

# Representing Africa!

## Trends in Contemporary African Hip Hop

by

guest editor

Msia Kibona Clark

This special issue of *The Journal of Pan African Studies* focuses on hip hop music and culture on the African continent. This issue explores the ways in which Africans are using hip hop for self expression, often using the music to give voice to important social and political issues.

Emerging from the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip hop's origins are rooted in African storytelling and musical traditions and built on African American social and political resistance. In the 1980s hip hop made its way to Africa, where youth identified with the stories being told by the Black youth of urban America. Building upon hip hop's roots as a platform for social and political discourse, African hip hop has evolved the genre to fit the contours of contemporary African society. The musical exchange between the Diaspora and the Continent is not new. The music of Africa and the African Diaspora have a long tradition of borrowing from each other. Hip hop is one of the latest manifestations of that exchange.

Hip hop, as well as its controversial cousin, mainstream hip hop, have had significant influence in Africa. Mainstream American hip hop is a product of record corporations that have produced artists and images that are little more than apolitical, stereotypes of what Black culture is supposed to be (Rose, 2008; Charnas, 2011). Mainstream American hip hop or pop music has spawned pop music genres in Africa. There also exists significant crossover between hip hop and other urban youth music in Africa, such as Kwaito in South Africa, Hiplife in Ghana, Genge in Kenya, and Bongo Flava in Tanzania. However, a focus on hip hop to the exclusion of other genres of African music allows for an enhanced investigation into the ways in which African hip hop artists are building upon the foundations laid by hip hop's origins. Therefore, putting the research in the context of broader linkages with African American hip hop, assists in revealing African hip hop artists own participation in social and political discourses.

The issue features a collection of scholars from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. The nine articles cover Southern Africa (South Africa and Zimbabwe), West Africa (Nigeria and Senegal), and East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania). An important contribution to studies of African hip hop, the majority of the contributions in this issue come from female scholars. This is significant because hip hop studies is dominated by male voices, and studies of hip hop in Africa are no different. Moving beyond expectations that female hip hop scholars must write on gender, the scholars in this issue address topics ranging from Mickie Koster's look at revolutionary hip hop in Kenya to Lanisa Kitchiner's look at the caricaturization of gangsta rap in South Africa. In addition, many of the authors represent both the African Diaspora and Africa, and several are based in institutions in various countries. This diversity of perspectives has led to contributions that contribute greatly to African hip hop studies.

Two papers examine hip hop communities in Southern Africa. Lanisa Kitchiner examines what she terms "thug minstrelsy" in her look at the appropriation of gangsta rap by the South African rap-rave group Die Antwoord. Kitchiner takes a critical look at the distortion of both African American culture and gangsta rap by a group that emerged out of Cape Town's Coloured and poor White communities. Kitchiner brings to the fore contradictions in racial politics in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Katja Kellerer looks at the confrontation between hip hop and Urban Grooves (pop music) in Zimbabwe. Kellerer's research examines the emergence of a pop music genre, which, promoting materialism is completely non-threatening. Like Bongo Flava in Tanzania (see Msia Clark this issue), the emergence of Urban Grooves has served to marginalize hip hop artists, who's music has the potential to exert real political influence.

Levels of political engagement in West African hip hop vary. Stephanie Shonekan's article examines the influence of mainstream American hip hop on Nigerian hip hop. Shonekan argues that the embrace of mainstream African American hip hop culture in Nigeria is devoid of any in-depth understandings of African American history or culture. Like Caroline Mose's (this issue) examination of the importation of hip hop culture in Nairobi, Kenya; Shonekan also examines influence of hip hop on youth identities in Nigeria.

Both Marame Gueye and Damon Sajnani examine hip hop in Senegal. Marame Gueye looks at one of the most political hip hop scenes in Africa, analyzing the political engagement of hip hop artists during the 2011 social protests against President Abdoulaye Wade. Gueye looks at the music that came out of the movement and the role of hip hop groups like Keur Gui who helped found the Y'an a Marre (Enough is Enough) movement.

Damon Sajnani's article is a deconstruction of the link between hip hop artists and African griots. He conducts his research in Senegal and examines popular notions that hip hop artists either emerged from, or are the equivalent to, African griots. Using Senegal as a case study, his work contrasts the role of griots in Senegalese society with that of hip hop artists in Senegalese society.

In East Africa four authors present papers on hip hop in both Kenya and Tanzania. Mickie Mwanzia Koster's paper is a look at the remembrance of the Mau Mau revolution in Kenya through the socially conscious hip hop group Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. Through interviews, surveys and archival research Koster looks at the conscious connections being made between the Mau Mau struggle and youth protest by one of Kenya's most vocal, and political hip hop groups.

Caroline Mose looks the global hip hop values of *swag* and *cred* among Nairobi hip hop artists. Her research examines the value of *swag* and *cred* in the urban space, drawing comparisons between hip hop's emergence in Nairobi and in the ghettos of New York City. Mose places hip hop artists in Nairobi within a global hip hop community, a community with its own distinct identity and cultural markers.

Msia Kibona Clark's article examines discussions over hip hop authenticity and commercialization in Tanzania. These discussions, which have been a part of US hip hop studies for some time, are examined. In Tanzania hip hop music is marginalized in favor of its less political cousin, Bongo Flava (pop music). As in Kellerer's (this issue) findings in Zimbabwe, Clark investigates how hip hop artists in Tanzania struggle to define and maintain hip hop authenticity in the face of pressure to commercialize.

Shani Omari presents one of the first academic studies of hip hop on the islands that make up Zanzibar. Omari's research looks at the causes behind the slow growth of hip hop in Zanzibar, compared to mainland Tanzania. Her research presents the clashes between hip hop and Islam on the islands, and the attempts by Zanzibari youth to use hip hop to both promote development on the islands and to engage global communities.

The articles that make up this issue present research on hip hop in Africa from multi-disciplinary perspectives. The articles collectively tie hip hop communities in Africa to global hip hop communities. Most address global hip hop concepts and values, such as *swag*, authenticity, and commercialization. Most of the articles also rest on hip hop's roots in social and political commentary, in hip hop's fifth element; knowledge. This confirms Africa as a space in which "authentic" hip hop resides and can be tested or observed. This approach also distinguishes hip hop in Africa from hip hop hybrids and urban pop genres.

## References

- Charnas, D. (2011). *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*. New York: NAL Trade.
- Rose, T. (2008). *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.