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ABSTRACT

This article offers a snapshot of South African hip hop by focusing largely on the uptake of 'conscious' hip hop in the 1980s and 1990s. It argues that especially Cape Town activists made meaningful contributions to advancing Black multilingual expression and, thereby, validating negated Black identities as the country was beginning to make the transition from apartheid to a democratic, post-apartheid South Africa. Ultimately, it questions whether the binary opposition between 'conscious' and commercial hip hop or Cape Town vs. Joburg hip hop is helpful in understanding the nuances of South African hip hop by pointing to examples that complicate such binaries.

KEYWORDS

multilingualism
apartheid
'conscious' hip hop
commercial hip hop
hip hop pedagogy
Kaaps
Afrikaaps

NOTABLE EMCEES

- AKA (RIP)
- Andy Mkosi
- Black Coffee
- Cassper Nyovest
- Dope Saint Jude
- Driemanskap
- Emile YX?
- Godessa
- Janine 'Blaqpearl' van Rooy-Overmeyer
- Jerome Rex
- Jitsvinger
- Nadia Nakai
- Tumi/Stogi T
- YoungstaCPT
- Yugen Blakrok

According to accounts by hip hop stalwarts such as Emile YX? and DJ Ready D, hip hop made its entry into Cape Town, South Africa, in the early 1980s (Haupt et al. 2019). Initially, this took place via breaking or breakdancing, as it was known then. Many artists who later gained acclaim as DJs, graffiti artists and MCs, actually started out as aspiring breakers. These include DJ Ready, Rozanno, DJ Azuhl, Emile YX? and Falko.

By the late 1980s, hip hop emerged as a movement that congregated, first at Club Teazers in the Cape Town City Centre, and then at Saturday matinees at The Base, also in the city centre. It is in spaces such as these that hip hop heads were introduced to the work of Afrika Bambaataa, KRS-One, Public Enemy and NWA, amongst others and shared material on aspects of Black nationalist hip hop movements, such as the Nation of Islam and the Zulu Nation. Heads either became politically conscientized through these exchanges (e.g. DJ Ready D, founding member of Prophets of da City [POC] and Brasse vannie Kaap [BVK]), or were political activists in the anti-apartheid

NOTABLE HIP HOP ACTIVISM PROJECTS

- 'Fingo' (Makanda, Eastern Cape)
- 'Heal the Hood Project' (Grassy Park, Cape Town)
- 'Scratch Lab' (Woodstock, Cape Town)
- 'Soundz of the South' (Khayelitsha, Cape Town)
- 'Stellenbosch Literary Project and InZync Poetry Sessions' (Kayamandi, Stellenbosch)
- 'Words Worth Saying' (Observatory, Cape Town)

1. For more on kwaito as a music genre, see Ndabeni and Mthembu (2018), Peterson (2003: 197–213), Livermon (2020) and Steingo (2016).

movement who were drawn to hip hop's counterhegemonic orientation, such as Shaheen Ariefdien, founding member of POC.

In this time, two very influential hip hop crews emerged, Black Noise and POC– both from Cape Town. These crews took on the anti-apartheid politics of the day in their music, both in their performances and in their engagement with the public via workshops. Black Noise went through a number of key line-up changes over the past two decades. A key turning point for the crew in the early 1990s was when it decided to opt out of pursuing record deals with the mainstream music industry, which had yet to make the transformation from its very recent apartheid past, in favour of pursuing an independent path that would allow them to conduct community workshops and tours. By 1998, Emile YX? established a non-profit organization, Heal the Hood, in order to enable partnerships with European collaborators on community projects in South Africa and parts of Europe.

POC pursued a similar path in terms of performance, community workshops and tours. They were also signed to an independent music label, Ghetto Ruff, which played a key role in establishing rap music and, later, kwaito[1] on the South African music scene. Kwaito is a music genre that mixes African languages and house beats to effectively affirm multilingualism. A key turning point for POC came with their third album, *Age of Truth*, which was banned in 1993. By this time, POC had attained very significant exposure on a national and international level. The album broke from their earlier work in that it presented a far more aggressive critique of apartheid and calls for South Africans to 'forgive and forget' during the early 1990s, a time when key parts of the country were in a virtual state of civil war and in which negotiations between the ruling National Party and the African National Congress had already broken down (Haupt 2001, 2008).

A music video for the track 'Understand Where I'm Coming From' was aired on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) twice in 1993 before the album was banned (Haupt 2001) – this in a time when the country had not yet made the transition to democracy and when censorship was practised by the state and its functionaries. The video featured footage of police brutality and civil protest in township spaces alongside footage of key anti-apartheid activists, politicians and right-wing racist organizations, such as the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweeging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement [AWB]). The crew's position on the calls for reconciliation is summarized by one of their more provocative songs, 'Dallah Flet' (*dallah* ['to do something'/'go with the flow'] + *flet* ['flat'/'outright']), which commences with a scene of violence between men over a 'dop en 'n' stop' ('booze and drugs'):

> Don't let FW puzzle you!
> *Hy praat jou kop vrot*
> *In sy oë is jy nogal altyd 'n kaffer en 'n hotnot*
> *Hulle sponsor township violence*
> *En gee vir smokkelhuise licence*
> *Want hy wiet die wyn vok op die brein*
> *Want dan vang jy kak aan en word jy geblame*
> *Die move is beplan want jy gaan nou mang*
> *Jy gat nou hang*
> *Want die vark is 'n slang!*

(POC 1993)

Translation:

> Don't let FW [De Klerk] puzzle
> He misleads you
> In his eyes, you're still a *kaffir* and a *hotnot* [racial epithets]
> They sponsor township violence
> And award licenses to shebeens [informal, residential pubs]
> 'Cause they know that they wine fucks up the brain
> Then you get up to shit and get blamed
> The move is being planned 'cause you're going down
> You're going to hang
> 'Cause the pig is a snake!

POC's use of Kaaps/Afrikaaps (or what it used to call 'gamtaal') is a deliberate challenge to the apartheid state's enforcement of 'standard' Afrikaans as the language of instruction in the 1970s as well as one of only two official languages in a multilingual African country under colonial rule (Haupt 2001). Essentially, the crew was intent on affirming Black modes of speech by affirming Black multilingualism (Haupt 2001). On *Age of Truth*, they challenged the apartheid state's use of Afrikaans as an official language by affirming the negated version of that language: Kaaps/Afrikaaps or what they used to call *gamtaal* (the language of the biblical sons of Ham) (Haupt 2001; Alim and Haupt 2017). More recent arguments about Kaaps/Afrikaaps include the view that Afrikaans is a form of cultural appropriation of Kaaps/Afrikaaps in service of the apartheid state's attempts to construct white Afrikaner racial identity – with Afrikaans as the language of white Afrikaners, thereby excluding Black speakers and denigrating Kaaps/Afrikaaps/'gamtaal' as slang or the language of gangsters – thereby, effectively mobilizing a race and class slur against 'coloured' and 'black' speech communities (Haupt 2022, 2021). In 'Dallah Flet', POC calls for the electorate to exercise their critical thinking skills during the build-up to the country's first democratic elections (Haupt 2001). The scene of violence set up at the outset of the song is linked to their scathing view of former President Frederik Willem de Klerk and the National Party. They suggest that young men in 'coloured' (a racial category in apartheid's racist tripartite system)[2] townships act out the script written for them by apartheid policy, hence their reference to the fact that shebeens received licenses from the apartheid state. The message is much like that of the character Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne) in John Singleton's film *Boyz n the Hood*. Styles explains how gentrification of Black working-class neighbourhoods coincide with the social ills, such as drugs and violence, in Black communities. He suggests that gangsters who kill each other and who prey upon members of their own communities act out the script of white supremacy: 'They want us to kills ourselves' (Singleton 1992; Haupt 2015).

This theme was also taken up by Black Noise, even in earlier songs like 'Colour Ain't Shit', and in their youth workshops under the banner of Heal the Hood. Black Noise and Emile YX? also became drivers of key hip hop events, such as African Hip hop Indaba, African Battle Cry and Shut Up and Dance. By the 2000s, these events became central means through which hip hop in the Western Cape was developed and sustained. An important issue for EmileYX? was not merely to focus on the four elements of hip hop (MCing, DJing, breaking and graffiti art), but also to make 'knowledge of self' (cf. Haupt 2001, 2008) a key aspect of the events and workshops that he and

2. It is important to note the difference in spelling between 'coloured' with the letter 'u' and the US spelling of 'colored' without the 'u'. The term 'coloured' with a 'u' has a specific political and historical meaning in South Africa because it is a racial category created by the Population Registration Act under apartheid and effectively created a separate racial category from the category Black. Being classified 'coloured', automatically afforded subjects with a set of class, educational, career and residential opportunities that were not extended to subjects who were classified 'black'. However, these advantages were not equal to privileges extended to those who were classified 'white'. The term 'coloured' is contested and has been a key focus of work by Black Noise, Emile YX? and Prophets of Da City, who were inspired by Black Consciousness thinkers like Steve Biko in order to position 'colouredness' as a part of the broader Black experience (Battersby 2003; Haupt 2001, 2008, 2012). Biko saw the claim to Black identity as a means to unite a range of people oppressed by apartheid and, thereby, reject biologically essentialist understandings of race that subjugate and divide colonial subjects: 'Merely by describing yourself as black you have started toward a road to emancipation, you have committed to fight against all those forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being' (Biko 1978: 48). Scholars like Zimitri Erasmus have also interrogated

biologically essentialist understandings of race in discourses about 'colouredness', 'mixed race' people and 'race mixing' in order to show how race is socially constructed and always-already hybrid (Erasmus 2001, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). A recent hip hop theatre show and documentary film titled *Afrikaaps* (Afrikaans + Cape = Africape), both of which address 'coloured' identity politics and multilingualism in Cape Town, offer meaningful insights into the ways in which Afrikaner nationalists culturally appropriated Afrikaans to construct white Afrikaner identity at the expense of Black subjects who first spoke and wrote Afrikaans in an educational context (Alim and Haupt 2017).

his collaborators presented. A significant part of this objective is to challenge the ways in which apartheid has divided Black citizens into different racial categories and ethnicities (e.g. positioning 'coloured' as separate from Black). Both POC and Black Noise therefore took on apartheid classifications, such as 'coloured', in attempts to challenge the extent to which racist self-conceptions had been internalized under apartheid. Emile's own solo work reflects this engagement, as for example in his album *Who Am I?*

More hip hop crews would follow the lead set by Black Noise and POC. BVK, co-founded by DJ Ready D, would continue POC's work of embracing and promoting Afrikaans hip hop. POC's Black Consciousness agenda sought to defy attempts to position them as a 'coloured' crew by including Ishmael Morabe and Junior Danisa Dread in their crew to ensure that POC became a multilingual crew that included African languages beyond Afrikaans and English. BVK took POC's affirmation of the vernacular further by taking Afrikaans hip hop to more mainstream South African festivals, such as Oppikoppi, and by collaborating with the metal band Nine on the song 'Cape Flats' of their second self-titled album (2000) as well as with (white) Afrikaans artists, such as Coenie de Villers. This transition set the scene for the wider acceptance of Afrikaans hip hop, eventually leading to the ascendance of white Afrikaans rapper Jack Parow and the controversial Die Antwoord, whose performances have been interpreted as cultural appropriation and blackface (Haupt 2012).

The affirmation of Afrikaans hip hop and Black Consciousness politics via the work of BVK and POC had a profound impact on Cape MCs. A wide range of Kaaps/Afrikaaps/Afrikaans and Spaza hip hop acts such as Driemanskap and Rattex, who mix informal dialects of Xhosa, Afrikaans and English followed. These include the leading female hip hop crew, Godessa (Shameema Williams, EJ von Lyrik and Burni Aman), which took on race and gender politics in relations to debates about global capitalism in their music (Haupt 2008). While most of their work was in English, they took on POC's Black Consciousness politics to explore identity politics on a local level, while also establishing international relationships though projects, such as the Rogue State Alliance, which linked Swiss and southern African artists and activists. While Godessa was the most prominent female crew in the early to late 2000s, they were by no means only female hip hop heads on the scene. DJs, like Malikah Daniels, and MCs, such as Contro'versey (RIP), Elise 'Black Athena' Fernandez, Evesdrop, Khanyi, Celeste Mitchell and Miscellaneous, to name but a few, have been active as performers, organizers and activists. More recently, Andy Mkosi (see her music video, 'Zizo') and Dope Saint Jude have pushed boundaries of hip hop's significantly heteronormative politics. Specifically, Dope Saint Jude performs intersections of race, class, gender and sexual orientation in order to transform South African hip hop's largely male heterosexual identity (Haupt 2019).

POC's affirmation of 'vernac hip hop' also set the scene for the rise of kwaito and its embrace of Black multilingual expression. The affirmation of mother tongue expression aside, the crew also spent a great deal of time in Joburg (aka Jozi, aka Johannesburg), where the commercial side of the music industry was located. Through the music label, Ghetto Ruff, they produced a number of hip hop and kwaito projects and did a great deal to develop new talent. POC member Ishmael Morabe went on to form popular kwaito crew, Skeem (on the Ghetto Ruff label), which is best known for its tribute to Black popular culture in the song, 'Waar Was Jy?' ('Where were you?'). Junior also

went on to form the band, Boom Shaka, which became an instant hit with their debut single, 'It's About Time'. POC therefore made a crucial contribution to the post-apartheid music, inspiring key kwaito and hip hop performers, like Zola (whose music, which is also on the Ghetto Ruff label, is featured in the controversial TV series, *Yizo Yizo* and who starred on the Oscar-winning feature film, *Tsotsi*) (Haupt 2012). Hip hop's multilingual politics and affirmation of Black cultural traditions and expression has been of great interest to scholars with an interest in multilingualism, education and identity politics (see Alim and Haupt 2017; Haupt 2001; Williams 2016).

The South African hip hop scene is still largely seen as being split between a Cape Town-based scene that is regarded as 'conscious' and less commercial, while the Joburg-based scene is viewed as largely commercial. This may be because it was 'conscious' hip hop that found traction in Cape Town in the 1980s under apartheid before it was taken up nationally. It may also be because Joburg has historically been South Africa's economic hub because Gauteng province's mining sector generated a great amount of wealth both during and after apartheid. However, the binary between a 'conscious' south and more commercial north is potentially misleading. Of course, some artists like Yugen Blakrok or the late Ricky Rick and late AKA, may be from provinces other than Gauteng, but found fame in Joburg. However, key examples of commercially successful Cape artists include YoungstaCPT, who has had a good relationship with Joburg hip hop artists, such as Stogie T and the late AKA. Stogie T (formerly known as Tumi when he performed with the Volume) is both 'conscious' and commercially successful – anecdotally, he has expressed a wariness of being boxed in by binary labels in a 2010 panel discussion.[3] Likewise, spoken word artists, such as the deeply reflective Lebo Mashile, have played an important role in establishing the Joburg hip hop scene. Yugen Blakrok's international success may have been facilitated by her move from the Eastern Cape to Joburg, but her focus on Afrofuturism points to anything but a typical or stereotypical path to mainstream commercial hip hop success (Vögele 2020). Cape Town DJs – such as DJ Ready D, Azuhl, E20 and Eazy – have been able to establish a local and international profile as commercial artists whilst also running community-focused projects and events. Capetonian MC Dope Saint Jude has also been able to affirm Black, queer identities both locally and in Europe and the United Kingdom; her commercial success is an important political gain in a music industry that continues to advance heteronormative imperatives. Clearly, the story of South African hip hop cannot be reduced to easy binaries.

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