

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

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ABSTRACT

Rebellion is expressed in a number of ways. In this paper, I analyse arts of resistance through a close reading *in situ* of Hip Hop graffiti art produced by mak1one while reflecting on the historical construction of the dominant aesthetics of Cape Town, South Africa in order to highlight how these artworks can act as tools of public literacy and organised visual dissent for those adversely affected by colonisation, slavery and the effects of European conquest. The research paper takes a qualitative exploratory approach. The method that is utilised is Critical Discourse Analysis, with the sub-method used to analyse the content of the Hip Hop graffiti art visuals being semiotic analysis. Five images are analysed in their location. The main messages communicated by mak1one in these works are found to be African, indigenous humanity; political rebellion for freedom; cultural hybridity; and autonomy. The paper finds it is reasonable to assert that Hip Hop graffiti art acts as a form of public literacy in Cape Town. The main contribution that this research makes is to fill the gap in the literature by blending the research domains of public literacy, arts of resistance and control through aesthetics with specific reference to Hip Hop graffiti art in Africa.

KEY WORDS: Rebellion, Hip Hop, Graffiti, Art, mak1one, Cape Town, South Africa, Literacy, Reading, Control, Colonisation, Slavery, Apartheid, Autonomy.

“I want
every image
to be the beginning
of an unseen
image”

Khalil Gibran, 1911

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HIP HOP GRAFFITI ART AS PUBLIC LITERACY

I remember the first piece of graffiti that captured my attention. It was in 1993, that tumultuous year when South Africa had not quite decided what course it would take. The piece was on a wall adjoining an empty lot in the upper-middle class, predominantly afrikaaner neighbourhood of Durbanville, Cape Town. The piece read:

“Hani Stinks! Good Ridance!”

Before long the piece was modified, in response to the racial hatred expressed in the celebration of the slaying of Communist Party leader and Umkhonto we Sizwe cadre, Chris Hani, someone had edited the piece:

D

“Hani Stinks! Good Ridance!”

^NATZI'S CANT SPELL!

As a young black¹ South African born into struggle and primed for liberation, I loved that wall. I loved driving past it and alerting everyone in the car's attention to it. I've come to realise now, that the thing I probably loved most about that wall was the way the medium, graffiti, offered every individual equal opportunity to make their inner views public. I believe I was also seduced by the accountability of the medium. Enchanted by the way in which ideas

¹ When referring to race in this research I defer to the leadership of Zimitri Erasums and Edgar Pieterse (1999), that is, I

“use ‘black’ to refer to all people oppressed under white domination. ‘Coloured’ refers to those South Africans loosely bound together for historical reasons such as slavery and a combination of oppressive and preferential treatment during apartheid, rather than by common ethnic identity...the identity coloured is sometimes seen as overlapping with ‘black’ and always with ‘african’...[I use] ‘african’ in the official South African sense that denotes people who speak indigenous languages with the exception of Afrikaans. The lower case indicates an anti-essentialist view of these identities” (169).

While I am aware of the relevance of coloured identity especially given the specific socio-political and geographical context of this study, it is not within the scope of this research to delve into the complexities of this identity formation. For further reading on this topic see:

Erasmus, Z. (ed.) 2001. Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspective on Coloured Identities in Cape Town. Kwela Books Cape Town

broadcasted via graffiti are subject to immediate and brutal accountability and recall. Casting my mind back, I think my affection for the wall also stems from the honesty and insistence that the medium evokes - the peephole that it gave to the real substance of the psyche of a nation in crisis and fundamentally unreconciled. In short, the wall was an indication of how much work would have to happen before South Africa could convincingly claim the now standard qualification of "New". Now, more than 20 years later my intrigue and interest in graffiti has only deepened.

In 2002, during my first year of tertiary studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT), I became actively involved in a not for profit, beneficiary trust called Imbawula Trust (the Trust). The Trust is guided by the mission statement which aimed:

"To find creative and innovative ways to celebrate and showcase new and emerging talent and art forms from the streets of Southern Africa's townships. To use hip-hop and street-art to heal, to celebrate the human spirit and to act as a social fire alarm alerting Southern African communities to social ills and injustice. (Imbawula Trust, 2002)"

To this end, the flagship project of the Trust was a three-day Hip Hop and street art festival called 'Fire on the Mountain'. The festival, which was held annually from 2004 to 2007, became a regional rallying point for African Hip Hop artists who viewed the culture as a tool for social change. The first three of these festivals were held in Franschoek, Cape Town, and the final one at the Drill Hall in the centre of Johannesburg.

I participated within the organisational processes of the Trust and the festival as a contributing activist. During this process, while organising in circles - horizontal work-lead structures - as a trust we constantly chose to produce for the ideological purposes as espoused in our mission statement, choosing actively against profit accumulation. It was during this period that I was initiated into the culture and the ethos of Hip Hop, internationally, nationally and in Cape Town. I became a participant in this amoebic culture and worked closely with artists to create the platform. One of the stages at the festival was called 'The Wall of Fire' - our Hip Hop graffiti art platform. Through this process, my interest in graffiti developed from a casual, intuitive curiosity,

towards active participation and support for the work of artists contributing to the festival.

While studying at the University of the Witwatersrand to complete my graduate schooling, I used the time, space and support to reflect on some of the discoveries made during the course of active cultural work within the Hip Hop community of post-apartheid South Africa. This research project is the culmination of all of these attempts and explorations. The project is also an attempt to synergize my own experiences and insights as a cultural activist working within the Hip Hop and street art community.

OVERVIEW

In this paper I am interested in unpacking the way in which aesthetics have been used to support the agenda's of colonial domination, apartheid, and the present neo-liberal state in Cape Town, South Africa. This discussion sets the context for an exploration into how arts of resistance emerge and function as countervailing narratives. These alternative points of reference are considered significant because they intervene at a discursive level offering subjected people a different way of making meaning that legitimises their dissatisfaction and also presents a set of lived practices that can be utilised to build a future free of oppression. It is this interface between expressions of discontent and how these are transformed into lived action, a process I, drawing on Freirè, call public literacy, that I am most interested in. I use the theory of sub-cultures, as defined by Hall & Jefferson (1976) and Hebdgie (1979) to analyse Hip Hop and Hip Hop graffiti art. My aim is to uncover some of the possible messages advocated for by one such art of resistance. Having reviewed the artworks in their locations, I argue that the work of mak1one is a code that forms part of a lucid enraged and critically conscious self-discourse. The messages he presents and the location of the art support the reading of his work as a public literacy text.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

In general graffiti is considered a transgressive practice in urban cities. Specifically, in the City of Cape Town (the City), graffiti is outlawed by the 2010 Graffiti By Law. The by-law describes all forms of graffiti to be a nuisance which mars a city internationally celebrated for its beauty (City of Cape Town Graffiti By-Law, 2010). Contraventions of the by-law are met with heavy sanctions. First-time offenders are liable to a fine of R15 000 or six months imprisonment. Conviction for a second offence makes them liable to a fine of R30 000 or six months' imprisonment. The by-law allows for alternative sentencing at the discretion of the court (City of Cape Town, 2010).

Despite the stringent laws governing the creation of graffiti in the City and the onerous sanctions attached to this crime, graffiti continues to pop up spontaneously on walls across the Cape Town landscape. And as this graffiti is created, so it is painted over by the Graffiti Enforcement Unit, a special purpose task team formed and funded by the City of Cape Town (City of Cape Town, 2010). The point of departure of this research is thus that graffiti is a "social fact" (Barber, 1989: 1) which when given serious analytical attention can engender greater understanding of the way certain social actors construe and create meaning and sense of their lived experiences (Erasmus & Pieterse, 1999). Critical urban theorists argue that research that pays attention to the creation of graffiti as well as the official processes to exterminate it, builds an understanding of the present-day processes of urbanisation and the battles over entitlement to the city (Iveson, 2010).

When attention is paid to the content of graffiti and the relevance that it has within its surroundings, purposeful literate practices and narrative stories emerge (Aguilar, 2000, Da Silva-Iddings, 2010). Graffiti very often contains popular knowledge, mythology and stories that are otherwise absent or invisible in greater society. Engaging closely with this and other forms of popular knowledge, it is argued, can enrich critical urban research with greater reflexivity (Iveson, 2010; McAuliffe, 2012).

The dominant focus within social science on graffiti as a destructive and deviant process to be controlled and eradicated has shrunk the space to

explore and investigate the generative capacity of graffiti and the alternative *values* present in graffiti texts and practice (Ferrel, 1996). This research argues that focusing academic scrutiny on the expressive, communicative and political nature and content of Hip Hop graffiti art specifically, does not play into a reductionist trap of romanticising all works of graffiti as radical, anti-establishment texts (Feigenbaum, 2010, Iveson, 2010). Rather, by situating a particular form of graffiti, namely Hip Hop graffiti art, and the work, of one specific artist, mak1one, in its historical, socio-political, cultural and spatial contexts, this project contributes to the international body of academic literature that aims to “develop a more nuanced set of criteria for discerning the aesthetic and political significance of different kinds of graffiti and street art” (Iverson; 2010: 28).

As will be demonstrated, Cape Town is an urban city deeply divided along intersecting and complex racial, social, ethnic, spatial and economic cleavages (Erasmus & Pieterse; 1999 & Gibson; 2009). The history of Cape Town as the first port of colonial access to southern Africa means that Cape Town’s urban history is significantly longer than the rest of the country and that these cleavages are more deeply entrenched (Minty; 2006). The discursive universe of South Africa, due in no small part to the process of state-sanctioned and legislated large-scale suppression of the communication of ideas during the apartheid era, has resulted in a current reality where the history and story of the majority of people has been stifled and silenced (Gibson; 2009). This research contends that given the skewed and racist way in which Cape Town has been represented and ideologically constructed, paying attention to the content contained in unsanctioned, unauthorised, transgressive, public texts created by black Capetonians contributes to correcting this systematically skewed history. This paper argues that putting the popular texts of Hip Hop graffiti art created by mak1one at the centre of analysis contributes to viewing the history and politics of the place from “behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung” (Wharton, 1979 in Barber, 1987: 3).

READING MAK1ONE²

Born in 1975, mak1one spent his formative years in a one-room shack in Cafda, one of Cape Town's original apartheid-created coloured settlements where his mother raised him and his younger brother and sister. His father would spend long periods away from home, working on ships to sustain the family. It was there that he received his artist name or AKA (Also Known As) from his grandfather, a painter who worked in the affluent southern suburbs. His grandfather was responsible for instilling a sense of pride for handwork and began to call him 'mak', and abbreviation of his full name Maxwell³.

The family lived in Cafda for ten years, waiting for the development of Mitchells Plain to be completed. This waiting period was punctuated by evictions, displacement and separation, a context that made learning impossible. His immediate family and himself were much darker in complexion than his extended family and had curly hair in a family that had predominantly straight, sleek hair. This meant that him, his siblings and his father were discriminated and ostracised within their family. He remembers being taunted by his cousins, aunts and uncles who, instead of calling him and his siblings by their names resorted to calling them 'Kaffertjie'⁴ 1, Kaffertjie 2 and Kaffertjie 3'. At the age of seven the family was allocated a home in Beacon Valley, Mitchell's Plain. It was with this extended family that he had to stay when the rest of his family moved because a school had not yet been built in the new settlement. Much of what he recalls from school was independently drawing images of 'Indians' from the Western genre movies that dominated South African TV during the 1980s. Described as daydreaming by teachers, his love for drawing and capacity to retreat internally was blamed when he failed his first year of school.

² This life story has been assembled from information retrieved in an interview with mak1one conducted on 7 March 2013 in Cape Town by the researcher. The interview was part of a commissioned story written for the Centre for Migration Studies at the University for the Witwatersrand and the Mail and Guardian. Transcriptions and audio recordings of the interview are available.

³ With reference to the full aka Mak1one, the meaning of both the numeric and written 'one' is unclear. When questioned directly about its relevance, the artist consistently resists explicitly explaining the meaning behind this name. Generally in graffiti practice, the inclusion of 'one' is meant to indicate that the writer is the first one with that name (Ferrell; 1996). As is the nature of graffiti culture, the meaning of this name is a riddle-like obfuscation which is intentionally misleading and distracting the significance of which is not central to understanding the work under review.

⁴ Kaffer is a derogatory term used during apartheid to refer to black people.

When he did eventually move to Beacon Valley, it was here at the beginning of 1982 that he was introduced to Hip Hop. He credits the culture for making knowledge accessible and teaching him what he could never access from formal schooling. With a natural affinity for drawing, mak1one began producing Hip Hop graffiti art during this period. Today he has produced around 700 graffiti pieces. mak1one along with Falko and Gogga, are widely credited as being one of the first Cape Town, and therefore South African Hip Hop graffiti artists.

While the majority of his work can be viewed in Cape Town, evidence of the international appeal and resonance of his work can be found in his involvement in the global art world. These include him participating in the 2002 Chromopolis preparations for 2004 Olympics in Greece, the 2007 Calligraphy Society in Belgium and the 2011 Troup St Mural Project in New York, USA. His imprint is also seen throughout urban and rural South Africa. Notably, despite commercial recognition, he maintains his community activism roots and participates in progressive developmental initiatives from Mitchell's Plain to Phakamisa, to Soweto.

Interestingly mak1one has resisted applying for the right to self-permit – a complex process that the 2010 Graffiti By-law sets out to ostensibly allow individual artists more freedom in their work. This resistance is framed by the fact that he is one of the most recognised and established names in graffiti in Cape Town and that this right has been awarded to other graffiti artists with whom he shares a similar profile and stature. While he has worked on projects where the organisers have applied for and been granted permits, he has himself never applied for a permit to create graffiti from the City.

Stylistically, mak1one employs a three-dimensional style. He places increased emphasis on developing depth of field in his letters and in the embellishments around them. Thus when he slices a letter into a number of component slices, emphasis is placed on ensuring that each of these slices is in turn three-dimensional. The same applies for his decorations of bubbles and arrows. mak1one is constantly deconstructing his letters to create new more intricate and arguably more intriguing letters using the same base form, his AKA. He has since at least the early 2000s, incorporated subtle decorative details of

South African culture into his fill-ins. He incorporates geometric shapes and patterns that are heavily influenced by the Ndebele painting and broader Nguni culture.

Not all graffiti artists have drawing skills. Many focus purely on constructing and deconstructing the letters and the embellishments as outlined. mak1one however, is an avid drawer and this makes his work more complex and analytically intriguing. As with his letters, his drawings are not realist representations of his subject matter. When drawing human characters he has spent a lot of time developing his signature character traits. Thus through constant sketching, he has been able to perfect realistic representation of people and has then begun breaking up the component parts of human features and adding his signature trait to each feature. He is able to create his own look for human features that when assembled into a face or body maintain overall synergy and balance. Some of his signature traits are that he always represents black people in his work despite never using colours that reflect skin tone. Instead he tends to use symbolic colours and yet the characters remain recognisable as black subjects. His images are rarely, if ever, 'pretty' and yet they don't jar with the overall aesthetic of the piece. His characters tend to have deep set, small eyes breaking from the convention of Hip Hop graffiti art of creating over-sized cartoon-like eyes (DaSilva-Iddings, 2011). He frequently has a strong stroke above the eyes and finishes the face off with solid eyebrows which are connected to a square frame that forms the bridge of the nose. The nostrils tend to resemble those of a cat and the fingers of his characters are normally slightly shorter than normal.

The Hip Hop graffiti art that mak1one produces and the regulatory environment in Cape Town that seeks to eradicate it are located in a long, global narrative. To deepen an understanding for why people draw on walls and why this practice is so aggressively restricted in Cape Town, the study turns to a review of relevant literature.