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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Hip-Hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers.**

Msia Kibona Clark. 2018. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Bibliography, index, 25 photographs, 266pp.

Any researcher of the hip-hop generation working in urban Africa cannot but observe how hip-hop has reinvented itself in a number of fields such as music, politics and popular history and how it animates young people even in rural districts.<sup>1</sup> African rap music is enjoyed by fans globally and is recognised in the emergent field of global hip-hop studies. Clark's book is an ambitious attempt to make a contribution to global hip-hop studies through a study of African hip-hop.

Much in hip-hop studies has changed since the appearance of *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-hop Outside the USA*, where only one source about hip-hop studies in the African continent was cited (Mitchell 2001). Following the great research anthology, *Hip-hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World* (Charry 2012), Clark's book is a second attempt concerned with hip-hop in Africa. More has been published on sub-regions (cf. Ntawarangwi 2009) or single countries of the continent (cf. Williams et al. 2019). Books about hip-hop in transcontinental linguistic areas such as the Lusophone world are also being published, and they have addressed hip-hop in former African colonies of Portugal as well as hip-hoppers among African descendants in Brazil and Portugal (Rosana and Carnevacci 2018; Siteo and Guerra 2019). Clark's book contributes to this research by presenting artists mainly from former British colonies, both at "home" and those studying and living in the USA.

Clark's monograph has a certain advantage when compared to Charry's edited anthology. While many of the anthology's twelve contributions were excellent case studies, it lacked a shared understanding of what hip-hop is. While Charry's book addressed local genres which had little or nothing to do with global hip-hop culture, as in including styles such as hiplife, bongo flava or djembe jams, Clark presents more a coherent concept of hip-hop as culture and as music genre, based on what she calls rhyme schemes and hip-hop flow, which are needed to fulfil expectations of "keepin' it real" (18-25). These generic patterns, however, are used for a selection of the artists discussed in the book, and their meanings and nuances are not further examined. For instance, while briefly mentioning the increase in local African elements in instrumentals used by many emcees who return from the USA, and in their language choices (171-173), musical aspects receive little attention. Hip-

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jeff Chang (2005: 2), the hip-hop generation started after DJ Cool Herc and Africa Bambaata and it includes anyone who is "down."

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hop producers and broadcasters are not presented at all. The author's focus is, and legitimately, not in music, but I would have liked to hear more about the aesthetics of hip-hop production, sampling, and timbre and sonic aspects, which certainly are an essential part of an artist's message. Without acknowledging music hip-hop studies risk becoming more like an affected branch of social movement studies.

As one of the art's founding fathers, Grandmaster Flash, stated, hip-hop indeed has a greater number of elements than its famous four and the so called fifth element, or rather, "Knowledge of Self", which is usually related to the social location of oneself, as in understanding where you are "coming from." Of those elements the author focuses on rapping and particularly the lyrical content of songs related to social issues such as gender, migration and politics without ignoring traditional issues of race, space and authenticity. Other elements such as graffiti, breakdance and dj'ing are addressed briefly (53-59). Some notes and images about Africa's unique hip-hop fashion, where African cloth is often a visible element, are offered as well. Indeed, it might be fair to say that the author recognises classical elements but focuses on hip-hop's fifth element through rap lyrics, emcees' public interventions and interviews.

The emphasis on the textuality of song lyrics and interviews with artists might be justified by the fact that the author locates her study in African studies and culture studies. She examines her material through a theory of cultural representation as proposed by Stuart Hall (37-39). Thus rap songs are analysed as cultural representations and reflections of emcees' lives and what they simultaneously might want to change through these representations. The author is aware of the vast cultural and linguistic diversity of the African continent. She amplifies critiques against harmful stereotypes about Africa as expressed by many artists in the book. For instance, in his media interventions as well as in his songs, K'Naan (Somalia/Canada) has challenged Western media representations about Africa as a continent of disease, poverty, war, corruption and famine and instead, offered a more positive representation of his homeland, Somalia, as a land of poetry. This is not a minor point because African emcees are often artists who read widely, move between social classes and across borders, and produce eloquent expressions of their art.

As a scholar with a background in anthropology, and specialising in hip-hop in Mozambique, I think that Clark's is possibly too ambitious for one author. I thought it would be more productive to examine only one of the subregions, for instance, southern African or central African hip-hop where all the artists would at least come from more similar geo-cultural areas with a shared history. To a certain extent she manages to compensate the understandable limitation of one's own expertise with readings of hip-hop studies in African countries where many previous studies

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have been conducted, particularly Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania. But these are countries where her own expertise is the strongest and best insights are offered on artists from Swahili speaking Africa and former British colonies. According to the author, migrating artists contribute with their particular experiences to a growing body of literature on migration, transnationalism and Pan-Africanism, aside from other types of accounts in academic research or Afropolitan novels such as Chimamanda Adichie's "Americanah."

Another major contribution of her book is that she makes often marginalised female emcees more visible and audible, from the book's cover (Kanyi Mavi, Cape Town) to its very last pages (Flockin Stone, Ghana) (214-215), and particularly in the fourth chapter entitled, *Femme d'Combat* (118-147). As the author states, rarely do women decide to become emcees and even more rarely do they manage to establish a career (145). This is a pity for hip-hop culture and makes the claim that it represents "the people" highly problematic. As she herself avers, "If hip-hop is to convey the story of a people without women, part of that story is missing." The author shows in a fascinating way how female emcees bring important topics and perspectives to hip-hop. This may be observed, for instance, in women's particular problems and a feminist critique against patriarchy, including the questioning of many male emcees' misogynistic lyrics. South African group, Godessa, in their song called "Social Ills", for instance, addresses black women's hair and they challenge Eurocentric ideals of beauty, which are still dominant in the so-called "rainbow nation." Dope Saint Jude raps in Cape Town's queer slang and challenges heteronormativity with her choice of language (120-130). Besides, males are not going to work it out alone: expressing agency in female sexuality and presenting a more multidimensional image of women are much more probable by female than male artists.

In contrast to migrant emcees and female emcees, who the author represents with great passion and insight, many of her generalisations and notes beyond Anglophone Africa remain sporadic or out of context. That makes many of her conclusions, which might be valid in countries she is focused on, sound insufficiently sustained when generalised to refer to an entire continent. For instance, the claim that hip-hop moved from protest music to combat music has occurred in fewer than a dozen African countries, which is seemingly selected only for her own sample (116). Besides, although different in style, it does not sound probable that all over Africa the youth would see much less expressions of female sexuality in the media than their counterparts in the USA (135). For instance, in Mozambique, or Angola, from traditional and neo-traditional dances to Atlanta dominated mainstream rap, female sexuality is very much present in the contemporary mainstream and social media. The author's insights on cultural appropriation/misappropriation are

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thoughtful and in line with postcolonial theory and they are surely a step forward, but many of her reflections on language choice have little validity outside former British colonies where African American vernacular English (ebonics) is surely not a dominant language (*cf.* Guissemo 2018).

Many observations provoke interesting questions. For example, the distinction between “hip-hop beat” or “African beat”, which the author makes, is not very clear. She vaguely observes that “hip-hop beats are often dominated by a heavy bass, music samples, and repetitive break beats” and adds that “many African artists rely on either hip-hop or African beats, which can share similar drum patterns” (18-19). Later, she observes that in Senegal, mbalax beats, as an example of the above mentioned “African beats”, are used particularly by many socially conscious emcees (Appert 2016: 27). At least, in Mozambique, according to my own experience, it would be impossible to adopt her observation for two reasons: firstly, hip-hop is both global and local, and its sonicity has always been in constant evolution both globally as well as in its numerous locations. Hip-hop producer, Djano from Beira, for instance, sampled conga drums as well as flutes for his hip-hop instrumentals, which were originally inspired by Wu Tang Clan’s instrumentals. While other methods for composing instrumentals are used, other Mozambican producers have, faithful to the hip-hop tradition, sampled African or USA jazz saxophones, local genres, Bach, local instruments such as the mbira or timbila, Arabic pop, Gregorian vocals, dead people’s discourses as well as progressive rock, horror movie soundtracks and gospel. Hence, the hip-hop beat and the African beat cannot be mutually exclusive categories.

Despite my criticism, I recommend this book for everyone who is interested in hip-hop, black expression and contemporary social realities on the African continent. It also offers a wonderful play list particularly of Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda and indicates a useful way for hip-hop scholars such as myself to proactively promote female artists, too often marginalised by the industry as well as in hip-hop scholarship. This book offers one version of history and the present state of the hip-hop generation on the African continent.

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