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THE DISCURSIVE CREATION OF A SUBCULTURE BY CONSCIOUS RAP ADHERENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

The early hip hop made in South Africa in the 1980s was politically conscious and openly critical of the apartheid system. Hip hop has proliferated and diversified since its beginnings, and according to several contemporary researchers, this development has entailed a shift from an emphasis on black consciousness towards a focus on individual achievement, sensuous pleasures, and materialism (e.g., Künzler 2011; Watkins 2012). This article shows that conscious rap still exists in South Africa. It studies the discourses of contemporary conscious rap artists and adherents and argues that they construct putatively distinct subcultural factions according to the music styles followed by the youth. The distinctions are driven by both the musical and socio-political considerations of the interlocutors. Theoretically, the article contributes to subcultural studies by arguing for the significance of both affective attachment and political context in the analysis of the subcultures.

Key words: conscious rap, hip hop, house music, kwaito, South Africa, subculture

INTRODUCTION

Hip hop was adopted early in South Africa. The first crews to gain popularity in the 1980s were the politically conscious Prophets of Da City (POC) and Black Noise, both based in the Cape Town area. POC's album *Our World* (1990) was among the first full-length rap albums in Africa (Charry 2012: 13), and break dance competitions were started in Cape Town as early as 1982 (Watkins 2004: 130). Since its beginnings, hip hop has proliferated and diversified and several researchers have recently noted the decrease of politically critical content and an increased focus

on individual advancement, sensuous pleasure, and commercial-mindedness in South African hip hop lyrics (e.g., Künzler 2011; Watkins 2012). However, there is also a relatively thriving 'conscious rap' scene, and this article focuses on the performers and followers of this genre. In contrast to much of the existing hip hop literature that is based on analysis of lyrics, I will concentrate on the discourses of conscious rap devotees that I have gathered through interviews and informal conversations. What emerges from these discourses are surprisingly recurrent themes that come to define conscious rap as a subculture and a value orientation

distinct from competing youth music styles, *kwai-to* and house music in particular.

Here, rather than viewing ‘subcultures’ as distinct youth groups that set themselves against the norms of the wider society as in the early writings of the Birmingham School (e.g. Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1983 [1979]; Willis 1981), I am interested in the ways that the youth construct subcultural relations and distinctions among themselves. In this regard, my approach aligns with that of Thornton (1995) whose study of British dance club cultures explores the distinctions and hierarchies made by the youth within the popular culture domain. In Thornton’s material, as well as in my own, the studied subculture is constructed by its devotees’ defining other youth music styles as ‘mainstream’ and thus of lesser value. In the opinion of the conscious rap followers studied here, contemporary *kwai-to* and house music in particular represent the ‘mainstream other’ that epitomises and enhances what they consider to be the currently hegemonic socio-political values. For this reason, the macro-political situation enters my analysis in a way that it does not in the analysis of Thornton and the Birmingham School; indeed, the hip hop adherents’ discourses and expressed values cannot be fully understood without the wider political context. I use the term ‘expressed values’ quite deliberately because this is what discourses are about.

Even while disregarding the macro-political context, Thornton’s sobering contribution to subcultural studies was the acknowledgment of the micro-politics involved in young people’s making of distinctions. Unlike earlier scholars who tended to view and celebrate subcultures as forms of progressive defiance to the dominant order and values, Thornton emphasised the ways in which the making of subcultural distinctions enables youth to negotiate and accumulate

‘subcultural capital’, and in that way acquire status in their social worlds. She coined this term by drawing from the work of Bourdieu (1984) on diverse forms of capital. The picture that emerges from Thornton’s interpretation is devoid of the subversive capacity that the early scholars associated with subcultures. While this is an important, balancing view for subcultural research, it is simultaneously problematic because it tends to reduce youth styles and distinctions to mere competition over status. While I acknowledge the micro-political dimensions of the conscious rap followers’ discourses—that is, the ways they aim at increasing their own value vis-à-vis those of the adherents of the other styles—I do not see this as their only dimension. Being engaged in—or in economic terms, investing their time and energy in—making and listening to music that does not necessarily bring them decisive social or economic capital means that there is more to that engagement than an analysis inspired by Bourdieu can reveal. The content of the discourses—the expressed aesthetic, affective, and socio-political values—deserves serious consideration.

Because this article is based on conversations with conscious rap adherents, and not on a holistic analysis of their lives and practices, it does not seek to measure the truthfulness or the authenticity of the discourses vis-à-vis the interlocutors’ lived reality. Instead, the article examines the discursive creation of a subculture and subcultural boundaries. It views subcultural identity construction as based on narratives and stories that people tell about themselves and each other (cf. Yuval-Davies 2010 on identities). In addition, it regards such discourses as performative (e.g., Austin 1962; Butler 1990), that is, as having an impact on how social reality is conceived. The investigated discourses construct understandings about distinct

subcultures, allegedly woven around disparate musical, social, and political values. The article shows that, in addition to the subcultural micro-politics of status competition, the discourses tackle the macro-politics of the state and the elites.

In what follows I first describe how contemporary conscious rappers consider early *kwaito* a formative experience for them, rather than the early local, politically conscious hip hop. After that, I will examine other recurring themes in their discourses. I do not aim to conduct a rigorous linguistic discourse analysis, but use the word ‘discourse’ in a wider Foucauldian sense, where interpretation is not based on detailed analysis of a speech situation but on its wider social and historical contextualisation. My material is derived from numerous interviews and informal conversations with conscious rap adherents, that is, producers, rappers, event organisers, and fans in Cape Town and Johannesburg between 2005 and 2013.¹ All the people cited appear with their real names or their artist names; when the artist name is the person’s real first name, I have added the surname in parentheses when introducing the person for the first time in the text.

I use the terms black, coloured, and white, and write them in lowercase letters, even though I acknowledge that these are artificial labels created by the apartheid regime to classify and differentiate various population groups. The political definition of blackness includes all of the non-white population of the country, that is, black Africans, coloureds, and Indians. However, the apartheid-era categories continue to be used in the official statistics and in much of the popular parlance. Hence, in this article the word ‘blacks’ refers to black Africans (people considered to be indigenously African); ‘coloureds’ refers to people considered to be of mixed decent (initially mixtures of

whites, the Khoisan and Xhosa populations and imported slaves especially); and ‘whites’ refers to Afrikaans- and English-speaking descendants of European settlers. In addition to these, there is also the population group called Asians that refers to people of Indian origin, and nowadays also to the newer settlers of Chinese origin.²

THE IMPORTANCE OF KWAITO: INSPIRATION AND EVALUATION

Kwaito appeared in the 1990s and quickly gained popularity. It combined elements from several foreign music styles such as house music, hip hop, dancehall, and raggamuffin with earlier South African styles, in particular *kwela*, *mbaqanga*, *marabi*, and *bubblegum* (or ‘township disco’). Even though combining foreign and local styles, *kwaito* was perceived as a local style, as it was sung in township street language and dealt with township issues.³ Furthermore, it localised the international styles by slowing down the tempo to about 100 beats per minute, to make the music more danceable by South African standards of the time. All this distinguished *kwaito* from the other urban youth music of the era, predominantly hip hop and house music of foreign origin.⁴

Exceptions to the US-dominated hip hop scene at that time were the two above-mentioned groups—Prophets of Da City (POC) and Black Noise—who had emerged in the 1980s from the townships close to Cape Town. These groups were expressly political and vocal about the injustices of the apartheid system and in that way strongly local in their lyrical content and approach. Composed of coloured performers, these groups were also radical in advocating unification of coloureds and blacks for the common struggle against apartheid and the artificial population categories it had created.

Their message did not always crossover to the black youth, however, because of the lines of separation that apartheid policies had managed to instill. Some of the contemporary conscious rappers to whom I talked had been impressed by POC and Black Noise, while others had been aware of them but could not relate to lyrics that were performed in *gamtaal*, a street language based mainly on Afrikaans, mixed with some English. Most of the contemporary conscious rappers had listened to American rap at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s and were initially fashioning their appearance and rapping according to American models.

All of my interlocutors described how they had been deeply impressed and influenced by early *kwaito*. For instance, El Nino, of the hip hop group Driemanskap, explained that they listened to *kwaito* when they were kids, because ‘*kwaito* was like your everyday mother tongue, that’s the reason why everyone liked it at the time. More than any other music it was original (...) because we never had our own music, something that we as South Africans would own’ (interview, 2009). The sense of ownership that *kwaito* created included political and racial awareness. Simphiwe Mabuya, who describes his artistry as rhythm and poetry, said the social meaning of *kwaito* was comparable to rap in the US as ‘in South Africa, *kwaito* was the kind of music that enabled us to say whatever we wanted to say as youth; to be free and say, “This is our music, we own it”’ (interview, 2009). Comparably, Khanyisile Mbongwa, a poet and a university student, said that just like ‘underground hip hop in the US was about resistance, trying to inspire the black man, *kwaito* was the same thing for people in the township. It’s something they owned and created, outside of whiteness completely’ (interview, 2010).

Almost all the contemporary rappers who had enthusiastically listened to *kwaito* in their

early years were of the opinion that at the end of the 1990s *kwaito* started to change and eventually became diluted and less interesting in all ways. Musically, what was described as its initial ‘raw sound’ shifted first towards a ‘more melodic and popish sound’ and in time towards house music, with the pace of the music gradually increasing from the initial 100 beats to 120–126 beats per minute. Simultaneously *kwaito* was perceived as distancing itself from township realities and becoming increasingly superficial and dubious in its lyrical content and visual imagery. In describing the change, Khanyisile Mbongwa, for instance, maintained that *kwaito*, which was initially more concerned with resistance, became driven by a capitalist mindset: ‘It stopped being about the grassroots, about being black in the township, and started selling the easiest commodities: sex, fun, and fantasy’ (interview, 2010). According to several young female and male conscious rap adherents, this emphasis was seen in the way *kwaito* videos started to portray women as sexual objects and increasingly inscribed ambiguous words and expressions (that from the start were prevalent in *kwaito*) with sexual meaning. DJ Rozzano, who was part of the early political hip hop scene and appreciated early *kwaito* as well, considered contemporary *kwaito* part of the larger commercial music scene that thrives on ‘the chick’s legs, skimpy outfits, making of fast, easy money: It’s like a strip show’ (interview, 2009). Kanyi (Mavi), a rapper summarised her criticism of contemporary *kwaito* by saying, ‘Its main message is shake your ass. But that’s the wrong message! That can’t be all the genre has to say!’ (interview, 2009).

At the time of research, the popularity of *kwaito* seemed to be decreasing, while the production and popularity of local hip hop and house music were growing significantly. Simultaneously, house music elements had

become more prominent in *kwaito*, making the two styles overlap more than in the past. Consequently, many rappers likened *kwaito* to what is called ‘commercial house music’. The similarity between the two was considered to lie in the relatively hard beat, the prevalence of catchy one-liners, with the lyrical content and the overall ambience emphasising dancing, partying, and having fun. The lyrics in both contemporary *kwaito* and commercial house are usually in vernacular languages or the township street patois. While some conscious rappers lump together all house music and view it disparagingly, others make a distinction between commercial and deep house, appreciating the latter more. Deep house is mellower in sound and often somewhat slower in tempo than commercial house, and its lyrics are usually in English. Because in the discourses the music styles are defined in comparison to each other, *kwaito* and house music will keep on featuring in the forthcoming descriptions and evaluations by conscious rappers.⁵

CONSCIOUS RAP FOLLOWERS DEFINING THEIR MUSIC OF CHOICE

For many conscious rappers a more general distinction between conscious and commercial, or between underground and commercial music remains important.⁶ For instance, Luyanda Mafiana, for whom rapping is an important hobby, makes a rather sharp distinction between underground or conscious rap as something that has content and is educational, versus commercial music (in any genre) that is about entertainment and making money (interview, 2009). When I met him, he was just on his way to feature in a hip hop performance called The Basic Training Session taking place in the city centre of Cape Town.

Conscious rappers emphasise the importance of meaningful content or messages in music, referring especially to lyrical content. Rapping is closely associated with poetry, so hip hop events frequently also have poets performing at them, and some artists prefer to call themselves poets rather than emcees even though they perform with beats. However, no contemporary rapper that I met would call his or her art political, not even those who most emphatically link rapping to serious content and educational purposes. Instead, they say they are interested in talking about social issues and making social commentary. With this, the rappers wish to distinguish their art from the political ‘struggle music’ of the apartheid era. Furthermore, rappers prefer to describe their motive as sharing their personal and everyday experiences. For instance, Simphiwe Mabuya says he makes:

real music or truth music, because when I write, I write about truthful incidents, things that I’ve seen, things that I have experienced myself. I have songs about how I grew up without my father, songs about my brother, and how he got caught up doing bad things and ending up in prison. I have songs about my daughter. I have songs about the political system in South Africa. I have songs about women’s abuse, and songs about education. I have songs about hip hop itself: how it started affecting me and my love for it. I draw from real life. (Interview, 2009)

However, a rapper does not need to address major social concerns, at least not in all his or her songs, in order to consider his or her art conscious. The key qualities for conscious rap that emerge from the discourses are thinking and listening. The rapper Nthabi (Mofokeng)

calls her music a ‘thinking man’s music’ and describes it in this way:

Maybe today I feel like making a song about dancing, and I’ll talk about that. Maybe tomorrow somebody hurts me and I’ll feel like making a song about that. Or I see something that happens in the news and I want to make a song about that. If you’re willing to take the time out to listen to the words, then it is for you, and it doesn’t need to be too deep or too complicated. All it requires you to do is just listen; what you do with the information is totally up to you. (Interview, 2011)

Thapelo Raphuti, who markets several significant youth culture brands and hip hop artists, explains conscious rap by comparing it to house music:

Hip hop is all about thinking, whereas with house music you don’t want to think. House music is an escape from what’s happening around, from the hardships. Just the other day I almost had a fight with my girlfriend when we were doing a long distance drive. I’m like I don’t want to listen to house because you get lost. The tracks are so long and it’s the same beat. When I listen to hip hop, I concentrate better, because I’m actually listening to what he says and trying to think what he was thinking. (Interview, 2011)

The focussed listening and thinking that hip hop requires from its audience is contrasted to the *kwaito* and house music sensibility of dancing and partying. The rappers do not completely denigrate the audience response of dancing, but dancing is expected to be subordinate to the primacy of listening to the message, and so to be

kept at a reasonable level. People in the audience should not ‘go wild’ and lose themselves in dancing, which is believed to happen to *kwaito* and house audiences. Simphiwe Mabuya explained:

My music is not the kind of music that makes you go crazy, dance and so. When you’re listening to hip hop music, you’re not jumping up and down. When there’s an emcee on stage, you need to listen to what he is saying. And then you may nod your head as you’re listening, clap your hands—the beat has to move you. Once it moves you, you listen to the content, and the two connect; then you’ve touched that person’s soul. And that person would like to hear that song again, because there’s something that he or she relates to. (...) Music is supposed to be—this is the way I see it—a tool to talk to people, to get a message across. And you can’t deliver a message in two, three words. (Interview, 2009)

Emcee Kanye described her art as follows:

I rhyme about my shit: things that I see and notice. It’s basically like social commentary. (...) I generally like very, very hard beats. I like very aggressive beats. I also like beats that are very soulful. I think I’m somewhat of a purist when it comes to hip hop, I don’t like things to be too poppy and too jiggy, because I only deal with serious issues, so I don’t like something that’s going to take away from that; I don’t want to trivialise. If it’s heavy, let it be heavy; it’s a heavy thing! Whenever you put a melody to it, you’re lightening it up, you’re entertaining. I want you to listen to what I have to say. And you can jam, you can move your head, you

can do whatever, but listen to what I have to say. (...) House is very fast, adrenaline music; it's not for me: [in house] nobody listens to anything, so what I have to say is lost. (Interview, 2009)

Kanyi strictly defines her art as conscious and underground. This distinction between conscious-*cum*-underground and commercial hip hop raises uneasiness among many artists and other music scene insiders because they consider the distinction outdated and clichéd. Yet, at the same time it keeps on coming up in the conversations and in the emcees' and recording industry representatives' efforts to describe the musical styles and the differences between them. Some rappers want to shy away from commercial hip hop altogether, likening it to *kwaito* and house music and what is referred to as the 'bling-bling mentality'. A very common—and not invalid—claim is that commercial hip hop gets good media coverage and sells well, because it does not deal with difficult and controversial issues. However, some hip hop artists have started to integrate more melodic and danceable elements to their music, some also live instruments. Concessions to the dance groove often increase audiences and popularity, and simultaneously tend to create suspicions about commercialisation and selling out.

Simultaneously, commercialisation has its appeal even for many of those who would rather like to see themselves as representing the 'underground'. Most simply, commercialisation increases the potential to make money. Several of those initially involved in the conscious hip hop scene (in Johannesburg) described how they always enjoyed performing at different events, but the need to earn a living eventually made them think about improving their marketing and audience appeal. Corporate and government

gigs—that is, performing at a corporate or a government function—are among the best sources of income for South African artists in general (Pietilä 2015), and these are not easy to get if the artist appears too serious and politically critical (cf. McNeill 2012). The most famous rappers have attracted corporate sponsoring and employed PR and marketing agents, and some have established their own clothing or shoe brands. Groups that adopt a more commercial approach usually argue for their continuing credibility by emphasising the persisting importance of the lyrical content in their music. For instance, some years ago one of the leading hip hop groups of the time, Skwatta Kamp, made a move towards a more danceable and what was considered a more commercial sound. Flabba of the group did not think that the shift compromised their message. He explained:

People are tired of hearing about problems; people want to dance, to have fun, want to forget about the struggle. (...) I'd like to think that our music makes sense. It's very conceptual. We make kinds of songs that you can relate to; what you've been through as a human being, what happens to you as you go through (...) and keeping it real and simple. (Interview, 2005)

A rising Capetonian hip hop crew, Driemanskap, does not eschew market success either, even while considering themselves serious artists with a social message; Ma-B of the group describes their music as 'commercial, with a strong lyrical content' (interview, 2009). At the same time, part of Driemanskap's perceived seriousness and relevance derives from the fact that they make vernacular, or what is called, '*spaza rap*'⁷ by mixing Xhosa language with Zulu, Afrikaans, *tsotsitaal*, English, and Tswana languages. The

language choice is conscious and simultaneously, by necessity, somewhat limits their audiences, and in that way their commercial success.

Many of those who consider themselves 'conscious' artists make songs on light topics as well. For instance, the ragga-rapper Crosby (Bolani) estimates that some sixty percent of his songs are about social issues: 'I'm more on social commentary, because I'm from the ghetto, and I'm born in the apartheid era. I've seen what impact the apartheid has had, even up to today, and how a lot of people haven't had opportunities' (interview, 2009). Crosby has also lighter songs that talk about such issues as celebrating and having a good time. But even in those he wants to convey some 'positive message'; for instance, in one song he urges people to realise that 'we are all one, we share the same sun, from South Africa to Switzerland'. Some hip hop adherents expand the notion of 'reality' even more to include almost anything as long as it 'makes sense', that is, talks about the rapper's experiences in a way that the audiences can relate to. The hip hop producer Dre explained what 'making sense' means: 'It can be a conscious song, but not only that: the song can tell about girls or partying or whatever, because that is what everyone has experience on' (interview, 2009).

At the more relaxed end of the 'message versus dancing' dichotomy are also those who think that there is a time for both functions. For instance, for DJ Rozzano hip hop is 'about the two E's: entertain and educate'. Even though he does not appreciate commercial music because it only focuses on entertaining, he explains that 'when I DJ, it's really about dancing, though. To let your hair down for all the shit that's around you' (interview, 2009). Yet, as mentioned above, even amid these concessions and the uneasiness that the dichotomy between conscious / underground and commercial music raises, the

distinction tends to persist. Thus, for instance, DJ Rozzano continued explaining as follows:

But underground is about creativity. I am an activist; music is a weapon. I spread my music in the web; you don't hear it on the radio, because it's too soulful, it speaks to the soul; it is there for you to wake up. They [the government] want a consumerist generation, not people who are awake. (Ibid.)

He said his interest had always been to uplift and wake people up through music. In the 1980s he was involved in the early local rap and reggae that, according to him, were the main tools for 'waking up people'. DJ Rozzano started as a break dancer and also acted as a reggae DJ in the political mass rallies resisting apartheid, even though at the time some of the music was banned.

Reggae is still popular in South Africa, and considered by many rappers to belong to the conscious music camp. Many South African emcees emphasise that American hip hop is of African ancestry; that it derives from Jamaican reggae created by African slaves. Crosby, for instance, was of the opinion that all the elements of hip hop culture stem from ancient Africa, from indigenous people like the San who used to sit around a fire and create chants like emcees do today. The chanting made some dance just like break dancers do today, while others among the San made rock art that is comparable to graffiti. Crosby concluded by saying, 'The whole history of hip hop and reggae is here, in the motherland' (interview, 2009).

A central aim in conscious hip hop is to be educative. As event organiser Zozo Mohoto said, 'Hip hop can make you understand what is going on around the world, because it talks a lot, it's not just about the rhythm' (interview,

2009). Photographer Solomon Moremong explained that he will never stop loving hip hop, because it has taught him things in life he would not have known otherwise. He cites hip hop by calling it the 'you and I varsity', which he translates to mean that life itself is a university (interview, 2011). He believes he could have become a criminal or been killed due to the violence that is rife in the township, had hip hop not introduced him to the path of expressing feelings creatively and through art. Solomon explained that hip hop is 'not what I do for a living; it is what I am: I am not studying hip hop, I am hip hop' (ibid.) Moreover, several conscious rap devotees explained that listening to rap had filled some important gaps that school teaching had left in their historical and political knowledge. For instance, both the artist Kwelagobe Sekele (interview, 2011) and the marketer Thapelo Raphuti (interview, 2011) explained that they had only learnt about the exploitive history of gold and diamond mining from listening to several American emcees rap about it.⁸

MENTAL, SPATIAL, AND SOCIO-POLITICAL DISTINCTIONS

Thus, in conscious hip hop followers' discourses, a differentiation is made between music that enhances listening and thinking faculties and music that encourages dancing and partying. In addition, meaningful messages and content are set against repetitive lyrics and the focus on the embodied and sensual aspects of music. A further distinction is drawn between education orientation and entertainment orientation, as well as between the consciousness-raising and mind-emptying qualities of the music. In addition, a difference in spatial orientation to either city centres or

townships is perceived (as will be elaborated on below). *Kwaito* and commercial house in particular are defined by the latter attributes in each pair, that is, the dancing, entertaining and mind-emptying qualities and the township surroundings. Furthermore, conscious rap fans use certain recurring phrasings to explain their adherence: the most frequent is the assertion that they can 'relate to the music' or that it is 'relevant' or 'makes sense' to them. These phrases are common in global hip hop parlance, and refer to the skills of the artist to mediate his or her experiences in a way that speaks to the audience.

The discourses are not merely neutrally descriptive, but contain evaluation and value ranking of the styles and their followers. Conscious hip hop adherents emphasise the thoughtful, mindful, and reflective faculties that their music of choice is said to cultivate. They describe the accompanying dancing as cerebral rather than wild and boisterous. They thus emphasise the way the music moves the mind, and only secondarily the body. In contrast to contemporary *kwaito* and especially (commercial) house, hip hop is depicted as 'waking up' people, being 'educative', making one 'alert', and making one 'think'.

Another feature that appears in hip hop devotees' descriptions of their favourite music is their emphasis on individual distinction. A rapper wants to mediate his or her personal experiences and wants the listeners to attend carefully to what exactly she or he has to say. This is juxtaposed with the purported uniformity of style and collective immersion in sensual dancing in commercial house and *kwaito*. In reality, however, the distinction is not that clear. In house music and *kwaito*, DJs, producers and artists are conceived of as unique stars and brand names for their music. On the other hand, although individual emcees battle with their

skills, hip hop crews often associate themselves with their home neighbourhoods and compete with crews from other neighbourhoods. The same applies to many DJs, producers and artists in *kwaito* and house music, who identify with the areas in their home townships or cities. Thus, regardless of the discursive emphasis on the individual versus collective faculties of the different genres, both artistic distinction and collective identification are important in each genre, just as in any popular music.

The discourses are important, however, because they are a means of emphasising and making distinctions, and not merely reflecting them. The discursive emphasis on individual distinction relates to other qualities that hip hop adherents associate with their genre, such as the intellectual or mental orientation and the city centre location rather than the township. Yet another similarity that emerges from the discourses of hip hop devotees is the description of the soulful virtues of their music. All these qualities allude to the genre's alleged sophistication and urbanity in comparison to the purported township coarseness of contemporary *kwaito* and commercial house.

Divergent social backgrounds play a role in youth's taste for music. Some of the early hip hop artists in particular had better than the usual township schooling. They may have been born and gone to primary school in the townships but, in many cases, their parents or grandparents had sent them to a multi-racial secondary school in the suburbs or city areas, as soon as it became politically possible, and some of these youth eventually proceeded to university. They also had early access to American hip hop and could make sense of the lyrics better than many of the more ordinary township dwellers. Yet, while musical taste does reflect social background to some degree, this relation should not be overdrawn. With the increased

use of vernacular languages in rapping, hip hop nowadays attracts performers and audiences from diverse class backgrounds.

The conscious rap devotees' descriptions of music styles include a good deal of socio-political commentary. This also becomes evident in the ways the styles are associated with different locations that are imputed with different qualities. In these discourses, contemporary *kwaito* and commercial house, and sometimes also commercial hip hop, are associated with the township people and locales, whereas conscious hip hop (and sometimes deep house) are associated with the city centre. The distinctions are again stricter in discourses than in reality, particularly in the case of hip hop; for instance, park jams and other events (often with rudimentary facilities) that gather underground hip hop and reggae artists are usually organised in townships, and deep house is played in many township bars and clubs.⁹

Followers of conscious hip hop often associate house music venues—whether in towns or townships—with morally suspect mentalities and practices behind the polished façade. These are typically described as places where men who have enriched themselves by illegitimately capitalising on the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies seek to pick up pretty young girls (see more on these policies below). The hip hop fan Zenande put it in this way: 'BEE guys always go for girls who are around their twenties, and house music venues are good places for that' (interview, 2009). The rapper Luyanda Mafiana stated that house music venues are populated with people

who like materialistic stuff. (...) Old black guys who have profited from the government hang out there, showing off with their new cars, and girls who are looking for money and rich guys. I do

not support that concept or mindset; it's commercial and cheesy, and it's misleading, because everybody goes there thinking that one day they have to own a Mercedes Benz, achieve that standard. It's just about glamour. (Interview, 2009)

The poet Khanyisile Mbongwa related her friend's experience of going to a township bar that played house music: 'She found young girls and very old, older men, and small rooms with beds in the back' (interview, 2010).

Rappers say that most of their gigs are in the city, because in the townships people just want to have fun, and house music, contemporary *kwaito* and commercial hip hop suit that mood. This orientation is usually explained by ignorance and the prevailing lack of education in the townships. For instance, according to Luyanda Mafiana,

in the townships people don't want to listen, they have been trained that way: don't think, don't listen. No money or funds are thrown into the townships, so education is on that level. There are few things they know or are exposed to. So people want to entertain themselves. (Interview, 2009)

Damian Stephens, an owner of the label Pioneer Unit that releases hip hop, described the musical and social orientation of their most popular crew, Driemanskap, as follows:

A lot of their music is about—not necessarily the struggle itself but—overcoming struggle and adversity. But it's done in a way that's not about 'Let's get rich, let's get money'. It's more about spiritually overcoming those adversities. So Driemanskap's songs are about life's struggles and I think they purposefully

do not write songs about things that aren't relevant to them, like consumerism, and (...) they're not trying to push the ultra-capitalist agenda on people they know and on their fans that live in townships and can't necessarily afford those dreams. And even having those dreams is not really something they're trying to push. Sure, get some money and feed your family type of thing, but labels and designer clothes and fancy cars and all of that stuff, they're not pushing that agenda. (...) Like with house music you can't avoid that impression, because every single video is like that: guys in shirts in the club, girls dancing around, champagne bottles or whiskey bottles on the table. (...) Even in commercial hip hop it's the same: that agenda of success and glory and wealth and power. It's dance music with catchy lyrics about success. I can understand in South Africa especially why people don't necessarily wanna always be thinking about tough times and hardships and politics and things that are just in people's face on a daily basis. I can understand the desire for escapism. But part of me feels it's very unhealthy (...) but it's not for me to judge. (Interview, 2013)

In critical academic and popular discourses, urban youth music and South African youth are frequently blamed for lacking socio-historical awareness, and for an overall orientation towards superficial and consumerist values (e.g., Stephens 2000; Bogatsu 2002; Peterson 2003). Künzler (2011), for his part, maintains that the more politically inclined contemporary rap in South Africa discusses township struggles but not the systemic causes of them. However, the conscious rap devotees discussed here are aware of and vocal about the structural inequalities of the society.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DISCOURSES

The conscious rap followers' discourses need to be situated in a wider social context to understand them fully. Townships were created by the apartheid regime in the 1960s to enforce its ideology of each 'race' living separately in its own area, with the best areas allocated to the whites. In practice the townships became labour reserves with poor infrastructure and very low levels of services; they were huge monotonous areas whence blacks and coloureds (and, to an extent, Indians) had to commute to their white-owned workplaces. Post-apartheid improvements in housing and infrastructure in parts of the townships have not abolished the historical legacy of relative and absolute poverty. In her recent study on South African township youth, Swartz (2009) found features in the hegemonic township mentality similar to those described above by the conscious rap adherents. Swartz's inquiry revealed that the township youth did not regard their problems as an outcome of structural inequalities, such as apartheid, poverty, and unemployment. Instead, they showed a strong sense of personal responsibility for their struggles and a belief in meritocracy. In addition, in some issues the youth attributed their problems to such external agents as witches, God, or *ikasi* (township) style. *Ikasi* style refers to many kinds of behaviour regarded as immoral, yet prevalent in townships, such as smoking, drinking, theft, having multiple sexual partners, dropping out of school, and using violence (ibid.: 69). When directly inquired about the fact of living in poverty, one of Swartz's (ibid.: 131) research participants explained as follows: 'I've learnt to live with it (...) I've learnt to accept it. I just forget about it, because it will lower my self-esteem. It will make me sad. So I just keep myself busy

listening to music, and dancing—just to forget about all these things.' Many claimed that acts that they later judged as inappropriate were caused by their lack of thinking and reflection (ibid.: 100).

According to Swartz, this kind of mindset is created by the absence of an enabling environment wherein the young could develop themselves, their reflective faculties, and their plans for the future. The township schools are of poor quality and violence-ridden and the youth lack adults with the time to listen and talk to them, and consequently they also tend to lack an attainable future with employment opportunities. Swartz's (2009: 34) study also found that those of the township youth who attended mixed suburban schools showed better critical thinking skills than those who went to township schools, because the quality of teaching and other facilities are much better in the suburban schools.

Swartz's findings reveal similar features in prevalent township mentalities to those described by conscious rap adherents, such as the lack of thinking and reflective faculties, the immersion in music and dancing in order to forget their troubles along with an absence of insight into their structural causes. In addition to some facts of township life, the similarity of the picture portrayed by Swartz probably also tells us about the discursive reality that the township youth and the conscious rap devotees inhabit and share. In contrast to the majority of the ordinary township youth described by Swartz, the conscious rap followers with whom I discussed such matters did not have any difficulties in perceiving and discussing the structural inequalities created historically and today. Almost all of them were born in townships, with most of them having gone to a township school, while some had gone to better, racially mixed schools in a suburban

or a city area. Those in the mixed schools had learnt somewhat more about history and maybe critical thinking, and all had learnt about such issues from rap lyrics and other rappers. In this respect, my findings align with those of Haupt (2008: 205) who maintains that conscious hip hop has constituted a public in which the youth can congregate and make sense of societal realities as well as develop their 'critical skills in ways not afforded them by the formal education system'.

While aware of and vocal about the burden of apartheid history, conscious rap devotees also address the inequalities perpetuated and created in the post-apartheid era. More than twenty years after the dismantling of the apartheid system in the 1990s, South African society remains highly unequal in terms of access to economic, educational, and other resources. In addition to the racial distinctions implemented during the apartheid era, new class distinctions, in particular among the black population, have emerged. In 2011, 94% of poor people were black Africans, and the average household income of a black African-headed household was 16.6% of that of a white-headed household, 24% of an Indian / Asian-headed household, and 54% of a coloured-headed household (Statistics South Africa 2014b: 27). The average incomes conceal the wide disparities in incomes, employment opportunities, and poverty within the population groups. In particular, in-group inequality has increased quite strongly in the post-transition period. The biggest increase in inequality has taken place among the black population (Leibbrandt et al. 2010; van der Berg 2014). Much of this is the result of black upward mobility, with some black Africans becoming middle class and others very rich. The latter are sometimes called Black Diamonds, with some of them having unduly profited from

the government's affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies.

The ANC adopted BEE policies in the 1990s to promote the transfer of stakes in white-owned businesses to a new class of black investors. In this legislation, the word 'black' is an inclusive term for the African, Coloured and Indian population groups. The Employment Equity Act, adopted somewhat later, obliged large firms to make their workforces racially representative, while the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policy, adopted in 2003, set targets for broadening black ownership and for the promotion and training of black workers. These policies have helped even out some of the gross racial disparities in wealth but have simultaneously contributed to the creation of further societal inequalities. Those with connections to the government or the ruling ANC have especially benefited in setting up and enlarging their business endeavours. Indeed, according to Southall (2004: 16), in the post-apartheid era the route to high-level business has often been through politics or the state. This has involved a close relationship between state managers and the black corporate bourgeoisie, with leading politicians and civil servants also holding positions in the private sector. Furthermore, the wealthiest faction of the newly enriched black Africans—from the current president, Jacob Zuma, to many prominent politicians and businessmen—are often involved in conspicuous consumption and the public display of their riches.

Thus, during the post-apartheid era, a group of very rich black people has emerged, while more than half the black African population continues living in poverty, with a high unemployment rate. Whites continue to dominate the economy, both through direct ownership and through their positions as

managers and directors in the national and multinational corporations that have remained central economic power-holders in the post-apartheid era economy (MacDonald 2006: 140; Southall 2013).

The conscious rappers' discourses comment on these developments and the increased economic polarization among black citizens in particular. They associate the carefree mentality of contemporary *kwaito* and house music, as well as commercial rap, with immoral ways of achieving socio-economic advancement. They are not alone in holding such views. Some academic scholars have associated contemporary *kwaito* with compliance in questionable politics and politicians. For instance, Steingo (2007: 34–37) has written about the appropriation of *kwaito* music at political rallies by parties across the political spectrum, from the ANC to the New National Party (NNP), and the Democratic Alliance (DA). For Steingo, such conviviality between *kwaito* artists and politicians marks the end of conventional politics and its replacement by the rules of late capitalism and neoliberalism. He maintains that *kwaito* embodies the neoliberal ideology and spirit and therefore it suits the purposes of current politicians who would rather dance and party than discuss real politics and serious issues (ibid.: 34–35, 39). More recently, some of the *kwaito* stars and house DJs have given visible support to the faltering ANC in particular. The early 'King of *kwaito*', Arthur Mafokate, has appeared as a staunch supporter of the ANC, with his own regular TV show for the state-owned public broadcaster SABC (The South African Broadcasting Corporation). The former popular *kwaito* artist, Eugene Mthethwa, of the group Trompies, is employed in an elevated civil service position in the government. Both *kwaito* artists and house music DJs are frequently hired as musical entertainers at pre-election ANC

rallies. These examples reveal that the conscious rappers' discursive welding of subcultures and political values is not completely without grounds, even while it might be somewhat overdrawn.

There is an Afrikaner counterpart to conscious rap, the most prominent representatives of which are Die Antwoord and Jack Parow. These artists bring to the fore the existence of poor, working-class whites in South African society. In that sense, Afrikaner rap also deals with issues of race, ethnicity, class, and social inequalities, but unlike conscious rap, it does this in the tone of parody and irony. Die Antwoord integrates aspects of coloured gang culture into its portrayal of poor whites, producing a rather grotesque imagery full of references to media and popular cultures of the previous decades. This results in representations of poor white characters that are anti-heroic yet clearly recognisable to their audiences, and simultaneously antagonistic to ideal or normative whiteness (see e.g., Haupt 2012; Milton and Marx 2014). The humorous and gaudy character of the work of Die Antwoord and Jack Parow has also made them internationally famous, unlike most of the performers of South African conscious rap.

The voice of conscious rap adherents has been rather marginal in wider South African society for quite a long time, yet, interestingly, with the increase in political turmoil of the past couple of years, it has been increasingly acknowledged as relevant by people outside the rap and the music scene. A movement initiated by university students in 2015 demanding the decolonisation and transformation of societal power structures has resulted in various campaigns such as 'Rhodes Must Fall' (as a result of which the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town grounds was removed), '[University] Fees Must Fall', and '[President]

Zuma Must Fall'. At the end of 2016, as I was conducting research among fashion designers in Johannesburg, several of them listed conscious hip hop as one of the factors that had contributed to the general awareness of—and an increased urge to act against—persisting inequalities in South African society. This is all the more notable as most of the designers would not consider themselves fans of hip hop.

CONCLUSION

The early writings of the Birmingham School (e.g., Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1983 [1979]; Willis 1981) viewed the post-war British youth subcultures as signifying practices that express the defiance of working-class towards the hegemonic order and its values. The defiance in these writings was regarded as rather unconscious and inarticulate, while the styles allegedly reflected a working-class background. Consequently, it was not considered to have any potential for a decisive transformation on a societal or even individual level; for instance, according to Hebdige (1983 [1979]: 131), 'working-class youth will in all probability remain working class throughout their lives'.

In contrast, the conscious rap adherents discussed here are aware of, and articulate, the social and political inequalities in the past and today. They also come from diverse social backgrounds. Rather than their subculture arising from their experiences and class positions in an organic and unreflective manner, they are better viewed as actively constructing it—with its expressed musical, ideological, and moral underpinnings. In this regard, their discourses are performative: they create their subculture and its speciality by emphasising difference to the other popular youth music styles, in particular contemporary *kwaito* as well as commercial house and hip hop.

Just like the proponents of the dance club subculture studied by Thornton (1995), the conscious rap devotees portray competing youth music styles as being of lesser value by claiming that they represent the mainstream. But, unlike the distinctions found by Thornton in the club cultures, those made by conscious rap followers extend well beyond musical taste and considerations of what is 'hip'. All my interlocutors vehemently emphasised their 'love' for hip hop and what it had done in their lives by expanding their mental horizons and understanding. Such passion is important in and of itself, and speaks of an affective commitment to this particular music genre. In addition, there is socio-political dimension in the discourses in the way the different musical styles emerge as signifiers for different social orientations, moral values, and political ideologies. 'Mainstream' denotes aligning with what is considered a prevalent morality of avarice and lack of social responsibility in contemporary South African society. In the conscious rap followers' opinion, such morality is expressed in and enhanced by music that focuses on dancing, partying, and emptying one's mind, instead of critical thinking and listening. This view finds some empirical resonance in the prevalence of *kwaito* artists and house music DJs as performers at political party rallies, nowadays especially those of the ruling party, the ANC, whose reputation is increasingly tarnished by corruption scandals.

In making their discursive distinctions, conscious rap devotees are negotiating and accumulating what Thornton calls 'subcultural capital', that is, they are trying to improve their own status by portraying themselves as more sophisticated, progressive, concerned, and urban than the followers of competing youth music styles that allegedly convey a carefree and undiscerning mentality prevalent in townships. However, reducing the meaning of the ample

discourses simply to a status competition does not do full justice to them. Viewed in the context of contemporary South African society, it is evident that conscious rap adherents are addressing topical issues. In so doing they are participating in public discussion about the traces of the apartheid history, the prevalence of poverty, and the inappropriate forms and manifestations of black upward mobility in the post-apartheid era. Once regarded as rather marginal voices, recently their views have found resonance with the fervent protests demanding a cessation in corruption and an overall transformation of the societal power structures.

NOTES

- 1 This research was enabled by the Academy of Finland funding for my Academy Researcher project entitled 'Globalisation of African Music' in 2008–2013. I also want to thank Khanyisile Mbongwa for acting as an assistant on one of my research trips in Cape Town.
- 2 According to the statistics, in mid-2014, the total population in South Africa was estimated to be 54 million. 80.2 % of the population were black Africans, 8.8 % were coloureds, 8.4 % were white, and 2.5 % were Indians/Asians (Statistics South Africa 2014a: 2–3).
- 3 In the Johannesburg region, where *kwaito* first appeared, this argot is a mixture of Zulu, Sotho, English and Afrikaans and is called *iscamtho* by linguists. Colloquially it is often called *tsotsitaal*, a contemporary version of a gangster patois developed in the early twentieth century townships.
- 4 For a review of the popular and academic criticism of *kwaito* as well as an alternative view to its socio-political importance, see Pietilä (2013).
- 5 The conscious rap devotees' valuations are opposite to those of the academic writers, who celebrated what they perceived an emergence of a more socially conscious and self-reflexive strand of *kwaito* in the end of the 1990s (e.g., Allen 2004: 102; Ballantine 2003: 20, cited in Steingo 2007: 30; for more thorough comments, see Pietilä

2013). Haupt (2008), for his part, contrasts South African conscious hip hop to mainstream hip hop (such as gangsta rap) and *kwaito*, emphasising conscious hip hop's critical, empowering and anti-hegemonic qualities against the compliance with the hegemonic values in *kwaito* and mainstream hip hop. Recently *kwaito* has experienced a further commercialisation as several of the mainstream rappers have started referencing and integrating relatively early, well-known *kwaito* songs and dance styles in their music (<http://pigeonsandplanes.com/in-depth/2014/05/south-african-rappers-the-new-kwaito-kings>).

- 6 This distinction appears to be stronger in the Cape Town region than in Johannesburg. This is most probably due to the fact that Johannesburg is the hub of the music industry, where the most important record companies and labels as well as the entertainment media are located, and with them, artists who try to become commercially successful.
- 7 *Spaza* is a slang word that originally referred to an informal township kiosk or small shop. *Spaza* rap refers to hip hop from the Western and Eastern Cape sung in a mixture of languages where Xhosa is dominant.
- 8 The idea of hip hop as alternative education is also employed, for instance, in the Cape Town-based Bush Radio's MC workshop series, titled 'Alternative Kerriculum [*sic*] for Mentoring Youth' (Haupt 2008: 159).
- 9 The situation varies geographically. Cape Town's city centre used to have a few clubs with regular hip hop evenings, but they hardly exist anymore; in Johannesburg there are some city centre venues featuring hip hop.

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