

BOOK REVIEW

Hip-hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers by Msia Kibona Clark, Ohio University Press, 2018, xi -266 pp., \$23.96, ISBN 9780896803183 (paperback)

Allow me to begin my review of Msia Kibona Clark's impressive Pan-African survey of hip-hop making, "Hip hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers," by highlighting the often neglected book cover. The cover, designed by Beth Pratt, features an image of Xhosa-speaking hip-hop artist from South Africa, Kanyi Mavi. Her image, captured by Clark in Cape Town, foregrounds Clark's centering of African women cultural producers and their experiences (see chapter four). For instance, in Kanyi's song "Ingoma," she addresses men's violence against women, specifically emphasizing the consequences of staying in abusive relationships. Indeed, women in African hip-hop often reveal and highlight the contradictions of male dominated narratives produced and circulated in many hip-hop communities. Clark shows how women emcees use braggadocio as a way to reclaim space and demand to be heard. Their voices introduce African feminist perspectives on sexuality, African womanhood, and offer a glimpse into a world in which women thrive. In this way, these emcees embody the possibilities that hip-hop affords marginalized and underrepresented experiences.

The book consists of six chapters titled after songs, a foreword by Quentin Williams and afterword by Akosua Adomako Ampofo. Interspersed within the pages of text are portraits, also shot by Clark, of the artists featured in the book. One welcomes scholarly work on visually rich practices of representation that are not simply reduced to the written word. Indeed, the reader will also appreciate Clark's attention to African hip-hop's influence on fashion and the understudied African graffiti communities. Theoretically drawing on cultural studies, Clark observes that hip-hop as a cultural representation helps us understand how meaning making practices shape and inform our understanding of society. Specifically, her study focuses on the narratives African hip-hop constructs on social transformation, political institutions, migration, gender and identity. Methodologically, she draws on interviews, participant observations and textual analysis to examine various hip-hop communities in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Senegal, Ghana, Angola and Uganda. Overall, Clark persuasively demonstrates how hip-hop has become an important vehicle for what Gibson-Graham calls the politics of possibility¹, the ability to not only

¹ See "A Postcapitalist Politics" Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006)

contest the existing hegemonic neoliberal social order but to imagine a better society.

In chapter three, Clark makes an important contribution through her perceptive adaptation of the Fanonian concept of national culture. She describes three stages of an African hip-hop artist's evolution – assimilation, protest and combat (p.74). She observes that the imitation of commercialized U.S. American hip-hop in the assimilation stage may give way to the protest moment which often begins the process of indigenization. At the protest stage artists direct social commentary towards their oppressors but in the combat stage their messages are aimed at mobilizing the people for social transformation. This shift, she informs us, is crucial but can occur unnoticed. Recent examples include the Y'en a Marre of Senegal who helped prevent President Wade from winning a third term². Indeed, Clark makes legible how these cultural strategies are shifting the dispositions of power. Yet, Clark also reminds us that politicians and transnational corporations are leveraging the soundtrack of the youth to maintain and reproduce existing power structures. For instance, Clark shows how the ruling party in Tanzania, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, recruited the services of hip-hop artists to perform at campaign rallies and secure youth voters (p.78).

Themes of authenticity remain central to the book. For instance, Clark draws our attention to how African emcees use language to construct transnational and Pan-African identities rooted in the continuous flow of cultural exchange between Africa and its diaspora. For her study, African hip-hop included the music and culture produced by those born in Africa and who identify as African regardless of their current location. In Clark's definition of African hip-hop she notes that "as long as an artist is representing his or her reality and experiences as an African, through hip-hop, it can be seen as African hip-hop" (p.13). To Clark, then, Ghanaian emcee Reggie Rockstone's song "Visa," is an example of African hip-hop as it captures the quest for better economic opportunities in the West that significant numbers of Africans undertake, and the challenges they often face to secure a visa. On the other hand, she is careful to point out that while other popular genres like hiplife in Ghana and Kwaito in South Africa are often examined as hip-hop, they should be treated as separate genres. In Ghana debates on the distinction between hip-hop and hiplife have been productive areas of reflection as artists wrestle with questions of class, race, language and identity. The Ghanaian artist, M3nsa contributing to the debate on Twitter essentially argued that hiplife and hip-hop are the same thing but "hiplife is about identity." He asserted, "Hiplife is Ghanaian. Our language, our rhythms, conversations and our interpretation of Hip-hop." To be sure, we should recognize an artist's

² Y'en a Marre sought to prevent President Wade from seeking a third term and proposed amendments to the constitution aimed at reducing the required run-off vote percentage from 50% to 25%. There was also a proposal to create a Vice President position modeled after the U.S. governance structure. This move was viewed as a calculated attempt to eventually make Wade's son the president.

agency to self-identify and define what they make, a position Clark would surely appreciate. While some may not entirely agree with Clark's definition of hip-hop in Africa, what remains significant is how African artists have adopted hip-hop making – sampling, electronic beating making, speaking over beats and more – to tell their own stories regardless of whatever genre they use. Indeed, as Clark shows in chapter two, hip-hop in Africa emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, a period marked by harsh economic conditions and, in some countries, political instability. To be sure, African hip-hop praxis evolved against the backdrop of what also appears to be a disinvestment in the creative sector in a number of African countries. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o³ has elucidated, our imagination is nourished by arts and culture, but under repressive governments the imagination is often starved because the state apparatus attempts to limit the space to imagine possibilities.

Overall, this Pan-African project is a thoughtful synthesis of the various hip-hop making practices in African communities across the continent. It is highly recommended for popular cultural scholars, hip-hop heads, and the cultural producers in hip-hop communities. Indeed, Clark's book reads in an accessible manner which demonstrates her critical understanding of how academic knowledge production is often confined behind academic walls and trapped in dense "academese" rendering it inaccessible to the communities we make knowledge with. Similar to her work with the Hip-hop Africa blog and podcast⁴, this project cements Clark's commitment to publicly engaged scholarship and to ensuring that writing about hip-hop is also part of the cultural production of the community.

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³ See "Language Is a 'War Zone': A Conversation With Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o" by Rohit Inani (2018) <https://www.thenation.com/article/language-is-a-war-zone-a-conversation-with-ngugi-wa-thiongo/>

⁴ See Hip Hop African, <https://hiphopafrican.com/>

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