

Article

Kwaito Culture and The Body: Nonpolitics in a Black Atlantic Context

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Much has been made by critics both within South Africa and from outside its borders of whether, and how, post-Apartheid South Africa is “new.” Kwaito, “an encompassing term for a popular dance music that [for much of the late 20th century and early 21st century has been] associated with contemporary urban black [South African] youth style and identity”¹ evidences contemporary South Africa’s novelty by invoking what Paul Gilroy might acknowledge to be a contemporary Black Atlantic cultural milieu.

Kwaito is revolutionary within this context because it is a form of “nonpolitical” cultural resistance, with its resistive quality located firmly in the gestures and politics of the body rather than its often brief and materially focused lyrical exhortations. By examining existing secondary sources that locate and attempt to define the revolutionary potential of Kwaito in its lyrical content, as well as contemporary performance theory that situates current Black embodied practices as they apply to a group of popular Kwaito performances, we can better understand the genre as a site of resistance to Apartheid-era politics and an invocation of Black Atlantic belonging.

Origins and embodied forms of resistance

When Apartheid rule dissolved, Black and Coloured South Africans began to explore new methods of self-stylization in new sites. Though still divided from their white, upper-class South African counterparts in the private sphere, they gained access to public spaces in the once racially restricted city: “For young urban blacks, what got the party started was the fading of the old apartheid laws — suddenly they could spend a night in a club rather than under curfew.”² Kwaito crystallized during this time through hybridised articulations of both African and Afro-diasporic musical influences, as well as a yearning to represent

practices and signs, indeed riffs, of tropes that constituted belonging in an imagined Black Atlantic ghetto; Kwaito has come to characterize what Nuttall might call the “politics of possibility” in young South Africa.³

By 1994 slowed-down House music had been rising in popularity, gaining traction as an alternative to the ‘Bubblegum’ sound once immensely popular in South African clubs. David Coplan, who has written extensively on popular music in South Africa, calls the Bubblegum that preceded Kwaito, “a childish tease in which the initial burst of sweetness quickly vanishes on the tongue.”⁴ In contrast to Bubblegum’s seemingly simplistic pop trappings, Coplan notes that the genre’s star, Brenda Fassi, performed songs that dealt with a wide spectrum of South African experiences. In addition to the sexual politics of recordings like “Weekend Special,” which protests the “subordinate romantic status of the ‘weekends-only’ girl,” Fassi penned an ode to the country’s first Black President as well as a song that imagined a debate between a liberal and a racist white on the subject of educating Blacks.⁵

Coplan’s analysis does not fully acknowledge Fassi and the Bubblegum sound she pioneered as stylistic forbearers of Kwaito’s embodied forms of resistance. While seducing her audiences with saccharine melodies, Fassi was embodying, both in her videos and live performances, an identity that incorporated elements from an expansive field of Afro-diasporic signification, such as adornment and gestures reminiscent of 70s Disco. In a video for “Weekend Special,” Fassi dances solo, moving her body in the center of a vacant dance floor. She performs without a microphone, perhaps to emphasize that she is performing for herself, rather than any potential suitor, in a blue and white, satin one-piece - an outfit that is a direct visual cue to 1970s Black Disco performance. We might read her performance in this video as a refutation of the man whose weekday neglect she is refuting. She is both articulating her sexuality (outlining the contours of her thighs and caressing her breasts) and claiming it for herself - she doesn’t need a partner to sweat through this performance, just as she does not need to be a

weekend-only girl.⁶ While Fassi's lyrics are explicitly an answer to patriarchal norms, they are further emphasized by her striking performance.

Though Bubblegum is an important genre tied to the development of Kwaito, the emergence of Kwaito should not be understood as a linear evolution from it. Kwaito, as it has been understood at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, began to emerge in the late 1980s through the experimentation of producer/DJs in clubs like Pretoria's 'Gemini' and Johannesburg's 'Razzmatazz.' It was in these venues that, as South African producer Oscar Mdlongwa, AKA Oskido, says of the early days, DJs started, "remixing those international house tracks to give them a local feeling ... putting in percussion and African melodies but maintaining the house groove."⁷ This South African flavor condensed in the post-Apartheid moment with elements of Hip Hop, Ragga, R&B, and American and European House to constitute what has been commonly understood to be Kwaito music.

The Kwaito sound is primarily produced for and by marginalized Black and Coloured South Africans, with the township functioning as a symbolic site of embodied contestation. As performance geographer Sonjah Niah says, the township is a constitutive part of the ghetto imaginary linked to these bodies:

"Johannesburg and its surrounding townships, Soweto in particular, hold important sites of memory for Kwaito. The township is associated with high levels of danger for the average Black South African youth: high murder rates, police harassment, hardship and squalid conditions."⁸

Niah goes on to describe the way that spatial politics inform Kwaito culture: "On weekends, streets are taken over by jams or bashes, where aspiring actors try to woo audiences and attract the attention of producers. The street is the first stage for many aspirants."⁹ One excellent example of the township as a frame for the Kwaito imaginary can be viewed in Bongo Maffin's video for the song "Kura," in which the township takes center stage: School-uniformed youth march in step with the group's three singers and people go about their daily work, stopping only to dance or braid singer Thandiswa Mazwai's hair.¹⁰ With

the township as a central character, Bongo Maffin acknowledge the complexity of their own ancestry as non-South African— being that Appleseed is of Zimbabwean descent and sings his verses in Shona, while Stoan and Mazwai sing in Zulu— and the complexity of home for Diasporic peoples. Invoking the joy and love felt in their “homeland,” the group provides a sonic and visual antidote for the many Africans and South Africans living abroad as well as those that live as refugees apart from home within the continent and country.

Some scholars writing on Kwaito have grappled with spatiality, embodiment, and dance, and their bearing on the culture’s revolutionary potential. Gavin Steingo, in an article published in 2005, expressed anxiety and frustration with the continued use of materialistic tropes and gold imagery in Kwaito lyrics: “kwaito artists do not *ap*-propriate, but *ex*-propriate, as defined by Jacques Derrida: ‘to lose one’s memory in the memory of the other.’”¹¹ But, Steingo’s writing focused on lyrical content, and thus, in a sense, he missed the proverbial forest for the trees. Indeed, critical dismissal of Kwaito’s “bodily politics” sidesteps a major aspect of the genre’s practical social utility. Writing several years after the publication of his first article, Steingo acknowledged that his inadequate criticism of Kwaito was based on the, “contradictions inherent in the politicization of a cultural formulation that has apolitics at its center.”¹² Lara Allen’s interview with Arthur Mafakote, a well-known Kwaito artist whose song “Kaffir” was both political in its lyrics and in its exhortation of bodily resistance, neatly illustrates the trap of lyrical analysis: “They thought there was gonna be a war [at Apartheid’s end] ... I thought, but what if this music can bring unity? Because if they all dance to the same tune they might as well be under one leader.”¹³ Mafakote’s “Oyi Oyi” music video illustrates this sentiment. The artist began his career as a dancer, uses the visual field of the video to claim nocturnal space, which was a newly liberated terrain for many Black and Coloured people in the post-Apartheid era, as the stage for hetero-social play and courtship. Young Kwaito men and women dance in flashy urban/industrial club gear in city’s back alleys, against the backdrop of a graffiti-covered wall, and beneath an

illuminated overpass. The night streets become spaces to convene and take pleasure, as opposed to being represented as restricted or danger-laden.¹⁴

Bhekizizwe Peterson, on the other hand, is a theorist who has always recognised and made use of Kwaito's embodied possibilities. His assessment of Kwaito as the, "triumph of ... the corporeal and hedonistic body over the suppressed and repressed body of conservatism," situates Kwaito in relation to tropes of entrapment, or the incarceration of ghetto life, and flight, the liberation of strategic identity formation that transcends it. These poles aptly characterize the thorny terrain that Black and Coloured youth learned to navigate in the post-Apartheid era; Peterson recognizes Kwaito to be the soundtrack of that learning process.¹⁵ His analysis helps to illustrate ways in which youth who identify with Kwaito culture are actively engaged in a process of identity formation predicated on newly liberalized imaginaries and possibilities.

The neglect of the corporeal in much of Kwaito criticism is not simply a dismissal of what ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt calls "a technology of Black communication and identity",¹⁶ it also fits in nicely with the patriarchal American/European canon of Black pop culture criticism that engages in the flippant feminization of embodied forms, thus missing a whole spectrum of context-specific eruptions in Afro-Diasporic hybrid culture. To counter this tendency, a thinker like Gaunt emphasises the significance of what she calls "kinetic orality" in relation to Black expressive culture:

The body ... becomes a musical interpreter—the repository of various dance styles, and multiple bodies can be observed and analyzed as a set of somatic historiographies of black social life, or interpreted as nonrepresentational commentary about social identity and identity formation.¹⁷

Niaah's notion of "performance geography" is similarly useful. She venerates "the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual task of enacting one's being in such spaces as the Black Atlantic, between violation, ruptured roots, and self-(re)construction."¹⁸ When understood in tandem with the concept of a politicized

Kwaito body, “connected discursively and materially to the musical practices of Kwaito ... racialized as Black ... mobile and disruptive,”¹⁹ the value of Kwaito’s politicized bodily articulation is amplified. Gavin Steingo, in his later writing, sums up the strategic pose of the nonpolitical, embodied stance: “Kwaito fans arguably work toward a kind of de-subjectification that shouts defiance ... resisting normative forms of resistance [they] skillfully dodge the totalizing dialectic of hegemony-resistance”.²⁰ By using their bodies and refusing to engage in a logocentric debate, Kwaito bodies are resisting hegemony on their own, Afro-Diasporic terms.

The symptoms of critical misinterpretation that affect Kwaito are not new. Critics of Black art have often dismissed or ignored dance and its constitutive body politics. Dance and the body are seen as being excessively corporeal and only moderately worthy of being theorized, if they merit any theorizing at all. The 1980’s school of Black British cultural studies, with luminaries such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, focused largely on the work of filmmakers and visual artists whose cultural products exist outside their bodies²¹, while popular American critics such as Kalefa Sanneh and Jon Pareles of the New York Times have been blessedly preoccupied with the lyrical content and masculine vicissitudes of Kwaito as it compares to Hip Hop.²² This is not to say that there hasn’t been some attention given to Black forms of dance music, but there is definitely room for a more nuanced, robust field of critical work on the corporeal power of Disco and its stylistic children. Without a densely populated critical terrain, audiences and critics alike will continue to misunderstand many of the important interpretive cadences that find their origins in the movements of the body and deliberate uses of highly contextual spatial practices.

One bright spot on the horizon is the work of Xavier Livermon, who analyzes Kwaito in a context of embodied practices. In his 2006 dissertation, “Kwaito Bodies in African Diaspora Space: The Politics of Popular Music in Post-Apartheid South Africa” Livermon coins the term “Kwaito bodies” to describe “the ways in which those young people who participate in the musical practices

of Kwaito are configured in representational practice”.²³ His analysis distills the notion of non-politics that can be seen to be crucial to understanding the form—imbuing it with the importance of the compromise that previously disadvantaged Black peoples have made in a neoliberal post-Apartheid moment. These peoples may participate in capitalist practices, but they have defied the illogic of an explicitly economic, though tacitly cultural, agreement predicated on European whiteness and education:

If black bodies do not properly absorb and perform this capital, than their inclusion into the spaces of modernity and humanity occurs at a subordinated level. “Kwaito bodies” are disruptive because they remind the racialized colonial elite that they will enter the spaces of whiteness on their own terms. They will play their music loud, spin their cars on suburban streets, and slaughter animals to bless the new home²⁴

Other nonpolitical articulations and identity formation in a Black Atlantic milieu

Kwaito culture in the late 20th century and early 21st century can be looked at as an ‘emergent zone’ in Post-Apartheid South Africa, one where, in the early moments post-1994, new identities were in the making. Young artists exploded from the townships; the beats they crafted encouraged young people to come together, to dance, and to engage in what Peterson calls a “redemptive fantasy.”²⁵ These youths are dubbed, generation “Born Free,” derided by those who had to fight for their freedom, the “Lost Generation.” Old political leftists, such as Professor John Simpson of The University of Cape Town have brushed aside and admonished the Kwaito generation with statements like, “Twenty years ago young people were the vanguard of the struggle for change. Now kids are saying you must look after yourself, the social issues are not important.”²⁶

While it may be true that Kwaito’s lyrics do not necessarily exhort listeners to enact political change in the form of direct political action/protest, they are hardly apolitical. First of all there is the politically charged act of choosing to sing mostly in *Tsotsitaal*, or ghetto-speak. For example, songs like Zola’s “Stars” evidence a complex amalgamation of English, Afrikaans and South African dialects explicitly crafted for a township audience.²⁷ This is a significant political statement after long years of state-imposed Afrikaans in public schools and government. Lara Allen, quoting A&R manager Skumbuzo Khulamo, further

explicates the political significance of Kwaito's sanctioning of ghetto vernaculars: "in the township we've got our own ways of talking. And what excites people [about Kwaito is that] for the first time they are hearing what they are using in the township being recorded. It's for the first time! It's that excitement".²⁸

Like the youth studied by Elaine Salo in her Manenberg ethnographies, the Kwaito generation is using new tools provided by a newly visible globalized youth culture.²⁹ This culture, accessed via the mass media and new technologies, is primarily comprised of the artistic contributions of Black Americans, Europeans, Caribbeans and Africans. Afro-Diasporic tools from these distinct but interrelated social cultures help articulate new ways of being and open up new spaces of becoming, where identities are less fixed by Apartheid structures and more dependent on an individualistic approach in tension with a set of communal practices. As mentioned earlier, one use of technology in the genesis of Kwaito involved the slowing down of British house and the translating of its lyrics into vernacular South African.³⁰ This methodology ultimately had legal implications, but it was important in its evocation of a Black Atlantic affinity—visible in other forms, such as in the “versioning” of Jamaican Dancehall or “sampling” in Hip Hop. Using technology, Kwaito practitioners were refashioning, popular song structures or melodies to suit their needs and participating in a form of collective Black Atlantic creative practice. Sampling the visual and sonic elements of Afro-Diasporic art functions in Kwaito in many of the same ways that it does in popular American, Caribbean and European Black music. It is often a means of recognizing and paying homage to musical forbearers, as Bongo Maffin does by sampling Miriam Makeba's “Pata Pata” for their song “Makeba.”³¹ Sampling is also used to update and make relevant and even reclaim contested texts, such as the South African national anthem, which was given a Kwaito update by Boom Shaka. For the Kwaito generation, meaning is layered in these new polysemic interpretations. How does making the SA anthem into a club track work to establish new ways of being or new modes of understanding in a post-Apartheid context? Perhaps by

jacking his or her body to the national anthem in a club, the Kwaito youth is disrupting the prescribed way of comprehending and consuming it: somberly standing at military attention with one's hand over his or her heart. Kwaito is an exercise in musical memory and an exorcism of the past. It exposes the paradoxical idea of a "lost generation" and forces us to ask the questions: lost for whom, and at what cost?

Kwaito is understood globally as a genre that is at once indigenous, with hyper-local contexts and meanings, and international, being that its sound and imagery maintain a dialogue with American and European forms of popular Black music and their accompanying visual scripts. This Black Atlantic conversation, what Paul Gilroy might call a product of diasporic intimacy or affinity,³² affirms the aforementioned "new" South African identity that emerged in the post-Apartheid context. As with many 21st Century Afro-Diasporic hybrids, like Reggaeton, Grime and Baile Funk, Kwaito demonstrates the trans-Atlantic incorporation and elaboration upon African traditions as well as the enabling of artistic characteristics facilitated by enhanced connectivity and technological innovation. Much in the same way that the advent of the phonograph enabled the "eclectic flexibility" of post-bellum American Black secular music, the globalization of once ghettoized Black sounds like House and Hip Hop has enabled this process of exchange.³³

Today's Afro-Diasporic conversations happen within a complex dialogic matrix; digital transmissions of ideas are absorbed by audiences and performers via streaming web radio, shared YouTube videos and comment threads on blogs. By envisioning these points of connectivity as part of a massive conversation mediated and influenced by an unceasing ebb and flow of information, we can understand the ways that Afro-Diasporic hybridity and an interplay of rooted scenes reverberate on a global level. Critics operating in the Black Atlantic paradigm must be careful not to impose a sort of "ontological essentialism," as Gilroy would call it, in favor of a "brute Pan-Africanism," while attempting to negotiate this emergent discursive space.³⁴ In his pivotal essay on the Black

Atlantic, Paul Gilroy employs a notion of the ship as a “chronotope,” a mobile micro-community that has linked the port cities in the Atlantic throughout history. Some scholars have critiqued Gilroy for his term “Black Atlantic” because in its articulation he eschews the importance of Africa in the formation of Diasporic identities and peoples. However, Gilroy’s terminology emphasises the irreconcilability of modernism with traditional African ways of being, as well as the slave trade and colonialism.³⁵ To reconcile the Gilroy problematic, a thinker such as Livermon looks to Hanchard, who describes Afro-modernity as a response to the age and technology that made the aforementioned contradictory elements possible.³⁶

With respect to new technologies, the ship may not be so useful a metaphor today, since the developed, and in many cases the developing, nations in the Americas, Europe and Africa are constantly in conversation via the internet. While Kwaito’s roll call of Hip Hop, Ragga, House and other Afro-Diasporic hybrid forms may be at times be a manifestation of longing for an imagined home outside of the nation, it should not be understood as something that has emerged from a biological imperative. The connective tissue of Afro-Diasporic, cultural hybridity is found in innumerable deliberate instances of give and take across the channels of a social and ideological web spanning centuries. This tissue exists despite countless instances of displacement and trauma; it must not be minimized or taken for granted as having been naturally retained or inevitably reproduced. Indeed, Afro-Diasporic Art can be thought of an ever-growing body of artistic contributions made by Africa and its descendents abroad across this web. And Afro-Diasporic transnational identity, predicated in many cases on relationships with this art, can be an additive way of understanding belonging and ethnic particularity. By complicating full conscription to national identity in states that colonized and brutalized their people, the children of the African Diaspora can fashion hybrid identities that are less constrained by dominant post-colonial narratives, which continue to obscure violent histories of oppression. Kwaito is a central, evolving text that evokes and sheds light upon these hybrid identities.

In understanding Kwaito as a rhetorically complex and highly embodied artistic practice, we can better make sense of its place in an Afro-Diasporic conversation, and thus better articulate theories that are predicated on its use-value in the 21st century. For critics and audiences who remain committed to finding and analyzing the discursive intricacies that once marked Kwaito's revolutionary potential, they must be sure to recognize and comprehend Kwaito as a site of resistance and creative possibility in the terrain of late 20th century global, Black artistic practices. Failing to do so would minimize the immense ingenuity and talent of Kwaito artists, as well as the often subtly resistive political dispositions of their audiences. We can surely do better.

Notes

- ¹ Impey as quoted by X. Livermon. *Kwaito bodies in African Diaspora space: The politics of popular music in post-apartheid South Africa*. Thesis (Ph. D. in African American Studies: University of California, Berkeley, 2006), p.ix
- ² S. Robinson. (2004, April 11). That's Kwaito Style. TIMEEurope Online. Retrieved October 23, 2009 from <http://www.time.com/time/europe/html/040419/kwaito.html>
- ³ S. Stephens. 'Kwaito: Senses of Culture' in *South African Culture Studies*. 2000: 256-273, p. 268
- ⁴ D. Coplan. 'God Rock Africa: Thoughts on politics in popular black performance in South Africa' *African Studies*. 64 (1), 2005, 9-27, p.12
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p.12
- ⁶ Brenda Fassie. (Artist). 2006, November 10. Weekend Special [music video]. Retrieved Dec 10, 2009 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0V1M0r5jkPI>
- ⁷ McCloy as cited by G. Steingo. 'South African Music after Apartheid: Kwaito , the "Party Politic," and the Appropriation of Gold as a Sign of Success' in *Popular Music & Society*. 28 (3), 2005, 333-357, p. 342. The article Steingo references has been edited, but much of the content remains searchable at <http://www.rage.co.za/readArticles.php?articleID=64>
- ⁸ S. Niaah Stanley. 'Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto' in *Space and Culture*, 11 (4), 2008, 343-360, p.353
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p.355
- ¹⁰ Bongo Maffin, (Artist). (2007, April 27) Kura [music video]. Retrieved Oct 23, 2009 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhXoWvCT1Kc>.
- ¹¹ Steingo, 2005, p.351
- ¹² Steingo. 'The Politicization of Kwaito: from the "party politic" to party politics' in *The Free Library*. Retrieved October 27, 2009 from [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The politicization of kwaito: from the "party politic" to party...-a0172908478](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The politicization of kwaito: from the)
- ¹³ L. Allen. 'Kwaito versus Crossed-over Music and Identity during South Africa's Rainbow Years, 1994-1996' in *Social Dynamics*, 30, 2004, 82-111, p. 85
- ¹⁴ Arthur Mafokate (Artist). (2008, April 16) Oyi Oyi [music video]. Retrieved Dec 10, 2008 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PwH1U5s6bU>.
- ¹⁵ B. Peterson. 'Kwaito, 'dawgs' and the antimonies of hustling' in *African Identities*, 1(2), 2003, 197-213, p. 207
- ¹⁶ K.D. Gaunt. *The games black girls play: Learning the ropes from Double-dutch to Hip-hop*. (New York: New York University Press, 2006) p.59
- ¹⁷ Peterson, 2003, p.126

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- ¹⁸ Niaah, 2008, p. 345
- ¹⁹ Livermon, 2006, p. 124
- ²⁰ Steingo, 2007
- ²¹ S. Hall. 'Cultural Identity And Diaspora' in Braziel, J. E., & Mannur, A. *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader: Keywords in Cultural Studies*, 6 (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2003) p. 233
- ²² For American perspectives on Kwaito, see: Sanneh, K. (2004, August 9). CRITIC'S CHOICE/New CD's; House Music Thrives in South Africa. *The New York Times Online*. Retrieved September 19, 2008 from <http://nytimes.com>. Sanneh, K. (2008, August 25). Hip-Hop Hybrids That Scramble Traditions. *The New York Times Online*. Retrieved September 19, 2008 from <http://nytimes.com>. Pareles, J. (2002, August 23). MUSIC REVIEW; South Africa's Reigning Pop And Its Upbeat Ambassador. *The New York Times Online*. Retrieved September 19, 2008 from <http://nytimes.com>
- ²³ Livermon, 2006, p.244
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, p.246
- ²⁵ Peterson, 2003, p.197
- ²⁶ T. Masland.. 'Generation Born Free' in *Newsweek*, Vol.143 Issue 14, May 4, 2004, 42-43, p.42
- ²⁷ Zola (Artist). (2007, June 4) Stars [music video]. Retrieved Dec 10, 2008 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l77ZQFOga1s&feature=related>
- ²⁸ Allen, 2004 p. 87
- ²⁹ 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*. 6 (3), 2003, 345-365
- ³⁰ Allen, 2004, p.89
- ³¹ Bongo Maffin (Artist). (2008, January 17) Makeba [music video]. Retrieved Dec 10, 2008 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUVDCPvQQgA>
- ³² As quoted by Livermon, 2006, p. 4
- ³³ L.W. Levine. 'Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American folk thought from slavery to freedom' (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.231
- ³⁴ P. Gilroy. 'The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity' in Braziel, J. E., & Mannur, A. *Theorizing diaspora: A reader. Keywords in cultural studies*, 6. Malden, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishers, 2003), p.67
- ³⁵ Gikandi and Okpewo as quoted in Livermon. 2006, p.19
- ³⁶ Hanchard as quoted in Livermon. 2006, p.20