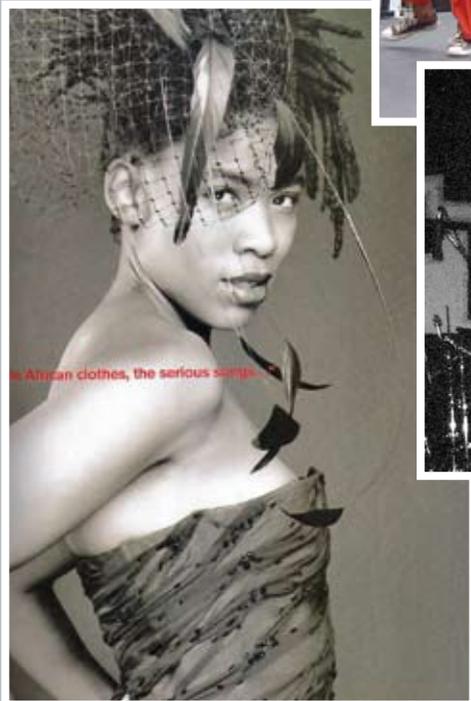


the world of music

Kwaito

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In African clothes, the serious singer



WMB

the world of music

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Is Kwaito South African Hip-hop? Why the Answer Matters and Who It Matters To

Sharlene Swartz

Abstract

This paper asks whether South Africa's kwaito is an indigenous form of hip-hop or an original "spectacular vernacular" and considers how the difference between kwaito and hip-hop is discursively constructed and performed. The provenance, politics, economics and style of kwaito provides the locations for this comparison with hip-hop. While its provenance is similar to that of hip-hop, understanding the complex politics of kwaito deepens our understanding of identity and resistance in the context of the South African racial taxonomy and political history. The economics of kwaito alerts us to both the materialism of kwaito culture and the power of economics as political act. Finally by interpreting the style or "reading" some of the cultural artefacts associated with kwaito, the ambivalent relationship between young "black" South Africans and the various dominant groups against which they rail is highlighted.

1. Introduction

"Black"¹ youth in Khayelitsha, a township near Cape Town, are proud to be South African. Ingwazi and his friends talk township *tsotsitaal*² (a local, usually youth, and colloquial vernacular) and wear street credible clothes replete with *Spottis*—a floppy sun hat turned into an icon of street culture. After school they work hard at writing lyrics for their own songs and hang out on the streets in *All Stars*—cheap canvas shoes, sometimes known as three-fives, because they cost R35.³ Figure 1, a CD cover for a local music compilation depicts these two popular artefacts of street culture. On a Saturday night they attend street bashes where they dance to a raucous beat—a mix of slowed-down house with African urban rhythms and sounds liberally sampled into the mix. The dancing is sexual, the lyrics raw. The music is known as kwaito. Is this the South African version of hip-hop? Ingwazi would argue not. Mandla, wearing a Tupac t-shirt agrees with him loudly, but others are not convinced.



Fig. 1. Ezimitoti Kwaito Hits (EMI International) CD cover showing All Stars (foreground) and the Spotti (left back) (used with permission from EMI South Africa, with thanks to Timothy Doolabh)

As a researcher of South African youth culture, I have long observed the changing debate regarding the differences between kwaito and hip-hop in the field. Opinions over the past decade have varied widely and changed subtly amongst young people. So this article is not an attempt to describe the de facto similarities and differences between kwaito and hip-hop (although these will receive brief attention). Rather I endeavour to describe how kwaito has been discursively constructed, performed and likened to hip-hop, especially during the 1990s. The article delves more deeply into the question of whether kwaito is an indigenous form of hip-hop or an original and authentic “spectacular vernacular”⁴ And more importantly it considers to whom the answer to this question matters, and why it does so.

In order to construct my argument I have loosely appropriated Paul Du Gay’s analytical framework for studying a cultural phenomenon through “how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use” (1997:3). Each of these localities of meaning provide sites for understanding whether or how kwaito and hip-hop are related.

The article comprises four main sections, namely the provenance of kwaito, its politics, its economics and its style. The provenance of kwaito provides a strong basis of comparison with hip-hop. Understanding the complex politics of kwaito deepens our understanding of identity and resistance in the context of the South African racial taxonomy and political history. The economics of kwaito alerts us to the materialism of kwaito culture, the nature of its resistance and the power of economics as political act. Finally, interpreting the style or “reading” some of the cultural arte-

facts associated with kwaito, highlights the ambivalent relationship between young “black” South Africans and the various dominant groups against which they rail.

2. Provenance: Fusion, Eclecticism and Hybridity

Journalists from Newsweek, CNN and *The Economist* invariably begin an article on kwaito by comparing it to hop-hop. Essentially they say it is a style of hip-hop that uses indigenous South African languages. *Billboard* magazine however calls kwaito “a South African innovation” (Williamson 1999:23; see also Williamson 2002) and “a genuine world-fusion vibe” (Van Vleck 2002). *Billboard* adds that kwaito is influenced by hip-hop, but much in the same way that other world music styles have influenced each other, for example, raga, bhangra and ska.

The local debate is much the same. Miles Keylock writes in the July 2006 edition of *GQ* magazine:

Sure, both [kwaito and hip-hop] might be forms of youth music that have spawned an entire generation of DIY-BEE [do it yourself “black” economic empowerment] opportunities but sonically speaking, what is the different between the choice inner-city club kwaito cuts of Mandoza and the ghetto slick hip-hop chakalaka of Skwatta Kamp? Ask ex-TKZee bad-boy Kabelo and he will tell you that kwaito is simply homegrown hip-hop. Of course, hip-hop movers ‘n’ shakers Skwatta Kamp insist that an emcee standing on stage rapping some backing beats is about the only similarity. Who knows? Maybe it is simply a case of kwaito battling against hip-hop for market share. (Keylock 2006:61)

The kwaito-hip-hop argument generally revolves around origination, authenticity and influence. As Thandiswa of Bongo Maffin says kwaito “is about showcasing our African-ness, about showing off our continent, our culture and our country” (Pan 2000:74). So while Skwatta Kamp, a “black” hip-hop group, fiercely maintains: “Hip-hop is hip-hop, kwaito is kwaito. [Kwaito] is not South African hip-hop. You don’t hear 50 Cent say hip-hop is American kwaito!” (Keylock 2006:61), as we just saw, others, like TKZee’s Kabelo seem less certain.

Of course, there are strong arguments in favour of distinguishing between kwaito and hip-hop now, as there presently exists in South Africa a strong and separate hip-hop movement (involving Pro Kid, Godessa, Skwatta Kamp, Tuks and H20 to name but a few). In the 1990s, this was not the case. Hip-hop was a small, almost insignificant, movement located predominantly in the “coloured” community, although Prophets of da City had both “black” and “coloured” members (see further, Bosch’s article in this issue), while kwaito emerged as the music of choice of the majority of “black” youth. Steingo (2005:342) cites further evidence for the distinctness of kwaito as a genre when he quotes “ex-kwaito duo turned hip-hop” H20 telling why they switched genres: “Because you just repeat the same thing over and over again in Kwaito. It gets boring.... With Hip-Hop you get a chance to really talk to people while performing”. And if further evidence is needed, even the South African Music

Awards present separate awards to both kwaito and hip-hop artists at their annual jamboree.

Coplan (2005) cites various artists and producers who maintain that kwaito is a distinct genre that emerged from the township pop or bubblegum music of the eighties (for more about bubblegum and kwaito, see Viljoen's article in this issue). These older "black" South African musicians include Brenda Fassie, Yvonne Chaka Chaka and Sello "Chicco" Twala. By focusing on this link, artists and producers reaffirm the strong sense of South African-ness of kwaito music. According to many current kwaito artists the *mpantsula* style has been a major influence on kwaito. The clothes, dance and even tough gangster attitude from the 1950s (which persisted through the 1980s and now is enjoying resurgent popularity), is evident in kwaito. Junior Sokhela, of the group Boom Shaka, says:

The mpantsula era was like the break dance era whereby it was the only culture we could relate to, it was what everybody wanted to be. It was like the B-Boy of South Africa...it's the only culture we can relate to that's ours, that's local.... [In South African] townships they call you a punk if you're into the baggy pants and all of that. (Rage 2003)

Sokhela makes four very important points. First he asserts strongly that kwaito has South African roots and South African history. Second, that kwaito is historically South African, not historically American. Third, he draws a strong distinction between the American hip-hop mode of dressing, with its *de rigueur* baggy pants, and kwaito style. Finally, he makes a strong case that *mpantsula* style has evolved into kwaito style, thereby affirming the continuity and uniqueness of "black" history in South Africa.

But are there structural and perhaps even cultural similarities between kwaito music and hip-hop? Structural and technical similarities are clear. Like hip-hop, kwaito music is performed to pre-recorded backing tracks over which lyrics are spoken or chanted (essentially rapping). Like hip-hop, kwaito makes use of liberal sampling of music and employs visual and proactive dance and videos to accompany tracks. Both employ call-response in their singing, but this similarity can be explained by understanding some of the history of South African music. The music of the 1970s consisted largely of the mournful and aggressive chants of freedom songs. "Black" (and sometimes "coloured") South African youth grew up with these chants and *toyi toyi* as the background score of their march towards freedom.⁵ The call-response style was a staple of these freedom songs. In 1994, when freedom songs were put to rest in the ballot box, call-response re-emerged in the feisty music of kwaito. Call-response is not borrowed from hip-hop, rather it emerged along a different pathway. In fact, call-response is not unique to hip-hop music either; Kelley (1997:59) maintains that rap borrowed-call response from go-go music.

Like many hip-hop songs, kwaito lyrics contain sexual (some say "vulgar"⁶), violent, political and materialist themes. Yet kwaito's lyrics are not as overtly political as some hip-hop, nor as misogynist, according to South African youth and commentators like Coplan (2005:18).⁷ Moreover, kwaito is often more hedonistic (see Imey

cited in Steingo 2005:343; Coplan 2005:15-16) than hip-hop and definitely does not glorify murder and violence (*ibid.*:18) as much as does hip-hop:

perhaps because life for the average young black South African is much more dangerous than it is for the average young black American, songs glorifying murder do not sell well.... The threat of violence in South Africa is omnipresent. People do not like to be reminded of it. (Anon. 2000:85)

When young women are asked about the misogyny in kwaito they maintain that they try not to listen to the lyrics, which they find degrading but which simply reflect the sexism inherent in South African society (Stephens 2000:270). In addition, and unlike hip-hop, kwaito lyrics are fairly straight forward and do not employ the signifying characteristic of hip-hop music. Nor do graffiti and break-dancing form an important part of kwaito.

However like hip-hop, kwaito is both the style and music of the streets. In an interview with the *Financial Mail*, Gabi Le Roux, producer for kwaito icon Mandoza, said kwaito “has become to SA what hip-hop is to American youngsters. It’s not just a genre of music, it’s a lifestyle” (Pile 2001). Gavin Steingo makes the point that during his own research he found that:

many kwaito fans describe kwaito (and not South African hip-hop) as “South Africa’s hip-hop.” Not “South African hip-hop”, but “South Africa’s hip-hop.” That is, many kwaito fans believe that kwaito is to South Africa what hip-hop is to America. In this sense, in South Africa kwaito is more hip-hop than hip-hop. Hip-hop is not South Africa’s music, because that would imply a sense of belonging; and it is kwaito that belongs to South Africa, not hip-hop. (Steingo, personal communication, July 2006)

So kwaito is *culturally comparable* to hip-hop in that it has become an entire youth subculture. It provides youth with the means for creating new identities, establishing fresh societal norms and generating economic opportunities, especially in the midst of marginalisation.

The structural, technical and cultural similarities between kwaito and hip-hop music are in no doubt, then, but there are also important differences in both history and substance. Jeffrey Kallberg (1988:243), in his seminal work on genre, speaks about context being as integral a part of defining a genre as the “immanent characteristics of the music” itself. So although kwaito may share some of these immanent characteristics with hip-hop, the context in which it emerged and the “generic contract”⁸ which the artist establishes with his/her audience creates an entirely new understanding of meaning (*ibid.*). Potter’s view that hip-hop does not want to “have its histories obscured” is equally applicable to kwaito, “since the whole point of vernacular art forms is that they come from a particular place at a particular time, and are sites not only of invention and creativity, but of history and resistance” (1995:146, 145). Obscuring histories can easily be done by producing a genealogy of music styles and attributing not just influence, but origination.

3. Politics: Identities, Exclusion, Aspiration and Social Activism

Why is the provenance of kwaito important to South African “black” youth? Is it perhaps because kwaito is more than a music or cultural style—is it, in fact, a political act? Unlike some genres of hip-hop music, many youth, and media commentators claim that kwaito is apolitical and young South Africans say they like it that way. They are tired of politics; the beat is what it’s all about. New York-based South African journalist Mark Gevisser (1999:27) comments: “If [young “black” South Africans] have any kind of oppositional identity, it is generational rather than political”. But, as Coplan (2005:25) argues, “the politics of popular music, and indeed those of popular culture more broadly, do not require explicit verbal...encoding to be political”. There are many ways in which kwaito is in fact a subtle act of politics. I will consider four of them, namely identity, aspiration, exclusion and social activism.

3.1 *Identities in Transition*

South African youth are currently in the process of creating a first-time identity distinct from that of society around them and they oppose what Hebdige called the “colonisation of mind and identities” (1979:104; see also Liechty 1995) by “imported pop music fads” (Swink 2003). These youth are not satisfied to simply capitulate to the hegemony of the USA nor to dissolve the cultural and political nation state. Instead South African “black” youth could be said to be colonising (stealing, raping, bastardising) the grooves, styles and techniques of dominant music (like hip-hop) and with it, producing a new identity.

After interviewing numerous young South Africans, Leggett, Møller and Richards (1997:97) conclude that “South Africa is a country in search of an identity”, and kwaito is beginning to fulfil this need for a new identity—one based largely on authenticity and materialism. This is why kwaito’s relationship to hip-hop is so important as South African youth “build...culture out of remembered fragments” (Potter 1995:7), proving Hebdige right when he says:

the material which is continually being transformed into culture can never be completely “raw”. It is always mediated: inflected by the historical context in which it is encountered; posited upon a specific ideological field which gives it a particular life and particular meanings. (Hebdige 1979:80)

So the growing “Afrocentricity” of which Gilroy (1993) talks is as true in South Africa as it is in both the rest of Africa and amongst minority groups of the African Diaspora in the Global North. Africans are desperately seeking their own renaissance,⁹ both politically and culturally. While Gilroy (*ibid.*:4) connects it with a “new found fervour for purity”, I would argue that it is the pent-up frustration of having being made to be subservient through decades of colonisation and deprivation that is finally finding expression in the emergence of a dominant Afrocentrist youth culture. As Rose (1994:78) reminds us, “hip hop culture emerged as the source of alternative

identity formation and social status for youth in a community whose older local support institutions had been all but demolished.” In the same way kwaito has emerged and is in the process of establishing itself as a unique youth subculture, creating an identity for young, post-Apartheid “black” South Africans. These youth have been denied historical identity by the legacy of Apartheid and by exclusion from the liberation struggle, in which they were too young to play a role. So, while older “black” South Africans can claim an identity as freedom fighters, South African youth experience theoretical freedom without the privileges of a shared culture or access to the economic benefits of a free country.

3.2 *Politics of Aspiration*

Does it matter that part of this new identity is a “politics of aspiration” (Nuttall 2003:240) and a “politics of pleasure” (Peterson 2003:209)? After the intense South African political struggle and knife-edge, often violent run up to the South African democratic elections in 1994, kwaito emerged in welcome relief, and with it, a drive for economic prosperity and social reinvention. An article in *The Economist* reports that this drive “disturbed black South Africans over 30, who grew up on protest songs, [and who] found kwaito’s apolitical materialism disturbing.” Quoting Leo Manne, a programme manager at kwaito radio station Yfm, the article further captures this materialist drive inherent in kwaito: “There’s no young person in this country who didn’t start the millennium thinking: How am I going to get fucking rich?” (Anon. 2000). This drive for prosperity, however, can and should be understood as a political act. Kwaito, for all its hedonism and materialism, is an attempt to reclaim that which was stolen by three-hundred years of conquest and oppression, and to rebuild a country ravaged by separatism, inequality and injustice. Fundamental to such a rebuilding is the redistribution of wealth. Economic aspiration is therefore to be expected.

3.3 *Language as Exclusion*

The kwaito industry wields a lot of control (and demonstrates resistance), not only economically (more of this later) but through the way in which it employs language, a site where resistance is both found and contested. Kwaito music utilises a multiplicity of languages—everything from isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho and Afrikaans to *tsotsitaal* finds a place in kwaito. Everything that is, except English.¹⁰ Herein, too, lies a political act of subversion. When kwaito artists sing and chant in indigenous South African languages, they reverse the cultural hegemony of English. If “white” South Africans want to be part of this new street culture, they have to finally do something about their tacit refusal to learn indigenous languages. The language of kwaito makes “white” people feel uncomfortable, out of place and—ironically—

second-rate citizens. They know neither the moves, the dress code nor the (street) language that is kwaito. It is a sardonic reversal from Apartheid days.

It is extremely ironic to find Afrikaans liberally incorporated into *tsotsitaal*. In 1976 the beginning of the uprising against the Apartheid regime was specifically a protest against having to use Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in township schools. Students protested this injustice and marched through the streets of Soweto on 16 June 1976. By the end of the day hundreds of young, dead bodies littered gravelled township streets. Could the adoption of Afrikaans words be a way of reclaiming the past through language? The almost exclusive use of indigenous languages in kwaito certainly reclaims space in South African youth culture for “black” South Africans, while excluding “white” South Africans. Even more ironically, Steingo (2005:342), citing an article by Kasumba, tells how the “coloured” hip-hop group Godessa felt excluded by kwaito because they could not understand it, and that unlike kwaito “hiphop is universal...it is a vehicle for us to speak to the masses.”¹¹ The irony of course is that kwaito *does* speak to the masses whose mother-tongue is isiXhosa and isiZulu, not English—the language of hip-hop (in the 1990s).

Kwaito “speak[s] loudly but privately, to tell...[South Africa] about herself in a language that leaves her puzzled” (Alim 2004:9). While Alim was referring to hip-hop in these words, the sentiment applies equally to kwaito, except that it is “black” youth speaking “loudly but privately” to each other rather than to a wider society through their use of language. And their message is political—“shake off the shackles of Apartheid and express yourself, it’s time to rebuild, but on our terms.” Previously discriminated against, “black” youth are firmly positioning themselves as dominant in the pantheon of South Africa’s “racial” groups.

The use of indigenous language has also carved a unique space for kwaito in opposition to the hegemony of American hop-hop. It is one of the most important ways in which kwaito is considered “local.” However as the lure of international exposure has gained momentum, kwaito artists are increasingly writing their lyrics in English in order to capture mainstream markets (read European and America).¹² Giroux’s (1999:221) comment that “language is situated in an ongoing struggle over issues of inclusion and exclusion” paradoxically highlights how “white” South Africans are excluded from kwaito (and street culture) by language but also how the temptation of making money will most likely result in their inclusion, albeit late (as predicted by Hebdige 1979). In fact the CD *South African Hip Hop Kwaito* (Figure 2), serves as an important cultural artefact when considering language. Not only do many of the artists use English lyrics on the CD (which was made exclusively for the international market) but the compilation includes many other “black” South African musicians who are not kwaito artists, but with whom an international audience would have some familiarity.

The very fact that it is subtitled “South African hip-hop” can only be seen as an attempt to locate the album in a known genre, thereby constructing it as such, presumably as a marketing strategy in order to facilitate sales. But this album has had more than a commercial impact. By labelling kwaito as South African hip-hop,

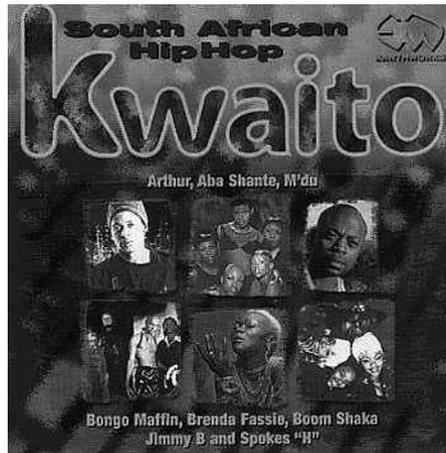


Fig. 2. South African Hip Hop Kwaito (*Sterns/Earthworks*) CD cover showing how kwaito may be seen to be complicit with consumerism (used with permission from *Sterns/Earthworks*, with thanks to Robert Urbanus)

Stern/Earthworks have created a perception (certainly internationally if not locally) that kwaito is South African hip-hop.

3.4 Social Activism

A further political act of kwaito is to be found in its strong “social activism” (see Coplan 2005:15, 19). As Peterson describes:

the kwaito figure traverses an urban landscape that is riddled with deep personal, social, familial, cultural and socio-political obstacles. ...Over and above the countless songs that chronicle the daily routines of suffering and hustling or songs that speak against violence and crime, there is a significant body of kwaito that seems fixated with thinking through the meaning of life in a social context where it seems that death has clearly triumphed over life. (Peterson 2003:207-8)

It is therefore no wonder that kwaito is constantly harnessed as edutainment in the service of social interventions against violence, AIDS, rape, poverty and substance abuse. Groups like Bongo Maffin, TKZee and Trompies and individuals such as Zola and Mandoza all participate in live gigs, television broadcasts and as ambassadors for various social issues that profoundly affect “black” youth. Mandoza’s 2004 hit “Respect” provides a example of the strong social activist messages regarding AIDS, gangsterism, misogyny, culture, money and faith present in kwaito:

“Respect” by Mandoza

This one goes out to my boyz, all my boyz
Respect life boy, respect life boy
Respect your father and mother, so that your days can be longer in life

Just holding on letting time go
I wasn't afraid to take chances
And wouldn't let myself go down
Learn about the deadly disease
And also acknowledge the ancestors
Don't forget where you grew up
Don't take blood money
Always know that women are important
Don't let yourself down - remember to pray
God can amaze you—He'll always be with you

Respect life boy, respect life boy
Respect your grandmother and grandfather, so that your days can be longer in life

God is gonna make sure to give us the tools of life
And those tools are gonna be like fire
So that nothing can come near you
I don't want you to go with fashion
Cause I learned my lesson
I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did
I went to jail but I got out and I survived
Doing business with undercover gangsters
But now I pray everyday
And I know that I have dedicated my life to God

Respect life boy, respect life boy
Respect yourself boy, so that we can also respect you

As this example illustrates, while youth may not be rushing to express their democratic right and duty to vote (less than a quarter do) they are expressing through kwaito their right to an identity, to economic aspiration, to assert their dominance and to challenge the social circumstances in which many of their peers languish. Steingo (personal communication, July 2006) and others argue that these kind of “socially conscious” lyrics form a vast minority of kwaito songs, the repertory usually being accused of being extremely apolitical, as already discussed. Christopher Ballantine has a short (as yet unpublished paper) where he discusses what he calls “mature” kwaito, showing that this socially conscious (and mature) form of kwaito was a later development. While this might be the case, the lyrics of kwaito music seem to be becoming increasingly socially conscious.

4. Economics: The Commodification of Meaning

As alluded to in the previous section, the economics of kwaito are integral to the genre's politics. Although it does not contribute materially to my comparison between kwaito and hip-hop (since I have limited knowledge of the economics of hip-hop), there is some benefit to be had from taking a brief detour to further consider the economics of kwaito.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, gangsterism is often perceived as a way to make money. A further difference between hip-hop and kwaito is that while much of South African hip-hop is clearly "accepting [and] even proud of its gangster associations" (Steingo 2005:341), kwaito is less associated with gangsterism. Peterson, however, does not discount the elements of "social banditry" that kwaito appears to encourage, and that my own research confirms.¹³ But making money from kwaito-inspired gangsterism is only a small element in kwaito's economic potential.

Economically kwaito is the biggest thing that has happened to "black" economic empowerment since the end of Apartheid. The US\$130 million dollar a year industry is almost entirely "black"—artists, record labels, production companies, clubs and staff of Yired (the company that owns kwaito radio station Yfm and youth culture magazine *Y-mag*).¹⁴ Pan, writing in *Newsweek*, claims: "the [kwaito] industry offers a way out of the township and into the money" (2000:72). In many ways, the emergence of kwaito can be compared to the production of a local, hip teen culture magazine in Kathmandu, into which "local merchants project their dreams of a local 'youth culture'" and who stand to make huge sums of money in the process (Liechty 1995:174). Many kwaito groups are manufactured by music producers who bring artists, singers and dancers together and train them to fill niches. There is an almost exclusive domination of the genre by a very small number of producers. Established artists like Oscar, Arthur and M'du constantly find new talent and form and reform groups. In 2004 Arthur had *fifteen* groups which he had founded and who were concurrently recording. Young artists tend to make some money out of kwaito but their success is often short-lived. Instead kwaito as an industry swallows up local artists and treats them as mere cogs in a well-oiled machine. As this commercialisation of kwaito continues, and as artists compete to be signed by multinational labels with its own ideas of the direction in which kwaito artists should go, kwaito as local "black" economic empowerment will become further diluted as money moves off-shore.

There are further ways in which kwaito (like hip-hop) is complicit with consumerism. Like hip-hop, large corporations such as Pepsi and Vodacom have colonised kwaito artists in the marketing of their products. The image of success portrayed by these companies is the kwaito star with a suburban Sandton home and fleet of German cars, an image of wealth recently occupied by the "white" oppressor. Kwaito has spawned multiple spin-off industries. The clothes will be discussed later, but most spin-offs are media-related. Radio stations (such as Yfm), magazines (such as Y-Mag) and television series such as *Tsha Tsha* and *Yizo Yizo* are all built on kwaito

music and street culture. While many contain social messages, their commercial nature is not to be forgotten.

Hebdige has repeatedly pointed out that the media plays an important role in mediating culture by playing back a picture of what youth look like or ought to look like. These media accompaniments to kwaito both make money for themselves and provide a source of revenue for kwaito artists and producers. While 57% of South Africans (the vast majority of them “black”) currently live below the poverty line (HSRC. 2004), my current research reveals that even those youth who are clearly poor spend a disproportionate amount of money on (street cultural) attire and music. This is a vast virgin township youth market awaiting exploitation by commercial interests.

Lyotard (1996) asserts that eclecticism and fusion of tastes is all about making money. Stephens (2000:257) confirms this critique: “As a musical hybrid, kwaito is mediated in the same ways as Western and international popular music to fulfil a *commercial demand* that has resulted from changes in channels of media and communication technology, synchronous with the changing socio-political environment.” His argument is that economic factors make it necessary for traditional or indigenous music to become diversified, more understandable and hence more marketable to a larger audience. Accordingly, even as kwaito expands and its appeals widens, its political identity begins to dilute in the pursuit of wealth. And although authenticity itself is not the grounds for critique, kwaito artists and producers do appear to be “selling-out” albeit intentionally in pursuit of the megabuck. This is the ultimate commodification of meaning. And while to some it may seem that youth who build their identity on such an ephemeral base are ultimately bound to be disappointed, to others it is yet another irony. The market from which many have for so long been excluded, is again excluding the masses. Only this time those doing the excluding are not “white” oppressors but a rising affluent “black” elite in whose hands the production and distribution of kwaito largely resides.

5. Style: Reading the Spotti, All Stars and Gold

A final site in which to consider how kwaito is discursively constructed is that of style. Kwaito style is distinctive and like other youth subculture styles “dress, appearance, language, ritual occasions, styles of interaction, music...form a unity... which then defines the group’s public identity” (Clarke *et al.* 1997:110). There is also an inherent resistance in youth style. The irony with hip-hop however, is that urban street wear has been taken over by huge fashion houses and are now so expensive that youth are either unable to afford them or go to all sorts of lengths (including social banditry) to be able to obtain them. As Hebdige argues:

Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions [since]...once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce

them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. (Hebdige 1997:96)

The kwaito industry (so far) has resisted this domination. Two local kwaito fashion labels have emerged, Loxion Kulcha and Woola Seven. At present they are still in the hands of “black” business entrepreneurs.

Another form of resistance is the employment of bricolage, a practice where “things are put to use in ways for which they are not intended” (Gelder and Thornton 1997:88). The Spotti, a floppy sun hat, is a mainstay of South African “black” urban street wear that has been given such new meaning, along with new colours, price tags and attitude. A typical unbranded Spotti retails for around US\$2. It is culturally significant for two reasons: for that which it parodies and because of what it is not. Essentially the Spotti is a sun hat used by cricket players when fielding. And cricket is a symbol both of British colonisation and a sport of the (previously) dominant upper-class “white” elite. Using the Spotti as an icon of kwaito culture serves “to take the piss out of the image” of the white settlers (Clarke *et al.* 1997:109). Clarke *et al.* also say that “it is at the intersection between the located parent cultures and the mediating dominant culture that youth subcultures arise” (*ibid.*:107). But post-Apartheid “black” youth have a complicated relationship with the dominant culture. Who are the dominant culture? Is it the “white” group in whose hands the country’s economy is still largely to be found or is it the ruling and emerging “black” elite (who dress like their former colonial masters) who are at once the parent culture and the (newly) dominant culture? Kwaito street wear takes the piss out of both.

The Spotti is also noticeably and unmistakably not the ubiquitous American baseball cap—a ubiquitous, global icon of youth culture. Adopting the Spotti rather than the baseball cap as an element of kwaito style is yet another way in which South African youth are attempting to distance themselves from, and challenge the hegemony of, American culture. Cultural studies tells us that meaning does not arise directly from an object but from the way the object is represented. The Spotti is a good example of just such a re-presentation.

All Stars are low-top, canvas shoes (trainers, takkies, sneakers) which are a staple of kwaito street culture. Although originally produced by American manufacturer Converse, Timberland seems to have replaced All Stars in the USA as the street footwear of choice. In the case of All Stars, their production is informative. As a consequence of Apartheid-era trade embargoes and boycotts, local South African companies have been making imitation All Stars for many years. Consequently, the price in South Africa is a fraction of that in the USA (compare \$5 to \$40). I would argue that All Stars are more South African than American, since they are more popular and ubiquitous than All Stars in the USA. No South African youth I have asked knows them to be an American brand. And in the USA they are worn not by followers of hip-hop culture but by “hipsters” (primarily white, middle-class young people who listen to Indie-Rock).

All Stars have assumed an identity of authenticity in South Africa, but one which is being contested by USA fashion labels, who are attempting to lure kwaito stars

into wearing hip-hop street wear. McCloy (2003) in an interview with Trompies tells of how the group arrived at an interview wearing typical kwaito street wear: Spottis, All Stars, *mpantsula*-style loud shirts and checked pants. In the middle of the interview, just before she was about to take some pictures they rushed off and changed into “[baseball] caps, jeans, tracksuits and shoes from American label Fubu...these guys transform into something that now looks more Bronx, New York than Meadowslands, Soweto”. They responded by saying it is all about colonialism—the USA is trying to colonise another commercial market, South Africa, yet they (Trompies) are using Fubu to build personal “infrastructure”—money and corporate respect to facilitate being signed with major labels in the future. At the end of the day, kwaito is about “headspace” they claimed, not just clothes. Rose’s comment that hip-hop “clothing and consumption rituals testify to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression” applies as much to kwaito, which equally “forges local identities for teenagers who understand their limited access to traditional avenues of social status attainment” (1994:80). But as the Trompies example indicates, who is really using whom?

Ironically it is the kwaito clubs in the middle-class suburbs which ban both Spottis and All Stars, a form of regulation which can only be interpreted as the attempt of the moneyed classes to control kwaito and perhaps make it more respectable by directing the dress of those who follow it (at least into these upmarket clubs).

Finally, Steingo (2005:350-51) provides an interesting comparison with how gold assumes different places in kwaito and hip-hop. In hip-hop gold is fake and overdone bling. It makes a mockery of those complicit with consumerism and is an act of resistance. In kwaito gold is real and both status-revealing and enhancing. It tells observers that “I have arrived, I have the cash to afford what has been previously denied to me, what my parents slaved to produced in the service of wealthy ‘white’ magnates.” So while kwaito and hip-hop have distinctive street styles, these styles are magnitudes apart in both physical appearance and in significance.

6. Conclusion: Hybrid Nation or Spectacular Vernacular?

Kwaito is an eclectic, fusion, hybrid bricolage. It is not original in its technical provenance, but since meaning is constructed and produced it certainly can be argued that kwaito has a unique meaning and role in the lives of young “black” South Africans, indeed for all South Africans. So the question of whether kwaito is South African hip-hop matters far beyond its technical similarities to and differences from American hip-hop. The way in which kwaito is produced, consumed and resisted is an ongoing process and one that is shaping the identity of young South Africans by their inclusion, exclusion or opposition to it. Kwaito serves to rearrange the hierarchy of dominance, by including those who have been previously excluded and by shifting the balance of economic power, or at least having the potential to do so. If it were

merely a bastardised version of American hip-hop, its political significance would be far more insipid.

So is kwaito well described as South African hip-hop? The evidence collected for this article regarding kwaito's provenance, politics, economics and style suggests that the scales are tipped toward kwaito being a spectacular vernacular genre, not an indigenous version of American hip-hop. It is spectacular because of its departure from traditional South African "black" pop or traditional African music, as well as due to its runaway popularity, success and potential for "black" economic empowerment. It is a vernacular music because it creates an original identity for "black" South African youth, and excludes both elders and "white" youth from this new headspace.

While there are many parallels with the function that hip-hop plays in the lives of urban "black" Americans, kwaito *is* a local style. But the music industry remains a *commercial* and evolving industry after all. The kwaito music of the 1990s has and continues to change; what Rage (2003) calls "genre pressure" is increasingly felt. "Black" hip-hop groups are becoming ever more ubiquitous and popular in clubs and on radio stations throughout South Africa. Mandoza's newer albums admits to having a few hip-hop tracks and a strong hip-hop influence (see further Mandoza 2003). Graffiti is beginning to appear in "black" neighbourhoods in imitation of American tagging. And new group Hip Hop Pantsula (HHP) with their blend of *mpantsula* and hip-hop are establishing new boundaries and (so far) evading classification. Finally, American hip-hop groups are beginning to sample (or is it cannibalise?) South African kwaito songs. To give an example, kwaito super group TKZee is featured on the South African release of Puff Daddy's (P. Diddy) single "P.E. 2000."

Hip-hop culture has been evolving for over thirty years and has materially shaped the identity of young Americans. Kwaito, on the other hand, although simmering for the last decade, has only recently debuted with the dismantling of Apartheid South Africa. Already it is fluid and shifting. Hebdige (1979:69) notes that "as the music and the various subcultures it supports or reproduces assume rigid and identifiable patterns, so new subcultures are created which demand or produce corresponding mutations in musical form." The way in which kwaito evolves and shapes contemporary South African youth culture will be worth watching. How will it continue to redraw the lines of racial segregation? How might it redress or inflame inequalities of the past? What does it mean when kwaito stars redress in hip-hop clothing for public photo shoots? What does it mean for girls to ignore the misogynist lyrics of kwaito music? These important questions remain to be answered. In the meantime, to consider kwaito as anything less than a spectacular vernacular is to erode its significance as a liberating political accomplishment.

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Notes

- 1 All my references to “black” (African, Bantu), “white” and “coloured” (mixed race, Malay, Indonesian, indigenous Khoi-san peoples) are made in the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of these labels despite their expediency for analytical purposes. I encapsulated them to remind the reader of this fact. Under Apartheid legislation people were classified according to these and other labels.
- 2 Satyo (2001:139) provides a discussion of both the meaning of this term and his renaming of it as “kwaito-speak”; see also Steingo’s article in this issue.
- 3 At the moment of writing (January 2008) R7 equals roughly US\$1, although a better equivalency in terms of buying power would be to roughly equate R3.50 to US\$1.
- 4 The phrase is borrowed from the title of Russell Potter’s book, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995). A vernacular is the everyday, indigenous, contemporary or “slang” language of a country or part of a country.
- 5 *Toyi-toying* is a slow rhythmic like dance-march, where participants hop from side to side in a controlled yet deliberate fashion. It was the chosen way for people to march through the streets of South Africa in protest to the Apartheid regime.
- 6 Rage journalist, Maria McCloy calls many of kwaito’s lyrics “vulgar” in an interview with the BBC; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/rhythms/southafrica.shtml>, accessed 3 May 2003.
- 7 There is a strong political movement within American hip-hop. Eminem’s “White America” and Public Enemy’s “Don’t Believe the Hype” and “Rebel Without a Pause” are just a few examples of a large genre of political rap. In contrast there are only a few kwaito songs with overtly political lyrics, for instance, Arthur’s *Don’t Call Me Kaffir* and Ngema’s *AmaNdy*.
- 8 Kallberg’s notion of a “generic contract” is that as the “composer agrees to use some of the conventions, patterns, and gestures of a genre, and the listener consents to interpret some aspects of the piece in a way conditioned by the genre” there is an establishment of a “framework for the communication of meaning”.
- 9 The Organization for African Unity’s July 2001 New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the formation of the African Union (led by South African president Thabo Mbeki) are indicators of an African renaissance.
- 10 I have not made a careful analysis of early kwaito music to establish this fact empirically. However as a young adult growing up in the 1990s I was bewildered by the kwaito lyrics I heard on the radio, at concerts and in the townships. I picked up various Afrikaans words but never heard

- English. I was always forced to ask my isiZulu and isiXhosa friends to translate lyrics for me, this in contrast to township pop or bubblegum that was easily accessible to English speakers.
- 11 During the 1990s young, “coloured” South Africans generally excluded themselves from kwaito street culture through affiliation to a small but influential hip-hop culture located primarily in Cape Town. “Coloured” youth have historically embraced, and continue to embrace, American culture. There is empirical evidence that they do so because they feel excluded from the new political dispensation, as they did from the previous one. In a series of street interviews I conducted, Zaynu’s (not his real name) response was typical: “This is not a rainbow nation. The black man is at the top. The white man is at the bottom and the coloureds are nowhere. The ‘whites only’ signs are down, but racism is in everyone’s heart” (21 February 1996, Claremont, Cape Town). Not only do coloured youth embrace American music and culture, but they use their affiliation to disparage kwaito music, a further example of how music and meaning are contested across racial lines.
 - 12 Van Vleck (2002:20) in *Billboard* magazine quotes Bongo Maffin as being one of the first kwaito groups to produce most of its lyrics in English as a conscious effort to break in the world music market.
 - 13 Peterson equates “social banditry” with Stuart Hall’s concept of hustling: “the possibility of modes of survival alternative to the respectable route of hard labour and low wages: above all, that range of informal dealing, semi-legal practices, rackets and small-time crime classically known in all ghetto life as hustling” (Hall *et al.* cited in Peterson 2003:208).
 - 14 Interestingly Yired is owned by HCI holdings whose Chairman is “coloured”, CEO “white” and Executive Director “black”. According to their 2005 annual report, the Department of Trade and Industry have noted that they are an “exemplary” “black” empowerment company.

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