

## **Deterritorialised Blackness: (Re)making coloured identities in South Africa**

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*“When I was a kid in the early eighties, this music [hip-hop] was the first I’d heard that I could relate to. You know, ‘Fuck da Police’, and all that shit, that’s what I was feeling.”  
Shamel X interview<sup>1</sup>*

*“Black is not a question of pigmentation. The Black I’m talking about is a historical category, a political category, a cultural category... Black was created as a political category in a certain historical moment.”<sup>2</sup>*

During the summer of 2003 I took my first pre-dissertation trip to South Africa to develop my dissertation topic on coloured identities in post-apartheid South Africa. Although it is no secret that hip-hop as both a musical genre and a defined lifestyle has gained recognition and popularity around the globe, I was not quite prepared for what I experienced in South Africa. I encountered cars blasting Jay-Z, Sean Paul and P. Diddy among others; people wearing Sean John, Avirex or United States sports team jerseys; and cell phones ringing to the tunes of the latest 50 Cent or R. Kelly songs. I found that as a black person of Caribbean and American descent, I felt a common blackness with the coloured people I interacted with not because of a common African heritage but mainly because of black popular culture and hip-hop culture specifically. This led me to ask: What does it mean to be black in today’s world? Is there a transnational or globalised notion of blackness?

For many African-Americans, discussions of Africa conjure up images of “the motherland”, the origin, the place they imagine when constructing their blackness. Simultaneously, African-American popular and hip-hop culture has become global in nature touching many corners of the world and my preliminary research indicates that it has become one of the lenses used by coloured youth and young adults in South Africa to articulate notions of blackness. Through a focus on hip-hop and popular culture, fashion and hair politics, I argue contemporary racial identities are constructed through an engagement with local racial categories and global popular culture. In this way, the universe of potential racial identities and race in South Africa is no longer situated in one place or space but rather inhabits a deterritorialised shifting cultural space. This article is based on interviews I conducted, data gathered from local television and radio programs, newspapers and Internet resources as part of an on-going dissertation research project in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, South Africa.

### **Deterritorialisation and Blackness**

I have entitled this paper “Deterritorialised Blackness” and will begin by addressing my choice of words. The movement of symbols and meanings—in this case images of blackness—can be seen as part of a current of goods and ideas that moves among populations. Here I draw primarily on the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s use of the term deterritorialisation in his article, “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology.” According to Appadurai, “this term applies not only to obvious examples such as transnational corporations and money markets, but also to ethnic groups, sectarian movements, and political formations, which

increasingly operate in ways that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities.<sup>3</sup> He further states that deterritorialisation thrives on the need of the relocated population for connection with its homeland. However, he stresses that the homeland is partly invented and exists only in the imagination of the deterritorialised groups. The concept of “scape” also captures the processes and relations that are involved as globalised images of blackness move, mutate and are re-created in various spaces around the world. A scape is a way to characterise the flow of global cultural movement that influences and transforms the practices, identities and meanings of local groups who use those spaces. Rather than place cultural flows in a linear relationship between core and periphery, the scape captures the intense interactions that occur as a result of the movement of capital, people, ideas, media and technology. The young coloured people in my study are situated within, and affected by, the flow of global black popular culture yet simultaneously they select various images of blackness and incorporate them, thereby creating distinctly new local spaces and identities. Similarly, anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1987, 1990) describes a world of creolisation, where holistic notions of bounded cultures do not have explanatory power.<sup>4</sup> Instead the boundaries between existing cultural units shift, dissolve and are reconstituted in a world that exhibits high degrees of transnational connectedness.<sup>5</sup> Further, Stuart Hall states, “Because of the process of globalisation the relationship between the national cultural identity and the nation-state is now beginning to disappear.”<sup>6</sup>

Cultural theorist, Paul Gilroy (1993) developed a similar approach to describe the interconnectedness of peoples around the world. However, Gilroy refers specifically to the connectedness of dispersed African populations globally. Gilroy argues that for a century and a half, black intellectuals travelled and worked in a transnational frame that precludes anything but a superficial association with their country of origin. Gilroy states: “The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through [a] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.”<sup>7</sup> Further, central to Gilroy’s argument is the shared experience of slavery among black diasporic communities. In some ways it is this common experience that is at the heart of a transnational black experience. Through an examination of black popular music and specifically the musical mix of soul, reggae and hip-hop of performers like Soul II Soul, Monie Love or Maxi Priest, Gilroy argues that ideas and styles travel, interact, and become transnational. Additionally, making reference to his own experience with music as an adolescent he writes:

When I was a child in London, black music provided me with a means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of blackness were assembled. The Caribbean, Africa, Latin America and above all black America contributed to our lived sense of racial self. The urban context in which these forms were encountered cemented their stylistic appeal and facilitated their solicitation of our identification. They were important also as a source for the discourse of blackness with which we locate our own struggles and experiences.<sup>8</sup>

Hip-hop artists and other young people in my study have asserted similar views regarding the appeal of hip-hop. In the quote at the beginning of the paper, rapper Shamel X states that hip-hop was the first music he heard that he could relate to.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Berni of the all-female hip-hop group Godessa, states that, like the South Bronx in the United States, the Cape Flats are

synonymous with the birth of hip-hop because of the similar urban experiences and feelings of marginalisation.<sup>10</sup>

According to Gilroy, blackness can be understood, not simply as a racial entity, but also as a common experience of racialisation and discrimination throughout the diaspora that unites peoples of African descent who are identified as "black".<sup>11</sup> Though blackness can at times be essentialised as a racial affiliation emanating from primordial African roots, for Gilroy it is not confined to the territory of Africa, because it is also an identity of displacement, the feeling of belongingness to a community that transcends national boundaries, and it is a much less territorialised identity. Similarly, Hall states that black is a historical category, a political category, and a cultural category created as a consequence of certain symbolic and ideological struggles.<sup>12</sup> Thus the global "traffic in blackness" (literally the exchange of consumer goods and images) facilitates this identification across national borders and challenges the primacy of nationally bounded affiliations. Therefore, in this paper, I am interested in examining the methods by which local identities [and political consciousness] are formed within both national and international spaces. Furthermore, I am specifically interested in the ways hip-hop and black popular culture create a flow between the diaspora and South Africa and the ways coloured youth and young adults actively construct identities by mixing and blending hip-hop symbols and global images of blackness with their local cultural influences, thus ultimately creating black identities and plugging into a blackness that bypasses place and space.

Many theorists of cultural globalisation argue that cultural flows move from the North to the South and lead to northern hegemony and local cultural destruction.<sup>13</sup> However, Daniel Miller (1995) argues that cultural globalisation does not necessarily lead to generic Westernisation.<sup>14</sup> Not only are global cultural forms incorporated and shaped by local histories and cultural contexts but in the case of Africa and the Diaspora, as I have discussed above and will further argue throughout this paper, there has been a circulatory ongoing exchange of ideas and cultural forms. For example, according to Sheila Walker (2002), in an effort to reconnect with an ancestral heritage, African-Americans look across the ocean to Africa for roots, identity and inspiration. Although the African-American relationship to Africa is more pan-Africanist in orientation, African-Americans look to the African continent nonetheless to re-establish those symbolic connections.<sup>15</sup>

In the realm of popular culture, the flow between South Africa and the Diaspora stretches back to the 1940s. (Haupt, 2001) For example, David Coplan (1985), Ulf Hannerz (1994), and Rob Nixon (1994) address the influence of global [black] popular culture on blacks in South Africa. Nixon examines the ways that the blossoming of artistic expression in Sophiatown in the 1950s draws on the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Hannerz states, "it seemed that one would leap over white South Africa and involve oneself more directly with what one thought of as interesting, attractive or superior in more distant places."<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Coplan examines the history of the interaction between American and South African jazz musicians during the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>18</sup> The contemporary flow of hip-hop and other aspects of black popular culture between Africa and the Diaspora therefore become part of the long history of this interaction. As will become apparent later in this article, comparisons can be drawn between the use of global popular culture in the 1950s and contemporary uses of hip-hop culture as a way to articulate specific notions of blackness and highlight issues specifically affecting black communities.

Certainly some will argue that hip-hop has taken on a new meaning because young people around the world use it as a vehicle for addressing the oppressive forces they experience. However, according to Tricia Rose, (1994) this should not be equated with a shift in rap's discursive or stylistic focus away from black pleasure or black fans.<sup>19</sup> Rose states, "Rap's black cultural address and its focus on marginal identities may appear to be in opposition to its cross over appeal for people from different racial or ethnic groups and social positions."<sup>20</sup> It is true that rap music, like many black cultural forms before it, resonates for people of vast and diverse backgrounds, however Rose asserts, "To suggest that rap is a black idiom that prioritizes black culture and articulates the problems of black urban life does not deny the pleasure and participation of others."<sup>21</sup> She further states, "The drawing power of rap is precisely its musical and narrative commitment to black youth and cultural resistance, and nothing in rap's commercial position and cross cultural appeal contradicts this fact."<sup>22</sup>

### **The making of the coloured**

The ambiguous place of those once classified as coloured in contemporary South Africa is the result of the complex racial history of the country. Coloured identity is a complex, historically located identity that stems from the process of slavery, genocide, rape and perceived miscegenation.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, all formerly colonised countries have produced a racially heterogeneous creolised population but because of the hardening of this category through the racial classifications of apartheid, coloureds in South Africa are unique in many respects. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company, under the command of Jan Van Riebeeck, went to the Cape in South Africa with the intent of establishing a refreshment station to supply their ships en route to and from the East.<sup>24</sup> Although they did not favour the establishment of settler communities in the Cape, the company allowed some of its employees to set up as independent farmers in order to serve the needs of the refreshment station. Encouraged by the success of these initial farmers and because the indigenous people were reluctant to part with their cattle, the company granted free passages from 1685 to 1707 to Hollanders wishing to settle at the Cape. From very early in the colonisation of the Cape, slavery became an important source of labour supply. Company authorities decided to import slave labor from the East Coast of Africa, Madagascar, the Indonesian Archipelago, Bengal, South India and Sri Lanka.<sup>25</sup> Pickel (1997) defines coloured origins by stating, "With the arrival of the first white settlers an ongoing process of absorption and miscegenation between European colonists, the indigenous Khoikhoi peoples of the Cape, slaves, and the so-called Bantu-speaking people gradually created a heterogeneous group of mixed people later to be called coloured."<sup>26</sup> Since the early days of the Cape, the white population has seen coloureds as not quite white enough. At the same time, due mainly to their comparatively privileged position under apartheid, the coloured population found itself disliked and distrusted by the black population.<sup>27</sup> In South Africa where skin color was the determining factor for social position and life chances, where whites and blacks had clearly defined positions, the coloured came to occupy a place between the two.

Under the Population Registration Act of 1950, the apartheid state officially constructed and enforced four classifications of South Africans: black, coloured, Indian and white. The imposed coloured category had a great impact on the socialisation and identity formation of the members of this group. Additionally, apartheid policies such as the Group Areas Act allowed for the physical segregation of different racial groups. Under this act urban and rural space in South

Africa was carved up into racially exclusive enclaves that were to be inhabited by the populations racially designated by the apartheid state. At least two million people across South Africa were forcibly removed from their existing residences as urban and rural spaces were racially separated and ‘cleansed’.<sup>28</sup> Further, the very conditions that led to the formation of the coloured population were made illegal in apartheid South Africa by the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950). These processes served to shape and reinforce a coloured racialised identity as one separate from whites, blacks and Indians for a diverse population with a multiplicity of identities.

Even with the dismantling of apartheid, coloured identity remains ambiguous and problematic. This was clearly illustrated during the 1994 and 1999 elections when an overwhelming number of individuals, identified as coloured in the Western Cape, voted for the Nationalist Party (NP), the party that instilled apartheid. For many, it was strange that just at the moment when coloured identity should have waned; there was a reassertion and reclaiming of coloured identities. The “coloured vote” led to a great deal of scholarly attention for those formerly identified as coloured as outside observers, academics, activists and intellectuals sought to understand what happened to the historic alliances that linked coloureds to Indians, blacks and progressive whites during the anti-apartheid movement.<sup>29</sup> According to some scholars the “coloured vote” was instrumental in highlighting the fears of the coloured community in the Western Cape, however other scholars believed that the vote finally forced a discussion and examination of the group’s identity.<sup>30</sup> Coloured identities in South Africa have been inscribed with a great deal of conflict and discomfort primarily because this identity is intrinsically linked with the historical and political development of South Africa. The origins of the coloured community can be traced to the colonial era while the institutionalisation of the category is indicative of the apartheid government’s subsequent policies of racialisation.

The end of apartheid has in many ways destabilised the identities of all South Africans and has led to discussions of how all formerly apartheid prescribed identities need to operate in post-apartheid society. However, the nature and continued assertion of coloured identity continues to be heavily debated in post-apartheid South Africa. In general, many within the coloured community are finding new and innovative ways of articulating colouredness in the new space they find themselves in. Some sectors have decided that it is most effective to reach back to history by identifying with a slave past and others have sought out and reinvented Khoisan roots as a way of renegotiating coloured identity. Still other sectors identify more closely with rainbow nationalism and notions of an inclusive South Africa. In contemporary post-apartheid South Africa people are choosing to identify as bruin or bruin-ous<sup>31</sup>, browns, coloured, Khoisan, mixed-raced, or multicultural. Others state they will never again acknowledge or be called by a name imposed upon them and still others have chosen to identify as black. Regardless of how those formerly classified as coloured are choosing to identify, what is clear is that coloured identity remains tenuous and, for the first time in South Africa a new generation of coloured individuals have come of age whose past, present and future are neither completely defined by the social and physical ordering of apartheid nor completely free of it.

### **Urban marginalisation: making coloureds black**

Abdou Maliqalim Simone (1999) states that by the mere act of being born, coloureds were denied fundamental access to the [black] African world.<sup>32</sup> That is, because coloured people did

not speak an indigenous African language as their mother tongue, they have failed to be recognised as black African.<sup>33</sup> Yet, they were certainly too “black” to be white. Simone states that even though coloureds certainly were not striving to become black in the South African sense, during the 1980s politicised youth began to invoke the term “so-called” coloured or even black. He states that this was the by-product of the black consciousness movement, whose theoretical formulations were largely imported from the Diaspora—where the common blackness of light and dark-skinned people was viewed as a historical achievement. However, Simone emphasises that this move to identify as black or to invoke the “so-called” was not so much a vehicle of identification with black South Africans but rather was a mechanism of undoing the absence of an identity or filling a void.<sup>34</sup> This void was particularly strong for the generations of coloureds who because of the Group Areas legislation were forcibly removed from their homes, particularly from areas like District Six.

The Group Areas Act and the subsequent removals of coloured families to the Cape Flats were instrumental in the transformation of working-class communities.<sup>35</sup> Before group removals, a supportive network of extended families and neighbours held working-class culture together. This ‘extended kinship network’ created cultural continuity and stability.<sup>36</sup> The Group Areas removals had the effect of breaking this web of mutual support and solidarity as families were removed to various nuclear family units scattered across the Cape Flats. A generation of young people grew up in “fabricated” neighbourhoods with little history, few institutions and without the cultural practices, social networks and urban inventiveness that had characterised everyday life for their parents.<sup>37</sup> This particular generation of coloured youth therefore, grew up in townships that were very similar to the urban “ghettos” of the 1970s in the United States. It was under the new circumstances of the Cape Flats that the conditions became ripe for coloured youth to begin looking to black America for ways to articulate their experiences of marginalisation in South Africa; because they experienced many of the same hardships that led to the emergence of hip-hop in New York’s black and Latino neighbourhoods.

This view is echoed by Jane Battersby (2003) who argues that “South African hip-hop as a genre is a form of social text and as such offers opportunities for new identities for the South African coloured community.”<sup>38</sup> She also posits, “that hip-hop can be seen as an expression of a particular facet of [African-American] blackness, one that is rooted in a radical urban identity relating to ghetto life.”<sup>39</sup> She also states, “the overtly political messages of early U.S. hip-hop and the links with the U.S. Black Power Movement struck a cord with many highly politicised coloured youths in the early 1980s. At this time the youth dissatisfied with apartheid education, were taking to the streets for their education. During apartheid, coloured youth from the Cape Flats used hip-hop to work through the tensions of being racially marginalised. It was also a way for these young people to identify with black people around the globe based on a common oppression and struggle against racism. This view is consistent with Stuart Hall’s argument that:

In that very [symbolic and ideological] struggle is a change of consciousness, a change of self-recognition, a new process of identification, the emergence into visibility of a new subject. A subject that is always there, but emerging, historically.<sup>40</sup>

Adam Haupt (2001) examines the ways that the rap groups, Prophets of da City (POC) and Brasse Vannie Kaap (BVK) employ *Gamtaal*<sup>41</sup> in order to problematise hegemonic

representations of black subjects.<sup>42</sup> Haupt states, “It appears that the group’s use of an African-American art form, rap music, conforms with black artists’ reliance on African-American or Caribbean material in their attempt to construct Black Nationalist narratives that rely on the notion of a global black experience of oppression and resistance.”<sup>43</sup> Although the members of POC and BVK consciously rely on a music style from the African Diaspora, this global music form is mixed with the local influences of Jazz and other African sounds. Therefore, my focus on the influence of the global does not discount the impact of local influences. In fact it is important to note that hip-hop is continually reworked and moulded to fit a distinctly local South African racial and class context through the use of Afrikaans and local English idioms and by commenting on local South African situations. For example, both POC and BVK were involved in voter registration drives. POC in particular was actively involved in the voter education program, *Rapping for Democracy*, and they went to great lengths to persuade Cape Town’s largely coloured electorate *not* to vote for the Nationalist Party.<sup>44</sup> In the song entitled “Dallah Flet 2” they state: (translated in Haupt)

Don’t let FW (De Klerk) puzzle you  
 He’s a smooth talker  
 He still thinks of you as a kaffir (Nigger) and hotnot (hottentot)  
 They sponsor township violence and give licenses to shabeens  
 Because they know that wine fucks up your brain  
 And then you get involved in shit and then you get blamed  
 The whole thing is planned because you’re going to jail  
 And you’re gonna get hanged.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the use of U.S. hip-hop by groups such as POC and BVK, as well as by other coloured youth during the 1980s and 1990s for ways of creating an oppositional voice to their lived experiences, one cannot conclude that all youth from the late 1990s onward look to hip-hop to express an explicit black nationalism. Rather, my research suggests that although there are some who continue to assert the black consciousness perspective, a new generation of young coloured South Africans use black popular culture as a means of actively engaging with, reworking and creating identities that do not necessarily conform to South African notions of race. Additionally, a new generation of musical artists are using hip-hop to speak specifically to issues affecting working class coloured communities, the perceived marginal experience of coloureds in post-apartheid South Africa, and as a way to work through issues of coloured identity in contemporary South Africa. The fall of apartheid and the new moment of globalisation with faster flows of information that emerged during the 1990s have given coloured youth and young adults additional access to varied global images and potential identities. Yet, coloured young people do not accept all popular culture wholesale. They continue to filter their choices through local realities while drawing on global black popular culture. Hip-hop culture and African-American athletes and actors continue to hold a prominent place for constructing identities.<sup>46</sup>

Coloured identity continues to be contested in post-apartheid South Africa and new generations of coloured young people continue to use hip-hop as a vehicle for engaging critically with colouredness and as a way of actively creating black identities. There are many young people who reject the term ‘coloured’ while others, particularly of the working classes, continue to adhere to a racialised conception of colouredness as a means of identification.<sup>47</sup> Yet through their engagement

with hip-hop, coloured young people are attempting to problematise and reinvent coloured identity as well as link into a global notion of blackness based on common understandings of dislocation, displacement, rootlessness, marginalisation and racial oppression. For example, in a song entitled, “I Remember Way Back”, the group Godessa, which released their first album in 2004 state:

But let me move on to the days  
 When self-development began  
 It was strange to my fam[ily]  
 How I changed all my plans  
 And from the onset  
 Knowledge of self was the concept  
 I never thought of myself as being a born black  
 Till the contact with hip hop  
 Led to even more facts<sup>48</sup>

By identifying with the situation of black people globally, hip-hop artists bypass local South African understandings of blackness and are able to move past perceptions of being half-victims to authentic marginals.<sup>49</sup> In an interview with four young men, in response to a question about why coloured young people have been so drawn to hip-hop, Chris, a young man from Mitchell’s Plain responded, “We’re like African-Americans, we can relate to them best because we don’t always know where we’re from and like the African-Americans we live in Ghetto’s. We’re like the same only we live in Cape Town.”<sup>50</sup>

As the young people engage with global black popular culture generally and hip-hop specifically they are able to plug into the global black experience. Yet simultaneously they continue to use hip-hop to speak specifically to local issues of identity in post-apartheid South Africa. In a track entitled, “You Never Know,” the Durban-based hip-hop artist Big Idea grapples with the issue of coloured identity when he states:

The gods must have been crazy when they made me  
 Misplaced people  
 But they call me a bushie  
 That’s an irony  
 Coz bushie’s are the origies [Original] inhabitants of the Kalahari  
 I’m with my band touring the country  
 It doesn’t mean I’m on Safari  
 I’m a brown African my cuzzie  
 This is my gully,  
 Don’t worry, I’m certain of my identity  
 Cultural complexity  
 Means your black and white visions  
 Keep on vexing me  
 I’m proof there’s an in between<sup>51</sup>

### The global traffic in Blackness

It is now commonly understood that individuals construct cultural identities with the tools of cultural production made available to them. Through an examination of how young black men in Columbia use rap music to create a cultural identity, Peter Wade (2002) argues that individuals are constantly involved with producing representations of their cultural identities and that this production is both material and symbolic.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Nadine Dolby (2001) argues that local and global contexts and tastes based on global popular culture emanating from the United States and Europe shape the ways young people in South Africa create identities. In this article based on a one-year ethnographic study at a high school in Durban, South Africa, Dolby argues that, because of the effects globalisation and the expanding influence of global popular culture, youth identities no longer belong to one place or location; instead they are influenced by a plurality of languages and cultures.<sup>53</sup> She further concludes that global popular culture is a key site for identity formation as students spent a great amount of energy both in and out of school consuming the global popular. She states that notebooks were plastered with pictures of musical groups and movie stars while the latest dance craze dominated lunchtime conversation.<sup>54</sup> She also argues “that students desire to model their lives not on Nelson Mandela but on the lives of the then most popular American celebrities-Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey or the cast of New York Undercover.”<sup>55</sup> Dolby therefore argues, “The global commodity, explained and policed through a discourse of taste, becomes the fulcrum for constructing one’s own racial identity, connecting self to others who are of a similar race.”<sup>56</sup>

Dolby highlights an important point by noting that youth are not the passive receptors for an undifferentiated onslaught of corporate generated popular culture, but instead they carefully select, mould and combine specific commodities and other aspects of popular culture to create identities that are both racialised and contextualised within particular circumstances. Based on my research, I would take this a step further by arguing that coloured youth and young adults in particular engage in the consumption of *black* popular culture and not simply global popular culture. This has been illustrated by the history of identifying with hip hop artists from KRS-ONE to Tupac Shakur, and other West Coast rappers and the consumption of contemporary African-Diasporic artists such as Ludacris, Jay-Z, Sean Paul or Nas. Throughout the past three years, I have spent a great deal of time listening to local South African radio stations primarily targeted for black and coloured audiences and most music played has been a mix of mostly popular R & B and rap music from the United States and local South African music. For example, U.S. based R&B and rap artists dominate the weekly list of the top singles played on MetroFM, Good HopeFM and P4 radio. Further, the entertainment news sections on air and on the websites usually cover the latest news on American rappers and R&B singers, African-American movie stars and other African Diasporic celebrities. The daily give-aways usually include CDs and posters by American R&B and rap artists or other African Diasporic artists including reggae and reggaeton<sup>57</sup> musicians. Additionally, while in Johannesburg I visited the MetroFM radio station and was able to observe one of the radio programs and interview the host and producer. After the interview the producer pulled me aside and stated, “If you ask me I think there’s more America in South Africa than Africa in America.” She then amended her statement by stating, “You know, I mean black America, right?”<sup>58</sup>

During 2004, I observed a weekly hip-hop show entitled “New York live crossover with Thabo” that is produced in New York but airs live in South Africa. The show is co-hosted by a young

South African man in New York and DJ Zak in South Africa. *New York Live* aims to give South Africans the most up-to-the-minute news on the U.S. hip-hop scene by addressing music, music videos, movies and the latest celebrity entertainment news. Throughout the hour-long show, there is great emphasis placed on the fact that they are “coming straight out of NYC.” Both hosts also stress that listeners are getting the “hottest info” because “they’re bringing it live straight across the Atlantic.” Throughout the hour-long show, Thabo made many references to the New York City weather outside or what he observed on the way to the studio, again adding emphasis and perhaps an added level of authenticity to the fact that he was in New York. After observing the show for several weeks, I was reminded that hip-hop culture also encompasses discourse about rap music and there is also an emphasis on language and word choice. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) uses the notion of distinction to highlight how individuals and groups use various symbolic markers to set themselves apart. It is common knowledge that slang is a key identity marker for youth in general and rap music in particular. The use of slang creates a sense of identity and a common culture with which young people in South Africa and the United States can relate and identify.

Hip-hop culture does not solely include rap music, but also includes a particular generation of R&B singers as well as the way people dress, style their hair and use language. Therefore in order to plug into this particular way of life, as Peter Wade argues, individuals must continually engage in representing this through the use of particular symbols. This means that individual’s consumption of very specific brands of clothing and particular forms of dress become key. I attended a braai<sup>59</sup> at the home of Swift and Tanya, a 27-year-old couple in Cape Town, where I had the opportunity to observe and interview the ten adults present. Hip-hop and R&B by U.S. artists was the only music played during the night and a few of the other men present were impressed by Swift’s CD collection. Conversations about new cell phones, sneakers and other clothing dominated most casual conversation. I was asked the prices of several items of clothing in the U.S. and also asked if I would be willing to purchase particular items and send them back to South Africa once I returned home. Some of the items included Yankee Starter jackets, basketball jerseys and caps and the latest Timberland boots. This situation repeated itself several times throughout my time in Cape Town and Johannesburg as individuals continually asked me the prices and to purchase items from abroad. The interest of these young people in the brands and clothing styles most affiliated with black popular culture emphasizes that clothing can take on very specific and charged race and class connotations.

Hair can be another symbolic method of expressing blackness. According to Kabena Mercer (1994) hair, which is as visible as skin color and also the most tangible sign of racial difference, takes on a forcefully symbolic dimension. Further, Zimitri Erasmus states, “dreadlocks until recently was specifically a black style and an article in the April 1999 edition of *Marie-Claire* refers to dreadlocks as a natural and African “hair-type” as opposed to hair style.<sup>60</sup> However, Mercer links the origins of this hairstyle to the Rastafari movement in Jamaica and states that, “they [dreadlocks] are specifically Diasporean and they do not signify Africanness but rather blackness.”<sup>61</sup> Erasmus states, “In South Africa today, this style has come to represent African-ness.”<sup>62</sup> Erasmus posits:

The increasing popularity of dreadlocks in post-1994 SA can be understood as a process signifying a re-making and revalorisation of Africanness through the borrowing and

localisation of Africentric black American images and ideas. This 'turn to dreadlocks' can be seen as post-1994, post-liberation cultural formations. These transnational cultural borrowings and recreations suggest local uses of and for the global.<sup>63</sup>

Further, Teresa, a young woman who grew up in Hanover Park states, "If you look around Cape Town today, you'll notice that it's now in for coloured women to wear their hair natural or in dreads so that they can show they're black too."<sup>64</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is widely understood that there has been a long history of cultural and political interaction between Africa and the Diaspora. In this paper I have argued that hip-hop and black popular culture have assisted in creating a blackness that is less territorialised because it transcends geographical and national boundaries. Through the global traffic in blackness including the exchange of ideas and goods that travel between Africa and the Diaspora, contemporary identity among coloured young people in South Africa becomes a continual and complex interaction between local experiences of identity construction and global black popular culture. It is ironic that the coloured population are not black in the South African sense, yet by looking to a blackness based on urban marginalisation and the struggle against racism originating in the United States, coloured youth and young adults are able to articulate a blackness that links up with global understandings of blackness based on oppression and discrimination. This examination of contemporary coloured identities in South Africa points to the way black popular culture facilitates the articulation of broad racial categories and political affiliations that transcend racial categories. Research in this area is important not simply because it illustrates that local identities and political consciousness are formed within both national and transnational spaces, but because it also points to the fact that hip-hop culture can be a potential site in the organising and struggle against oppression.

- <sup>1</sup> Shamel X is currently a producer and DJ in Cape Town. He is also a member of the rap group Prophets of the City. Battersby, J. "Sometimes I Feel Like I'm Not Black Enough: Recast(e)ing Coloured through South African Hip hop as a Post Colonial Text. In Wasserman, H. and Jacobs, S. (Ed) *Shifting Selves: Post-apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Identity*. P. 116
- <sup>2</sup> S. Hall. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities" In Anthony King (Ed) *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Respresentation of Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1998 p. 53-54
- <sup>3</sup> A. Appadurai. *Global Ethnoscapes in Modernity at Large: cultural dimensions of Globalization*. MN: University of Minnesota Press 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> See U. Hannerz. *The World in Creolization*. Africa 1987 57(4) p. 546-558
- <sup>5</sup> L. Back. *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*. London: University College London Press 1996. "Inglan, Nice up!": Black Music, Autonomy and the Cultural Intermezzo."
- <sup>6</sup> S. Hall. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities" In Anthony King (Ed) *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Respresentation of Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> P. Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso. 1993 p. 19
- <sup>8</sup> P. Gilroy. p. 109
- <sup>9</sup> Shamel X is currently a producer and DJ in Cape Town. He is also a member of the rap group Prophets of the City. Battersby, J. "Sometimes I Feel Like I'm Not Black Enough: Recast(e)ing Coloured through South African Hip hop as a Post Colonial Text. In Wasserman, H. and Jacobs, S. (Ed) *Shifting Selves: Post-apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Identity*. P. 116
- <sup>10</sup> see interview on [www.urbansmarts.com](http://www.urbansmarts.com) dated 7/8/04
- <sup>11</sup> See P. Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. London: Verso 1993
- <sup>12</sup> See S. Hall. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities" In Anthony King (Ed) *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Respresentation of Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1998.
- <sup>13</sup> E. Salo. *Negotiating Gender and Personhood in the New South Africa: Adolescent women and gangsters in Manenberg township on the Cape Flats*. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2003 Vol 6(3) p. 345-365
- <sup>14</sup> D. Miller. (Ed) 1995 Introduction: Anthropology, Modernity and Consumption, in *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the prism of the Local*. London: Routledge. Miller, D. (Ed) 1995 Introduction: Anthropology, Modernity and Consumption, in *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the prism of the Local*. London: Routledge. p. 5
- <sup>15</sup> S. Walker. *Africanity vs Blackness: Race, Class and Culture in Brazil*. North American Congress on Latin America. 2002 Vol. 35, No.6
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- <sup>18</sup> N. Dolby. *Constructing Race: Youth, Identity and Popular Culture in South Africa*. New York: State University of New York Press 2001
- <sup>19</sup> T. Rose. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Culture in Contemporary America*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press 1994. p. 5
- <sup>20</sup> T. Rose. p. 17
- <sup>21</sup> T. Rose. p. 5
- <sup>22</sup> T. Rose. p. 5
- <sup>23</sup> C. Hendricks. *Urgent Need for Dialogue in the Western Cape: More to our Tensions Than Identity*. Cape Times, February 2, 2006. p. 11
- <sup>24</sup> R. Du Pre. *Separate but Unequal: The Coloured People of South Africa – A Political History*. Johnathan Ball: Johannesburg, South Africa. 1994 P 11
- <sup>25</sup> T. Keegan. *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order*. (Cape Town: David Philip 1996) p 15-22
- <sup>26</sup> B. Pickel. *Coloured Ethnicity and Identity: A Case Study in the Former Coloured Areas of the Western Cape South Africa*. *Demokratie und Entwicklung Series No. 28*. Hamburg: Lit, 1997.
- <sup>27</sup> See J. Battersby. "Sometimes I Feel Like I'm Not Black Enough: Recast(e)ing Coloured through South African Hip hop as a Post Colonial Text. In Wasserman, H. and Jacobs, S. (Ed) *Shifting Selves: Post-apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Identity*.

- <sup>28</sup> See E. Salo. Negotiating Gender and Personhood in the New South Africa: Adolescent women and gangsters in Manenberg township on the Cape Flats. In *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2003 Vol 6(3) p. 345-365
- <sup>29</sup> Zimitri Erasmus *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town*. Cape Town: Kwela Books 2003; Farred, Grant. *Better the Devil You Know? The Politics of Colouredness and Post-Apartheid South African Elections in the Western Cape*. *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 2000 2(2 Spring) :50-64 and Rasool, Ebrahim *Unveiling the Heart of Fear*. In James, W et al ed. *Now That We Are Free: Coloured Communities in a Democratic South Africa*. IDASA: Rondenbosch Institute for Democracy in South Africa 1996.
- <sup>30</sup> See Rasool, 1996, Farred, 2000
- <sup>31</sup> Afrikaans term meaning brown man aaz
- <sup>32</sup> A. Simone,. 1993 In *The Mix: Retaking Coloured Identities*. Foundation for contemporary research
- <sup>33</sup> A. Simone, 1993
- <sup>34</sup> A. Simone, 1993
- <sup>35</sup> See Pinnock 1982
- <sup>36</sup> See Pinnock 1982
- <sup>37</sup> See Simone 1999
- <sup>38</sup> J. Battersby. p. 109
- <sup>39</sup> J. Battersby. p. 109
- <sup>40</sup> S. Hall. p. 54
- <sup>41</sup> A Cape Flats dialect of Afrikaans which has stereotypically been associated with working class coloured people.
- <sup>42</sup> POC and BVK were two of the first rap groups to emerge in South Africa during the early 1980s.
- <sup>43</sup> A. Haupt. 2001 "Black Thing: Hip hop nationalism race and gender in Prophets of da City and Brasse Vannie Kaap" In *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place* edited by Zimitri Erasmus, South Africa:Kwela Books.
- <sup>44</sup> A. Haupt. p. 179
- <sup>45</sup> A. Haupt. p. 190
- <sup>46</sup> See N. Dolby.
- <sup>47</sup> M. Adhikari. *Not Black Enough, Not White Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community*. (Center for International Studies Ohio Press: Athens 2005)
- <sup>48</sup> Godessa, Spillage, 2004
- <sup>49</sup> See A. Simone, 1996
- <sup>50</sup> Interview conducted December 15, 2005. The names of all interviewed have been changed throughout this paper.
- <sup>51</sup> Bruin-ou.com Compilation CD, 2006
- <sup>52</sup> P. Wade. *Music and the Formation of Black Identity in Columbia*. NACLA: Report on the Americas 2002 35(6May/June) 21-27
- <sup>53</sup> N. Dolby. p. 11
- <sup>54</sup> N. Dolby. p. 11
- <sup>55</sup> N. Dolby. p. 11-12
- <sup>56</sup> N. Dolby. p. 11
- <sup>57</sup> Reggaeton is Spanish reggae. p. 176
- <sup>58</sup> Interview conducted on August 23, 2003.
- <sup>59</sup> Afrikaans word for barbeque
- <sup>60</sup> See Z. Erasmus. *Hair Politics*. In Nuttull, S and Michael, C (eds) *Senses of Culture: South African Cultural Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000 p 380-392
- <sup>61</sup> K. Mercer. 'Black Hair/Style Politics' in Mercer, K. *Welcom to the Jungle*. London:Routledge. 1994 p. 108
- <sup>62</sup> See Z. Erasmus, 2000
- <sup>63</sup> Z. Erasmus, 2000
- <sup>64</sup> Interview conducted January 23, 2006.