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Publisher: Routledge

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Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmuz20>

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Published online: 07 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Michael Kgomotso Masemola & Pinky Makoe (2014) Musical space as site of transculturation of memory and transformation of consciousness: The re-affirmation of Africa in the Black Atlantic assemblage, *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, 11:1, 63-70, DOI: [10.1080/18125980.2014.893095](https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2014.893095)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2014.893095>

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Musical space as site of transculturation of memory and transformation of consciousness: The re-affirmation of Africa in the Black Atlantic assemblage

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Abstract

This article argues that the recent meteoric emergence of trends such as hip hop and other popular genres in South Africa is a simultaneous internationalization and indigenization of representational temporalities. The connection with Afro-American music, for example, is a fulfillment of commercial imperatives of market success through multinational companies such as SONY, as well as a conscious effort to assert an African idiom through South African indigenous languages and signature beats from the rest of Africa. The article shows how, from the early days of Miriam Makeba's address to the United Nations and performances in New York in the 1950s to Beyonce Knowles' renditions supporting the noble cause of the United Nations recently, a new form of aesthetic transformation globalizes recognizable homologies of Africa and the Black Atlantic assemblage.

Key words: homologies of black culture, Black Atlantic assemblage, internationalization, indigenization, affirmation

Introduction

At the outset it is important to note that, amongst other things, when the South African artist, Lira (her original name at birth is Lerato Molapo), performed at the inauguration of the first black United States President Barack Obama, she was performing alongside artists such as Mary J. Blige, Alicia Keys, Mariah Carey, Beyonce and Jay-Z, in an atmosphere that was not unlike the one that prevailed during the inauguration of the first black president of a democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela who, true to form, repeated the memorable script of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s expression "Free at last! Free at last" (1995: 612). Major scholars in the field have addressed these performances at these two grand celebrations as exemplary Black Atlantic moments affirming Africa in the Black Atlantic assemblage, where the musical expression is a fundamental part of "a philosophical discourse that finds poignant expression of unity in Mandela's memoric repetition" (Masemola 2013: 73).

Homologies of black struggles and culture: Connections and celebrations

In one place, it is observed that “such transnational black culture qualifies itself as a modern counterculture on the basis of a philosophical discourse that unites ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics” (Gilroy 1993: 38–39). In another, the affirmation of Africa in the Black Atlantic through both memory and performance signifies not only unity in that assemblage, but also a unity of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics, struggle and freedom, continuously and consciously reinscribing the revolutionary aspects of the Black Atlantic archive (Masemola 2010: 153–155). In like manner, hip hop artist Jay-Z in his best-seller *Decoded* captures both sense of unity and hope, when he looks at the inauguration of President Obama in terms in freedom struggles that preceded the presidential campaign:

There has been a lot of legitimate criticisms against Obama. But if he'd lost, it would have been an unbelievable tragedy—to feel so close to transformation and then to get sucked back in to the same old story and *watch another generation grow up feeling like strangers in their own country, their culture maligned, their voices squashed*. Instead, even with all the distance yet to go, for the first time ever I felt like we were at least moving in the right direction, *away from the shadows* (Jay-Z 2011: 170–171, emphasis added).

Internationalization versus indigenization: The tensions of authenticity

The unity of hope, thought and homologies of black freedom on two sides of the Atlantic signifies the embodiment of struggle and ideas on both sides. In this sense we experience both celebration and transculturation within the assemblage. The transformational, transcultural musical space is therefore double. This space, “in music, [is] the interval between two adjacent lines” (Mudimbe 2013: 148). The exercise of drawing from the oeuvre of the Rockerfella stable that brought Jay-Z to the pinnacle has seen Afro-American samples transculturated in a South African hip-hop stable headed by popular artists such as Hip Hop Pantsula aka HHP aka Jabba (real name Jabulani Tsambo) and Thabure Thabo Bogopa Junior, better known as JR. It is noteworthy that the stable is called “Motswako”, which ostensibly denotes a “flavored admixture”. Between the “two adjacent lines” to which Valentin Mudimbe refers (2013: 148) is indigenization through the local vernacular idiom of Setswana.

Such indigenization is not a crude admixture of classic Motown samples overlaid with Setswana lyrics. It is an involved but eclectic structure of modulation or what Merle Williams, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, calls “an operative language” that enables South African musicians to be enmeshed within the cross-flights of the diasporic body of the assemblage, where “the score representing the musical idea constitutes an abstraction produced by reflection” (2013: 27). Hence it is that we find in most HHP albums a reference to the Mafikeng town that hosts Motswako often referred to as “Maftown”, which alludes to Motown in the United States. The simultaneous indigenization and

internationalization of Afro-American cultural scripts is part of an operative language “rooted in the interaction of embodied consciousness and circumambient world gives rise to formalized, conventional levels of signification”; for “[s]uch acquired ideas ... are themselves caught up in a ‘second life’ and ‘second visibility’ on the far side of the operative language” (Williams 2013: 27).

Acquired ideas described above, or indeed acquired Motown-to-Maftown samples and sounds, also depend on popular cultural symbols and sources that require specific reconfigurations to augment that second visibility for the musician and the beats. For instance there are artists such as Washington-born South African rapper Da Les (real name Leslie Mampe) who are hell-bent on mimicking the Afro-American style, complete with autotune beats, crass materialism typical of Rick Ross videos. Da Les’ song, “Heaven”, featuring AKA (Kiernan Jordan) & Maggz. This song, despite its lofty and metaphysical reference, lacks credibility and situational authenticity and, for that reason, lacks authentic second visibility of the second operative language of local yet internationally derived music. Unlike Hip Hop Pantsula (HHP), Da Les is far removed from the conscious transformational imperatives that codetermine commercial success of the US artists like Drake and Lil’ Wayne that he crudely imitates. The song “Heaven” opens with a verse by AKA that goes:

How the fuck we work so hard;
 Working all goddamn day get no reward;
 Better get on your marks, get set, go.
 This dough takes no days off.
 I put my plan in motion, your swag is broken;
 This song I’m making got this nation under mass hypnosis!
 We don’t fuck with you assholes
 Gassed up like Castrol.
 More stamps on my passport
 That’s bad news like tabloids
 Came up on that Death Row, West Coast, Bad Boy!
 I was ducking my landlord
 Looking out for my standpoint
 I’m Simi Sosa
 (“Heaven” www.theboyschillo.wordpress.com, accessed on 13/09/2013)

As AKA wittily goes beyond reinventing himself from Kiernan Jordan to the next level of identity-fashioning, he creates an entry into the avatar of Simi Sosa, thus creating identities. He is ephemerally transmuting himself through flight, as indicated by the words, “more stamps on my passport” (line 9), with the principal aim of connecting with the United States rappers’ circuit. The explicit reference to Death Row, West Coast and Bad Boy expresses his ambition to assert his place in these recording companies. This is heavily laden with the stuff of irony; for according to him, it will be “bad news like

tabloids” (line 10) but good news for him. Further irony is that Lira, the dark skinned artist who insists on the natural if distinctively “raw” but elegantly simple African look and jazz fusion sounds in her soul music, is highly regarded and performed at the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

Lira, often positively understood to be re-inventing Makeba, exudes a cosmopolitan *Africanness* that makes a new, never-heard-of syncretism that clearly positions her as a valuable addition to the transculturated sounds of the assemblage through a connection with available iconic African figures embodied by Erykah Badu and others. Similarly, Lira’s deliberate choice of earth colours in her dress code in her promotional music videos as well as her eloquent use of recognizable local languages have earned her success and respect. She partakes, by virtue of this *difference* in the operative language of Black Atlantic Assemblage, and becomes perfectly ensconced in what Merle Williams has earlier on described as a “second visibility” where the authenticity of her music is as important as the different musical idea; the latter “vibrates evocatively in the melody that makes it audible” (Williams 2013: 27). Lira’s is the melody of differentiated authenticity, if ever there was one.

By contrast, the entry into the fad-dism of notoriety of Bad Boy Records and Death Row Records positions Da Les and AKA as being without an exclusive standpoint but nothing short of either “gate-crashing” or crash landing on the site of the assemblage. That is even suggested by the ubiquitous use of the “fuck” word. All told, it affirms mimicry of the vile tongue, and so denies “second visibility” and guarantees anonymity. In short, this verse flies in the face of his assertion, namely, “Looking out for my standpoint” (line 13). In the place of the said standpoint, here is evinced a will to imitate, rather than innovate, which is not an affirmation but a defeat of its own means. The video for “Heaven” successfully picks up the codes of vulgarity *sans* euphemism, where “dope” is semantically interchangeable with “good” in the parlance of the world of hustlers who mistake the effects of drug addiction (on Afro-American families) for “a nation under mass hypnosis” (line 6).

Such mass hypnosis was the province of the late rapper and hit-maker Notorious B.I.G., especially with the rendition of his massive hit, “Hypnotize”. Biggie Smallz, as he was popularly known, when he reinvented part of Slick Rick’s “La-Di-Da-Di” tune for his chorus:

Biggie, Biggie, Biggie, can’t you see
 Sometimes your words just hypnotize me
 And I love your flashy ways
 Guess that’s why they are so broke,
 And you’re so paid
 (“Hypnotize”: www.azlyrics.com (accessed on 13 September 2013))

For all its crass materialism and ostentation, Biggie puts on display and flaunts through an almost oracular female voice that praises him, instead of doing it himself. There is a sense in which he is awakened to his own power, to which he is seemingly oblivious

“Can’t you see”, Line 1). This splitting of the persona is nowhere present in Da Les’s “Heaven”, which embraces not the stylistic twists of Biggie but only imitates its misogyny in its use of the word “fuck”. Its envisaged entry into the Black Atlantic assemblage is based on superficial imitation rather than deep appreciation of the mark of difference, and it needs to glean some pearls of wisdom from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., when he counsels caution: However, Gates finds it inefficacious to imitate “all that can be imitated, everything exterior, appearance, gesture, intonation and dress” (quoted in Masemola 2013: 72).

While “ducking the landlord” (Line 2, Verse One) when Biggie is “so Paid” (Line 5, Chorus), clearly the American intonation in AKA and Da Les, denying the mark of difference from dress code to supercars to lexical items, makes it difficult to whatever is unique. Take the use of “dough” in Verse Two of Biggie’s “Hypnotize”:

I put hoes in NY onto DKNY (uh-uh)
 Miami, D.C. prefer Versace (that’s right)
 All Philly hoes, *dough* and Moschino (c’mon)
 (“Hypnotize” www.azlyrics.com accessed on 13 September 2013))

Surely there are many opportunities for similar yet localized paradigmatic selections that could connect with the quotidian vernaculars defining Da Les’s support base. Interestingly, the specific packaging of this South African export into markets lacks both imagination and originality. These elements of imagination and originality are based on the repetition of the archive in a manner that reconfigures US-SA transcultural discourse. In the lines that follow in Verse Three of “Heaven”, Maggz makes an explicit reference to Biggie, when he recalls the gesture of one of the two drunk party girls and/or groupies:

... wathi kimi: no biggie
 Let’s do backseats and get kinky
 Ngathi: “K my love you’re too cool as fuck” as I am burning down my sticky.
 (“Heaven” www.theboyschillo.wordpress.com, accessed on 13/09/2013)

Significantly, here Maggz consciously transmogrifies and takes on a Biggie personality where AKA chooses a Simi Sosa avatar, and his spectacular backseat antics (line 14) are traceable to Biggie, too. For instance, in Verse Two of “Hypnotize” Biggie proclaims:

Them niggas ride dicks Frank White push the sticks
 On the Lexus LX, fur and a half;
 Bulletproof glass tints if I want some ass.
 Gonna blast squeeze first—ask questions last:
 That’s how most of these gangsters pass
 At last! A nigger rappin’ ‘bout blunts and broads,
 Tits and bras, *ménage a trois*, sex in expensive cars...
 (“Hypnotize” www.azlyrics.com (accessed on 13 September 2013))

Despite criticism of the invisibility of Africa in Gilroy's Black Atlantic, it is the handicap of imitation that underscores "staying in the shadows" (Jay-Z 2011, 171). The question of belonging to the Black Atlantic through the identification of "race" and "imitation" has been settled by two important studies by Sope Maithufi (2013). Maithufi ascribes primacy to what he nominates as an ironic form of distancing based on irony, that is, "ironic distancing" (2013: 10). That is to say that identifying with Biggie in this case serves the run-of-the-mill function of merely connecting, without the differential signature of performance that stands out as a unique inflection rather than interpellation. For Maithufi, there is dire need, as a vital part of the connection, for "variations and defamiliarizations" (2013: 5). What the fair-skinned Da Les and AKA as quasi-Drake figures have done with the packaging of the song "Heaven" is copy signature tunes and beats without variation or ironic distancing. Unlike the ironic twists and sarcasm in, say, Lil Wayne's "God Bless Amerika", Da Les and AKA are thus peddling instead an image that is now no longer in vogue in the United States rapper's circuit:

I was never on that nationalist tip as an MC, but MC's I looked up to, like Rakim, Kane, and Cube, whatever their politics, were unambiguously black, with no concession to any other standard of appearance. They didn't hate themselves. *They knew how to be strong and stylish but stay black in a way that wasn't self-conscious or contrived. Just by being true to who they were, they obliterated the ideal of the light-skinned singer with the S-curl, which, for a lot of kids of my generation, took the edge off the kind of color consciousness that's always lurking for black people in America. Even when hip-hop aired some of the ongoing colorism among black people – like Biggie rapping that he was black and ugly as ever – the point is that we were airing it out, not sweeping it under the rug and letting it drive us crazy trying to pretend it didn't exist. Just one more way that hip-hop kept us sane* (Jay-Z 2011: 177, emphasis added).

All that Jay-Z highlights is the colour consciousness in the representation that is anchored to a degree of authenticity in the "standard of appearance", and so "stylish but staying black" as a cultural and existential imperative best expressed in the remaking of the song "Young, Gifted and Black", which features an introduction by Louis Farrakhan. It is noteworthy here that, beyond the Biggie representation of "black and ugly as ever", the idea of blackness requires radical entrenchment through the iconic figure of Louis Farrakhan. It is not imitation, but purposeful rehabilitation of blackness through experiences of "making it" despite an environment that nurtures no hope for black citizens of the United States:

And out of the mercy of Allah and the lord written in our nature
 We call an individual into existence and when that individual comes
 I make no apologies for what I 'm about to do
 [Jay-Z] I 'm America's worst nightmare
 I 'm young black and holding my nuts like shh-year
 Y'all was in the pub having a light beer

...

There's your ticket out the ghetto

Take flight right here

Sell me, you go bye-bye here yeah

Damn there's a different set of rules we abide by here

You need a gun niggas night drive by here

You 're having fun racing all your hot rods there

Downloading all our music on your iPods there

I'm Chuck D standing in the crosshairs here

Y'all straight, chicks got horsehair here

You ain't gotta be in fear of your bosses there

Y'all lose your job, your pop's rich, y'all don't care

So I don't care, y'all acting like y'all don't hear

Hear all the screams from the ghetto all the teens ducking metal here

Trying to take they mind to a whole different level here

Yeah, we 're real close to the devil here

There gotta be a better way. Somebody call the reverend here

Yeah, y'all must really be in Heaven there

Somebody tell God that we got a couple of questions here

My little cuz never got to see his seventh year

And I'm so used to pain that I ain't even shed a tear

(Jay-Z 2011: 184, emphasis added)

The kind of morass in which the black subject is stymied is described through situations that test the limits of hope (“We’re close to the devil here”); yet, indeed, “there gotta be a better way” for those who get the “ticket out of the ghetto” and “take flight right here”. It would seem as if Da Les was having this kind of flight in mind when in the track “Heaven” he envisions “More stamps on my passport”. That explains why, in part, the track has a feel derived from beats directly interpolated from Ace Hood’s blockbuster hit “Bugatti”, featuring Future and Rick Ross.

Conclusion

Whereas there is unity in the aesthetic assemblage of the 21st century, it is underscored by a strong presence, recognizable sound that has occupied and reconfigured sites of struggle. The need to identify with commercial success is only part of the US-South African connection; what counts is the reinvention of blackness in the “in-between” space of that emerging South African-United States sound that rewrites the scripts from Notorious B.I.G. of yesteryear to Ace Hood today. As with the mark of interpellation and differential signature used by HHP, that Ace Hood sound, replete with its crass materialism and obverse hatred for poverty is spectacularly brought to view in a tweaked form in iFani’s “Milli” track, which also speaks to the rise to millionaire status through

hard work and words. It hardly promotes the drug hustling traditions that have seen many a rapper either or arraigned or buried. And, by using creative Xhosa rhyme schemes, it attains audibility and visibility earlier on described by Merle Williams (2013) and Sope Maithufi (2013). The overlay on iFani's syncretic beats seeks not to imitate but to innovate, much unlike Da Les and AKA.

The noteworthy fact that iFani has because of this adjacent line, as Mudimbe would have it (2013: 14), has been signed up by SONY, using the indigenous language of isiXhosa for rapping makes him a hip hop sensation of a stature similar to that of HHP aka Jabba. These two artists, notably, engage political subjects in their work, as and when they refer to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and (the ousting of) Kgalema Motlhanthe, respectively. Their work exudes a unity of purpose not only in belonging to the SA-US hip hop assemblage, but also affirms Africa's linguistic and rhythmic signatures. There is also a new deep thrust of authenticity that has moved away from hip-hop sounds and beats but imports them from the rest of Africa and incorporates them to create a cosmopolitan Pax Africana sound akin to Salif Keita's, churned out lately by artists such as Mafikizolo with their hit, "Khona".

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