

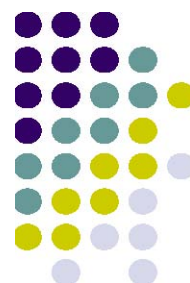


**HIP-HOP IN THE AGE OF
EMPIRE: *CAPE FLATS STYLE***

Adam Haupt

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Managing Editor:

Katherine McKenzie

Editorial Collective:

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Hip-Hop in the Age of Empire: Cape Flats Style¹

Adam Haupt

University of Cape Town

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of Empire is particularly helpful in a discussion of hip-hop in post-apartheid South Africa, which continues to deal with the economic and political consequences of apartheid whilst also having to deal with the demands of global capitalism. The authors' use of the term Empire alludes to the complex ways in which power is manifested on the global stage. They argue that imperialism and colonialism was characterised by "conflict or competition among imperial powers" (Hardt & Negri, 2000:9). This activity has since been replaced by "the idea of a single power that overdetermines them all, structures them all in a unitary way, and treats them under one common notion of right that is decidedly postcolonial and postimperialist" (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 9). Here, the authors are referring to supranational regulatory institutions such as the United Nations. Whilst they suggest that the "juridical concept of Empire" took shape in the "ambiguous experience of the United Nations" (2000, 6), they also contend that their analysis can be applied to the global influence of transnational corporations"(2000: 31-32). It is these authors' conception of the notion of Empire that provides a point of entry into a discussion of what I call hip-hop activism. My interest in hip-hop speaks to my ongoing engagement with the ways in which subjects are able to engage critically with hegemony as active agents or producers within the context of global capitalism. I also work from the assumption that in "the constitution of Empire there is no longer an 'outside' to power" and that: "the only strategy available to the struggles is that of a constituent counterpower that emerges from within Empire" (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 5859).

An exploration of certain aspects of hip-hop reveals how such counterdiscursive action becomes possible. Initially, I explore 'conscious' hip-hop and discuss its commercial and politically diluted spin-off, gangsta rap. I will argue that Dick Hebdige's key text *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* finds some currency in a discussion of the recuperation of hip-hop by the mainstream / the major record labels in its attempts to maximize revenue streams and consolidate its monopolistic control over the music market place. Hebdige reminds us that subcultures communicate through commodities and therefore work from within the operation of capitalist processes of retail, marketing and distribution (1979: 95). Hip-hop, much like punk subculture or reggae before it, thus walks a tightrope and it is "fairly difficult ... to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation ... and creativity / originality ... even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures" (Hebdige, 1979: 95). It is from this perspective

¹ A reworked version of this paper will appear in: Pieterse, E. and Meintjies, F. (eds) (forthcoming). *Voice of the Transition: Perspectives on the Politics, Poetics and Practices of Development in New South Africa*. Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers.

that Hardt & Negri's claim that there can be no "outside" to power" begins to make sense in the context of this discussion. Despite the seeming deligitimation of hip-hop, 'conscious' hip-hop continues to have underground appeal and is certainly employed as a tool in marginal spaces, such as Cape Town, South Africa. In this regard, I will suggest that hip-hop continues to be a valuable vehicle for educating youth in Cape Town. Whilst a significant amount of interesting activity still happens on stage and in recording studios - thanks to live acts like Black Noise, Brasse vannie Kaap, Godessa or Moodphase5ive, for example - I will argue that it is Bush Radio's hip-hop theory and practical workshop sessions that hold the key to ensuring that hip-hop's potential for developing critical literacies and facilitating the empowerment of diverse members of Cape Town's new generation of hip-hop 'heads'. I will suggest that these workshops hold true to the hip-hop concept of 'knowledge of self' in its attempts to offer its participants something that moves beyond the restrictions that South Africa's education system provides its pupils and moves beyond workshop approaches that merely seem to showcase hip-hop as an end in itself.

Initial thoughts about the existence of hip-hop outside of the USA might raise questions about whether its appeal is evidence of American cultural and economic imperialism, given the great popularity of gangsta rap and commercial rap across the globe. Elsewhere, I draw on research by David Coplan in order to suggest that South Africans' use of American genres of music, such as jazz, has a history that dates back to the 1940s (Coplan, 1985: 148; Haupt, 2000: 175-176). In this regard, I argue that the decision by crews, such as Prophets of da City (POC) and Brasse vannie Kaap (BVK), to employ hip-hop in their attempts to engage critically with South Africa's political reality "conforms with black artists' reliance on African-American or Caribbean material in their attempt to construct black nationalist narratives that rely on the notion of a global black experience of oppression and resistance" (Haupt, 2001: 176). The answer to the aforementioned question is that hip-hop's continued appeal across the globe cannot simply be ascribed to American imperialism - such a response would be too simplistic. Firstly, a distinction needs to be made between hip-hop and its more commercial spin-off, gangsta rap. A key aspect that informs what is often termed 'conscious' hip-hop is the concept of knowledge of self, which alludes to the idea that subjects need to achieve a significant level of self-awareness through a process of introspection so that they may engage critically with their reality. Shaheen Ariefdien alludes to this idea in a POC track titled "Black Thing":

The term 'coloured' is a desperate case of how the devil's divided us by calling us a separate race. The call me 'coloured' said my blood isn't pure, but G, I'm not yacking my insecurity. So I respond to this and ventilate my mental state with Black Consciousness And I believe in each one teach one reach one from the heart 'cause that's where the beats are from... But racism's a trap and the nation seems to lack knowledge of self. But it means, what it seems we're attracting anything but a black thing.

(POC,
1995)

Ariefdien refers to apartheid's 'divide and rule' policy, which sought to fragment black subjects into more manageable ethnic camps, and certain 'coloured' subjects' seemingly uncritical internalisation of racist discourse. Here, he makes the connection between Black Consciousness and the concept of knowledge of self in order to suggest that BC's unifying narrative offers an alternative to the divisive discourse of apartheid. In this instance, POC tap into what Stuart Hall calls the notion of the "essential black subject" (1992: 252-255) in an attempt to construct a unified black identity² that moves beyond an oppressive discourse. In contrast, gangsta rap - along with its celebration of 'thug life', misogyny and negative racial stereotypes - appears to do anything but move beyond oppressive discourses. Snoop Doggy Dog's hit "Gin and Juice" offers a good case in point:

*I got bitches in the living room gettin it on
and, they ain't leavin til six in the mornin (six in the mornin)
So what you wanna do, sheeit
I got a pocket full of rubbers and my homeboys do too*
(Snoop Doggy Dog, 1993)

Much gangsta rap (with the possible exception of Tupac Shakur) has, to date, displayed very little evidence of the hip-hop concept of knowledge of self and certainly makes no real attempt to engage critically with structures of domination. Many gangsta rap lyrics centre around the accumulation of wealth, male sexual conquests, drug abuse and misogyny. This recipe has made gangsta rap an exploitable commodity in the hands of the major record labels as their messages pose no significant threat to hegemony. It is thus no surprise that we have seen the ascendance of rappers such as Snoop Doggy Dog, Coolio, Dr. Dre, Eminem, P Diddy, Notorious BIG, and so on. In this regard, bell hooks contends that the "sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1994: 116). hooks' contention makes sense of the fact that more critical and subversive artists such as Sarah Jones, KRS-One, Dead Prez, Immortal Technique or Talib Kweli do not receive much airplay in the mainstream media. From this perspective, these artists do not serve the interests of "white supremacist patriarchy".

One could make sense of these trends by tapping into Dick Hebdige's discussion of subculture. 'Conscious' hip-hop's counter-discursive agenda resonates well with his understanding of subculture. Hebdige argues that subculture interrupts the "process of 'normalization'" and contradicts "the myth of consensus" in its attempts to challenge

² In "New Ethnicities" Hall speaks of a shift that marks the end of the essential black subject. He contends that this shift speaks to "the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature" (1992: 254). However, he frames his discussion by stating that this shift does not mark a linear shift from one conception of blackness to the other. Instead, they are "two phases of the same movement, which constantly overlap and interweave" (Hall, 1992: 252).

hegemony (1979: 18). POC's attempt to interrogate assumptions about racial identity in "Black Thing" offers an example of this kind of challenge. The song makes the claim that the term 'coloured' is not value-free and has a very specific political history. Poet Sarah Jones's "Your Revolution" (lyrics available at www.yourrevolutionisbanned.com) offers another example of an artistic attempt to challenge problematic representations. In this instance, Jones problematizes the mainstream appeal of gangsta rap's gender discourse:

*and though we've lost Biggie Smalls
your Notorious revolution
will never allow you to lace no
lyrical douche in my bush
...
your revolution will not be me tossing my weave
making believe I'm some caviar-eating, ghetto mafia clown
or me givin' up my behind just so I can get signed
or maybe have somebody else write my rhymes?
I'm Sarah Jones, not Foxy Brown*

(Jones, 2003)

In her piece, Jones makes reference to mainstream artists such as Notorious BIG, Fugees, Foxy Brown and Shaggy in order to issue a challenge to the values that bell hooks identifies in her discussion of gangsta rap³. She questions myths of consensus about what is deemed to be acceptable / natural practice in gangsta rap and commercial rap in general. In short, she challenges the idea that women are often represented as tradeable commodity items in gangsta rap videos and lyrics. It is interesting to note that Jones's chorus line refers to Gil Scott Heron's popular 70s poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised". This particular poem issued a similar kind of challenge to hegemony within its specific historical context. Her decision to refer to Heron is no accident as his poetry is considered to be one of the key influences on the rise of hip-hop during the late 70s and early 80s. Whilst Heron's work issued a challenge to white structures of domination - as evidenced in mainstream media representations - Jones's work suggests that the "revolution" has been sold out by gangsta rap's suspect gender politics and its complicity with "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy". It is for this reason that she asserts her artistic integrity at the end of the above quotation.

Essentially, Jones is engaging critically with the process of hip-hop's recuperation via the commercial exploitation of gangsta rap and commercial rap music in general. The term

Sarah Jones recently won a legal battle in which she challenged the Federal Complaints Commission's somewhat ironic ruling that "Your Revolution" was indecent. In a press release Jones claims that "we've maintained all along that the poem/song is not only far from indecent, but is exactly the kind of original, independent expression the FCC continues to endanger by supporting radio monopolies on the one hand and restricting artists' voices on the other" (<http://www.yourrevolutionisbanned.com/index4.htm>).

recuperation has a very specific meaning in Hebdige's discussion of punk and mod subculture. He suggests that the process of recuperation takes place in the following ways:

1. the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form);
2. the 'labelling' and redefinition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form) (Hebdige, 1979:94).

In his discussion of the commodity form, Hebdige reminds us that subcultures speak through commodities (1979: 95). In hip-hop, sampling relies on the use of elements of music texts - that are commodity items - in order to produce new music texts, which will become commodity items themselves. A significant amount of tension thus exists in the creative process of producing counter-discursive music texts as the process of music production is already quite complicit in commercial processes. At the same time, conscious hip-hop's subversive and critical lyrics seem to have been displaced somewhat by the mainstream appeal of gangsta rap. In this regard, Hebdige contends that "the creation of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging which must inevitably lead to the defusion of the subculture's subversive power" (1979: 95). Shaheen Ariefdien points out that hip-hop itself has not been deligitimated:

I use this example of where you have strings, right? Like Mozart, or whatever ... they might use strings in a classical piece. Now Britney Spears happens to do a ballade that uses strings – that doesn't make it classical music. Similarly, if you hear this rap thing on radio, it doesn't make it hip-hop just because you have this [sound effect] beat thingy and all this kak and then all of a sudden you have this rap verse, or something like that, and all of a sudden it's hip-hop (Ariefdien, 2002: 4).

It could be argued, however, that one key aspect of hip-hop - rap music, albeit gangsta rap has been co-opted by the mainstream, thereby diluting rap's subversive potential. Similar claims could be made about hip-hop fashion and graffiti art. Hip-hop fashion has been co-opted into mainstream fashion trends and graffiti art has been commissioned by corporations and organisations, which, some would say, deligitimates the subversive power of the art form. Hebdige's ideological form comes into play when considering the substantial amount of negative press coverage that rap artists have received since the 80s. The corporate challenge to sampling in hip-hop via court battles – Acuff-Rose Music Inc. v. Campbell, Boyd Jarvis v. A&M Records et al. and Grand Upright Music v. Warner Bros Records, for example – have come to characterise rap as deviant as well.

Interestingly enough, it is conscious hip-hop that continues to appeal to hip-hop artists in the South African context. In many respects, artists - such as BVK, Godessa, Devious, Fifth Floor and Plain Madnizz - remain true to the concept of knowledge of self, which continues to inform the messages produced by what many call underground hip-hop. Hip-hop from South Africa has never really been commercially viable for local artists and this

might explain why it was never truly recuperated in the sense that Hebdige uses the term. Another explanation may be found in the very operation of Empire itself. Tony Mitchell contends that the “flow of consumption of rap music within the popular music industry continues to proceed hegemonically, from the USA to the rest of the world, with little or no flow in the opposite direction” (2001: 2). South African musicians have therefore never really had the opportunity to succeed in the mainstream American or global music scene. If the motivation of substantial commercial gain has not kept hip-hop heads engaged in this subculture for so long, their continued interest seems to confirm Ariefdien’s claim that hip-hop is the voice of this generation of youth and that it is a “very useful tool right now” for education (Ariefdien, 2002, 11). It is from this perspective that Mitchell’s claims about hip-hop outside of the USA make sense:

Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world. (Mitchell, 2001: 1)

This contention rings true when considering the activities of crews like POC, Black Noise and Brasse vannie Kaap (BVK). POC has long been involved in a number of national education tours, such as a voter education tour titled “Rapping for Democracy” and a drug awareness campaign during the early 90s. Ariefdien and Ready D were also involved in youth development workshops in Ireland via Youth Network TV and POC established links with hip-hop heads – such as UK hip-hop crew Fun-da-mental - during their extended stay in the UK during the 90s. Black Noise’s Emile YX? was instrumental in launching an anti-racism, anti-crime campaign titled “Heal the Hood” in the late 90s and involved Swedish hip-hop artists in this campaign after establishing links with them during a tour of Europe. Emile YX? has also been a key in organising hip-hop workshops, competitions and performance events like “Hip-Hop Indaba” and “African Battle Cry” in his attempts to promote hip-hop. Black Noise continues to work on exchanges with European hip-hop heads and, at the end of March 2003, the crew left for a three-month tour of Europe, where they planned to record and release a new album. Emile YX? also organized “Verbal Tribez”, a b-boy workshop, b-boy battle and hip-hop gig featuring Jamyka (from Angola), BVK, Black Noise, Godessa and Black Twang (from Sweden). The event was meant to be a “celebration of 21 years of hip-hop in South Africa.” BVK has performed at the Pukkelpop Festival in Belgium and the Nottinghill Carnival in the UK in 2000. During that same year BVK also began to enjoy more mainstream success amongst white South African audiences and they performed at key festivals, such as Oppikoppi, Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees, Splashy Fen Folk Festival Up the Creek and the North Sea Jazz Festival. These crews demonstrate that hip-hop has, to a certain extent, been a “vehicle for global youth affiliations” (Mitchell, 2001: 1).

These affiliations seem to centre around the activities of specific hip-hop crews, however. Shaheen Ariefdien’s departure from POC marked a shift in the way hip-hop was being employed as a vehicle for global affiliations, education and debates about local identity. Ariefdien’s departure from the crew freed him up to become more closely involved in

community activism as well as pursue studies at the University of Cape Town. He and DJ Big Dré also drive a hip-hop show called Headwarmers, which is aired on community radio station Bush Radio. The show provides listeners with the opportunity to engage in topical debates (on AIDS or globalisation, for example), listen to local and international studio guests, call in to engage in ‘open mic’ emcee sessions as well as listen to hip-hop tracks, which are often difficult to obtain in the average music store. In a sense, the radio show has become one of the means through which Cape Town’s hip-hop community is constituted and offers a means through which heads are able to mobilise. The show later became one of the ways through which Ariefdien and the Broadcasting Training Initiative’s Nazli Abrahams would recruit participants in Bush Radio’s emcee workshops. These workshops are a spin-off of an initial programme called HIV Hop (2000), which was geared toward “looking at how to use hip-hop to educate young people about HIV and AIDS, but beyond messaging sort of the ABC thing that you see everywhere” (Abrahams, 2003: 2). Ariefdien sketches the detail on how these workshops were conducted:

We kinda worked a way of taking information, like resource information and then flipping and arranging it into songs. So we worked with Devious, Godessa, a whole bunch of other cats as well. Taking raw data, either from the Internet or gedagte and dealing with stuff And when we were supposed to send a group of people to Amsterdam to find out more and learn more about hip-hop theatre, we had to prepare for beforehand But we didn’t want to be purely on a technical writing stuff vibe. You know multi-syllable rhyme schemes, this verse, fuck that OK, so we started brainstorming ideas The connections between slavery, colonialism, apartheid That was purely just for preparation for them to gooi, you know, to perform thingie and stuff like that. And so we started speaking to them afterwards Fuck, and some of the discussions we had. Like that was even better than writing shit. The writing shit is cool because you can always practice on it, but other stuff forces you to think, you know (Ariefdien, 2002: 8).

Abrahams notes that the programme was supposed to run for one month, but continued for six months. The positive response they received from the workshop participants shortly after their return from Amsterdam convinced them that they could present a more structured programme and they advertised it on Headwarmers. The programme contains a practical creative writing component and a critical theory component, which has them engaging with theorists like Noam Chomsky, Frantz Fanon or Michael Parenti, for example. Abrahams says that they are also looking into possibilities of getting their students’ work published and are exploring international scholarship opportunities. Typically, many of the participants are high school students. In response to my question about whether these students are able to cope with what appears to be university level reading material, she points out that they are not required to write exams or essays, they’re not being graded and that their “understanding isn’t based on regurgitating information” (Abrahams, 2003: 4). She contends that the workshops focus upon a practical application of the information that is offered to them:

So my thing is, look, if you live in Khayelitsha, what does globalisation mean to you? What does NEPAD spell to you? Does it mean ... there was a case where a bunch of people died of cholera. Was it really just about the cholera or was it about water not being sanitised and where it comes from? Privatisation. So it's just building on very small – it's not small concepts, but it's building on small chunks of information that is very relevant to their everyday living. And because it hits here [points to heart] and not here [points to head] it makes it more interesting and so they're hungry to read or they're hungry to find out more about (Abrahams, 2003: 4) the difference

She also feels that youth education programmes and educators tend too “talk down” to children and that educators “assume that they don't know much” (Abrahams, 2003: 7). She's also keen on pursuing this programme on a larger scale in her attempts to offer alternative forms of education, particularly in the face of the view that largely under-resourced and poorly skilled schools are highly unlikely to make outcomes-based education work (2003: 8). The programme also benefits from visits by academics - like American linguist Geneva Smitherman – who either donate teaching time or books. Again, these workshops resonate with Mitchell's claim that hip-hop “has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations” (Mitchell, 2001: 1). It is also important to note that these ongoing activities have a greater potential to empower participants than tours of hip-hop crews and once-off workshops.

Some of the rhymes produced by workshop participants – those that I have had access to – reflect that Abrahams and Ariefdien's work are driven by the hip-hop concept of knowledge of self and that the programme encourages its participants to engage critically with their social, political and economic realities. The participants' writing also reflects that a significant amount of work is put into helping them to write skillfully and to exploit creative possibilities. Brad Brockman's “Noise From the Black Hole” reveals an understanding of how the discourse of apartheid continues to position black subjects:

*Soweto 1976, battles on the streets Throwing
stones at the Police To the ghettos of the
present we switch: That same hand now holds a
straightening comb Black Eves parading pallid
fallacies Faceless, so face this Even though we
jibe about the way they cook We idolize the way
they look The Bold and Beautiful As we grow old
bitter and dutiful Waiting for Blonde, blue-eyed
Saviors to save us When it was Religion they
used to enslave us*

(Brockman, unpublished)

Brockman's work affirms Mitchell's claim that hip-hop is a tool that can be used to rework local identities (Mitchell: 2001: 1). He comments on certain black subjects' uncritical consumption of American popular culture and the values that it promotes, here

referring to the appeal of American soap operas in which practically all of the characters are affluent white individuals. His observation reflects an awareness of the pervasive influence that American cultural imperialism has on South African citizens' everyday lives. In this regard, it came as no real surprise that, in my informal discussions with nurses working in clinics and day hospitals on the Cape Flats, I learned that many young mothers are naming their children after soap opera characters. Brockman's ironic shift from a militant, anti-apartheid scene to a domestic scene in post-apartheid South Africa reminds us just how much work still needs to be done in addressing the harm that racist discourses and practices continue to have on the psyche of black subjects. His piece also reflects upon the persistence of injustice on a systemic level:

*"Formerly" whites-only schools have the best facilities During
Apartheid the government invested selectively Utilizing
Education as a means of preserving white domination By
denying proper schooling to an entire nation These schools now
charge high fees Attended by whites and black elites Colonialism
in the Classroom to this very day History and Literature
portrays Europe as superior in every way So we no longer think
of ourselves as African As I speak for angry black men and
women Still being prepared for lives in servitude In these times
this still rings very true*

(Brockman, unpublished)

These rhymes resonate with Abrahams' misgivings about OBE in the face of the continuing class and resource disparities that continue to exist in the school system and impoverished communities at large. In essence, Brockman suggests that these disparities amount to what used to be called 'gutter education', which ultimately disempowers students. Ultimately, he suggests that even the content of history and literature curricula reflects the continued existence of a neo-colonial educational system that situates subjects in servile positions.

According to Abrahams, the workshops are well represented from a class and race perspective, but that female participants still constitute a minority. One of these participants, Coslyn Schippers, focuses on the histories of key black women – such as Cleopatra, Harriet Tubman, Nefertiti and Sara Baartman:

*A sexual freak our Hottentot Venus Money making treat
swindled from our hot beaches Displayed in the street; an
animal, a creature But who's the true beast; Saartjie
Baartman or you leaches Imagine being ordered to sit,
stand and stroll While Civilised people would grip, gag and
groan Two Thousand and two this Queen came back home
Two centuries of torture, we now rest her trapped soul*

(Schippers, unpublished)

Schippers' piece reflects on the 'horror' of colonialism and turns the mirror on what for long has been assumed to be the 'civilised' world. Her decision to focus on black female historical figures speaks to the absence of these subjects' stories from school history and literature curricula. In a sense, her writing fills a void that many students experience in classroom contexts. Toward the end of her work she comments on a similar kind of irony that Brockman alludes to in his writing:

*Women protested, demonstrated, campaigned Against pass
laws, class wars and man's gains Forced removal, Apartheid,
Bantu Education Dedicated women fought back for their
reputation So that African girls can admire white stars
Straighten their curls, ignore their right paths Not one
African woman praised in our textbooks But lies of Foreign
people who maintain to be the best crooks*

(Schippers, unpublished)

Here, she alludes to the irony of the persistence of internalized racist and sexist conceptions of black femininity, despite women's proud history of struggle against racism, class inequities and patriarchy. It is worth noting just how skillfully the first two lines in this quotation are written. These lines present an example of multi-syllable rhyme schemes, a key feature of well-produced rap lyrics. Notice that, if sounded out in a specific way, "protested" and "demonstrated" rhyme with each other; "pass laws" and "class wars" rhyme and that "man's gains" rhymes with "campaigned" in the previous line.

As Ariefdien mentioned earlier, Godessa - the first female crew in South Africa to secure a record deal - participated in these workshops as well. They, along with Ariefdien, have participated in an American conference titled Planet Hip-Hop, which was attended by key figures such as Chuck D and Afrika Bambaata. The crew has also produced tracks on globalisation for an American documentary on globalisation via Ariefdien. In their recent single, "Social Ills", they engage critically with the way in which consumers buy into media and advertising messages that promote commodity fetishism:

*Is it your Nike sneakers or Filas that breaches The
code of conduct that features in stores Collecting
salaries like whores on low calories Both trying to
marry me with fashionable jeans So expensive
can't tear the seam apart From the need to laugh
at a gifted form of art Switch the norm from light
to dark ... I got a divorce from Levi's jaws and
musical whores Media is the source when it comes
to Mental sores and public applause Knowledge of
self is personal wealth We need to question
ourselves And kick pink panther mickey mouse
snobs Below their motherfucking belts (Godessa,
2002).*

The crew offers the concept of knowledge of self, and the introspection that it demands, as the key to subjects' efforts to reposition themselves in relation to media messages about fashion, women's bodies and obsessions with expensive clothing labels. Here, Hebdige's discussion of subculture finds some resonance. What "Social Ills" attempts to do is interrupt 'myths of consensus' about what constitutes 'normal' fashion practices. This attempt is significant, particularly in the face of all the brand names to which they refer being American, once again, signifying the pervasiveness of American cultural imperialism in our everyday lives. The introductory reference to Nike or Fila sneakers resonates particularly in hip-hop circles, an issue that Sarah Jones picks up on in "Your Revolution" when she says, "the real revolution / ain't about booty size / the Versaces you buys / or the Lexus you drives." In essence, the crew not merely speaks through commodities – the medium of the song – but they also speak to it.

These artists' critical engagement with media messages resonates with Hardt and Negri's contention that communication "not only expresses but also organizes the movement of globalization. It also organizes the movement by multiplying and structuring interconnections through networks" (2001: 32).

Ironically, it is these very networks that make it possible for 'agentic subjects' or 'producers' to issue challenges to Empire. The communication and distribution networks that make it possible for the music industry to monopolize global markets also make it possible for agents to issue challenges to hegemony. More interestingly, the internet offers hip-hop heads from diverse spaces as Tanzania, New Zealand, Seoul, Mexico, Palestine, the USA and England the opportunity to meet in internet chat rooms (IRC) and via e-mail so that they may mobilise around projects of similar concern. One such a project is Hip-Hop Against Infinite War, a global project that has hip-hop activists mobilising in peace initiatives. In this regard, Ariefdien describes the production of a documentary by Big Noise Film Media:

You have a documentary thing that's being filmed, going through different places where there's music - like I just heard the Palestinian crew. Like they couldn't record together. They had to send their shit via wav file through the internet because of the kak that was happening. So you had one kid dropping a verse at home, sending a wav file to another kid on the other side - Gaza, you know. Someone else sent it back and someone mixed it. They gave a copy to Jackie, they gave me as well . . . Like hectic shit. So we can have a fucking Tanzanian recording stuff and it send in it up to Holland, where the hottest producer in Holland can take the canellas and throw a different beat over it. That's fucking amazing. You know? You have people in different parts of the world connecting. Like-minded people who share similar kak, goeters, you know? And I think that right there is the possibility. It's kind of hectic when you think of Internet and hip-hop and all of that type of shit. So . . . for me it's important that those kinds of relationships don't stay in the virtual world . . . but having a place where we say, You know what? In the next few years we'd like to

have a summer school for kids of fucked up areas. To have kids from Sao Paolo, from Dar as Salaam, you know, like from Papa New Guinea and Cape Flats and we have a two-week summer school thingie (Ariefdien, 2002: 15).

Ariefdien knows how this medium - including wav and mp3 file formats - can be exploited to serve the interests of disenfranchised communities, but he is also aware that the relationships that are established in cyberspace actually need to translate into real action at grassroots level. This is particularly important, given the considerable size of the digital divide in Africa and many other Third World contexts. Until this key issue is solved, the Internet is but one tool in the hands of activists and interest groups who wish to strengthen civil society and provide greater access to public space. More conventional avenues such as community radio, the print media, the informal exchange of mix tapes and CDs as well as word of mouth continue to be powerful tools in the hands of the hip-hop movement. What is interesting to note, though, is that this level of networking and global mobilisation employs the very kind of information and technology network that “organises the movement of globalisation” (Hardt & Negri, 2001: 31) and, thereby, confirms Hardt & Negri’s claim that “the only strategy available to the struggles is that of a “constituent counterpower that emerges from within Empire” (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 5859). These developments therefore point to interesting directions that the Cape Flats’ hip-hop movement could take on a local, national and global level, employing the avenues afforded to it by information technology networks, global migrations, informal music production and distribution as well as conventional music distribution networks employed by the music industry.

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