentrism in the United States, Afrocentric scholars praised his role in “making the blackness of Ancient Egyptians into an operational scientific principle.”⁹⁴ Diop regarded Egypt as the source of much of Western civilization and encouraged Africans of the diaspora to turn to Kemet as the foundation of African cultures. Martin Bernal’s seminal work *Black Athena* (1987-2006) contributed to Afrocentric representations of African history and sparked academic

⁹² Clarence Earl Walker, *We Can't Go Home Again: An Argument About Afrocentrism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xxiii.

⁹³ Molefi Kete Asante, “African American Studies: The Future of the Discipline,” in *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), 103.

⁹⁴ Ama Mazama, “The Afrocentric Paradigm,” in *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), 10-22.

debates throughout the United States.⁹⁵ Bernal argued that European histories of classical Greece eradicated the roles of Egypt and Phoenicia as precursors of Greek and European culture. In the three-volume work, Bernal hoped to “lessen European cultural arrogance.”⁹⁶ Indeed, Afrocentric academics sought to establish links between modern racist notions of blackness and ancient Egyptian civilizations.⁹⁷

For members of the hip-hop generation, the remembrance of a powerful Egyptian civilization associated with African Americans contributed to a shared belief of blackness as influential. Centring on blackness as a way to achieve community and spirituality is a tenet of Afrocentric thought; shared beliefs, community, and spirituality as emergent through Afrocentrism also coincided with the traditional role of religiosity in African-American civil society. With its focus on Egypt, however, Afrocentrism was reproducing Eurocentric ideas of power and civilization, and neglected to include other African cultures and societies in its notion of influential or important blackness. Although Afrocentric theorists premised that black Americans derived cultural and philosophical identity from West African “tribes”, association with civilizations likely linked to African American ancestry such as societies of Sub-Saharan Africa were merely aesthetic on Brand Nubian’s album cover and illustrate the lack of exploration of Sub-Saharan African societies and civilizations in Afrocentrism.⁹⁸ Intended to

⁹⁵ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

⁹⁶ Molly Myerowitz Levine, “Review Article: The Marginalization of Martin Bernal,” ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers, *Classical Philology* 93, no. 4 (1998): 345.

⁹⁷ Ann Macy Roth, “Building Bridges to Afrocentrism: A Letter to My Egyptological Colleagues A,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 775, no. 1 (June 1995): 313–26.

⁹⁸ Austin, *Achieving Blackness*, 113.

empower all people of African descent, the glorification of ancient Egypt instead reproduced narrow conceptions of black advancement.

Symbols of Egyptian antiquity were commonplace in Afrocentric American hip-hop. The music video for the Brooklyn based hip-hop group X-Clan's "Funkin' Lesson" (1990), was rife with ancient Egyptian and Afrocentric symbolism.⁹⁹ The opening of the video additionally spoke explicitly to black nationalism in the United States. Members of the group and several other African-American men and women appear on a television screen within the video, all of whom are wearing beaded wooden necklaces, some with the *ankh*, an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol for life. Everyone on the television screen is wearing traditional African kofia hats, five of which are decorated with a green circle and a red ankh on top (see fig. 2).



Figure 2. Opening scene of X-Clan's "Funkin' Lesson" video.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ 2pacShakurImmortal, 2012, "X Clan - Funkin' Lesson," YouTube video, 4:48, October 3, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ay0O_Jtf6Ts&list=RDay0O_Jtf6Ts&t=41.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Professor X, a founding member of X-Clan, performs a monologue while the camera zooms away from the television to depict a young, angry white man smashing a beer bottle on a table and damaging furniture throughout the room. Professor X's monologue is as follows:

Peace. I'm called Professor X the Overseer. In the early 1900s our brother set out on voyage. His mission: black nationalism. His oath: freedom or death. In the 60s, brothers like Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown. The mission: black nationalism. The oath: freedom or death. In the 90s. The mission: black nationalism. The messengers: X-Clan. The movement: Black Watch. The oath: freedom or death.¹⁰¹

The symbol of the *ankh* remains prevalent throughout the video and was used in ancient Egypt to represent life and regeneration.¹⁰² Meanwhile, the use of green, red, and black on the hats is meant to invoke the colours of the Pan-African flag, also known as the Black Liberation flag. The image of the enraged white man during the monologue is clearly meant to symbolize the displeasure of white supremacy in the face of African-American liberation and protest. The video goes on to depict several African cultural referents such as wooden African cultural artifacts and dancers in a field wearing head-wraps and patterned garments alongside drummers using *djembe* drums of the Mandingue people of West Africa.¹⁰³ Although the use of the *djembe* by African Americans was a way by which to connect with African traditions and identify with Africa, the depiction of the drummers and dancers in the field adopted a highly essentialist perspective of Africa that contradicted the lived realities of most African people.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama, "Ankh," *Encyclopedia of African Religion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 60-61.

¹⁰³ Tanya Y. Price, "Rhythms of Culture: Djembe and African Memory in African-American Cultural Traditions," *Black Music Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2013): 227.

Professor X's monologue also deserves attention. Beginning the monologue with a reference to Marcus Garvey's Black Star Shipping Line, Professor X affirms the Pan-Africanist sentiments of X-Clan. Garvey's theories of Pan-African unity were considered instrumental in the creation of Afrocentric black nationalism.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, the allusions to Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown reference the Civil Rights Movement, but also affirm Pan-Africanist sentiment through Carmichael's figure and the Black Power Movement through both Carmichael and Brown.¹⁰⁵ Above all, speaking during the 90s, Professor X identifies X-Clan as the new "messengers" of African-American liberation. Instead of identifying with any particular socio-political movement, however, X-Clan chooses to identify with the Black Watch Movement. The son of a civil rights activist, Professor X founded Black Watch in the late 1980s to promote social awareness and community activism. According to Brother J, another member of X-Clan, Black Watch "was [intended] for people to experience Black Nationalist values in hip-hop music."¹⁰⁶ By presenting themselves within the lineage of a century of African-American activism, it is evident that X-Clan saw their music and hip-hop culture as continuations of black nationalism and protest. Afrocentricity in X-Clan's music, videos, and social engagement represent refashioned traditions of black identity and resistance that would include Afrocentric ideals of nationalism and community involvement in the hip-hop generation. Hip-hop nationalism's adoption of Afrocentric imagery, however, reproduced racist imagery

¹⁰⁴ Mazama, "The Afrocentric Paradigm," 19.

¹⁰⁵ Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 203.

¹⁰⁶ XXL Staff. "Brother J of X-Clan R.I.P. Professor X: August 4, 1956 – March 17, 2006." *XXL*, March 16, 2007. <http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2007/03/brother-j-of-x-clan-rip-professor-x-august-4-1956-march-17-2006/>.

of Africa as it failed to include the diversity and reality of Africa beyond ancient Egypt and homogenized “tribal” culture.

KRS-One (Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone) is widely considered one of the most influential conscious hip-hop artists of all time. He initially emerged onto the New York hip-hop scene as a member of Boogie Down Productions (BDP) in 1987. In July of 1989, BDP released their third album, *Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip-Hop on Jive*. The eighth track on the album, titled “You Must Learn”, was written and performed by KRS-One and specifically represented the concerns of Afrocentric academics through hip-hop. The video for “You Must Learn” begins in a classroom with KRS speaking to a group of black high school students, “Genesis, Chapter 11, Verse 10 explains the genealogy of Shem. Shem was a black man in Africa, if you repeat this fact, they can’t laugh at ya.”¹⁰⁷ An administrator, however, interrupts KRS saying, “Get outta here!” and then orders two security guards to escort KRS out of the class. As KRS attempts to continue telling the story, the black students stand up and display anger with the abrupt end of their lesson. The administrator rolls up a pull-down map of Africa displayed in the front of the class. After KRS picks himself up following the debacle with the security guards, the song begins. In the first verse of the song, KRS simply rhymes and discusses the “force” of knowledge. However, he notes that the normalization of whiteness and white narratives in American schools is damaging to black students:

And this has got to stop, See Spot run, run get Spot,
Insulting to a Black mentality, a Black way of life,
Or a jet black family, so I include with one concern, that
You must learn.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ BoogieDwnProdVEVO, 2018, “Boogie Down Productions - You Must Learn,” YouTube video, 5:39, January 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78gsIUjRV9k>.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

“See Spot run,” refers to the dog in the popular basal readers *Dick and Jane*. Dick and Jane are the white protagonists of a series of books that were often used in American schools to teach reading. In the second verse, KRS continues by highlighting the importance of teaching black history to white and black students alike, and alludes to prominent black figures such as Haile Selassie, Harriet Tubman, and Madame C. J. Walker. The third verse, however, distinctly reproduces Afrocentric perspectives of African history:

Alkebulan is the original name
Of Africa, now stripped of its fame
It's good to know that in ancient times
Egyptians developed all sciences of the mind ...
Let me continue with Theodosius
A Greek ruler not known to most of us
He, in the fourth century A.D.,
Calls the Egyptians fools you see
Two years later, Justinian rules
Six A.D., was it for schools
As a result, ignorance had swirled
Over Christian Europe and Greco-Roman worlds
This went on for a thousand years
Of ignorance, stupidity, and tears.¹⁰⁹

KRS's valorization of ancient Egyptian history as a source of African-American pride is similar to the representations of African antiquity illustrated above in X-Clan's "Funkin' Lesson" and Brand Nubian's "Brand Nubian". KRS's verse, however, also represents the Afrocentric tendency to compare the technological and cultural advancements of ancient Egypt with classical Greco-Roman civilizations. KRS's use of the Kemetic or Ancient Egyptian term "Alkebulan" to refer to Africa alongside his affirmation that Africa was "stripped of its fame" further highlights the glorification of Ancient Egypt. He also, however, mimics the Afrocentric tendency to neglect the broad tapestry of cultures and societies that were present in Africa. Afrocentric theorists were

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

mainly concerned with restructuring Eurocentric narratives of black and African history. Although they focused primarily on Ancient Egypt, academic Afrocentrists denied education for African-American children that positioned slavery as the beginning of black American history.¹¹⁰ As a result, Afrocentric scholars in the 1980s produced theories of Afrocentric education that diverged from Eurocentric curriculums, and also replaced Eurocentric styles of teaching with Afrocentric styles of learning. For example, if rules, standardization, and memory of specific facts are facets of Eurocentric styles of teaching, then variation, creativity, and flexibility are Afrocentric styles of learning.¹¹¹ In fact, educators and community activists in the 1980s saw Afrocentric educational approaches as possible solutions to high rates of failures among black students in urban schools and implemented them in various scenarios.¹¹² The restructuring of black education was at the heart of the Afrocentric initiative, and though advocates of Afrocentrism sought to redefine black history in a variety of political and social realms, schooling and academia were their major concerns. W. E. B. Du Bois's idea that a talented tenth of highly educated African Americans would save black America was not entirely inaccurate. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a black educated elite that had absorbed elements of Euro-American culture emerged, and this elite class dominated African-American liberation movements.¹¹³ The representation of Afrocentric history and the rejection of Eurocentric knowledge and schooling in "You Must Learn" therefore mimics Afrocentric attempts at restructuring Eurocentric knowledge and the role of schooling in African-American

¹¹⁰ Austin, *Achieving Blackness*, 114.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 116.

¹¹² Shawn A. Ginwright, *Black in School: Afrocentric Reform, Urban Youth & the Promise of Hip-Hop Culture* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 3.

¹¹³ George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

communities. However, where Afrocentric representations of African history were empowering to African Americans, Pan-Africanist sentiment within Afrocentrism was selective in its representations of Africa and reproduced historically racist ideas of Africans.

III. American Hip-Hop and Apartheid

Afrocentrism is inseparable from Pan-Africanism; the cultural and historical references to Africa among African Americans declared a unity among those of African descent regardless of their physical proximity to Africa. Within hip-hop, Afrika Bambaataa and Universal Zulu Nation were emblematic of Pan-African sentiment. Since the birth of hip-hop in New York in 1973, Afrika Bambaataa became a central figure on the scene. In 1973, merely months after DJ Kool Herc pioneered hip-hop DJing, Afrika Bambaataa formed Universal Zulu Nation. The hip-hop collective would come to include some of the most commercially successful Afrocentric hip-hop artists of the era. Grandmaster Flash, A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, and Queen Latifah were just a few of the revolutionary artists and groups that associated with Zulu Nation. Bambaataa named himself after the notorious Bambatha Revolt in the British colony of Natal, South Africa, in 1906. During the Revolt, the Zulu peoples in the region staged an armed revolt in protest of taxation and intended to overthrow the colonial administration.¹¹⁴ In 1964, the film *Zulu!* told the story of an earlier Anglo-Zulu War in 1879, popularized the narrative of the Zulu people as militant and strong in the face of colonialism, and was allegedly the inspiration for Bambaataa's

¹¹⁴ Sean Redding, "A Blood-Stained Tax: Poll Tax and the Bambatha Rebellion in South Africa," *African Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (2000): 29.

Universal Zulu Nation.¹¹⁵ Afrika Bambaataa himself was a Jamaican immigrant, and his affinity to the Zulu peoples of South Africa undoubtedly represents Pan-Africanist sentiment. The depiction of Zulu people in the aforementioned film, however, reinforced racist notions of African barbarism.

In 1990, Bambaataa produced “Ndodemnyama (Free South Africa)” as a condemnation to apartheid, featuring various hip-hop artists, including Queen Latifah, Grand Puba of Brand Nubian, Professor X of X Clan, hip-hop group, UTFO, and several others. Much like other Afrocentric hip-hop videos, the video for “Ndodemnyama” shows artists wearing kofia hats, adorned in the symbol of the *ankh*, while several wear dashikis (garments from West Africa).¹¹⁶ The video switches between images of artists rapping and images of protests, riots, and violence in South Africa and the United States. However, imagery of police brutality and violence towards black people is continuous throughout the video. The tone of the song is affirmative and aggressive, with artists making statements such as “Crush that African Apartheid bullcrap, poppa had this before you, I got my rifle to your dome, now what you wanna do?” “Ndodemnyama” is an example of Afrocentrism in hip-hop diverging from emphasis on ancient African civilization and focusing on ongoing issues within Africa. However, at the same time that “Ndodemnyama” was produced and released, Zulu nationalists in Natal and Zululand, as part of the Inkatha Freedom Party, were engaged in a violent war with ANC forces. The song also shows support for Nelson Mandela, the face of the ANC during the anti-apartheid movement. “Ndodemnyama”

¹¹⁵ Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998); Christopher Sharrett, “Zulu or the Limits of Liberalism,” *Cineaste: America’s Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema* 25, no. 4 (2000): 28.

¹¹⁶ Themodeone, “Free South Africa Hip Hop Against Apartheid – Ndodemnyama,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLeLfGbdWmA>.

was a condemnation of apartheid in general; however, Bambaataa and Universal Zulu Nation's failure to recognize nuances of the anti-apartheid movement indicates the lack of attention given to Africa and African people beyond the boundaries of essentializing Afrocentric imagery of the continent.

In 1989, Queen Latifah, a member of Universal Zulu Nation, released her album, *All Hail the Queen*. One of the most popular songs on the album was the feel-good track "Ladies First". The video for which begins with images of black female icons including Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela.¹¹⁷ Viewers can see Latifah dressed in military garb with two dancers walking towards the camera. The dancers wear bright yellow and red patterns, reminiscent of West African textiles, and Latifah also wears a sash with a similar pattern. Following the scene, the video depicts Latifah standing over a large map of South Africa on a table. The video transitions between the map scene and scenes of Latifah and featured artist Monie Love rapping and singing. In between these scenes there are photographs and videos of black protests, including Sam Nzima's iconic picture of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Holding a large stick, Latifah pushes statues of white men off the map and replaces them with statues of fists. Towards the end of the video, the camera pans back to show the whole map as a group of black men and women gather around the table with their fists raised into the air looking over five statues of fists on the map (see fig. 3).¹¹⁸ By depicting the Black Power fist continuously throughout the video, especially over the map of South Africa, Latifah conveys the Pan-Africanist sentiment of shared black struggle.

¹¹⁷ Tommy Boy, 2018, "Queen Latifah - Ladies First (Feat. Monie Love) [Music Video]," YouTube video, 3:57, January 19, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Qimg_q7LbQ.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.



Figure 3. Ending scenes of Queen Latifah's "Ladies First" music video. ¹¹⁹

The "Ladies First" video also tied Afrocentric imagery and African-American freedom struggles to contemporary issues of race, specifically apartheid in South Africa. The video also repositioned the role of women by depicting Latifah as a military figure head and emphasized the role of women in black liberation movements both in the past and in contemporary issues. Latifah challenged the narrative of male-led initiatives at the centre of black liberation struggles of the 1960s.

Central to American Afrocentrism was the glorification of an African past. As Afrocentrism made its way into popular culture, it was adopted into the lifestyles of many African Americans who ascribed to notions of Pan-African identity. Among others that believed in an essential blackness, hip-hop artists chose to draw from Afrocentric theory and depict selected histories of Africa in order to present oppositional narratives to white supremacy. These narratives, however, abandoned and ignored African history that didn't operate within the framework of "civilization". Despite protesting Eurocentric narratives of Africa and blackness,

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

hip-hop artists who chose to adopt Afrocentric ideas of an African past still relegated a large majority of Africa and its history into the confines of Eurocentric and white narration. Although public and global attention given to the ongoing anti-apartheid movement in South Africa engaged hip-hop artists to recognize aspects of African history that Afrocentric theory otherwise neglected, references to apartheid were nonetheless rare and indicate the influence of Afrocentric theory in American popular culture.

Chapter 3: Race and Identity in South African Hip-Hop

I. Introduction

Musicologist Eric S. Charry argues that the 1980s were an incubation period for African hip-hop as African artists imitated hip-hop's American originators and sought markets for their own work.¹²⁰ The spread of hip-hop into South Africa at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle allowed creators of hip-hop music in South Africa to engage with themes of racial inequality through this African-American art form. This chapter explores the advent of hip-hop in South Africa and how South African artists encountered and engaged with American styles of hip-hop in the production of their own music during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The music of Cape Town hip-hop group Prophets of Da City (POC), pioneers of South African hip-hop culture, will be the focus of this chapter. POC, the earliest creators of South African hip-hop, were what in South Africa's language of race are called "coloured", that is, they were of mixed racial heritage. African-American hip-hop allowed coloured youth to redefine notions of blackness for themselves. Although POC rejected Western cultural hegemony in Africa, Cape Town based hip-hop artists, including members of POC, advocated staying true to the various aspects of "authentic" American hip-hop culture in the face of rising non-political, commercialized hip-hop and gangsta rap in South Africa. Where African-Americans identified themselves as African through Afrocentrism, South African coloured hip-hop artists didn't identify as American. Rather, they drew on the Black Consciousness Movement and American understandings of mixed-race as black to challenge constructions of race in South Africa during the late apartheid and early democratic era. Although historically excluded from identifying as black or fully

¹²⁰ Charry, *Hip Hop Africa*, 12.

African in South Africa, coloured youth during the 1980s expressed changing understandings of coloured identity in the 1980s through hip-hop.

Nationalist-inspired ‘conscious’ hip-hop produced by African-American artists during the 1980s often spoke in protest against racial injustice, violence, and poverty. Apartheid in South Africa was characterized by state violence, mass removals, enforced segregation, and widespread poverty. It is imperative to recognize the long history of music as a form of social protest against apartheid in South Africa. From the beginning of the apartheid era in 1948, liberation songs earned a unique place in South African resistance movements.¹²¹ Hip-hop was not the first African-American musical form to gain a foothold in South African liberation movements; since the 1940s, the performance of jazz music by black artists sought to effect a moral change in white listeners and was seen as a way to improve the social mobility of performers.¹²² Even as hip-hop became a genre of resistance in South Africa during the 1980s, collectively performed Zulu and Xhosa liberation songs and songs in the *mbaqanga* style remained powerful political tools for anti-apartheid activists.¹²³ After apartheid, *kwaito* additionally emerged as a uniquely South African musical style that has since been prominent in South African youth culture.

At the height of conscious American hip-hop, South African artists were consumers of Afrocentric hip-hop; however, their positions as residents of Africa at a time of exceeding political unrest meant that their representations of Africa, Pan-Africanism, and an African past differed from those in Afrocentric American hip-hop. The advent of hip-hop in South Africa marked an important cultural change, as South Africans adopted African-American musical

¹²¹ Hirsch, *Amandla!*.

¹²² Christopher Ballantine, “Music and Emancipation: The Social Role of Black Jazz and Vaudeville in South Africa between the 1920s and the Early 1940s,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17, no. 1 (1991): 13, 135.

¹²³ Hirsch, *Amandla!*.

expression as well as the aesthetics of broader hip-hop culture through graffiti art, breakdancing, and clothing. Along with the music, the appropriation of African-American hip-hop aesthetics by South African youth was an affirmation of Pan-Africanist and modern identity. South Africa's specific racial hierarchy, which divided "Africans" (or "Bantus") and "coloureds" (people of mixed-race) into distinct groups, played a role in who had access to hip-hop and how they represented themselves and their communities.

The introduction of American television, radio, and music to South Africa during the late 1970s facilitated the birth of South African hip-hop. Amidst a turbulent political climate in which anti-apartheid organizations were banned and political protests were violently suppressed by the South African government, media censorship was amongst the National Party's arsenal of oppression. The introduction of American and African-American television shows in 1976, however, imported notions of desegregation to South Africa.¹²⁴ Alongside television, radio broadcasts of American radio shows introduced South Africans to hip-hop music and culture. While the South African government imposed similar forms of social, political, and economic oppression on people of colour as that imposed on African Americans during the era of Jim Crow segregation, there were, however, major differences. Among them was the presence of a self-identifying "coloured" population that under apartheid was separated from "African" communities. Though also oppressed, coloured communities often had access to slightly better resources than black communities in South Africa due to the government's constructed racial hierarchy. Coloured youth were among the first in South Africa to create hip-hop music; although they had limited numbers of hip-hop tapes sent by friends and family abroad, they were

¹²⁴ Timothy Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York; London: New York University Press, 2013), 65.

more likely to be able to afford stereos, televisions, and other equipment in comparison to their black counterparts.¹²⁵ Youth in Cape Town, where the majority of the population is mixed race, were pioneers of South African hip-hop also due to the city's position as an urbanized port city.

II. The Beginnings of South African Hip-Hop

Prophets of Da City were not only “*the* original South African hip-hop collective,” members also joined and contributed to later hip-hop groups such as Brasse Vannie Kaap (BVK), and some went on to become *kwaito* stars during the democratic era.¹²⁶ POC's contributions to South African hip-hop are unparalleled, and their extensive body of work presents a unique opportunity to trace changes in understandings of society, race, and hip-hop culture through the late apartheid and the early democratic era. Like other early South African hip-hop artists, POC came from a community that was socially and economically vulnerable. The Cape Flats were composed of families and communities forcibly relocated from inner cities in order to vacate designated white areas under the Group Areas Act of 1950.¹²⁷ As a result of over-crowding, high levels of poverty, and unemployment, gangsterism and street crime became common place in the Cape Flats and other communities to which people of colour were forcibly relocated.¹²⁸ These themes would often arise in the group's music as they engaged with political and social change in South Africa during the 1980s and the 1990s. One of POC's members, DJ Ready D, describes his first interaction with American hip-hop:

¹²⁵ Neate, *Where You're At*, 136.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 119.

¹²⁷ Nadine F. Bowers Du Toit, “Gangsterism on the Cape Flats: A Challenge to ‘Engage the Powers,’” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (February 21, 2014), 2.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

I got into hip-hop as we know it around 1982 ... the first hip-hop video we saw was “Buffalo Gals” by Malcolm McLaren and that really sparked us off. It changed our lifestyle in a big way because we could actually see the characters – the Rock Steady Crew and the kids in the video – and we could identify with them because they looked exactly like us kids on the Cape Flats.¹²⁹

The Rock Steady Crew, which was highlighted in the video, was a group of break-dancers composed primarily of Afro-Puerto Ricans.¹³⁰ As Ready D and other coloured youth engaged with American hip-hop culture, the representation of people that looked similar to them mattered greatly. Retaining a shared sense of identity through physical appearance inspired the South African artists to engage with hip-hop culture. Considering POC’s later music would unify coloured and black communities into a singular category of black, it is important to recognize that POC initially identified with Afro-Puerto Rican members of the Rock Steady Crew. The members of Rock Steady Crew were also understood as black in the United States. Although unprejudiced representations of non-white people in popular media marked important political and social changes in the United States and South Africa alike, Ready D and POC were not initially inspired to participate in hip-hop culture with politically charged music. According to Ready D, “Buffalo Gals”, “Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang, and “The Breaks” by Kurtis Blow were songs that attracted POC and other coloured youth in South Africa to begin to engage with hip-hop.¹³¹ However, these songs lacked any sort of political or social message. Rather, ongoing social and political unrest during anti-apartheid protests in South Africa

¹²⁹ Neate, *Where You’re At*, 130.

¹³⁰ María Pérez y González, *Puerto Ricans in the United States* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 154; Kieran K. Meadows, “Back to Borinquen: The Rock Steady Crew in Puerto Rico,” *Large Up*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.largeup.com/2013/11/01/watch-this-puerto-rock-steady-2013/>. NOTE: Malcolm McLaren himself was a white artist.

¹³¹ Ibid.

influenced POC to later adopt the political trend of American conscious hip-hop. Ready D described the group's early experiences with politics in South Africa:

Our early gigs all happened to be political – and community-oriented-type events because that's what was going on at the time, like rallies and anti-drug marches. That made us more conscious and then listening to hip-hop from [America] added to the process.¹³²

POC recognized the trend of American hip-hop that spoke to political and social issues and reproduced the aesthetics of conscious American hip-hop while speaking to African issues. The quotations from Ready D above are taken from interviews conducted by music journalist Patrick Neate and published in his book *Where You're At*. Neate recognizes that seeing familiar appearances to one's own on a TV screen was powerful for coloured youth, and was also a non-political motivation for coloured youth to engage in hip-hop culture. From the time that POC would first engage with hip-hop culture, to the development of their careers into the post-apartheid era, their understandings of race would however intersect with the rise of coloured rejectionism.

In 1990, Public Enemy released their third album, *Fear of a Black Planet*. A Tribe Called Quest would also release their debut album *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* this year. Hip-hop luminaries define A Tribe Called Quest's album as Afrocentric and Public Enemy's as militaristic.¹³³ Both albums are considered to be among some of American hip-hop's most prominent works, and both are considered to be "conscious". In 1990, in Cape Town, Prophets of Da City also released their album *Our World*. One of the songs on the album,

¹³² Neate, *Where You're At*, 131.

¹³³ Chuck D et al., *Chuck D Presents This Day in Rap and Hip-Hop History* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2017), 65.

“ROOTS”, spoke to South Africans and Africans more broadly about the effects of colonization and globalization on African identity:

Can't you hear Mother Africa is crying out,
cause we ignore her, we not looking for her,
we don't care, we don't adore her ...
But we don't care, we act as if we are not from here.
Ashamed to show your homies that you're down with culture ...
So why be shy to be proud of our nation,
try to apply ourselves with dedication, to our motherland,
and understand that our people are originally African ...
We'd rather be English or American, adopted cultures,
and letting them forget our traditions ever existed,
and in our books, it's not even listed. Deep in my heart,
I hope that every brother and sister can be proud and say,
word to the Motherland!¹³⁴

POC were critical of the cultural hegemony of American, British, or other Western cultures in Africa, stating, “Ashamed to show your homies that you're down with culture ... We'd rather be English or American, adopted cultures.” And like Afrocentric hip-hop artists, POC wished to call attention to a neglected history of Africa and empower black and coloured people to claim African culture and heritage. Although critical of Western cultural hegemony, the album cover of *Our World* looked like a typical conscious American hip-hop album; as the four members crouch over a map of Africa, graffiti font, colourful zig-zag borders, and stick figures much like those on A Tribe Called Quest's *People's Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm* surround the image. Additionally, one member wears a black beret with a map of Africa, reminiscent of the Black Panther Party's uniform as well as berets worn by Public Enemy (see fig. 4). Although POC did not refer to ancient Egyptian history in their calls to African pride, they did appropriate Afrocentric American hip-hop aesthetics in their own affirmations of African pride. Much like

¹³⁴ Prophets of Da City, 2015, “Prophets of Da City - ROOTS (1990),” YouTube video, 4:09, March 2, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCF1TweTfIL>.

their first encounters with American hip-hop, it is evident that shared aesthetics with American artists played a role in POC's presentations of themselves. Unlike their initial encounters with non-political hip-hop, however, the aesthetics of Afrocentrism were political in that they highlighted certain aspects of Africa in order to convey African pride in African Americans.

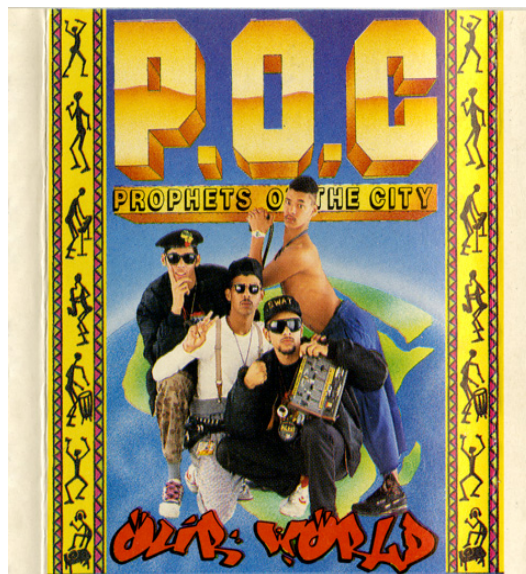


Figure 4. Prophets of Da City's *Our World* album art.¹³⁵

III. Changing Ideas of Race in South African Hip-Hop

Although POC identified with black American hip-hop artists and mirrored the “conscious” aesthetic, according to Ready D, conscious hip-hop from the United States misrepresented Africa:

Then a lot of the material from our second album, [*Boomstyle* (1991)], was banned, our videos were banned, because of our political stance and the kind of statements we were dropping. These were the last hard days of apartheid. At the time, hip-hop had started going towards black consciousness with groups like Public Enemy and X Clan. To be honest, we couldn't understand what these American rappers were talking about. They were over there so what did they know about Africa? But on our side we were quite

¹³⁵ “Prophets of the City *Our World*,” *South African Audio Archive*,
http://www.flatinternational.org/template_volume.php?volume_id=176.

ignorant as well. We heard Public Enemy rap about Elijah Muhammad and Minister Farrakhan and we didn't know who these people were and that really made us curious.¹³⁶

POC considered themselves to be engaging in the same trend of conscious hip-hop production as artists in the United States; however, they considered American hip-hop artists to be ignorant to the experiences of Africans. Ready D highlighted two subgenres of black nationalist hip-hop: Afrocentric hip-hop and 1960s nationalist inspired hip-hop. Despite mimicking aspects of American 1960s inspired hip-hop in their music, such as use of the Black Power fist in videos, the Afrocentric representations of a glorified ancient African past in American hip-hop were not reproduced by South African artists. Once again, however, the album cover of *Boomstyle* shared striking similarities with Afrocentric hip-hop aesthetics. The borders on the left and right hand side of the image are red, green, and black, evocative of the colours of the Pan-Africanist flag. While the dancing stick figures, similar to A Tribe Called Quest's art, appear again. One member holds up a large speaker over his shoulder while another member wears his hair as a Hi-Top Fade, a hairstyle popularized by 1980s rappers such as Doug E. Fresh and Schooly D (see fig. 5).¹³⁷ Even though Ready D recognized his and his peers' own ignorance of American political issues, they didn't identify themselves as African Americans the way in which African Americans identified themselves as African through Afrocentrism. This speaks to different understandings of Pan-Africanism and race in hip-hop during the 1980s. While African

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Guy Trebay, "Redoing Those '80s 'Dos," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/17/fashion/17Gimlet.html>



Figure 5. Prophets of Da City, *Boomstyle* album cover.¹³⁸

Americans identified with aspects of African history to challenge white American narratives of black inferiority, South Africans did not relate to African-American history nor reproduce Afrocentric ideas of ancient African history. However, the use of American hip-hop culture and aesthetics that were known to convey African pride for those in the United States that identified as black allowed POC to engage with American understandings of blackness and challenge apartheid's racial hierarchy that divided coloured and black people.

Like Afrocentric American hip-hop artists, in the 1990s POC began to present a racial binary in their music of white versus non-white or African vs non-African despite entrenched racial classifications in South Africa. It is important to remember that prior to 1991 apartheid was still legal in South Africa, and the reality of a racial hierarchy that principally subordinated

¹³⁸ "Prophets Of Da City – Boomstyle," *Discogs*, <https://www.discogs.com/Prophets-Of-Da-City-Boomstyle/release/3832374>.

black communities was very much alive. Deriving from the Black Consciousness Movement, a racial binary sought to empower coloured and black communities alike by highlighting their shared blackness in opposition to whiteness.¹³⁹ In 1993, POC released their album *Age of Truth*. During the build-up to the first democratic elections in 1994, the album was seen as too controversial and banned by the South African government's censorship board. An energetic music video, produced for one of the songs on the album, "Understand Where I'm Coming From", would also be banned.¹⁴⁰ The video opens with one of the members of POC on a stage, declaring, "This is a song I'd like to dedicate to Nelson Mandela, I'd like to dedicate this to Oliver Tambo ... the one and only, Steve Biko, all those people who were with us in the struggle, especially all the people back home, the teachers, fighting for our education for our people."¹⁴¹ Similar to conscious American hip-hop artists, POC aligned themselves with prominent black South African figures, some of whom were often mentioned in American music as well.¹⁴² Fashioning themselves as artists of the anti-apartheid movement, "Understand Where I'm Coming From" discussed poverty, unemployment, police brutality, and other experiences of people of colour in South Africa. Its controversy, however, lay in its insistence of skepticism towards the construction of a "new" South Africa following the end of apartheid:

You gotta be black, you gotta be strong, you gotta be one!
 And no government, continent is run for our freedom.
 A new South Africa? I don't believe em! ...
 Forgive and forget? It's easier said than done,

¹³⁹ David Howarth, "Complexities of Identity/Difference: Black Consciousness ideology in South Africa," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 2, no. 1 (1997).

¹⁴⁰ Adam Haupt, 2013, "Prophets of Da City - Understand Where I'm Coming From," YouTube video, 4:19. July 6, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FUnCjyvx2M>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² For example, see A Tribe Called Quest, *Steve Biko (Stir It Up)*, New York: Zomba Recording LLC, 1993; Kool G. & DJ Polo, *Erase Racism*, New York: Cold Chillin' Records, 1990.

Cause you stole the land from the black man
Before you fall for the okie dokie and make to negotiate,
but I hope you make the right choice ...
But how soon we forget that they said peace
But racism's not out the door yet.
What's your meaning of peace by the way?
No more resistance? Is that what you're trying to say?
But no justice, no peace ...¹⁴³

At the time of the release of the song, the South African government was well into negotiations with anti-apartheid organizations. Despite the seemingly optimistic future, POC wished to emphasize the ongoing socio-economic issues in townships and communities of colour. They additionally hoped to highlight the fact that negotiations only came following generations of violent oppression and only came in response to a determined resistance movement.

Especially noteworthy here is the use of the term "black" as a unifying principle of South Africans. Whereas prior lyrics utilized Africa as a unifying principle, POC's important shift into using blackness as a unifying principle reflected a central argument of the South African Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) of the 1960s. BCM theorists, notably Steve Biko, argued that Africans, coloureds, and Indians all shared a common enemy in white supremacy.¹⁴⁴ In turn, BCM supporters took 'black' to be an indicator of solidarity and unity of non-white South Africans based on a common source of oppression.¹⁴⁵ Like Afrocentric and other black nationalist hip-hop artists from the United States, POC emphasized the unity of blackness in Africa. Their circumstances as creators within Africa, however, also compelled them to discuss the ongoing effects of colonization and imperialism as a unifying and empowering factor amongst people of colour on the continent.

¹⁴³ Adam Haupt, 2013, "Prophets of Da City - Understand Where I'm Coming From."

¹⁴⁴ Howarth, "Complexities of Identity/Difference," 66.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 67.

IV. Post-Apartheid Hip-Hop in South Africa

The effects of the resistance movement were further addressed in POC's 1994 song "Never Again". The music video for this piece begins in a room crowded full of young black and coloured men and women intently watching a small television. On the television is Nelson Mandela, delivering his inaugural speech, which followed his election as the first black president of South Africa on May 10, 1994. The song was titled after Mandela's famous and powerful words in the speech: "Never, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world."¹⁴⁶ As the song begins, a stark contrast is evident compared to POC's earlier videos. The music video for "Never Again" is celebratory. Differing from their other videos, which often depicted imagery of protest, violence, and stern political leaders, the video for "Never Again" is a montage of black and coloured women, men, and children laughing, dancing, shaking hands, and break-dancing. Similarly, the lyrics of the song are congratulatory:

Excellent, finally a black president, to represent ...
So I dedicate this to those who were down with the revolution,
All of the ones never snoozing,
I dedicate this to those who were down with the struggle G
Even when things got ugly
Cause the black race always had a slapped face
Cause freedom was at a whack place...
It sometimes takes a miracle to see my people free
Cause it's not done easily
So I dedicate this to those who don't turn the other cheek
And to those who would rather speak
Against colonialism, imperialism, and racism.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Nelson Mandela, "Nelson Mandela's Inaugural Address: The Full Text," in *Milestone Documents in World History* (Salem: Hackensack, 2010).

¹⁴⁷ NationRecordsLabel, 2015, "Prophets of Da City - Never Again," YouTube video, 4:08, October 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhN_GzCbH0I.

Despite the fact that POC had been skeptical of the ability of apartheid negotiations to facilitate real socio-economic change just a year prior in “Understand Where I’m Coming From”, the election of South Africa’s first black president marked important and meaningful change for them. The sample of Mandela’s speech used in the song mirrored the style of sampling employed by American hip-hop artists, like Public Enemy, who would often use political speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. as political devices in their songs and videos. The song’s focus on commending activism and the successes of the anti-apartheid movement repositioned the focus of POC’s conscious sound from criticism of political, social, and economic problems to recognizing the successes and agency of people of colour. Furthermore, POC drew on activism in South Africa to speak to the global issues of oppression: “The people in Brazil, dem not yet free, black people in Australia, dem want liberty, study black history, you will see, how long it took Azania to get victory.”

Like conscious hip-hop artists from the United States, POC aligned the liberation struggle they faced in South Africa with those faced by other people of colour around the world. Despite the joyful and jubilant tone of “Never Again”, POC undoubtedly recognized the ongoing effects of apartheid and racism in South Africa as the group went on to establish and participate in several community-based initiatives such as anti-drug tours, voter education initiatives, and school hip-hop workshops in order to address socio-economic issues faced by communities of colour.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, the use of the phrase “black race” by coloured artists in the post-apartheid era reflects changing ideas of race during the time. Mohamed Adhikari argues that the end of white rule in South Africa allowed for new and creative ways of conceptualizing coloured

¹⁴⁸ Haupt, *Stealing Empire*, 191.

identity and its role in South Africa.¹⁴⁹ As coloured youth continued to use hip-hop as a medium of expression, coloured identity increasingly aligned with black identity.

Although POC were a major part of South Africa's hip-hop scene, they did not account for the experiences of all people of colour in South Africa. Their experiences in the Cape Flats allowed them to speak to broader themes of racism, poverty, imperialism, and violence; however, their appropriation of conscious American hip-hop styles inevitably neglected other forms of expression. As mentioned in Chapter 2, during the mid 1990s, American hip-hop saw an increase in music that glorified gangsterism. The rise of *hyper-gangsta-ization* in the American hip-hop industry came merely a year or two after POC released "Never Again". As South Africans remained consumers of American music and media, the glorified tropes and caricatures of the gangster, the pimp, and the ho, made their way to South Africa. Referring to the influence of gangsta rap in South Africa, Ready D stated:

We've got one of the biggest gang cultures on the planet right here in Cape Town ... so obviously gangsta rap had a very negative impact over here, adding fuel to gang wars. If you combine our gang culture with the image of rappers like Snoop Doggy Dogg and Tupac? Of course it was easy for gang-bangers to click on to that.¹⁵⁰

American gangsta rap and hip-hop often glorified the gangsta lifestyle by selectively presenting imagery of excessive wealth and success to its consumers. So much so that youth gangs in the Cape Flats named themselves after the two sides of hip-hop's most famous war: the Junior Mafias, named after Biggie's East Coast hip-hop collective, and the Westsiders, named after Tupac's west coast/Los Angeles affiliations.¹⁵¹ As illustrated by Tricia Rose, the hyper-gangsta-ization of hip-hop came alongside the commercial music industry's attempts to sell black ghetto

¹⁴⁹ Adhikari, *Not White Enough*, 175.

¹⁵⁰ Neate, *Where You're At*, 132.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

life to highly profitable white audiences. In South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s, the market for South African hip-hop was not so profitable that record companies sought to package and sell black life. This delayed the *hyper-gangsta-ization* of South African music, a fear of Ready D's:

You want to know if I'm positive about where hip-hop is going? My only fear is when the record companies start getting hold of it and start to water it down; same as in the States. When the industry gets hold of you, you become a product of the industry. Hip-hop should never be a product of the industry.¹⁵²

Since Ready D voiced this concern in the early 2000's, however, the landscape of South African hip-hop has dramatically changed. Mirroring hip-hop trends in the United States, South African hip-hop has become commercialized and globalized over the last two decades. Often embodying the caricatures of the gangsta, the pimp, and the ho, South African hip-hop fans in articles and comment sections of music outlets now call for a return to the earlier conscious form of the genre, much like many American hip-hop fans. Ready D's concerns are shared by a member of another pioneering hip-hop group from Cape Town known as Brasse Vannie Kaap (BVK). Mr. Fat of BVK believes hip-hop is about more than music: "In Cape Town, we try to teach kids to go back to the basics. Our philosophy is emcee, turntablism, B-boying [break-dancing], graffiti and our knowledge of self because without those five elements hip-hop can't move any more than a man can walk with one leg."¹⁵³ At a lecture given at the University of Cape Town in 2014, Ready D also emphasized the importance of break-dancing, graffiti, and knowledge of self in hip-hop culture.¹⁵⁴ The importance placed on non-musical aspects of hip-hop culture is related to maintaining authenticity in hip-hop music. Especially in the case of conscious hip-hop, authenticity is a marker of which artists are worth listening to and given

¹⁵² Ibid., 134.

¹⁵³ Neate, *Where You're At*, 119.

¹⁵⁴ Adam Haupt, 2014, "Hip Hop Activism Lecture 1," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAJ40evBvCk>.

credibility by listeners and other artists within the hip-hop community. In the case of South African hip-hop, the emphasis on hip-hop culture as a whole also indicates the fear of losing authenticity in commercial success.

Much like Afrocentric hip-hop artists in the United States, South African hip-hop artists called on people of colour in South Africa to challenge Eurocentric and white narratives of African history. The use of American conscious hip-hop aesthetics indicates that POC and coloured hip-hop artists related to American representations of blackness through hip-hop. Largely shielded from the threats of commercialization, South African artists in the 1990s sought to preserve the authenticity of hip-hop as a genre beyond the conscious era of the 1980s and 1990s. The appropriation of popular African-American cultural aesthetics through hip-hop music allowed South African artists to engage with changing notions of African identity through an African-American medium and challenge apartheid classifications of race.

Conclusion

The 1980s and 1990s were turbulent decades in the United States and South Africa alike. In both countries, many black youth experienced racialized violence as a norm. As poverty and violence increasingly affected black America, African-American academics proposed Afrocentric theory as a way of instilling pride and “values” in black youth vulnerable to welfare, crime, or drugs.¹⁵⁵ As black America became increasingly pessimistic about American society’s prospects for them, Afrocentric nationalism in black popular culture became popularized and could be seen in black colleges, schools, homes, and in the music of African-American artists. Afrocentric hip-hop was a product of the cultural and social conditions of African-American youth during the 1980s. References to powerful ancient Egyptian civilizations as central to African-American identity redefined Eurocentric understandings of African-American history otherwise defined by slavery and its legacy. As hip-hop artists appropriated Afrocentric knowledge and aesthetics into their music, their music came to be recognized as political and conscious of cultural knowledge in black communities. Despite Afrocentrism’s focus on African pride for African Americans, its Pan-Africanist sentiment did little to engage with the diversity of Africa, the realities of African colonialism, and ongoing social issues within Africa, such as South African apartheid.

As hip-hop entered South Africa during the 1980s, Afrocentric hip-hop was among some of the first rap music South Africans encountered. Although coloured youth mimicked the dress and aesthetics of Afrocentric hip-hop artists, their representations of Africa did not glorify ancient African civilizations. Rather, their music engaged with apartheid and racism in South

¹⁵⁵ Austin, *Achieving Blackness*, 132.

Africa while calling for African pride in the face of racist and essentialist depictions of Africans. As African identity empowered African-American youth, coloured youth in South Africa presented narratives of racial unity through hip-hop to reject the divisive racial hierarchy of the apartheid regime. Where Afrocentric hip-hop derived from Afrocentrism in popular black culture, South African hip-hop derived from ideas of racial unity from the South African Black Consciousness Movement. Coloured South African hip-hop group Prophets of Da City (POC) began making hip-hop at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, and their music illustrates changing ideas of coloured identity at the end of apartheid and into the democratic era.

In South Africa and the United States, hip-hop was born and created under the social and economic pressures of violence, racism, and poverty. The political and social circumstances in both countries, however, fostered African pride, and hip-hop was a medium by which youth in both countries expressed this pride. Although coloured youth were the first to create hip-hop music in South Africa, soon enough, black youth and women became creators of hip-hop as well and utilized the genre to critically engage with their social and political realities as marginalized communities.

While scholars have identified African roots in American rap and hip-hop, these were not necessarily the historical and cultural connections that inspired African youth to engage with hip-hop culture.¹⁵⁶ By the 1990s, hip-hop was being localized throughout Africa, as rappers creatively integrated their mother tongues, engaged in multi-language wordplay, and expressed messages that spoke to African youth.¹⁵⁷ American hip-hop, however, dominates global music markets, and African-American artists remain principle creators of hip-hop.

¹⁵⁶ Eric S. Charry, *Hip Hop Africa*, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

Hip-hop music has never been solely about expressing political statements. This is evidenced by the beginnings of the genre as party music and the current state of hip-hop in which country rap, G-funk, Hiplife, pop rap, and more constitute just a few of the subgenres that speak to a wide variety of communities and cultures. However, the global consumption of African-American hip-hop since the 1990s, primarily through subgenres that represent the tropes of gangstas and drug dealers, has implications. Where the underlying politics behind the imagery and words of rappers that glorify violence and misogyny are not fully understood, racist stereotypes of African Americans risk being reproduced. Although American hip-hop artists wield a tremendous amount of cultural power in global hip-hop culture, the rapid globalization of hip-hop since the 1990s has led to people from cultures all over the world to create their own forms of the genre. The increasing presence of non-American artists in hip-hop culture will hopefully challenge stereotypical narratives in hip-hop and bring dynamic and diverse perspectives into the genre.

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