Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World

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On October 8, 2006, an important event in the evolution of African hip-hop took place in the Cargo Club in London, England. It was an African hip-hop festival called “Afrolution,” featuring hip-hop music groups from five different countries—Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, Gambia, and South Africa. Produced by Afrolution Records, this festival represented the growing face of African rap music and hip-hop culture that has taken root in each country on the African continent, continuing a kind of cultural revolution that adapts and extends this received African American youth culture. Simultaneously, African hip-hop culture facilitates connections across nation-states, languages, cultures, and ethnic groups that have been often divided and in conflict. African hip-hop youth find that they have more in common than they have differences, offering a potential ameliorating force for some of Africa’s long-standing problems. Festivals like Afrolution happen not only in Europe but on the African continent as well, such as the annual Gabao Hip-Hop Festival in Gabon. These festivals, whether in Africa or Europe, provide forums for youth from different African cultures to find a common voice for similar issues and concerns, linking youth on the vast African continent through rhymes, beats, dance moves, rebellious attitude, and particularized social critiques.

The youth subculture of hip-hop is a way of life that consists not just of the more pervasive element of rap music production and dissemination but also of deejay turntablting-mixing-producing; the daredevil acrobatics of b-boying and b-girling (dubbed by the media “break dancing”); the more recent rap
dancing that accompanies today’s rap music videos; aerosol “graf” art, or graffiti; and a general style, dress, and attitude about the world. The latter element of attitude is most important, because it is precisely this element, along with the obvious commodification of the subculture by American capitalism, that is most responsible for it proliferating from the South Bronx starting in the mid-1970s to nearly every continent, country, culture, and ethnic group on the planet, including Africa. The attitude of “flippin’ the script”—or talking back to any system of marginalization, whether based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, politics, neighborhood, or gender—posits hip-hop as a complex subculture not easily dismissed as a new fad that would dissipate, as the media pundits once pronounced in the mid-1980s about its then initial national commercialization in the United States.

Most youths globally seem to identify with this hip-hop attitude of “flippin’ the script,” offering alternatives to the master narrative prevalent in each particular locality. They also view the subculture’s defiance as a unifying force across borders and governments. Hip-hop organizational Web sites, e-zines, and international b-boy competitions virtually and physically link hip-hop youth throughout the world into the concept of the “Hip-Hop Globe.” This is a construct that is gaining increasing currency as young hip-hoppers grow up, become professionals, and link together across continents to accomplish various artistic projects.

Hip-hop in Africa (and outside of the United States generally) usually emphasizes the importance of counterhegemonic messages, one of the original penchants of the youth culture that has been obscured by its commercial “bling-bling” success in America. In South Africa, a crew called “Cashless Society” stands in literal and metaphoric contrast to Atlanta’s Cash Money Crew in the United States. Cashless Society’s name alludes to the realities of their situation as black South Africans in postapartheid Johannesburg, as opposed to the flaunting of money, diamond jewelry, and cars with twenty-five-inch rims sported by Cash Money Crew and many other commercial U.S. rappers. African hip-hop may offer a much needed alternative to hip-hop’s near total usurpation by the U.S. multinational record industry and American capitalism. This essay is an exploration of these dynamics in African hip-hop, grounded in one popular rap crew in Kenya, with a brief discussion of a Senegalese group for contrast. In exploring the dynamics of why hip-hop resonates in Africa, I also engage my theory of connective marginality that I fully elucidate in The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves (2007). Connective marginalities of culture, class, historical oppression, and youth itself complicate the
more familiar explanation of American popular cultural imperialism and its perceived wholesale adoption by youth globally.

**CONNECTIVE MARGINALITIES IN THE HIP-HOP GLOBE**

Imagine U.S. African American and Latino hip-hop culture at the center of a circle that has larger concentric circles emanating from it, each representing various sociohistorical realms that facilitate, inform, and motivate youth globally. These concentric, interrelating circles of influence are what I call “connective marginalities.”¹ The generational connection of “youth” itself, as a marginal status in most societies, is the easiest connection represented by the largest outer circle. Often, the younger, coming-of-age generation in each society is in conflict with the adult population in control of various realms from government to social norms and rules of conduct. Youth rebelliousness becomes a natural aspect of this age-group, making hip-hop’s rebellious tenets extremely alluring. Many nations, like Japan and Russia, connect with hip-hop simply because of its youthful rebellion.

Class is the second-largest social sphere of connectivity; worldwide, many ethnic and immigrant groups, perceived as either not indigenous or simply historically inferior in a particular society, are often relegated to second-class citizenship that results in a marginalized status. For youths among these “lower-class” groups in various countries, hip-hop becomes a way of giving voice to their unrest. Class status is measured in financial wealth, political power, and family position in most societies; it is often inherited but sometimes ascribed through mechanisms of social mobility. For whole populations who have been assigned a lower social status in a particular society, it becomes difficult, if not next to impossible, to alter that status. Hip-hop’s many rags-to-riches tales of wealthy rappers who were once ghetto dwellers are stories circumscribed by U.S. dynamics as the richest country in the world. In other nations, such as certain African countries, rap artists and hip-hop consumers coming from class-marginalized groups do not have that same social mobility. North African Arabs living in France, for example, are first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants from France’s colonial empire. In 2005, it was precisely these youth who were the source of the social unrest in France.

Historical oppression and culture are the last two connective marginalities that help explain hip-hop’s internationalization. Historical oppression, as the third-largest circle, explains the social status of a group who identifies with a long history of purposeful subjugation—one that can identify with the African
American experience as a prototypical model of overt oppression over centuries, such as American Indians or Native Hawaiians or black South Africans. Culture, too, becomes an important resonance in global hip-hop. If a youth culture, like that on the African continent, comes from a society steeped in an Africanist aesthetic—that is, in artistic elements such as polyrhythm, call-and-response, multiple meters, dance movements that privilege body isolations, and general improvisational skills, all posited within a battling/competitive mode that promotes energy as a vital force—then there will be cultural connections to the hip-hop aesthetic. This aesthetic has often been denigrated throughout the Americas as “low art,” as opposed to the “high art” of Europe. The Africanist aesthetic has indeed been marginalized, even though it has been the underpinning of world popular music and dance.²

Hip-hop culture is the latest manifestation of this aesthetic that was transported throughout the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade. All of these artistic elements resonate with cultures where the Africanist aesthetic is also very prevalent. African countries become important sites where local youth view connections between hip-hop and their rhythms exported long ago, as well as oral traditions like the West African griots, as a shared history with the black Atlantic. The aesthetic-cultural connection gets overlaid with class and youth rebellion in the African urban ghetto context. In Africa, youths connect with hip-hop as an aesthetic returned home and feel very comfortable with its elements, including its penchant to “flip the script” and challenge the local status quo. My construct of connective marginality adds new dimensions to the debate about global American cultural imperialism in general, particularly on the African continent. The connections perceived by youth themselves mitigate the profit motive of global pop cultural industries such as MTV Africa and the international subsidiaries of the major record companies.

In *Popular Music and Youth Culture* (2000), British pop music scholar Andy Bennett examines dimensions of the global-local problematic inherent in the exportation of Western pop music to the rest of the world. Obviously, the biggest problem in dealing with popular music is the issue of “how to reconcile popular music’s position in the marketplace with its function as a potentially counter-hegemonic cultural resource.”³ Contrary to many of the early scholars in the field of cultural studies, scholars like Bennett analyze local agency as an important aspect of popular music consumption. According to Bennett, the local audience for popular music “becomes a discursive trope signifying the constantly shifting and radically heterogeneous ways in which meaning is constructed and contested in multiple everyday contexts of media use and
consumption.” In other words, the audience, as representative of the local values receiving the global commodity of U.S. rap music, can alternate back and forth in assigning meaning and value to this particular style of music. Bennett’s further analysis of the significance of locality and particularity in this era of the massive exportation of American popular music validates my focus on agency implicit in hip-hop’s connective marginalities. He notes, “Far from destroying local differences between national and regional cultures, globalization may in fact work to enhance such differences.”

He goes on to use media scholar James Lull’s concept of “reterritorialization,” where global commodities are reworked by local audiences to incorporate them into everyday local settings and, in the case of rap music, to critique particular social and cultural dynamics of their country. Viewing specific African localities illuminates connective marginalities and Bennett’s use of reterritorialization.

AFRICANHIPHOP.COM

American popular culture hegemony ensured hip-hop music’s popularity in Africa since the early 1980s. South Africa’s wealth and connections to Europe made it one of the first to produce a recognized African hip-hop group—Black Noise, a crew from Cape Town, South Africa. They began as a graffiti and break-dance crew and started emceeing around 1989. South Africa’s apartheid government initially tried to ban rap music due to its involvement in the struggle against the racist regime, speaking volumes about hip-hop’s connective marginality of historical oppression. Thus hip-hop’s tendency toward “flippin’ the script” of the social order was a part of the culture’s early inroads on the African continent, giving voice to youth participation in the antiapartheid movement. The South African government did not make hip-hop legal until 1993, when rap music began to be played on radio and when rap videos appeared on television. Its legalization has resulted in today’s Channel O in South Africa as a hip-hop music video station complete with black celebrity veejays. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, hip-hop culture escalated all over Africa, each region privileging its own rhythmic style of rap, often in indigenous languages and musical rhythms.

Today, the Internet serves as an important tool in facilitating hip-hop’s unification process of local African youth cultures. One important Web site was originally known as “Rumba Kali—The Home of African Hip-Hop” and is currently called “Africanhiphop.com: The Foundation of African Hip-Hop Culture Online.” That this community of African hip-hoppers is located on the
World Wide Web, linking the primary sites of Dakar, Cape Town, Accra, Lagos, Dar es Salaam, and Nairobi, is indicative of the postmodern era where new global technologies coalesce with the long-standing need for African unity. Many hip-hop youths in Africa have transcended traditional rivalries of regionalism and tribalism and coalesced around common concerns through an artistic expression that originated in the African diaspora, a point to which I will return later in exploring Kenyan rap. Africanhiphop.com, as a hip-hop “zine,” projects a fully democratized image of shifting voices from the various locations on the continent. One of the primary features of the home page of the Web site is its hyperlinked map of Africa, where one can click on any country to get the latest news about that site’s hip-hop scene, often complete with downloads of rap artists’ current hits.

Early on, Africanhiphop.com set its agenda for creating connections and collaborations on the continent and across the black Atlantic. A June 1998 theme for the Web site’s home page was “Africa—Wake Up & Unify.” Rap crews from six African countries were invited to contribute their rhymes on that theme, often in their indigenous languages. Not only was African unity served, but Africa’s connection to the roots of hip-hop in African American culture was declared. This latter point is implicit in any culture’s participation in the global hip-hop youth phenomenon but is not always directly acknowledged. “Africa—Wake Up & Unify” also included American rappers KRS-One and Busta Rhymes, as two of the culture’s “elders” from the United States. The site read, “With artists from six African countries and one verse contributed by KRS-One, we come full circle.” The site also provided a link that month to American “old school tracks,” described as “the oldies of which date back to 1983!”

This conscious use of hip-hop to create black Atlantic musical links continues in contemporary times. In August 2006, the Web site used the digital revolution, broadcasting over five hours of contemporary hip-hop via “African Hip-Hop Radio.” In December 2006, the Web site had a webcast of one of its bimonthly forums, called “The Satanic Verses versus the African Dilemma,” hosted by deejays Drew and J4. The issues discussed via the webcast were listed as follows:

*Bling Bling versus Pan Africanist, Revolutionary versus Terrorist, and Conscious versus Commercial:* in 2006, African hip-hop artists are facing more dilemmas than ever before. What are the choices that they have to deal with in their careers, and which factors influence their decisions in the context of a globalizing and polarizing world?
In the computer age, African youth are linking the continent through hip-hop in ways that their parents could have never dreamed, as well as tackling issues that are both local and global, while positioning their youth culture in the international marketplace of popular culture and attendant ideologies. In so doing, they interrogate their particular concerns in relation to the larger context of global capital generated by hip-hop youth culture.

This technological facilitation of African unity through hip-hop youth does not, however, negate international pop culture industry and technological hierarchies. Hip-hop culture takes its place within the larger context of Africa’s neocolonialist umbilical cord, linking the continent to the Western-dominated media for news and popular taste. Although Africanhiphop.com is definitely pro-African and has served a salutary purpose since 1997, many of its literary contributors and critics are Europeans who either travel back and forth to Africa or live there. Malian film scholar Manthia Diawara observes that the global media “wired Africa to the West,... to the extent that Africans are isolated from nation to nation, but united in looking toward Europe and America for the latest news, politics and culture.”

Even though the World Wide Web has ameliorated this dynamic to a degree by linking community to community and people to people, aspiring African hip-hop emcees are still in competition with the hegemony of American music promoted by the global pop culture media. African American rhythm and blues and jazz that influenced their parents’ and grandparents’ generations often dominate the airwaves. Indigenous rap music is only beginning to get mainstream radio airplay in most of Africa’s urban centers, and when it does, American stars like Jay-Z and Diddy are more likely to be featured than their own local rappers. Cultural resonances across Africa and its diaspora through hip-hop subculture are manifest within continuing international hierarchies and exigencies of global capital.

Yet even with the realities of these hegemonic forces, each country has created its own cadre of rap groups and break-dance collectives that can be found on Africanhiphop.com. One can go online and read interviews with emcees or rappers such as Positive Black Soul, Pee Froiss, BMG 44, and Shiffai in Senegal; Unsung Heroes in Nigeria; RevVoltod from Cape Verde; Karim & Sphinx from Egypt; Prophets of Da City, Cavera, and Maluka in South Africa; Pox Presha of Nairobi; Sos-Bi of Tanzania; Kalamashaka in Kenya; Mabulu in Mozambique; Tata Pound in Mali; and many more. African female rappers are also represented, such as Alif in Senegal, Nubian Sister and Godessa in South Africa, and Afrik Image in Cote D’Ivoire. All of these African hip-hop emcees link their artistic lineage to Africa and the black Atlantic with specific African American
rappers, internationally known African singers such as Yousou N’Dour and Miriam Makeba, and Caribbean pop stars. For example, Afrik Image of Côte D’Ivoire is composed of Queen Afrik, who names her inspirations as both Queen Latifah and Miriam Makeba, and Magic Law, who says she was inspired by Tanya St. Val’s zouk music of the Caribbean. In their online interview, they present a new determined African female voice: “We have a rage inside of us. We want to succeed. If women can rap in the U.S.A., [we say] why don’t [we] try it in Ivory Coast.”

Cultural and aesthetic resonances across Africa and the diaspora affirm a connective marginality of culture through hip-hop. In Africa and its diaspora, hip-hop is less of a sign to be appropriated and adapted for indigenous purposes (although this is definitely happening in other sites) than it is a sharing across a root aesthetic. Kenya and Senegal are consummate examples.

SENEGALESE HIP-HOP

Hip-hop seems to have arrived in Senegal around 1985 with some of the first Senegalese rappers: MC Lida, MC Solaar (who went on to make it popular in France), and Positive Black Soul (PBS). PBS was one of the first emcees to mix rap with mbalax, the traditional Senegalese drum music played in West Africa for centuries. A received African American cultural form was immediately adapted to fit local rhythms. This is quintessential diasporic aesthetic intertext in the reterritorialization process. Some of the newer Senegalese rap groups that have emerged in the 1990s are BMG 44, Shiffai, Las MC, Slam Revolution, and Daara J. Although, on the surface, second-generation African rappers, such as Shiffai, seem to be following more of an American aesthetic with overt brag-gadocio, their method still falls into a traditional call-and-response aesthetic that is as old as the griot tradition.

In the post-Senghor era of Senegal of the late 1980s, Positive Black Soul became the rap group in Senegal who put African hip-hop on the international map. Consisting of Doug E. Tee (Amadou Barry) and Didier DJ Awadi from the Sicap Amitie district of Dakar, the emcee and deejay duo replicate the image of Eric B. and Rakim as the quintessential rapper-deejay hip-hop model of the early days of the hip-hop Bronx. PBS’s first internationally successful album was the 1996 Salam on the Mango Island label, earning them subsequent tours on the African continent, in the United States, and in Europe as the early ambassadors of African hip-hop. Yet given this international recognition, PBS continued to steep its aesthetic in local languages and indigenous musical styles.
More recently, they have established collaborations with Senegalese *mbalax* musicians Dieuf Dieul and Hamet Maal (the brother of famed Senegalese singer Baaba Maal) and with Doudou Ndiaye Rose, a living legend of Senegalese traditional drumming. PBS’s artistic choices continue to centralize a Senegalese image that clearly has them representing an indigenous cultural aesthetic, “keeping it real” in the truest sense of hip-hop culture.

Setting the tone for successful African rap being sung in indigenous languages, PBS’s first successful single, “Boul Fale,” meaning “Don’t Worry,” was sung in Wolof. Africanist Moradewun Adejunmobi says in relation to the use of indigenous languages and, by extrapolation, lyrics in musical choices, “The actions we undertake and the discourses we produce in respect of various languages are determined in part by our relationships to the places where these languages are or might be spoken.” Utilizing local indigenous languages is combined with the international language of commerce and popular culture: English. Hip-hop youth in urban Dakar reflect this phenomenon of mixing several languages in conversation that rap music often reflects: “In Senegal . . . a conversational Wolof that incorporates both French and English expressions, functions as the ‘trademark’ of young men and has become directly associated in the perceptions of the Dakarois with the talk of the jeunes bandits de Dakar, ‘the young low-lifes.’” These “jeune bandits de Dakar” include the hip-hop youths who either come from the streets or, following hip-hop’s tendency of ghettocentricity, image themselves in that context. Therefore, language in African hip-hop becomes a way of positioning oneself in one’s local particularity, as well as in the global cosmopolitan arena of popular culture from which the cultural forms have been received. This reterritorializing process establishes a continuum from local traditional language, including localized slang, to Black English and hip-hop slang, as it is imported from U.S. rap.

PBS’s choice of Wolof and Dakar street slang as their preferred rap language is based not only on their locality but also on the hip-hop tenets of “keeping it real” and “representing.” As Murray Foreman announced, “the ’hood comes first,” and this penchant for localized representation (“repping your hood”) extends into the international sphere. Representing is the process of taking on the mantle from the past in the present moment, connoting responsibility to one’s present context—crew, family, and community. Brenda Dixon Gottschild clarifies that “the individual is obliged to ‘represent,’ in the hip-hop sense of the word, to rise and be counted for a specific community, to positively and righteously stand up for a ‘crew.’” If one is to represent one’s cultural context, then
the use of indigenous language and local cultural expressions are crucial in hip-hop’s globalized subculture.

I want to telescope out for a moment to investigate the larger contexts of transmission and reception of American music globally. One way to understand PBS’s rap content, as well as various African hip-hop artists who privilege local culture, is by examining popular music theory. PBS and their audience “flip the script” of commercial U.S. rap, using the form to address their needs and concerns. Not only are youth in Senegal not totally abandoning their local cultures to be MTV cool; they are examining their local cultural values that they want to change. PBS not only included a local Wolof-slang language mix but underpinned the entire remix of “Boul Fale” with a reggae rhythm, steeped in a Jamaican dancehall rhythmic delivery of Wolof. Thus African American rap was reimaged with West African relevance through a well-established Jamaican musical form. The dialogue within the popular music of the black Atlantic became clear early on in African hip-hop with Positive Black Soul’s aesthetic mix. Poet Kamau Brathwaite calls this black Atlantic musical resonance “bridges of sound.” In so doing, Carolyn Cooper argues, Brathwaite’s . . . evokes the substrate cultural ties that connect Africans on the continent to those who have survived the dismembering Middle Passage. The paradoxical construct “bridges of sound” conjoins the ephemerality of aural sensations with the technological solidity of the built environment.15

Indeed, Western technology has in many ways facilitated these “bridges of sound”; but so has the Africanist aesthetic heard back and forth across the Atlantic that is lodged in various social and cultural marginalities. The easy reggae groove of “Boul Fale” is deceptive, for the Wolof lyrics are a scathing social critique. In the lyrics, PBS accuses national authorities of corruption, one of the themes of many young hip-hop artists on the continent of Africa. But what makes the entire album Boul Fale significant is that it set the trend of sociopolitical critique for which African hip-hop is known, making this approach acceptable throughout the continent.

KENYAN HIP-HOP

Thousands of miles away, on Africa’s east coast, Kalmashaka (aka K-Shaka) is a hip-hop group based in Dandor, a poor district in Nairobi, Kenya. This dynamic rap group, who paved the way for Swahili hip-hop to become more
mainstream in Kenya, is comprised of three members: Oteraw, Kama, and Johny. Formed in the mid-1990s, Kalamashaka became popular with their single “Tafsiri Hii” in 1998. Like Powerful Black Soul, they have performed in other African countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa, as well as having toured European countries, such as Sweden and Holland. Their first full-scale album, *Ni Wakati*, released in 2001, was a hit with South Africa’s Channel O when one of their videos from the album got major rotation. African hip-hop groups that have managed to get exposure on an international scale have often become opening acts for American emcees and established African American rap artists, and Kalamashaka is no exception, having opened for Coolio and Lost Boyz.

Although K-Shaka has brought Kenyan rap to a larger audience, they remain known for their socially and politically conscious lyrics. *Ni Wakati* addressed street crime, tribalism, politics, and Africa’s continuing revolutionary conflicts. Like PBS on Africa’s west coast, K-Shaka’s vision is to use rap music to awaken a new generation to contemporary political and cultural issues that intersect with past African discourses. However, each African hip-hop scene has its range of artistic content and form. Party and hardcore gangsta rap have always challenged the so-called conscious rap of the two groups on which I focus here.

In Africa, the added dimension of indigenous pop music intersecting with rap complicates the field. In Kenya, the popularity of so-called genege music—another “bridge of sound” between hip-hop, dancehall, and Kenyan traditional music—promotes a more danceable beat, often laced with “raunchy” lyrics, which has become very popular among Kenya’s youths. Genege, along with another genre called “kapuka,” vies with the more conscious rap produced by groups like Kalamashaka for record sales and radio airtime. Kenyan radio is often reluctant to play socially conscious music typical of Kalamashaka because it challenges the status quo and often specific government officials.

During the political upheaval and violence in Kenya over the supposed rigged political process that elected Mwai Kibaki to the presidency in December 2007, hip-hop was a central sociopolitical commentator in the social discourse. With the serious challenge by Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Party and a member of the Luo ethnic group, violence against the Kikuyu, the largest Kenyan ethnic group to which Kibaki belongs, escalated. This long-standing ethnic rivalry erupted as a result of the presidential election, with over a thousand people being killed and three hundred thousand left homeless. A young rap group called the “Hip Hop Parliament” became hip-hop’s spokespersons, denouncing the violence and voicing their generation’s outrage.
about the destructive life-and-death hatreds perpetrated by their father’s and grandfather’s generations. In the process, Roje Otino of the Hip Hop Parliament situated Kenyan youth in a definition of “conscious rap”: “We don’t play traditional drums like our fathers, nor do we depend on western culture. We don’t care what your tribe is: our hip-hop is about love.” Nickson Mberam of the same rap crew illuminated further, “I have a duty to my country and young people like me; I don’t want to be part of the problem; we want to be part of the solution.” The centrality of their message through hip-hop was borne out when Kofi Anan arrived in Kenya from the United Nations to try and broker peace. The Hip-Hop Parliament presented him with their own written declaration of peace. These contemporary African urban realities are now immortalized in indigenous raps, making this music crucial to the struggle over politics, culture, art, and the minds of today’s youth.

The struggle between commercial and more “conscious” rap music is rarely brought to the level of dominant public discourse in the United States. Due to the all-pervasive multinational popular music, television, and general telecommunications industries that actually make music decisions for us, awareness of choice in rap music is usurped by the ubiquitous hold on the means of communication and distribution by companies like BMG, EMI, Universal, Viacom, and others. Because they only have access to commercial rap music, the majority of American consumers are not even aware of the struggle over hip-hop’s representation.

In Kenya, Kalamashaka has remained active and refuses to record the more commercial Kenyan music. As a way of bolstering their ranks of conscious Kenyan rap music, K-Shaka has helped spawn other local rap groups from their Dandora district. They have also developed musical collaborations throughout Kenya and Tanzania, forming the rap collective Ukoo Fani Mau Mau, with over twenty members from Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya and from neighboring Tanzania.

There’s been a black revolution going on in Africa. In Kenya the Mau Mau were revolutionary. They were the ones who made the word *Uhuru*. They were the ones who brought it to the fore. The Mau Mau were revolutionaries.

Just as Malcolm X used Kenyan’s peasant Mau Mau revolutionary movement against the British colonialists to promote black awareness and empowerment in the United States, Kalamashaka uses Malcolm X’s rhetoric to reinvoke the discourse of freedom in Kenya against neocolonialism today. Even as Pan-Africanism as a global political movement has faded in the twenty-first century, the Pan-Africanist nature of black cultural efforts that promote black freedom and empowerment is becoming prominent through hip-hop’s globalization in Africa. This points again to connective marginalities of historical oppression that resonates within hip-hop youth culture. Conscious African rappers are reinvoking a Pan-Africanist message that links decades of struggle for empowerment across the black Atlantic.

Malcolm X’s use of the word *uhuru* (freedom) evoked many historical moments and can be associated with specific political and cultural movements. Besides the message of freedom of Kenya’s Mau Mau movement, there was the 1960s Uhuru Movement led by the U.S. African People’s Socialist Party, which emphasized internationalism in the liberation of African people’s worldwide. Other African and diasporic allusions are associated with *uhuru* as well. Jomo Kenyatta, a member of Kenya’s Mau Mau movement and first President of independent Kenya (1964–78), named his son “Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta,” and that son went on to become the leader of Kenya’s African National Union, one of the main political parties of postcolonial Kenya. Additionally, one of Jamaica’s most famous reggae groups, Black Uhuru, took the name as a way of identifying with black empowerment for liberation. Therefore, Kalamashaka’s use of Malcom X’s speech that emphasized the symbolism of *uhuru* reinvigorates a weakening worldwide black discourse of continuing struggle for freedom within the hip-hop generation in Africa.

With groups like Kalmashaka in Kenya and Positive Black Soul in Senegal, Africa’s hip-hop movement is in tension with the current Top 40 rap music heard on American commercial radio. African hip-hop’s focus, for the most part on social critique, black liberation, and specific political challenges on the African continent, is a far cry from the bling-bling booty music currently popular in the United States. African hip-hop, though itself consisting of a range of genres, tends to promote a consciousness-raising that is associated with the
U.S. hip-hop underground scene, rarely heard by the majority of America’s pop music audience.\textsuperscript{17}

**CONCLUSIONS: CONNECTIVE MARGINALITIES OF CULTURE AND HISTORICAL OPPRESSION**

African rap music has much to teach hip-hop youth and the general public in the United States about the sociopolitical power and potential of hip-hop culture and rap music. Manthia Diawara, as an African scholar who teaches in the United States, also offers cross-cultural analyses of hip-hop through his generation of West Africans. He captures a cross-cultural and cross-generational connection in “Homeboy Cosmopolitan,” a chapter in his 1998 *In Search of Africa*, where he explores his generation’s identification with an earlier manifestation of black cultural production in collusion with America’s pop culture industry: namely, the exported Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Being a Malian living in Monrovia, Liberia, in his early years, Diawara was struck by how much that West African country identified with the United States (which is not that surprising given its history with U.S. slavery and the debacle of the repatriation movement). He says,

I saw *Superfly*, *Shaft*, and other Blaxploitation films in Monrovia in the early Seventies. I remember being particularly struck by the opening sequence in *Superfly*—it seemed an extraordinary cinematic event. I was . . . fascinated with the movies, the music, the hairstyles, the hats, and the leather jackets what were popular among black Americans . . . To my students [at NYU now], these films are at best corny, and at worst celebrations of black men’s macho, violence, and misogyny. They also find exotic the fact that although I was living so far away and in a completely different culture, I could identify with Blaxploitation films.

But my students tend to overlook the elements of empowerment and pleasure and the subversive strategies that these films, and black American culture in general, make available to people oppressed because of the color of their skin.\textsuperscript{18}

One of our foremost African film scholars and cultural critics has captured two important points about the transatlantic music and cultural exchange between African Americans and Africans: (1) historically, several African generations, including the current hip-hop one, have been fascinated with black American style and cultural production as the world black population setting
global trends from the richest country in the world; and (2) this style is a part of an Africanist aesthetic that has provided, in Diawara’s words, “elements of empowerment and pleasure” for black Americans themselves, as well as for blacks throughout the world, including Africa. The process of claiming one’s power of identity in the face of oppression—whether it be racial as in the United States, or ethnic, class, or political, as in the case of many African countries—becomes an important process promoted by this aesthetic that has its latest manifestation in exported hip-hop culture.

Realistically, African American blues, swing, jazz, funk, and hip-hop have evidenced little conscious referencing of Africa, however much they may have shared aesthetic principles. Yet a continuing twentieth-century secularization of an aesthetic that originally made little distinction between sacred and profane realms is the historical legacy now bequeathed to the African homeland from its diaspora. Sub-Saharan black Africa, then, owes a great debt to its diaspora for the many manifestations of metaphoric embodiment and cultural recreations of its own ontology—like the centrality of music and dance for constituting community, as well as aesthetic principles such as polyrhythm, a danced orality, a call-and-response dialogue approach, and use of performance to represent social phenomena.

To be sure, Africa has recognized these New World resonances in the past, as evidenced by the midcentury rhumba orchestras of Kinshasa, the jazz bands of Accra, and the popular dance styles in Ghana’s urban discos after the early 1970s Soul-to-Soul tour with groups like Ike and Tina Turner and the Voices of East Harlem. The contemporary hip-hop movement has intensified this repatriation of black American music and dance, linking distant African sites such as Lagos, Dakar, Cape Town, Dar es Salaam, and Nairobi, among others. Connective marginalities of culture, class, historical oppression, and youth in opposition to adult sociopolitical authority facilitate these historical and contemporary resonances made manifest through rap music and hip-hop culture.

The Akan symbol known as sankofa is a bird with its head turned back toward its past. I view hip-hop in Africa in terms of this cosmological tenet of temporal circularity. The black Atlantic looks back to its African traditions and sends musical and danced messages filtered through its black Atlantic voices that are in turn heard and reinvented in Africa. In the cases of Senegal’s Positive Black Soul and Kenya’s Kalmashaka, we witness this theory in practice by their reterritorialization of an African American music form, recasting it in their own lived experiences and meanings. African American emcees and the entire U.S. rap audience have much to learn from African rap groups like Positive
Black Soul and Kalamashaka. The reinvoking of a world black revolutionary movement, not yet finished, is an important contribution from African hip-hop that could ameliorate current U.S. hip-hop’s obsessive diversion in American capitalist materialism.

**Notes**

1. See Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), for a full explanation of connective marginalities. This is my theory of one of the primary reasons for hip-hop’s international proliferation, particularly found in Chapter 2.

2. I define the “Africanist aesthetic” as African-based cultural forms and philosophical approaches existing in the African diaspora that continue to reflect similar musical, dance, and oral practices as those in Africa; though these forms and approaches are not African, enough resemblances in the performers’ attitude and relationship to audience exist that cultural connections to African cultural practices are apparent.


4. Ibid., 55.

5. Ibid.


10. Afrik Image, interview at Rumba Kali.


17. The so-called hip-hop underground is an important aspect of the subculture with which hip-hop entrepreneurs must continually engage. Street agency and the hip-hop underground form a web of affiliations, associations, and cliques that supposedly “keep it real” without compromise of artistic integrity or “selling out” to pop culture gatekeepers. This branch of hip-hop argues that commercial hip-hop entrepreneurs cannot engage in effective counterhegemonic activity while courting capitalist materialism. The underground forms a perceived significant resistance to the commercial hip-hop and rap industries. The lifestyle of the rich and famous that is lived by the black millionaire moguls of rap music is considered not “keeping it real” by many hip-hop communities across urban America who promote their own indie record labels, black-market street mixes (on tapes, CDs, and DVDs), b-boy collectives, and rivaling graffiti contingents. However, this dichotomy between underground and commercial is often a
false one, adding an even more complex layer to the analysis of hip-hop outside the United States.


**Bibliography**


