Native Tongues
A Dialogue between Hip-Hop, Hiplife, and Diaspora

Senior Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Department of African and Afro-American Studies
Jasmine Johnson, Advisor

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

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May 2015

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Acknowledgements

I dedicate my honors thesis to my mother, Diane Makeda Johnson, and father, Akbar Imhotep, who were the first to show me the beauty and possibility of the African Diaspora. Their work has been reinforced over the years by the Diasporic family I have grown into through my travels in the US, Ghana and the UK.

Special thanks to Dr. E. John Collins and Dr. Daniel Avorgbedor from the University of Ghana, Legon who lit the spark of my critical interest in Ghanaian popular music and its relationship to the global politics of blackness, to the Brandeis University Politics department Research Circle on Democracy and Cultural Pluralism for the grant that enabled part of my research, to the artists whose work has provided the soundtrack to this academic exploration, to Berneice Appiah ’18 who provided substantial translations of HiLife text, and to all those who live this work.

This thesis would not have been possible without the care, critical engagement and life support of my primary advisor Dr. Jasmine Johnson of the African and Afro-American Studies Department (AAAS) and Women, Gender and Sexuality studies program; my readers Dr. Gregory Childs of the History department and Dr. Chad Williams of AAAS whose insight into the field of global Hip-Hop studies gave needed focus and direction to the second half of my thesis. I would like to express extreme gratitude to my Honors Thesis support squad. To Shota Adamia ’15, Amanda Caroline De Olivera Perreira ’15, Yasmin Yousef ’15, Tasha Gordon ’15, Hannah Young ’15, whose collective hugs and check-ins throughout this process gave me a sense of community and belonging when the work got its loneliest.

I would be remiss not to express thanks for the various conversations on blackness, diaspora, Hip-Hop and Ghana I have had at length and in passing with various members of the Brandeis community over the course of this year. This thesis has been both an introspective look into my own journey and a rigorous interrogation of contemporary black cultural production. I am unduly grateful to the AAAS thesis working group. I extend this thanks to the entire AAAS department whose teachings over my four years at Brandeis University have informed the interdisciplinary understandings that this thesis showcases.
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Introduction

During my time abroad studying at the University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies I attended several open mic events and coffeehouses, periodically forgetting the British cultural training I received during program orientation and slipping into my snapping and verbal-affirmation-touting, southern, black-vernacular self. Upon arrival I was taught about ‘stiff upper lips’ and the power of silent applause. These things were supposed to ease my cultural transition and spare me of the harsh judgment of the English.

At the 2014 GTBank-sponsored Afrobeats concert featuring Nigerian singer-songwriter Wande Coal and Ghanaian musician Fuse ODG, I watched the crowd of people give themselves to music, let it take them somewhere as real and as imagined as nostalgia. The soundtrack to their journey was Afrobeats, a millennial genre of African popular music that emerged from Fela Kuti-era ‘Afrobeat’ and more contemporary Afro-fusion music like Ghana’s Hiplife. While standing alone waiting for a friend, a stranger asked me a question about the venue. I answered, and watched their face turn curious and familiar: "I love your accent. Where are you from?" she asked. "The states; Atlanta,” I replied. "Are you Ghetto?!" she inquired. She continued: "Usually people who sound like you are ghetto." I was stunned. What did she mean, exactly? Was she asking if I was poor? "Well," she explained, “I had a friend who sounds like you and she, she was like ghetto." Still curious, she inquired about my origins again, this time targeting my country of origin. “Ghana in theory," I offered. Her friend shared with me her belief that I was Nigerian. "Could be" I said, smiled, and nodded back into my bubble.

The moment fades, my friend who I am waiting for returns, the music continues. I attempt to mimic the moves of the two all-female dance crews that graced the stage and train my
body into new movements bent somewhere between Saturday night and an African dance class. This was the creative genius of a body called to harmony by a music so black and borderless it welcomed my “ghetto” into its own language.

I carried this Londonian exchange with me to Ghana, West Africa the following semester. Beachside concerts and nightclubs showcased the same soundtrack I encountered in London. In Ghana, ‘Hiplife’ signifies the niche sound of urban movement; blasted from dilapidated town centers just miles away from upscale nightclubs where the artists themselves host events. When a London-born Ghanaian artist has a hit he becomes a national icon; when a Ghanaian born artist takes his first trip to Europe he is prayed for. In Ghana my blackness was understood through rap music, through Hip-Hop. It was the lyrics to classic Hip-Hop songs I was expected to know and the translation I both sought (in social settings when Ghanaian cultural nuance turned my familiars strange) and offered (when American blackness became subject of discussion). Something shared, something inspired and something originated all playing at the same time: a social polyrhythm that can only be made sense of through the language of diaspora. In this moment two seemingly disparate histories conversed at an intersection. Hiplife, in rhythm and dance, serves as a vehicle for the foreign and local black body to move together in tribute to and in spite of differences in history, language and culture. Taking its cue from the series of questions about music, history, and blackness that my experiences brought to bear, this thesis explores Ghanaian popular music and its national and diasporic narratives.

Ghana and the United States of America are linked by a shared history that includes its musical forms. Consequently, this thesis examines the relationship between Ghanaian Hiplife, and American Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop here refers to music and culture evolving out of black and Latino communities in the late 1970s that became a major commercial genre in the 1990s. By
Hiplife, I refer to popular music coming out of Ghana in the late-1980s and early 1990s that sonically merged Ghana’s first nationally celebrated popular music, Highlife, with the expatriated cadence and lyricism of North American Hip-Hop music. While Hip-Hop does, quite literally, foreground Hiplife, I am writing in concert with theorists who privilege analyses of diasporic syncretism over the need to pinpoint absolute origins. My discussion of Hip-Hop and Hiplife is meant to account for the two distinct productions of sonic blackness, how diaspora permits their evolution, and what their relationship illuminates about the historically politicized nature of black cultural production.

This thesis explores the relationship between Hip-Hop and Hiplife and in so doing, puts ideas of nation, diaspora and authenticity in conversation. Rather than understanding Hiplife as exclusively Ghanaian music and culture, I argue that it is deeply effected by diasporic influences. Diaspora – a term of contested meaning – is invoked here to trouble the idea of the nation-state and the interest in absolute ownership that some nationalist treatments of Ghanaian music evidence. In an effort to clarify my application of diaspora theory to American Hip-Hop and Hiplife, I discuss transnationalism to offer up semantic distinction between it and “diaspora.”

Next, I discuss Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* as a text that crystallizes the field of African Diaspora Studies and as a text that clarifies Hip-Hop’s rise to mainstream popularity (and its subsequent transmission into Ghana). An active engagement with Gilroy allows us to understand Ghanaian independence as a history informed by the relationship between Ghanaian and global conceptions of blackness.

In undertaking this work, I acknowledge that it is both important and potentially dangerous to use Hip-Hop and Hiplife as umbrella terms that include (and potentially obscure) the sonic and cultural variation on the continent and in the African diaspora. It is important
because (taking into account African Diaspora Studies foundational rejection of essentialism) the act of labeling black cultural production offers insight into ways of understanding complex systems of similarity. Citing interviews with various Ghanaian artists associated with Hiplife, Msia Clark argues that though the lines between Hiplife and what she calls Ghanaian Hip-Hop (or Gh Rap) are blurred, there is a distinction between the two that relies on the agendas of lyrical content and commercial success.¹ For Clark, Hiplife is a commercially viable pop interpretation of Hip-Hop and Highlife, while Ghanaian Hip-Hop is a socially conscious evocation of rap lyricism and culture within a distinctly Ghanaian context. Differing from Clark’s definition, I use Hiplife to describe any Ghanaian modulation of rap lyricism and African national/Afro-diasporic music which includes, but is not limited to, Hip-Hop, Azonto, Afrobeats and parts of Ghana’s emerging dancehall soundscape. I am comfortable housing these different stylistic approaches to Ghanaian popular music together because of the foundational Afro-diasporic processes that propel them all.

In this exploration of the diasporic inflections of Ghanaian Hiplife, I first outline the interdisciplinary methodology that undergirds this work. I then define diaspora theory through a critical reading of various definitive texts; this establishes the meanings of diaspora on which my analysis is built. Later, I turn to 1957 to offer a historical exploration of the role of music in Ghana’s independence and to establish the political significance of black cultural production. After foregrounding the rise of the Ghanaian nation-state, I apply Stuart Hall’s critique of national identities to lay bare the diasporic influences of Ghana’s national symbols and open a conversation about the ways Nkrumah employed an Afro-diasporic practice to his nationalist project. After troubling the nation-state, I discuss migration in and out of Ghana and

subsequently in and out of the United States to provide some basis from which to discuss the movement and cultural transmission that allows for the globalization of Hip-Hop. Four “Call and Response” close readings of contemporary musical texts follow. I have labeled this section of lyrical/thematic analysis and historical context “call and response” to gesture toward the popular pattern of dialogue found in global black expressive culture and often utilized in Hip-Hop performance. “Call and response” speaks also to the ways in which the African diaspora is speaking across borders through the music. The first of these close readings addresses Afro-consciousness in US Hip-Hop through The Jungle Brother’s “Straight Out the Jungle” (1988).

The second half of Native Tongues turns to diaspora as a framework that has the potential to counter an African-American essentialism that is prevalent in Pan-Africanism and early diaspora theory. This is important because it offers a means to accept Hip-Hop as a forbearer of Hiplife without falsely centering the African-American narrative into the Ghanaian context. Next, I interrogate early modernist critiques of the validity of black music to cultural discourse in an effort to establish Hiplife as a complex medium of cultural exchange. I then delve into the history of Hip-Hop’s globalization and how it enters Ghana to be transformed into Hiplife. This makes way for an analytical survey of Ghanaian Hiplife, intended to highlight the ways in which Hiplife’s beginnings and millennial transformations have remained firmly situated across three chronological “Call and Response” close reads of Reggie Rockstone’s “Makaa Maka” (1997), M3nsa’s “No.1 Mango Street” (2010), and Blitz the Ambassador’s “Afropolitan Dreams” (2014). I conclude with a discussion on “Afropolitanism” and its relationship to Hiplife and diaspora as a way to return to and interpret the thesis’ opening moment and to suggest future lines of study.
Methodology

This interdisciplinary thesis has required several different forms of analysis. It uses methodologies from History, Cultural Studies and African Diaspora Studies. It utilizes lyrical analysis of Ghanaian Hiplife and American Hip-Hop where such close readings proved useful in exploring the interconnectedness of global black productions.

This work draws from historical and political documents to help contextualize popular music in Ghana in relation to the socio-economic conditions that facilitate its popularity. These texts ranged from the speeches of Kwame Nkrumah, to the writings of African American expatriates in Ghana in the years following independence, to contemporary writings on the evolution of popular music in Ghana.²

In undertaking this research, it was important to privilege the scholarship of writers of African descent, Ghanaian scholars especially. A sizeable portion of my writing on Ghana’s political and cultural history is grounded in the work of Ghanaian scholars. In taking a more contemporary look into Ghanaian migration, I included writers of African descent who have published on blogs like AfricaIsACountry.org.

This thesis builds from the work of scholars on Hip-Hop and Hiplife, particularly those publications produced from the mid-1990s onward. I draw from Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise* (1994), Jesse Shipley’s *Living The Hiplife* (2013) and a range of documentary footage of early Hip-Hop and Hiplife like Vh1’s ‘RockDocs,’ plus other music documentaries, music videos and

² Foundational texts here have been the work of British ethnomusicologist John Collins, who has resided in Ghana for over 30 years and serves as a professor of music at the University of Legon, and J.H. Nketia – one of the foremost scholars on African musicology – who is also tied to the University of Legon. (His grandson, coincidentally, happens to be Hiplife artist, Man.1.fest.)
interviews. I also attended the 10th annual International Hip-Hop Festival at Trinity College in April of 2015 to get better acquainted with the academic framing of Global Hip-Hop.

Finally, I draw from ethnographic reflections from my time in Ghana during the Spring semester of 2014 in addition to several moments when the country’s music met me as I traversed the Atlantic in London, England in the Fall semester of 2013 and back to the United States.
Diaspora Theory: A Discussion of the Literature

It is important to take stock of important publications in diaspora theory in order to accurately apply diaspora to Ghanaian popular music contexts. In this section, I focus on the works of Kim Butler, Robin D.G. Kelley, Paul Gilroy, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Tiffany Patterson to outline the meaning of diaspora as an analytical term.

Before the language of ‘African diaspora’ was popular, biblical allusions to the ‘outstretch of Ethiopia’s hands’ were employed by activists and historians as a way to discuss worldwide black movement.³ The term diaspora is itself of Greek origins. It means ‘dispersal,’ and was used in early migration studies discourse surrounding Jewish history.⁴ In the context of New World black cultures “African Diaspora” emerged as both a political and analytical signifier called forth by the socio-historical condition of African peoples in the 1950s and 60s.⁵ “African diaspora” became a term to refer to scholarly discourse on the breadth of black cultural transformations upon which the modern world was constructed. African Diaspora Studies is concerned with, but not limited to, transformations that came out of the forced dispersal of Africans through the West via the transatlantic slave trade. African Diaspora Studies assert that the contributions of African peoples and the African continent are central to world history.⁶ This assertion rebuffs the systematic exclusion of black contributions from the foundations of academia.

⁵ Ibid. 1982
One of the first scholars to use the term ‘African Diaspora’ was George Shepperson in 1965. In “The African Abroad or the African Diaspora,” Shepperson evokes the diaspora as a great movement or migration of people that should be viewed as integral to, and not separate from, world history. Shepperson describes the African diaspora as “the study of a series of reactions, to the imposition of the economic and political rule of alien peoples in Africa, to slavery and imperialism.”

In his analysis of the intellectual and ideological relationships between dispersed black populations, Shepperson speaks in terms of a collection of individual histories. Shepperson’s conception of the African diaspora as a series of reactions speaks to Hip-Hop as a site of sonic blackness that enables marginalized voices to become cultural and political capital. Shepperson’s pool of shared histories is taken up by Paul Gilroy as the cultural bank from which black populations consciously and subconsciously make their identities.

I employ Gilroy’s understanding of Diaspora as source text for black identity production in my understanding of Hiplife as a recent example of a tradition in Ghanaian musical production that draws from the sounds and images of the black West to create a new vehicle for cosmopolitan self-expression.

Scholars of the African Diaspora have long debated whether or not the identities and cultures of African diasporic communities are a result of African continuities or New World transformations. Two noted scholars at the core of this debate are Melville Herskovitz and E. Franklin Frazier. In The Myth of the Negro Past, Jewish anthropologist Melville Herskovitz discusses how American race prejudice of the 19th century was centered on the denial of black

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The Negro was portrayed as a man without a past or stake in the future, and therefore without an identity. While the middle passage was an oppressive process, Herskovitz argued that the culture of black peoples throughout the New World was profoundly influenced and shaped by residual Africanisms. E. Franklin Frazier, the prominent black sociologist of the 1940s argued to the contrary that all African heritage was lost during the Middle Passage, and that all the advancement of contemporary black culture was a result of slavery.\(^9\)

When Gilroy situates black New World cultures as a reservoir from which black British culture is forged, he accepts that those cultures are centered on syncretism: the ways enslaved Africans adapted their indigenous customs to plantation contexts. The cultural productions that Gilroy discusses are the products of the Transatlantic slave period. The risk of Gilroy’s evocation of the Transatlantic slave trade as a singular occasion of forced migration takes for granted earlier diasporic waves that also forced disparate groups into encounter.

Joseph Harris looks at the waves of diaspora in terms of migration and involuntary Diasporas. He classifies the first two waves as migrations; the third wave combines both voluntary and involuntary migration because of how the agency of Africans traversing trade routes was coupled with a slave trade. The fourth wave is the most notorious involuntary migration and the fifth lays way for “voluntary” migration from the 20th century onward, including present-day Afropolitanism.\(^10\) I use scare quotes around voluntary to imply that the factors contributing to migration in the 20th and 21st century are often heavily weighted by the

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\(^11\) The earliest wave of diaspora can be thought of as the evolutionary diaspora of humankind, the second refers to the trans-local movement of Bantu-speaking peoples around 3000 BCE, the third refers to extensive trading relations between Africa, Europe, Asia and the Middle East before Columbus bumped into South America, the fourth is the Transatlantic slave trade, and the fifth accounts for movement from the end of slavery to present day.
socio-economic conditions of Africans on the continent and thus, in diaspora. In other words, ‘voluntary’ migration is often employed as a survival tactic and should not always be interpreted as an act of leisure.

Central to the concept of the African diaspora is the notion that movement continually transgresses the boundaries of any given nation-state. Serial peregrination across land, bodies of water and theoretical planes equally as vast have resulted in a fluid discourse on what it means to be black and take up space. Gilroy asserts that nationalism in theory and practice is shortsighted and antithetical to the lived reality of the black Atlantic. Gilroy’s chapter on the politics of displacement discusses the fluidity of the discourse on black identity as a repossession of the “forced homelessness” that has marred most of the Black Atlantic. Gilroy’s establishment of the Black Atlantic, in opposition to regimented and racially constructed conceptions of modernity, calls out the intimate relationship between slavery and capitalism. Rejecting the idea of flattening conceptions of blackness found in postmodernist discourse, Gilroy responds to the cultural and economic trauma of slavery by asserting the collective value of the slave trade’s subjects. It is here that Gilroy mistakenly presents the African continent as a generative and symbolic root of diaspora, rather than an active subject in its own growth and development. This is something that Brent Hayes Edwards corrects in his 2001 article “The Uses of Diaspora.”

By “excavating a historicized and politicized sense of diaspora” Edwards effectively prioritizes the lived differences inside of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. Diaspora in Edward’s

13 Ibid. 1993: 15
14 Ibid. 1993
construction rejects western assumptions about nation and cultural production, early Pan-
Africanist politics of essentialist unity, and (black) American exceptionalist thought.\textsuperscript{16} Edwards interprets ‘the black Atlantic’ as too narrow of a framework to include global blackness.\textsuperscript{17} Gilroy names the “movements of black people – not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship” and uses it as a “means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory.”\textsuperscript{18} But in this reexamination of nation, the African continent is disallowed claims to national sovereignty while Western localities (Europe and the US) are positioned as solid and clearly defined antagonists. Using the language of C.L.R James, Edwards asserts that at its most efficacious, discourse on blackness in the diaspora serves as an intervention that calls for a complete reorganization of intellectual life.\textsuperscript{19} This intervention includes a non-hierarchal engagement of black narratives that traditional conventions of academia have disallowed for a variety of social, political and economic reasons.

In \textit{The Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora}, an anthology released the same year as Gilroy’s \textit{The Black Atlantic}, Eliot P. Skinner notes that Ghana’s independence changed the way Afro-Americans thought of themselves and their place in America. Seeing Africans dressed traditionally in places previously reserved for white elites, African-American interest in Africa increased as it “lit a match under” the fight for equality.\textsuperscript{20} What Skinner calls “the pursuit psychophysical freedom” shaped both the American Civil Rights struggle and the Black Power

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid 2001: 56-59
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid 2001: 61
Movement. African independence reenergized Africans politically, academically and culturally on the continent and abroad. In the late 1960s African diaspora was being used as a term to encapsulate the “unifying experiences of African peoples dispersed by the slave trade.”

In “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” Kim Butler offers an analysis of ‘diaspora’ that speaks to the diasporic inflections of Hiplife. Writing in 2001 alongside Edwards, Kim Butler notes that early constructions of ‘African diaspora’ took for granted the distinction between exile and voluntary migration. This distinction is particularly relevant to this discussion of Hiplife as it creates space for conversations about how class and access to transnational cultural materials influence the transnational flow of cultural products. Butler also discusses the significance of return to African diasporic communities. Ghanaian Hiplife presents two histories of return: the first is that of Ghanaian bodies – with the access and means to migrate out of Ghana’s political and economic turbulence – returning from ‘privileged exile’ in the west. The second is that of the sonic returns that are present in the music itself. While Hiplife music and culture can be read as a valorization and pursuit of westernization, Butler offers language to think of this relationship instead as “potential empowerment” rooted in diasporic subjects’ ability to mobilize international support, garner international attention, and influence both the land of home and host. The idea of diaspora as “a framework for the study of a specific process of community formation” holds the community of itinerant Ghanaian nationals and more distantly dispersed populations of African descent (in this case African-Americans) in

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23 Ibid 2001 P 192
the same theoretical body.²⁵ Here, even if Ghanaians and African-Americans aren’t individually aware of these diasporic connections, both groups are marked as black, and that blackness gestures towards what Butler names as the ‘ethno-national’ nature of diaspora. But as Patterson and Kelley point out “neither the fact of blackness, nor shared experiences under racism, nor the historical process of their dispersal makes for […] a common identity.”²⁶

Following these lines of critical inquiry, this thesis works to put the cultures of dispersed peoples into conversation with one another. It takes up Hiplife and the African diaspora as a framework for understanding black cultural production while remaining mindful that black internationalism is by no means caged by the literal or imagined territory of Africa, and that all of humanity is, in a sense, part of an African diaspora.²⁷ The radiation of new thought in the field of diaspora studies, becoming prominent in academic discourse in the early 2000s, ironically mirrors the cultural radiation of Hiplife and its North American forbearer Hip-Hop. I posit that the cultural and academic assertion of the value, merit and utility of global black production, coinciding with both technological advancements (music video technology, the advent of the internet, online streaming) and dramatic shifts in politics (the re-democratization of Ghana) attest to the inherent politicization of global black productions. A reading of the diasporic impact of Ghana’s independence underscores this point.

²⁵ Ibid 2001. P 194
Music in Ghana’s Independence

Ghana, the first African nation to win its independence, has a rich and important history in which music plays no minor role. In pursuit of a national identity, the first president, Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah, plotted out a cultural renaissance.\textsuperscript{28} To restore what he referred to as “the African personality” Nkrumah pulled from various scholars of African descent throughout Europe and the Americas. One central tenant of his reform was the advancement of Highlife, a musical genre that itself had been influenced by the presence and style of West Indian brass bands traveling with British colonial armies. Under Nkrumah Highlife became a symbol of Ghanaian nationalism and cultural independence.\textsuperscript{29} Nkrumah’s platform for political, social and cultural independence from imperial structures lead to the formation of Ghana’s first “Highlife” orchestra and served as the catalyst for public arts education programs aimed at creating a national culture.\textsuperscript{30} Ghanaian artists began utilizing the brass instruments and musical techniques of soldiers from Europe and the West Indies while pulling from other entertainment mediums like vaudeville and minstrelsy that were gaining popularity along Ghana’s coast and into the Southern part of the country.\textsuperscript{31} Exposure to these foreign mediums and approaches to performance added new sounds and rhythms to the Ghanaian musical vocabulary.

Musicologists who consider the performance similarities and general impact of Jazz era African-American music on the African continent posit that one factor leading to the rapid acculturation of music from the ‘Black West’ into the Ghanaian soundscape was the idea of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{31} Op Cit. 2005: 17
\end{thebibliography}
cultural feedback or sonic “homecomings”. Polyrhythm, apparent in most musical forms throughout the African diaspora, can be traced to West Africa. With Ghana being a major export point throughout the Transatlantic slave trade, it is plausible that many of the approaches to sound popularized by enslaved Africans throughout the West came from a distant cultural memory. Whether the similarities are due to the retention of Africanisms or individual creative responses to similar colonial situations, the sometimes subtle familiarity between the sounds of the ‘Black West’ and that of Ghana contributed to the acceptance of those sounds into Ghanaian popular culture. Foreign musical forms were gradually adopted into Ghanaian society and thus Africanized which resulted in new, distinctly Ghanaian musical forms.

The aesthetics of swing music, which was popular among Western soldiers during the Second World War, led to a transition from large dance orchestras to small “jazz-combo sized bands.” After the war there was an influx of nationalistic ideas towards political and social independence that influenced a “self-conscious Africanization” of popular culture. Nkrumah was a vocal proponent of Ghanaian music and the entertainment sector that supported his early political efforts. ET Mensah, whose Tempos band was one of the first smaller highlife dance ensembles, released “Ghana Freedom” on the album Day by Day shortly after Nkrumah was

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36 Ibid 2005: 17
37 Ibid 2005: 21- 22
elected in 1957. The lyrics celebrated the recent political achievement and praised Kwame Nkrumah as the star of Ghana:

Ghana we now have freedom/Ghana Land of Freedom (Hallelujah!)
Cause of the brave and the sweat of their labors
Cause of the brave we have brought results
Kwame Star of Ghana/Nkrumah star of Ghana.\(^{38}\)

For Nkrumah and other Ghanaian activists of the time, cultural renaissance within the nation-state was a crucial element of opposition to the invasive colonial culture that had plagued the territory under British rule. Independence meant both political sovereignty and freedom from the British residuals of a culture of invasion.\(^{39}\) Nkrumah’s cultural policy can be understood in terms of two main categories: statutory and non-statutory: statutory policy refers to those set forth and proctored by the various committees and institutions Nkrumah set up and non-statutory considers the practical activities introduced by Nkrumah himself.\(^{40}\) Nkrumah’s non-statutory interventions on national culture were not created independent of standing traditions, in most cases non-statutory policy reprioritized public performance of the African personality through an embrace of tradition.

Nkrumah was not the only Ghanaian intellectual concerned with cultural liberation. Predating Nkrumah’s rise to power, the foundation for a canon of creative and intellectual works that rejected colonialism were being laid. Nkrumah’s main political opponent J.B. Danquah, for example, was a scholar of Akan traditions and wrote folklore in his regional language as a form of protest.\(^{41}\) As early as the 1920s, cultural activists like Ephraim Amu were returning from

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\(^{38}\) Mensah, E.T. 1957. “Ghana Freedom”
travel to the West, no longer comfortable living among imperial residue.\textsuperscript{42} Amu is of particular importance for his work with African Music. Out of his study of the language and aesthetic of traditional African music he reified the genre of African choral music which became a cornerstone of Ghanaian Christian worship service (that later grew into the demand for popular gospel music on local radio that emerged alongside Hiplife in the early 1990s).\textsuperscript{43}

The specific performative elements of Nkrumah’s non-statutory policy were prevalent at both the personal and public levels of the new president’s control. In public, he accessorized himself with symbols that gestured towards the secular and religious roles of Ghana’s kings and queens: a white handkerchief, a horsetail, a walking stick. Aligning himself with both royalty and wisdom, Nkrumah showed reverence for traditional hegemony.\textsuperscript{44} Nkrumah, who had received degrees in economics, sociology and a bachelors in sacred theology from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania was licensed to preach and publically embraced traditional religion.\textsuperscript{45} This controversial performance of a spiritual duality was meant to illustrate that there was a place for Ghanaian ancestral knowledge in a modern world.

Nkrumah also opened public spaces for the practice of African traditional forms of entertainment like drumming and dance. His statutory policy then survived to regiment this inclusion of various regional performative traditions, collectively forming the canon of Ghanaian music dance and drama and giving it its own spaces, setting and parameters for its function and maintenance. The National Theater, The Arts Council of Ghana, and The Institute of Art and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{42} Op. Cit 2004: 151 \\
\textsuperscript{43} Op. Cit 2004: 151 \\
\textsuperscript{44} Op. Cit 2004: 152 \\
Culture were the three main branches of statutory policy. Out of these three wings came an outpour of creative works, trade and educational opportunities. From the Institute of Art and Culture at the University of Ghana, Legon came the Institute of African Studies and the School of Music and Drama. These were the first models of their kind in contemporary Africa. Nkrumah’s cultural policy was strongly symbolic but his platform faltered in its articulation of the Ghanaian socio-economic conditions which, possibly, foreshadows the dissent that led to his fall.

Deconstructing Ghanaian National Culture

As illustrated by the attention and government funds devoted to public and performative elements of Ghanaian national culture under Nkrumah, national identities are not innate and rely greatly on practice and representation. Stuart Hall argues in “The Question of Cultural Identity” that a nation is as much a “system of cultural representations” as it is a political entity. As present in the Ghanaian case, nations are typically detached euro-originated borders imposed on a collection of varied traditional communities. One of the factors that drew Nkrumah to Highlife was the fact that it transcended tribal ownership, it was a music so propelled by Afro-diasporic innovation that it could not be attributed to any specific ethnic group. The idea of an all-consuming national culture is in itself a homogenizing platform onto which modernity is built. It is an umbrella under which all preexisting cultures are held and often compromised.

Hall writes that sustaining a nation requires: 1) a narrative of nation making, the birth of national symbolism and rhetoric; 2) the high appraisal of origins, tradition and timelessness; 3) an invented tradition that emerges out of the narrative yet masquerades as ancestral; 4) a foundational mythology around which a typically fragmented people can find an alternative narrative of rupture (often manifest as colonial trauma); and 5) the conception of a purist, original folk community. These five characteristics can be found in US Black Nationalist, Pan-Africanist and early iterations of diasporic ideologies. This highlights the ways that the nation-state, even within its political borders, remains an imagined community.

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Nation, particularly in the Ghanaian case, remains in definition and practice diasporic. Nkrumah’s Ghana was built through the strategic and imaginative coalescence of 20th century Pan-African ideology, Black Nationalist theory, and global black history. Educated abroad and heavily influenced by his time in America and Europe, Nkrumah as a teacher prior to becoming a political leader was pre-occupied with the idea of Pan-Africanism as route to African liberation. Ghana was named for an ancient West African kingdom north of the colonial “Gold Coast” in parts of modern day Mali. The new country’s flag was a collection of symbols pulled in part from Ethiopia and the central ‘black star’ from Jamaican Black Nationalist icon Marcus Garvey. Nkrumah’s class privilege and access to education abroad afforded him a cultural dexterity that his knowledge of the ills of colonial and imperialist power shaped into an exacting syncretism of modernity and traditionalism. Nkrumah’s experience abroad also led him to prioritize the idea of transnational racial affinity, in fact it was exposure to the lives and work of black folks throughout the diaspora that enriched his politico-cultural perspective. I am again brought to Gilroy’s understanding that spurts of transnational movement are the norm and not the exception of the Black Atlantic experience. When considering the lives of Hiplife artists and even the trajectory of the African diaspora discourse itself, the shifting geographies of black bodies and the intellectual and cultural property they carry negate the nationalistic pre-occupation with absolute origins and authenticity. Nkrumah’s ideology cannot be separated

52 Garvey’s ‘Blackstar Line’ was a proposed fleet of steamships to empower the repatriation of African descendants o the African Continent. While his mission never came to fruition and his legacy marred by allegations of fraud, Garvey still stands as a Pan-Africanist hero and visionary.
54 Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2001. ‘The Uses of Diaspora’, Social Text, 19(1 66)
from his studies and travels; this is one of the ways that we can understand his nationalistic project as inherently diasporic.

In *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*, Jemima Pierre states that Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanist cultural orientation functioned as a “discursive response to a structural post-colonial dilemma.” Pierre asserts that within the British colonial infrastructure there existed a firm hegemonic distinction between the ‘civil society’ of the European ruler and the nativist system of culture and customs. This distinction remains present in post-colonial Ghana as the Pan-Africanist cultural agenda was advanced through Nkrumah’s Conventional People’s Party propaganda and non-statutory policy while the economic reality of the young nation retained its exploitative ties to Western imperialism. Despite the rhetoric and practice of ‘Africanization’ in some political sectors, Ghana in the years predating its independence had not been afforded the opportunity to establish its own base of capital. Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanist project required millions of government funds for travel and intercontinental aid. Without substantial Ghanaian investment the country remained dependent on foreign investment. Pan-Africanism, with no formal engagement with the racial implications of Ghana’s economic dependence on the UK and later the US, turned to a cosmetic Africanization that ultimately halted its own decolonization process.

While the Afro-diasporic orientation of Nkrumah’s cultural policies made them aesthetically antagonistic to the political and cultural imposition of indirect British colonial rule, Nkrumah’s political demise could be in part attributed to the fact that his nationalism was more

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56 Ibid 2013: 40- 42
57 Ibid 2013: 47
58 Ibid 2013: 50
concerned with transnational legibility and the creation of a national symbolism than it was with the lived reality, and immediate needs, of his citizens. In its mid-20th century infancy, the Ghanaian nation’s inability to completely divorce itself from western imposition was symptomatic of the European colonial project. The Ghanaian dependency on foreign economic intervention, despite its commitment to a new African integrity, speaks to the strategic colonial devastation of continental Africa and emphasizes the need for a dynamic and thorough conception of the African diaspora.

This chasm between rhetoric and reality does not disembowel Nkrumah’s efforts. Often touted as a visionary, Nkrumah designed a Ghana that could serve as a lighthouse for the African diaspora and embody a broad vision of African unity. This vision, paired with the political structure of a democratic republic, built a platform predicated on cultural production and international exchange.
Migration in and out of Ghana

Hiplife is a Ghanaian national product that is heavily influenced by out-migration and return. It troubles trends within African diaspora studies that bind analysis of cultural production to a hierarchy of origins. Engaging Hiplife and Hip-Hop as diasporic inventions requires a theoretical bridge between the African diaspora and the transnational production of culture. Here, I interpret transnationalism as both a condition and a process that deals with two distinct spheres of social movement.

The significance of Ghana’s independence for African-American’s domestic fights for civil liberties is evidenced by the volume and political activity of African-American expatriates in Ghana throughout the decade immediately following independence. The presence of African-American academic, political and cultural figures in Ghana between 1957 and 1967 speaks to the spirit of pan-African collaboration at the heart of the Ghanaian nation-state. For example, W.E.B Du Bois a preeminent black intellectual who was born in America to African-American parents, carried with him an awareness of the middle passage, traveled voluntarily throughout Europe, and ended his life in Ghana having developed a political relationship with Nkrumah who commissioned him for the Encyclopedia Africana.

The W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Center for Pan-African Culture, located in Ghana’s capital city Accra, is itself a destination for tourists both of the African diaspora and not. Beyond the stretch of large white exterior walls there is a courtyard that houses a building clearly remodeled over time to accommodate the needs of tourists. Formerly Du Bois’ residence, the

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60 A comprehensive compendium of "scientific" knowledge about the history, cultures, and social institutions of people of African descent: of Africans in the Old World, African Americans in the New World, and persons of African descent who had risen to prominence in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Du Bois died before completing the project.
main building functions as a museum. At the close of each tour the group is lead outside of the main house and into a circular mausoleum where Du Bois is laid to rest under a pallet of marble, his wife’s urn standing to his left on a carved wooden pedestal. The room is lined with Ashanti stools, the roof built to resemble a spider web in tribute to his wisdom, symbolically aligning him with Anansi, the West African god/trickster figure with the knowledge of all stories who often takes the form of a spider. In addition to tours and various cultural events, the center also hosts monthly meetings for the African-American Association of Ghana. Du Bois’ presence in Ghana literally facilitates diaspora. Du Bois, the Pan-Africanist ex-patriot, was among several African-Americans granted dual citizenship in Ghana during the early days of the new republic.

The solidification of the Ghanaian nation-state and the movement of nationals, both foreign and domestic, into and out of its borders forces us to ask: what is meant by the term ‘transnational’ and what is its relationship to ‘diaspora’? Defined by Randolph Bourne in 1916, transnationalism first appeared as a rejection of the popular assimilationist ‘melting pot’ theory prevalent in discourse surrounding immigration post-World War I. Bourne asserted that a person’s nationality was less about where they found themselves and more about their “spiritual country” and the culture they brought from it. Since 1916 transnationalism has evolved as a social and economic phenomenon involving a trade system that is not solely based around the parameters of any given nation. Transnationalism allows for the retention of the spiritual country in service of new global unities. I use transnationalism to describe the movement of ideas, culture and people across geographical boundaries and across time. My definition abstracts Bourne’s consideration of the imagined community of the distant homeland or the spiritual

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62 Ibid 1916
country; I place less focus on the notion of fixed national homes to focus more on how spiritual countries are defined and lived out by communities themselves. I employ transnationalism to suggest the possibility of transgression.\textsuperscript{63} What African diaspora encompasses that both internationalism and transnationalism do not account for is the productive capacity of disjuncture present in language and experience that shapes and deepens discourse on global blackness.\textsuperscript{64}

Focusing on the life and writing of W.E.B Du Bois, Gilroy echoes Bourne’s idea of the spiritual country as it is separated from the actual geographic territory it references in the consciousness of a diasporic people. Initially, Du Bois’ understanding of modernity did not include the African continent and relied instead on ‘Africa’ as an archived symbol of cultural innocence.\textsuperscript{65} Making Africa central to his early anthropological studies of blackness uncased the myth and catalyzed his engagement with global black politics. This early Pan-Africanism joined a legacy of subversive black political organizing in response to the premise of displacement often attributed directly to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.\textsuperscript{66} Gilroy states that “movement, relocation, displacement and restlessness are the norms rather than the exceptions” in the history of the black Atlantic.\textsuperscript{67} This conceptualization of a transient global black community, a black Atlantic, acknowledges and confronts the political utility of borders. By framing the Atlantic Ocean as the site of African diasporic identity making, Gilroy redresses the historical violence committed against the African continent and the black bodies and that built and supported the territories that their descendants currently occupy. Present now is a dual displacement: the recollection of

\textsuperscript{63} This is different from ‘internationalism’ – a term used to describe movement across nation-states and the literal movement of bodies within the African diaspora.
\textsuperscript{64} Edwards, Brent Hayes.2001. ‘The Uses of Diaspora’, Social Text, 19(1 66): 53
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid 1993: 114
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid 1993: 133
forced homelessness through the middle passage and the lived experience of otherness in the western host country.

I invoke the term diaspora to describe 1) the literal movement of peoples of African descent between western localities and the African continent; 2) the literal movement of Ghanaian people (through exile, labor-related migration, leisure travel, return); and 3) the transnational flow of music and culture throughout the “spiritual territory” of the Black Atlantic.

One significant moment of literal migration was that of delegates from newly independent African countries to the United States of America in the 1960s. This movement can be described as international in that its political significance lies in being directly related to movement from a newly solidified nation-state to another nation where Africans expected to be marginalized. Skinner says many came, informed by news reports on the devastation of Jim Crow, prepared to face racial violence. These African delegates came to the United States prepared to assert themselves against violent racism and had their assumptions about American race relations troubled by the differential treatment they received from white Americans. What they had thought to be inescapable American racism showed them its nicer liberal shadow. As stated earlier there was a huge class distinction. The vast majority of Ghanaians in the US in the 1960s were students and diplomats. Even when encountering some level of racial violence it could be attributed to anti (-American) blackness and the failure of the assailant to fully acknowledge their African distinction, this realization, Skinner says, bred a resentment for African-Americans.  

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In Ghana, there was slight skepticism about African-Americans traveling to the country in the 1960s working as “agents” for whiteness. This was symptomatic of a pervasive paranoia and rightful hyper-sensitivity to any hints of neo-colonialism.

Here privilege became a marker in the distinction between transnational and international movement within the diaspora. The internationalist experiences of African democrats in the 60s foregrounds the experiences of Ghanaians in privileged exile in the 1980s-90s who had access and mobility to escape the military regime and found voice in new black cultural forms as they learned to navigate the territories to which they expatriated. While I am marking the movement of Africans of some social, economic and political standing as “internationalist,” I consider the rearticulation of the black cultural forms they were exposed to while traversing the black Atlantic into Europe and the United States of America to be transnational in that the adoption of black movement and sound, particularly that of an underclass counter-culture, transgresses boundaries of language, class and the nation-state. The black Atlantic becomes a home for differences and translation. These cultural distinctions in conversation with one another are what transform black cultural production into something with the ability to transcend physical and temporal borders. The apparent political fragmentation speaks to ‘declage’ as a framework for diaspora outlined by Edwards and complicates ideas of hybridity and the generalized sense of Pan-African ‘oneness’.

Despite these growing political tensions, there were ever-present cultural transmissions that retained the ethos of Gilroy’s black Atlantic.

Interactions between Ghanaian and African-Americans are not singularly facilitated by the agency of people of African descent. The US government was involved in bringing many African-American artists to the African continent as more nations started working towards

independence. This started partly as propaganda to discourage relationships between African
countries and communist nations.71 The U.S Information Agency (USIA) in Ghana launched a
cultural defense highlighting African-American progress to United States’ international
reputation for racialized violence and legislation.72 During the year of independence, the USIA
and its campaign to influence the terms of solidarity between Africans and African Americans,
produced a picture exhibit in the windows of its central Accra office entitled “Africans in the
United States.”

The political utility of Ghanaian-African American solidarity – and the strategic
employment of a one-sided and prosperous African-American experience that catalyzed the
Africanization of popular culture – speaks to the legacy of aesthetic emulation that Hiplife
inherits. Like the presence of West Indian soldiers in colonial armies, the influx of Black music
makers in Ghana in the 1960s subsequently inspired Ghanaian artists across the country in a
spirit of pan-African cultural independence from the ‘White West’ at a time when the American
Civil Rights movement was parallel to Ghana’s independence struggle.74 As a part of the 1971
Independence Day celebration, Ghana hosted the “Soul to Soul” concert in Accra at Black Star
Square:

... Artists were affected. Guitar players in particular were inspired by Santana it seems,
and Wilson Pickett’s stagecraft, lyricism, and jumpsuit. The newspapers called him “Soul
Brother No. 2,” after James Brown of course. And Ike and Tina’s sexuality, their

United States: University of Chicago Press: 165
73 Heger, Kenneth W. 1999. ‘Race Relations in the United States and American Cultural and
Informational Programs in Ghana.’ Prologue Magazine: 6
incredible back and forth vocal and guitar exchanges, movement on stage. The concert had a Pan-African message of Black empowerment.\textsuperscript{75} “Soul to Soul” invoked the spirit of Nkrumah’s Ghana. The concert propagated trends in dress, dance, and music. Ghanaian artists performing alongside African-Americans offered an aesthetic of cultural brotherhood that built on the spirit of Garveyite Pan-Africanism that inspired much of Nkrumah’s foreign policy.\textsuperscript{76} For African-Americans it was a literal and figurative re-connection to the African continent that echoed and reinforced the rise of the Black Power movement and Afro-centricism in the US. For Ghanaians, it showcased the opportunity for the transnational mobility of black/Africanized art forms.

Following this moment in Ghanaian cultural history came a trend of Africanized Western pop-music giving rise to Afro-Rock, Afro-Soul, and Afro-beat. The early 1970s marked the highpoint of localized Ghanaian musical production.\textsuperscript{77} But this peak was followed by a sharp decline as a result of widespread economic collapse that halted record manufacturing and forced a shift from live nighttime performances spaces to televised concert series.\textsuperscript{78} The political and economic state of Ghana in the mid to late 70s sparked a mass migration of Ghanaians. Ghanaian artist creating in a Western context started a new cycle of African fusion in popular music that was then imported back into Ghana starting with techno-infused Burgher Higlife.

1979 was the year of Ghana’s June 4\textsuperscript{th} Uprising: the fourth hostile transition of government since the 1967 National Liberation Council (NLC) coup that overthrew Nkrumah. In 1979, the Supreme Military Council (virtually a reorganization of the National Liberation Council that assumed power in 1972) led by General F. K. Akuffo was ousted by military official

\textsuperscript{76} Op. Cit. 2005: 24
\textsuperscript{77} Op. Cit. 2005: 25
\textsuperscript{78} Op. Cit. 2005: 26
organized on behalf of the then incarcerated flight Lieutenant J.J. Rawlings. June 4th 1979 stands in a legacy of economically fueled political instability in Ghana. Since the decline of Nkrumah in the years leading up the NLC coup d’etat, Ghana had been grappling with national food shortages and high unemployment. Overbearing and seemingly inescapable poverty, juxtaposed against the erasure of Nkrumah’s unity politics, can be said to have created a social climate in which Ghanaians turned away from the imagined possibility of effective democracy which had created space for the reception and support of military leaders. Ghana’s political and economic instability shut down localized production of entertainment and the harsh social policies of military regimes shutdown local performance venues.

J.J. Rawlings assumed power in Ghana the same year the Sugar Hill Gang “up jumped the boogie” into commercial success (while the globalization of world trade decreased domestic labor opportunities in the US, leading to the skyrocketing of black unemployment rates). In 1978, 30.6 percent of black families in the United States were living beneath the poverty line. That same year the devastating IMF and World Bank policies present in Ghana spawned a wave of economically motivated immigration from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean to metropolitan localities like France, England, Germany and the US.

Ten years earlier in 1967, Clive Campbell emigrated with his family from Kingston, Jamaica to Bronx, New York. Merging his familiarity with Jamaican Sound System culture with the soundscape of early 1970s New York, young Campbell became DJ Kool Herc, a disk jockey and party promoter whose deconstructionist approach to stimulating a crowd birthed a new genre.

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of black expressive culture: Hip-Hop. The burgeoning New York City ethnoscape facilitated the radiation of this moment. At its foundation, Hip-Hop is sonic diaspora produced to accompany black movement that is both transnational and rhythmic. We can employ diaspora here as what Butler suggests is a way to think about community formation, a way to arrange difference.\(^81\) Hip-Hop is community formed from the conditional proximity of multiple, distinct and marginalized cultures present in the American inner city at the end of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Commercial Hip-Hop as an extension of sonic diaspora suggest that there is something inherently attractive and entertaining about collective blackness – that blackness somehow lends itself across language and border to something commercially digestible. I posit that blackness as vehicle for entertainment speaks to the ways racialized oppression seeks to own and cannot kill: how the black body cannot beat quiet, and how black resistance and survival is ultimately still capital.

At the genesis of Hip-Hop culture lies the “break”. The moment a beat is sonically interrupted by the past. By isolating and extending the most heavily percussive part of popular songs, Herc invented “the merry-go-round,” a loop of breaks played at the height of the party. This moment created a musical space to support “break-boys” and “break-girls.”\(^82\) Herc’s breaks also contributed to the language and flow of lyrical accompaniment that grew into Hip-Hop’s rap lyricism. These “breaks” from tradition are rooted in the contemporary composer, musician or artist’s need to live and create in his own century’s world of ideas and developments in science, and respond to trends in intercultural communications.\(^83\) By nature Hip-Hop is not a truly

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iconoclast musical genre; rather, it is the latest advent in the natural progression of musical
growth that uses it’s bearings in the sounds of the past as the platform off which a new medium
is erected. The continuity of Jamaican sound system skills were met with the creativity and
culture of survival of the Bronx. This circuit of sonic transmission was first in a cyclical series of
cultural developments within Hip-Hop.

Hiplife is also representative of a generational “break”. Hiplife emerged as a move away
from the aesthetic of national purity present in Nkrumah-era Highlife and a blatant subversion of
the “culture of silence” that had been propagated by decades of military rule.84 Following the
1992 elections and return to democracy, Ghana, under the continued authority of J.J Rawlings,
was poised to become a full democracy. The new constitution stated:

There shall be no impediments to the establishment of private press or media; and in
particular, there shall be no law requiring any person to obtain a license a prerequisite to
the establishment or operation of a newspaper, journal or other media for the mass
communication or information.85

The culture of silence that had been instituted by a fear politic that sought to quiet any and all
opposition to the military regime was not easy to break. Several academic pushes against the
cultural sanctity of Rawlings’ Provisional National Defense Committee (PNDC) in defense of
the Ghanaian peoples’ right to public opinion gained cultural clout in the late 80s. This discourse
on public speech led to the establishment of private radio broadcasts which started off as political
but ultimately opened up the market for localized musical content which had been impossible
since the mid-70s.86 The emergence of this early 90s market spoke to a new generation of
listeners no longer satiated with the nationalistic and highly instrumental Highlife. Exposure to

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Research & Publications: 157
85 Article 162, 3.
North American and European Hip-Hop through the import of records and visual material, often coming into the country on the backs of Ghanaian returnees, introduced a new language and approach to the Ghanaian soundscape and thus the ‘Hip’ of Hip-Hop met the ‘Life’ of Highlife and HiLife was born.

Following J.J. Rawlings transition to democratic president, the implementation of IMF backed “Structural Adjustment Programs” supported the privatization of local means of production and disbursal. This privatization of media created a market for local content that was filled by Ghanaian gospel music and HiLife. Ghana reopened its own means of cultural production, at the same time theorists of diaspora studies were publishing pivotal essays, books and anthologies. As Ghana returned to democracy, its expatriated artists regained intimate access to their own ‘national’ cultural products and thus began another transnational flow of production. HiLife, a genre that is hybrid even in its naming, inherits a legacy of transgressed borders and cultural liberation deeply tied to the political and intellectual environment of the times.

Throughout all these distinct moments in history, global blackness has retained its fluidity, which is why any discussion that obsesses over origins and authenticity is potentially misguided. In considering the possibilities of Africanism and cultural feedback there are no solid conclusions. I prefer to focus on the ways global black populations have been in conversation with each other and the space this dialogue creates for new understandings of diaspora.

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Migration in and out of the United States via New York

I am interested in the impact that the transnational movement of black bodies has had on the politicization of popular music both on the African continent and throughout the black West. Within Hip-Hop and Hiplife culture we see both Africa and (African-) America functioning as symbols. The mythology of these two very real and disparate social and cultural context brings them across the Atlantic, speaking to each other as responses to the displacement that Gilroy states is endemic of the global black condition. Some questions: what does it mean for the Grandfather of Hip-Hop to be a Jamaican immigrant? What does it mean when The Jungle Brothers – MCs from New York City known as pioneers of the sonic break within Hip-Hop to incorporate jazz – proclaim to be “Straight out the Jungle?” When New York becomes Jungle and, thus, metaphor for various cultural manifestations poverty as articulated by Grandmaster Flash’s “Message,” what (if any) are the implications of that metaphor on the African continent which, in the American imagination, holds the world’s jungles? Does the correlation between the inner city jungle and stereotypical notions of Africa bring the two localities closer, or just further instigate their incommunicable distance?

One of Hip-Hop’s elder statesmen who was creating and organizing alongside Herc in the 1980s was Afrika Bambaataa. Bambaataa’s foundational presence in Hip-Hop is another testament to the culture’s implicit diasporic orientation. Bambaataa was awarded an opportunity to travel to the African continent after competing in an essay competition in high school. The South Bronx native’s experience abroad, paired with his parent’s background in the Black Liberation Movement, inspiration found in the 1964 film Zulu, and general discontent with the

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state of his community, led to the creation of the Universal Zulu Nation.\textsuperscript{89} On top of producing one of the most fundamental Hop-Hop tracks (“Planet Rock” in 1982) the Zulu Nation housed a collective of politically and socially engaged MCs, break-dancers and graffiti artists. Bambaataa’s Zulu Nation was purposefully positioned as an alternative to gang violence in the South Bronx.\textsuperscript{90} The Zulu Nation’s Afrocentric was grounded in Bambaataa’s knowledge of the African continent. While the exact country of Bambaataa’s initial visit is unclear, an interest in South Africa rings loudest in his self-naming and aesthetic. For Bambaataa, Africa functions as both a literal geographic (historical situated) location and an inspired symbol for the possibility of black strength, unity and resistance. The cultural magnitude of the first recognized Hip-Hop organization being referred to as the Zulu Nation while promoting an Afro-conscious alternative to black identity is important. Its linking of infrastructural desolation (via the Cross-Bronx Express Way) with social deviance (via the prevalence of gang violence and crack cocaine) is what informed groups like The Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest. The Bronx also housed an early tension in Hip-Hop’s cultural formation. The centrality of West Indian migrants to New York City and within Hip-Hop as evidenced by Kool Herc forced cultural syncretism that became a marker of trans-local black existence. The push and pull between the nuanced cultures of Kingston and the Bronx, both facing their own level of infrastructural desolation, was an early signifier of Hip-Hop’s diasporic foundations.

\textit{Call and Response: KRS-1 Criminal Minded 1987}

KRS-1 who has cemented his place among Hip-Hop purist unabashedly pulling from Afro-centric rhetoric in his later years, released Criminal Minded in 1987, an imaginative street report that made use of the linguistic overlap of slang, vocabulary, and even accent between New

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\textsuperscript{89} Ibid 2011
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York and the Caribbean. Perhaps it started when Jamaican immigrant Kool Herc moved to The Bronx and was forced by cultural attitudes towards West Indians to lose his accent. Disregarding the American cultural reverence of vinyl, Herc destructed records. Pulling break beats from funk tracks; in other words, manipulating tracks like a Jamaican sound system DJ thus giving birth to Hip-Hop. Less than 20 years after the antagonistic relationship between Black Americans and Black Jamaicans forced Herc to abandon his Jamaican accent, KRS-1 and Boogie Down Productions released Criminal Minded. One infamous cut from the album is “The Bridge is Over.” The Bronx natives’ Hip-Hop diss track is so Jamaican sounding it is hard to believe there was ever any animosity between the two cultures. The track, driven by a bassline sampled from a 1986 Supercat song, features KRS-1 rapping in an almost seamless Jamaican accent, humming a popular riddim. In “.9 mm Goes Bang” KRS delivers a street life narrative typical of modern gangster rap, but with a Jamaican intonation lighter than that used in “The Bridge is Over” and lyrics like “his posse tried to kill me” he connects the everyday stories of African Americans in the ghetto to the Jamaican culture that was taking New York by storm. On Another track on the same album, “P is Free”, KRS-1 brings out his Jamaican accent again and shouts out “BDP Posse” using a very Jamaican musical styling to discuss the very American crack epidemic of the 1980s.

*Call and Response: The Jungle Brothers Straight Out The Jungle 1988*

The Jungle Brothers claim ‘Jungle’ as a direct affront to the capitalist orientation of “mainstream” Hip-Hop. I use scare quotes around mainstream to acknowledge that it is the same commercial mechanism supporting the “mainstream” that ultimately gives The Jungle Brothers (and the rest of the Native Tongues collective) a platform for dissent. When saying “mainstream” I am also referring to the aesthetics and sound of Hip-Hop in the mid to late-80s that was
influenced by the image of the “crack dealer.” As the 1984 crack epidemic swept through post-industrial New York, the crack dealer evolved as an urban icon of prosperity. An unabashed rebuff to Reagan, the crack dealer achieved prosperity in spite of an American national policy of destitution.\textsuperscript{91} But despite the flash and glamour of the hyper-individualist crack dealer, crack-cocaine had a devastating impact on New York City. The prosperity afforded to the dealers and the Hip-Hop artist who emulate their style is in stark contrast to the death and destitution that pervaded their communities.

The niche sound occupied by The Jungle Brothers during the late-1980s was that of a counter-‘crack’ sense of black selfhood. This conception of selfhood promoted Afrocentric as a way to look past the social devastation of the late 70s and 80s towards a sense of black possibility. The rejection of mainstream aesthetics (the denouncement of gold chains in favor of black medallions, dashikis, kufis, and an array of symbols of African affiliation that could be procured from street markets at booths managed by African immigrants) signaled a sartorial turn to diaspora.

Hip-Hop culture by and large has been aesthetically influenced by rearticulations of foreign trends, be they foreign by continent or by class. Even more mainstream Hip-Hop artists and consumers in 1980s New York were sporting European name brands like Gucci, Versace, and MCM reprinted as clothing and other custom items by Dapper Dan, an African immigrant trained as a tailor working out of Harlem.\textsuperscript{92} Prominent Hip-Hop scholar Tricia Rose names Hip-Hop’s appropriation of the commodity market as the “continued ‘Afro-Americanization’ of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[92] Op. Cit 2011
\end{footnotes}
contemporary commercial culture.” The rearticulation of class markers in the ‘mainstream’ and of African garb by the Native Tongues are both attempts at this ‘Afro-Americanization.’ In a way, this is the aesthetic manifestation of cultural diaspora. Like Hip-Hop artists who were reimagining the uses of their technological training in the post-industrial age and led to the invention of Hip-Hop’s basic tools, the African immigrants who were styling this culture found new use for their skills and imported wares.

The Jungle Brothers and the rest of the Native Tongues (De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Black Sheep, and others) embraced both the style and imagery of Africa. The name of the collective was ripped from a 1971 record by The New Birth entitled “African Cry.” The song talks about “the whole black African tribe” being taken and separated from its customs through the middle passage, the “African nation” being transplanted to a plantation and then led throughout the saga of black history and ultimately ends with a rallying cry of “right on!” in the spirit of “we shall overcome.” While this is an unorthodox sonic ‘break’ for the Native Tongues who are known for their trademark use of jazz sampling in contrast to the disco and funk ‘breaks’ of their forefathers, it grounds their symbolic evocation of Africa which we hear again in the title track of The Jungle Brothers’ first album.

“Straight out the Jungle” begins:

Educated man, from the motherland
You see, they call me a star but that’s not what I am
I'm a jungle brother, a true, blue brother
And I've been to many places you'll never discover
Step to my side, suckers run and hide
Africa's in the house, they get petrified

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Africa here is double entendre and means both the continent and the stage name, Afrika Baby Bam, of the MC (note that this is a direct and intentional reference to Afrika Bambaataa). This connection to the African “motherland” is evoked as a marker of authenticity and ironically has no grounding in the reality of modern Africa. However, as a matter of language and verbal representation, the prevalence of Afrocentric rhetoric in the early 90s Hip-Hop records served as a welcome and source text for Ghanaian youth, displaced by both physical blackness in a white space and a level of intraracial cultural otherness coming from the conspicuous nature of Ghanaian identity within the American conception of blackness that, by the mid-1990s, had been projected across the Atlantic (though Hip-Hop) and narrowly accepted as the standard.
African-American Exceptionalism and Diaspora as Counter Framework

A focus on nationalism in the African-American cultural and intellectual narrative flirts with an imperial strategy that values strict territorial boundaries of the nation-state and imposes a separatist hierarchy that understate the communal flow of diaspora in favor of American exceptionalism. Gilroy’s interpretation of this nationalism subverts the liminal reality of global black experience for tidy myths of ownership which is to say that in pursuit of a fixed national identity, African-Americans stake absolute claim to black figures in cultural production (heroes, theorists, artists) that are the product of voluntary and involuntary black movement and dialogue throughout the diaspora. Nationalism heralds the intellectual property of historically significant African-Americans without taking into account the ways those people physically and intellectually engaged with cultures and theorists across the diaspora.

Accounts of slavery in the United States of America offer a useful example through which to examine the importance of movement across national boundaries for African American identity. Popularized within the United States, the Slave Narrative genre of autobiography indexes trans-local diasporas that do not always contest the boundaries of the nation-state. It is in fact those boundaries that shape nationalized understandings of freedom and mobility. Enslaved Africans must escape from the south into northern territories. They must follow the North Star beyond the Mason-Dixon line. The boundaries of North American states are what

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97 Diasporic consciousness was present in the work of 17th and 18th century writers like West African-Britons Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano, and Peruvian Jose Manuel Valdes who directly defined themselves in relation to an international black community by way of the transatlantic slave trade. These proto-Diasporic narratives reflected the maritime experiences of enslaved Africans as well as issues of settlement and navigating new host countries. It is interesting to note that while these narratives and other of the time make some mention of the United States of America, they are grounded in other localities.
make and deny freedom. There remained a desire to cross boundaries alongside the threat of being pulled back into servitude. The Compromise of 1850 and its accompanying Fugitive Slave Act prevented the spread of slavery to the northern colonies by legally forcing the North to actively protect the southern slave system by mandating the return of any escaped property. This was a historical re-articulation of the boundaries of freedom in America. African-Americans were legally denied access to the nation. I argue that African-American exceptionalism is a hyper-corrective response to this institutional captivity and exclusion from nationhood.

Black American exceptionalism represents an attempt to claim parts of the North American nation-state. It follows the logic that those who built a nation would want to define their centrality to its existence. As described by Stuart Hall, American exceptionalism redressed as “popular authoritarianism” is the result of calculated political processes of the nation-state designed to harp on difference to abate socio-political resistance and advance a neo-imperialist agenda.98

African-American exceptionalism attempts to redress the tools of the master and risk discounting the maritime experiences of people of African descent in the early 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Reducing diasporic understanding to the exceptionalist perspective buys into the cultural binary set forth by institutions centered on the political, economic and social boundaries of a given nation-state. African-American exceptionalism in Diaspora Studies risks mythologizing the true history of the black Atlantic. From an African-American exceptionalist perspective, the stories of Equiano, Cuagno, and Valdes – all radical black thinkers educated and published outside of the US before the 20th century – are met with skepticism routed in the fact

that popular American discourse considers slavery to be a sedentary condition.\textsuperscript{99} The slave that traverses the sea and lives to tell the tale (or even earns his freedom as a seafarer) is such a peculiarity to the exceptionalist that the exceptionalist is likely to discredit the narrative.

A Black Atlantic ocean is a modern and virtually imagined territory for the popularized conception of the stationary, plantation-grounded US slave story; yet it is from these stories that we get the strongest pulls for an understanding of blackness liberated (literally and ideologically) from the oppressive nation-state. Early 21\textsuperscript{st} century writers attempting to refine the discourse have argued that an effective conversation about the African diaspora must be free from American exceptionalism. It must be free from all ethnocentrisms and reject the limiting borders of a nation-state without placing the African-American narrative at the forefront. The irony of contemporary black American exceptionalism is that it circumvents an already standing history of transnational awareness in global black thought which is a testament to the need for a nuanced and thoroughly researched look into black cultural and intellectual production.

Black sound and Modernity: Hiplife, Hip-Hop and Globalization

Gilroy writes that “modernity’s ethnocentric aesthetic assumptions have consigned [these] musical creations to a notion of the primitive that was intrinsic to the consolidation of scientific racism.” By making black music central in my discussion of cultural production in the African diaspora, I am writing against ideas of cultural purity that are predicated on racist science. The folk ideology of German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, for example, heavily influenced American writers of the 19th century as they sought to develop a canon of national literature. Within the folk, Herder distinguishes between two social elements the ‘das Volk der Burger’, which consisted of those “least affected by the influence of civilization…that embody the original folk characteristics of the nation” and the intellectuals. High culture was defined as everything outside of the folk, and the folk was one step above the non-rational emotive noise of the African.

The reduction of black cultural products to primitive is another markedly ethnocentric and imperialist notion employed by earlier scholars and philosophers to create enough distance between black and white to produce and vet fantasies of superiority. The cultural purity of the ‘primitive’ also lends itself to a preoccupation with authenticity. The need to pinpoint a black essence in cultural production leads to a preoccupation with defining origins and direct continuities. A diasporic lens shifts focus away from absolute origins and towards areas of hybridity that can be looked at in chronological terms but are not meant to gesture towards any notions of purity on either end of transmission.

With regards to Hip-Hop and Hilife, Gilroy’s black Atlantic and the theoretical framework of the African diaspora understands the syncretism and constructive discordance of the black intellectual tradition which includes theorists and philosophers (bound to the limitations of class and literacy) and artist, whom Gilroy classes as “Gramscian intellectuals” who produce outside of institutions and act as “temporary custodians of cultural sensibility.”

These Gramscian intellectuals were either barred from or chose not to employ the conventions of high society in their cultural commentary and production. Acknowledging the institutional exclusion of black folks from high society, Gilroy states that black artists functioning as cultural intellectuals are in constant battle against their own commodification and thus, the commodification of black cultural production at-large. He argues that the black creative carries with him an understanding of his social positioning and the role of art in subverting the oppressive boundaries of everyday life. Gilroy was writing in 1993 from England, when Hip-Hop was just beginning to permeate mainstream culture in ways that resemble today’s industry. The industrialization, academic exploration and globalization of Hip-Hop complicate Gilroy’s claims of the black cultural producer as inherent agent of personal revolution against imperialist order.

Hilife, much like its progenitors Hip-Hop and Highlife, incorporates musical forms of varied origins. While I have chosen to focus on the relationship between Hip-Hop (US) and Hilife (GH) and the specific process of transatlantic cultural transmission, I must note that the diasporic influences on both of my sites range – from broader pre-colonial West African influence on the rhythm and instrumentation of highlife music to the centrality of Latin American and Caribbean styles and sounds that make their way into Hip-Hop. Out of its North

102 Op. Cit. 1993:76
American context, Hip-Hop grows into a symbol for urban youth culture. It is a critical voice and a highly marketable commodity. This commodification – combined with globalization, technological advancement, and shifts in social policy – reestablished the connection between Ghana and North America as noted by musicologists and diasporic theorists studying the years immediately preceding Ghana’s independence.\(^{103}\)

Rose describes Hip-Hop as the necessary tension between the cultural and economic particularities of “deindustrialized” New York from the mid to late 1970s onward and the stylistic Afro-diasporic continuities by which it is propelled.\(^{104}\) Hiplife in turn is propelled by a similar system of Afro-diasporic continuities and emerges from the historical specificity of Ghana’s 1992 return to democracy after decades of military rule and economic instability. Rap music and broader Hip-Hop identity politics were brazen counter measures to the systematic destruction of the physical and social structures of the South Bronx throughout the 70s and early 80s. Hiplife is a loud counter strike against the cultural silence of Ghana’s three decades of military rule.

*Call and Response: Reggie Rockstone Maka Makaa 1997*

1997s *Makaa Makaa* was the first mainstream full length Hiplife album. The album was released by London-bred Ghanaian artist Reggie Rockstone after his development as a rapper in the UK Hip-Hop group ‘Parables, Linguistics and Zlang ‘(PLZ). The late 1990s represented a moment of broadening within Hip-Hop. The soundscape transitioned from the template put forth by Kool Herc to experimental sounds and jazz sampling being introduced by groups like the

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Native Tongues collective. This definitive movement represented a period where like-minded MCs were crafting niche sounds and capitalizing on their similarities to strengthen the artistic statements they wanted to spread across the Atlantic. In England, English rappers like MC Mello, London Posse, and PLZ (Reggie Rockstone) were doing much of the same thing. In order for artists to distinguish their own sound, they began pulling things from different sources of creative inspiration. Pete Rock and CL smooth looked to jazz, and Reggie Rockstone looked past the musical history of his host country, the UK, and to his homeland, Ghana.

Ghana was the first African nation to provide the right to return and indefinite stay for people of African descent throughout the African Diaspora. Section 17(1)(b) of the Immigration Law, Act 573 of 2000, states that the Minister may grant the “right to abode” to a person of African descent in the diaspora with the approval of the President. In the new millennium, half a century passed emancipation, the economic implications of this legislation speak louder than the social or even spiritual implications promoted by Nkrumah. “Right to abode” laws attract not only enterprising African-Americans but their bleeding hearts and their first world wallets which become increasingly important as tourism becomes central in Ghana’s economy.

Under the Dual Citizenship Act, a citizen of Ghana may hold the citizenship of any other country in addition to his Ghanaian citizenship. This can also be applied to a person of non-Ghanaian origin if she is an ordinary resident of Ghana, and by naturalization if she has made a substantial contribution to the progress or advancement in any area of national activity (and speaks one of the nation’s languages). This law is directed at Ghanaians in the diaspora who have acquired another citizenship but still have the means to contribute to Ghanaian national development. By 2000 Non-Resident Ghanaians had remitted US$400,000,000 annually to boost

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Ghana’s economy against contributions of Foreign Direct Investment, which since 1994 to 2002 had contributed US$1.6, or about US$200,000,000. Remittance in the period following the 1992 return to democracy is important because it marks a point of economic and subsequent cultural reentry.

Rockstone’s first ‘break’ was not purely in instrumentation. Language emerged as a way to communicate with his audience while touring in Ghana. On stage at Panafest (formerly “the Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival”) Rockstone began freestyling in Twi, one of the many national languages. Panafest is an event organized since the early 1990s alongside the emergence of a wave of critical theory in Diaspora studies (Gilroy, Harris, etc.). Panafest is, in effect, a continuation of Nkrumah’s cultural legacy. It promotes ideals of African unity and creates a space for the voices and bodies of those of African descent while putting culture at the forefront of celebration. Rockstone on the Panafest stage rapping in English, and then being inspired to rap in Twi, performs the intimacy of nationalism and diaspora in black expressive culture.

The majority of individual tracks on Rockstone’s Makaa Maka cannot stand on their own as examples of the sonically explicit incorporation of Hip-Hop and Highlife backing. Only two tracks feature Twi rap and the album is predominantly New York Hip-Hop oriented. One of the biggest sonic differences between Highlife and Hiplife is the arrangement. Hiplife songs are typically arranged like those of Hip-Hop with sixteen bar verses framed by choruses. Rockstone’s album regimented that format as a Hiplife standard. However, the album itself, laced together by interludes influenced by the traditional ‘adowa’ rhythms of the Ashanti region,

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108 A bi-annual event conceptualized by Efua Sutherland in the late 80s is a venue that seeks to celebrate the art and culture of the diaspora. It’s inaugural concert occurring in 1992.
propagated the creative and commercial intersection of tradition and modernity with strong pan-African undertones. While Ghanaian engineer Zap Mallet composed the interludes, the majority of the production was done by Rob Bakarin, an African American from New York who was in Accra during the mid-1990s. The two met in a club in Accra where Bakarin witnessed Rockstone freestyle rapping in English over a Fugees beat; Bakarin offered to make beats for Rockstone and that night they started working on the album that would spark a generation of Ghanaian cultural production. In an interview with Jesse Shipley for the documentary companion to Living the Hiplife, Bakarin remarks that it was initially Rockstone’s lack of Ghanaian accent that attracted him to his MCs skills. In Bakarin’s words, Rockstone’s London upbringing and proficiency with the English language of rap made him appear “more credible” than other Ghanaian artists. While Bakarin’s word choice carries a slight ethnocentric bias, it highlights how Rockstone was able to capitalize on not only his linguistic duality, but his firsthand experience in two realms of global black experience. Hiplife thus reflected a sense of transnational and Afropolitan identity that was both lived by expatriated Ghanaian youth and desired by youth who hadn’t left the country.

Rockstone is not the only Hiplife pioneer to have spent a substantive amount of time outside of Ghana or to have started a musical career abroad before returning. During the mid-1970s, the military regimes of Colonel Acheampong and Akuffo spurned a mass exodus of Ghanaians that continued into the early years of the J.J Rawlings regime. Out of this exodus came a class of Ghanaians raised in a European context, marginalized and in search of an outlet.

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111 Ibid 2007
A number of prominent figures in HiLife’s early years were based in London during the mid-90s. Hip-Hop in the UK developed similarly to that in the US. The difference for Ghanaians in Britain was a direct connection to home – a tangible point to return to sonically and physically. Of *Makaa Maka*’s fifteen tracks, two stand out as symbolic of this process of sonic and physical return coupled with performance of linguistic and cultural duality.

The first, “AGOO!” rapped completely in Twi, is a song about the pursuit of a lover. It’s opening line hook and title are the traditional Twi greeting “Agoo!” meaning ‘Hello, I would like your attention’ followed by “Ame!” which can be understood as an acknowledgement of the speaker. Rockstone raps about a girl he likes, how compatible they are, and how he’ll treat her right. Her name is Adjwoa, Akan for Monday-born female. He describes her as quiet, with a beautiful face, and good personality, and proclaims he is prepared to go to her parents’ home to ask for her hand in marriage. He then says that she should not be scared of him, and suggest that she should “shake herself on him” and he will not tell anyone; it'll be their little secret.

Rockstone takes a turn to tradition in courtship with a more modern and direct invitation to sexual movement. This track comes after the “Live and Direct” interlude, which seems to be audio ripped from a live performance in which “Agoo! Ame!” is employed as the performer’s means of grabbing the crowd’s attention similar to the way “Hey! Ho!” is employed in New York cypher culture. The chorus of “AGOO!” is an interaction between male and female voices. I take interest in Rockstone’s choice to introduce himself, and to grab the attention of a globalized crowd, through the sexualization of a female who is only heard in response to the Ghanaian social call for correspondence.

“All Accra All-stars,” is the second track: an ensemble reminiscent of early works of North American Hip-Hop groups with an Afro-centric cultural orientation like that of the Native
Tongues collective. Following another interlude of performance audio (a crowd chanting “Go Reggie!”) the track opens with a naming of the voices to follow which include Rockstone and the two members of Ghanaian Hip-Hop Duo Talking Drums. The opening line is “excuse me as I intervene like an African government.” The verses to follow, all in English delivered with neither an identifiable African or English accent, balance displays of bravado with cultural references to “Africa/Africanness” (Ghana is never named), “Blackness,” “Spear chuckers,” “jungle funk,” the streets of New York,” and “niggas.” Textually, I am hard pressed to find anything that pulls this track from the niche sound presented by the aforementioned US-based rapped groups like The Jungle Brothers.

Linguistic duality and lived experience in diaspora bring a group of artists, presented as ‘All-stars’ of their nation’s capital, into the same sonic and lyrical reality of African-American artists who speak through a homogenized conception of African roots. Both groups find expressive freedom in the imagined community of the African diaspora. The globalization of Hip-Hop makes this community commercially accessible. A manufactured narrative of belonging is opened up to anyone with purchasing power. This is undoubtedly problematic when we think of racialized appropriation, but what is interesting to consider in the case of Reggie Rockstone is the intra-racial politics of class and access in relation to Ghanaian migrants moving throughout the West with regard to the reception and cultural implications of Hiplife. In Ghana, the majority of listeners are not afforded the privileged exile that enables artists like Rockstone to see and hear themselves across these transnational representations.

One Rockstone track includes an interview snippet with a British radio host. “Chocolate Interview” begins with the host asking what the album is called. “Makaa Maka,” Rockstone replies adding that, “in [his] language, it means ‘I said it, cause I said it.’ I figured I give it an
African name cause most of the lyrics that I’ll be kicking on the album are in my dialect that’s Twi ‘T.W.I’” The interviewer follows up, “now did you say that all of the songs are in Twi?” “My fault my fault,” Rockstone interrupts, “nah I got a few English cuts on there…and a few songs that got Twi hooks and English rhymes.” She asks, “Who is your target audience? Is it for Ghana? Or is it for maybe Ghanaians who are living outside of the country.” Rockstone replies: “First, good music is good music. I’m targeting everybody you know I got to get that money in my pocket. You know what I’m saying, but most, I say I target Ghanaians ‘cause that’s the lingo I’m kicking, that’s the language I’m rapping in, that’s what they understand.” The inclusion of this interview both affirms and attempts to rebuff the albums’ diasporic orientation. In Rockstone’s (over)assertion of the role Twi plays on the album, I read a claim to authenticity. Even as he employs African American vernacular English in framing himself as a producer of “good music,” he cannot risk the distance suggested by the phrase “Ghanaians who are living outside of the country.” He, whose accent already marks a level of distance, is targeting Ghanaians that speak Twi wherever they are.

Call and Response: M3nsa Number One Mango Street 2010

Hip-Hop as a critical voice in response to ‘mainstream’ culture extended itself to Ghanaian youth through Hiplife, allowing them to directly influence the culture of their nation. Hiplife gave youth an entrance into the world of public speaking that is traditionally reserved for elders. Though rap lyricism and spoken word poetry are often discussed as having “come” to Ghana through the introduction of Black art from the West, poetry and proverbial speech are a key elements of traditional Ghanaian culture. Even the jaunty, bravado put on by many

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commercial rappers can be loosely attributed to the centrality of Anansesem, the stories of the trickster figure Anansi, in Ghanaian life.

The FOKN Bois, M3nsa and Wanlov are the loudest examples of this trickster ethos in the Ghanaian music scene. As artists, their constant blending of genres makes them hard to classify, but both members of the duo came through HiLife before they joined forces and crafted a niche that extends past music into the realm of global politics and an Accra based alternative art scene that is slowly grabbing the world’s attention. M3nsa, whose father was one of the original guitarists for the 1970s British-Ghanaian/Caribbean Afro-funk group Osibisa, started playing piano at a young age and was introduced to Hip-Hop by his older brothers. Once he started discovering music for himself, he joined his musical training with his newfound love for Hip-Hop and began to apply his piano skills to beat making.113 Wanlov is a product of Nkrumah era relations between Ghana and Romania whose father was a collector of music. The two started making music together as young deviants skipping class.114

Before the release of his first album Rapublic in 2000, M3nsa had done production work on two of Reggie Rockstone’s albums. After Rapublic, M3nsa relocated to London where he released two projects, Daily Basis then No 1 Mango Street in 2010.115 The title track “No 1 Mango Street,” tells the story of an artist in search of home, “Start again/Avoid the main road/Sankofa as the saying goes.” This references the adinkra symbol sankofa (which means “go back and fetch it” and is often illustrated as a bird facing an egg placed on its back) is followed by the artist singing “looking for a way home” and describing elements of home and life “where

114 Ibid 2013
115 Ibid 2013
it all started.” While the song certainly speaks to a larger and more general feeling of
displacement, it also makes a strong statement about the need to reconnect to Ghana to find
respite from the whirlwind of western life. M3nsa’s use of the Fanti language and distinctly
Ghanaian cultural references make this album, although produced in North London, undeniably
Hiplife. The track “Anaa?” samples a classic highlife track and “Fanti Love Song” pairs a
beautiful Fanti lyricism over a jazz infused beat. The album features a number of Ghanaian
artists rapping in English, pidgin and Twi alongside English musicians sonically and
ideologically intertwining popular black aesthetics with their Ghanaian roots.

M3nsa, who as an artist is intimately acquainted with the work of Rockstone and
culturally immersed in both English and American black musical traditions, makes a strong and
direct musical return to Ghana. M3nsa’s album and title track name a specific location. Mango
Street can be read as both an existing domicile in Ghana and the meeting of ‘mango’ and ‘street,’
the lush and fruitful natural landscape associated with Ghana and the modern industrialization of
London. “No 1 Mango Street” names place to highlight displacement and positions Ghana as the
solution to the ills of the West, which is similar cultural work to what we see coming from the
Native Tongues collective. The difference lies in M3nsa’s concrete understanding of and
connection to the African continent. Return isn’t merely an imaginative exercise that requires no
understanding of modern African realities, it is a decision to prioritize the tangible roots of one’s
blackness. It is diaspora in the sense that the album, produced in London and heavily influenced
by the canons of both Ghanaian and African-American contemporary music, holds all these
distinct sonic communities in one space to produce a unified body of work.

Call and Response: Blitz The Ambassador Afropolitan Dreams 2014

The ability to travel outside Ghana abates a certain level of cultural contentment. The class differential allows those who can leave to confront the reality of Afropolitanism. Blitz The Ambassador, who was once labeled as a local Hiplife but is now a Hip-Hop artist based in New York, released his 2014 album titled Afropolitan Dreams. I heard him speak about the album when I first arrived in Ghana in January 2014. He spoke eloquently about the promise of Africa and the need for those throughout the diaspora to return and invest their time and skills into the land. The leading single from the album, “Make you no forget,” features a hook by Seun Kuti, son of the Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti, and samples a classic Nigerian Afrobeat song with supplemental Highlife guitar.

[Hook: Seun Kuti]
Ohh hah, I say (Make you no forget where where you from) 4x
Police Corruption/ They steal election/
Brutality my brothers no get option/
That’s why (You don’t Forget where you come from)
That’s why (You don’t Forget where you come from)

The verses are presented as a one-sided pidgin-English conversation between Blitz and an unnamed Ghanaian friend, perhaps from the artist’s childhood. Throughout the first verse Blitz recounts several elements of tradition, specifically 1990s popular culture in Ghana. Allusions are denoted in *italics*:

[Verse 1: Blitz the Ambassador]
Chale, Make we sit make we chat some / Its been a minute since me den you reason way we laugh some/ You dey kai the time wey we be kiddies anaa?
The Chaskele

*Chaskele is an indginized version of cricket played with an empty milk can, a stick and a car tire or basket.]*

Pilolo's and the Panpanaa's/ Watching Osofo Dadzie We thought we will never grow up/
Osofo Dadzie was a Ghanaian drama show from the 80’s and 90’s. It was primarily in the Akan language.

By The Fire Side Maame Dokono was so hot/
[By The Fire Side was a children’s show revolving around Ghanaian folk tales.]

But non was hotter than Uncle George Laing/ Kye Kye Kule Kye Kofisa drove us insane/
[Another classic Ghanaian Children’s TV show from the 90’s.]

Chale/ You dey kai Italia 90 den the goal wey Roger Milla score dancing with the flag pole/
[A moment from the 1990 World Cup in Italy. An allusion to Milla’s goal celebration dance to the world.]

Better yet yet / You dey kai Senegal 92/ Ghana den Ivory Coast/They say the keeper use Juju/ Oh Chale/ the cell phones from back in the day?
Mobitel/ Megyina abonten na merekasa/”
[Mobitel was the first cellphone company in Ghana. There landmark commercial was set to James Brown’s “I Feel Good” and ended with a voice saying ‘Megyina Abonten Na Merekasa’ which translates to: ‘I am standing outside and talking’]

And in true Hiplife fashion the verse concludes with a Hip-Hop reference that doubles as a statement of appreciation for all the aforementioned memories:

“Well some things change and some might not/ But when they reminisce over you/ My God”
[Taken directly from T.R.O.Y (They Reminisce Over You) by Pete Rock & CL Smooth]

As Blitz’s reintroduction to the Hiplife scene, this song can be understood as the artist asserting his Ghanaian identity. Blitz is saying, “I may have lived in America but I have not forgotten where I’ve come from.” The entire album builds on this sentiment: the romanticized ideal of a literal return to Ghana, and the sometimes harsh realities of Afropolitan existence that force expatriates to look back.
Two highly criticized aspects of Hiplife are the hurried and abrasive lyrics and the lack of genuine musicality, specifically in performance.\textsuperscript{117} These are both issues that appear in the discourse surrounding US Hip-Hop. The typical Hiplife stage performance mimics that of a Hip-Hop show. The rapper, sometimes accompanied by a hype man or entourage, is the central feature of the performance with a DJ situated somewhere on stage behind a laptop surrounded by speakers. Formal concerts, like that of Blitz the Ambassador that I attended on January 25\textsuperscript{th} 2014 at Alliance Francaise in Accra, sometimes have elaborate lighting set ups and on very rare occasions, live bands. When there are live bands, it comes from a purposeful intent to reconnect with Highlife tradition.\textsuperscript{118} When performing in January of 2014 Blitz, following the format of his album \textit{Afropolitan Dreams} (2014), framed his set as a plane ride staged on the courtyard of Alliance Francaise in downtown Accra’s biggest commercial district, an area that cannot be reached by \textit{Tros-Tros}.\textsuperscript{119} During the middle of his airplane-themed set, Blitz began doing covers of classic American Hip-Hop songs, then switched to Afrobeat and Highlife. The crowd, predominantly young and dressed in a trendy blend of Western attire, was wildly receptive to both. Rapping and singing along as Blitz “took us on a journey” through the musical origins of Hiplife, he landed back in his own repertoire.

Blitz was first exposed to Hip-Hop via his older brother’s return from secondary school.\textsuperscript{120} Recounting his early exposure to Hip-Hop in an article he wrote for popular ‘Afropolitan’ online platform Africa is a Country, Blitz admits that some of Hip-Hop’s message was lost on him due to a language barrier. He resolved that, “it must have been the urgency with

\textsuperscript{118} Articulated Blitz the Ambassador onstage during the Jan 25\textsuperscript{th} 2014 concert in Accra
\textsuperscript{119} Ghana’s unofficial form of public transportation
which Hip-Hop artists asserted their views, a stark contrast to the love themed Highlife tunes our parents listened to” that made the genre so captivating. While he assumes that many of his peers were sonically hooked on Hip-Hop culture, Blitz (my italics added):

was enthralled by the physical attributes of the culture, especially the fashion and style. Giant Africa medallions, dashikis and kufis were the core aesthetics of Hip-Hop of that period. In my twelve year-old brain, I interpreted all that Afrocentric style as a symbolic call and response from a distant relative. I heard the call loud and clear but how would I respond? Was Hip-Hop really interested in hearing about my struggles and appreciating my Ghanaian aesthetic? Did the culture really value its international roots? After all, the Godfather of the culture, DJ Kool Herc was himself an immigrant. His block parties were directly related to the sound system culture of his native homeland Jamaica. So the light bulb went off- maybe I had to journey to the Mecca of Hip-Hop, New York City. There my response would be heard much louder.

Fortunately, Blitz had the means to travel and answer this call. The middle-class son of an attorney and a teacher, he emigrated from Accra when he was seventeen to pursue a business administration degree at Ohio’s Kent State University. After graduation he moved to New York to begin his music career.

Even after gaining some traction in the US Hip-Hop scene, Blitz still felt that “Hip-Hop as a culture [hadn’t] really yet embraced its international roots.” He points towards a kind of American exceptionalism that takes for granted diasporic influences as they are incorporated under the label of Hip-Hop:

The fact that this DJ Kool Herc emigrated from Jamaica to America and, you know, is considered the godfather [of Hip-Hop] and plays a significant role in the birth of this culture. But also, you know talking about the islands, talking about breakdancing culture that was partially borrowed from kung fu flicks or Capoeira that's practiced in Brazil. It's

121 Ibid 2014
122 Ibid 2014
just the beauty of the culture has been that it is all-inclusive. And as a fan of it, I just never really thought that, globally, the voices are recognized.¹²⁵

The cosmetic afrocentrism of the Native Tongues-era did not mean that a transition into the culture or market would be easy. The narrative of belonging projected and manufactured from both sides of this Atlantic transfer had failed to account for the realities of immigration. These realities are heard in Blitz’s content on songs like “African in New York” (Native Sun, 2011) and “Internationally Known” (Afropolitan Dreams, 2014). “African in New York” is a humorous chronicle of the obstacles faced by New York’s African immigrants. Sampling Sting’s "Englishman in New York” and Jay-Z’s "99 Problems,” Blitz writes against the invisibility of the African immigrant narrative and in effect, American exceptionalism in Hip-Hop culture.

“Internationally Known” takes a different approach. Utilizing a classic Hip-Hop sample from New York based MCs Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rocks’ 1988 hit “It Takes Two” and boasting “Okay you gotta city behind you, I got a continent” on the song’s hook, Blitz reappropriates Rob Base’s pronounced lack of international notoriety to highlight his African transience. Both the bravado and sampling at play here are landmark attributes of Hip-Hop while the beat’s percussion gestures towards the traditional cowbell and its horns announce its Highlife energy. “Internationally Known” captures both the Afropolitan dream of a pan-African mobility and the reality of displacement that calls for a beautifully urgent appraisal of African musical tradition. The result is an Afro-diasporic interplay of language, sound and stylization.

¹²⁵ Ibid 2013
Conclusion: Afropolitanism, Hiplife, and Diaspora

I return to the encounter that began this discussion: I am in Ghana the Spring of 2014. The Versace medusa head emblem reproduced a thousand times over on display in the stalls of Medina market. Me searching in open gutters among eager sellers for batik cloth and chalewote. I am greeted by a bit of home in the mess of gold foil screen-printing, misshapen logos, and misspelled label names: things that do not require literal or cultural translation. Ghana had kept up with the latest trends in American Hip-Hop, now appearing as the Trap music and stylings of Migos. But in Ghana they seemed to make even less sense than they did in my inner city Atlanta neighborhood. I am struck by the way poverty often appropriates luxury.

The friend who I accompanied to the GTBank Wande Coal concert in London, a Ghanaian-English event planner, is in Ghana for two weeks. I take a taxi from Medina to Osu and she tells me not to speak much to avoid Obruni tax. I don’t have to speak; once we pull into the lavish and hidden resort hotel she is working out of, the cab driver increases the price. I haggle poorly. She comes out and chastises him in Twi. I pay the original price and follow her upstairs. Here she is giggles and the Queen’s English beneath a palm-lined sunset; she is home. Her Afropolitan stake in Accra’s latest and most plush scene is underscored by her insider access to Ghanaian cultural knowledge and her intimate and moving commitment to the idea of entrepreneurial return.

Defined by Ghanaian- Nigerian novelist and photographer Taiye Selasi as:

the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic

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126 Batik refers to Ghanaian technique of wax printing, chalewote is the Ga term for cheap flip flops/shower shoes.
127 An Atlanta Hip-Hop trio
128 Obruni is a Twi word that translates to: “one who comes from beyond the horizon.” Colloquially used for: foreigner/white person
mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. Then there’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.129

Afropolitan speaks to a class of young, educated and enterprising African immigrants. This naming and public declaration of ones’ awareness to both class, ethnicity and identification to the African continent speaks to yet another kind of diasporic homelessness: the peculiar and privileged plight of the African who has too many homes. This naming also comes about in response to the African-American exceptionalism in public discourse that the most outspoken and self-proclaimed Afropolitans find propagates their erasure in service to the same mythic and easily digested essence of Africa that we see in early Pan-Africanist thought. Afropolitan emerges as a means to assert the everyday lived reality of millennial African immigrants. As suggested by Selasi, this diaspora carries with it strong ties to both tradition and seemingly excessive modernity. “What distinguishes this lot,” she writes (my italics added):

(in the West and at home) is a willingness to complicate Africa – namely, to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean most to them. Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique. Rather than essentialising the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend the cultural complexity; to honor the intellectual and spiritual legacy; and to sustain our parents’ cultures.130

What strikes me most about Selasi’s definition is its similarity to the aims of African diaspora scholars like Butler who are in pursuit of the collaborative space between the complexities of global black experience. Selasi continues:

http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76.
130 Op. Cit 2005
the Afropolitan must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural – with subtle tensions in between. While our parents can claim one country as home, we must define our relationship to the places we live. So, too, the way we see our race – whether black or biracial or none of the above – is a question of politics, rather than pigment; not all of us claim to be black. Often this relates to the way we were raised, whether proximate to other brown people (e.g. black Americans) or removed. Finally, how we conceive of race will accord with where we locate ourselves in the history that produced ‘blackness’ and the political processes that continue to shape it…

The Afropolitan conception of race is another point of interest. The imposed distance from “the history that produced ‘blackness’” can be seen in the early instances of African migration in the 60s and 70s. But beyond stating the tensions from which the identity grows, Selasi’s main project is that of claiming space in popular, cultural, and literary discourse.

Writing in 2004, Achille Mbembe frames the “African Metropolis” as the position needed to overturn popularized readings of Africa that have been marred by imperial traditions in much scholarship about the continent. The metropolis, with its real people, offers a picture of Africa that encompasses more than static horrors. Much like Selasi, Mbembe posits the existence of class privilege in Africa as a direct affront to the derogatory stereotypes of the impoverished jungle. But what this risks, as articulated by Nigerian-Irish writer Emma Dabiri, is popularizing a new kind of single story: a story of a trendy and glamorous Africa; a story where the slums of Accra’s Labadi Township – their Ga language and open gutters – are distracting fodder to the high-rises, nightclubs, and retail locations of nearby Osu. Afropolitanism as offered by Mbembe is harrowingly similar to diaspora in its recognition of cultural fluidity and in its prioritizing of the mixed, blended, and superimposed African past. However, in its

131 Op. Cit 2005
134 Op. Cit 2004
attachment to the city, this identity finds itself centered on consumerist values that laud the same capitalist system that has facilitated the conditions against which Afropolitan’s are writing.

The Afropolitan stake in global sensibilities tied to classed relationships with high culture risk displacing some of its own (less glamorous) diasporic connections. Much like the South Bronx, Ghana has a history of West Indian presence mitigated by the shared colonial power of Great Britain. This influence is heard in the way language breaks in Pidgin English and Patois. It is the basis of the rising popularity of Twi and Ga language Dancehall tracks, reggae bands and Rastafarian culture in Ghana’s Cape Coast. This connection is not often heralded because unlike the Western outpost named by Selasi, Jamaica offers a reflection of the colonial devastation and tourist economy that Afropolitans are imagining themselves beyond. Much like Kool Herc’s forced linguistic assimilation alongside the retention of Jamaican sound system culture created space for later appropriations of Jamaican language style and culture. Despite the lack of reverence, the impact of West Indian culture in Ghana specifically in the capital city of Accra and the Tourist hub of Cape Coast continues to speak to the ways The African diaspora exist both alongside and beneath what is seen as commercially viable.

In Hiplife we see this manifest almost in inverse to Hip-Hop’s evolution. Rap lyricism emerges from the destitution of postindustrial New York and after thirty decades, becomes a certified commercial success available for global consumption. Hip-Hop comes into Ghana on the backs and tape decks of those who can afford to travel. Command of and/or interest in the English language is a prerequisite for early African immigrants engaged with Hip-Hop. It takes one such ‘Afropolitan’ (here, Reggie Rockstone) to translate this acquired cadence into his mother tongue before ‘Hip-Hop’ and later Hiplife becomes accessible to Ghanaian audiences at-large. With the cadence of North American Hip-Hop comes its sartorial elements and even
behavioral posturing. While this culture evolves against the conditions of New York and then metastasizes into an American commercial mechanism, in Ghana it is bought as packaged. In effect, it has to be broken down to meet the condition of its new locality and serve in a similar fashion as a critical social voice for underclass youth.

As a common causality of commercialism, Hiplife quickly turns into a shallow label no longer tied to the cultural and/or artistic originality often associated with the era of its inception. I posit that no era of Hip-Hop or Hiplife has ever functioned in a vacuum, that historically the presence of the mainstream has always served to open a channel for the alternative or ‘conscious’ and vice versa. Following this line of thought, I consider contemporary Ghanaian Afro-pop, Ghanaian Afrobeats, Azonto and even some variants of Ghana’s emerging Dancehall genre as exemplifying the meeting of rap and Ghanaian national music and therefore, as Hiplife.

Selasi and Ghanaian-English Hiplife/Afro-Beats artist Fuse ODG are redefining the popular image of Africa. Fuse appears in every music video and television appearance wearing either a hat or t-shirt that reads: “TINA,” an acronym for “This Is New Africa.” While much of Fuse’s popularity comes from the viral circulation of his video “Azonto”, his mission is and has always been bigger than dance music. TINA, in the same vein as the popular Afropolitan vision, is grounded in the representation of a prosperous and modern Africa. During an awards speech given at London’s 2013 Music of Black Origins (MOBOS) Awards, Fuse shared via telecast that he grew up during a time when it was not cool to be an African in England. He recounts the way popular culture taunted him, his family and his peers for being less than British. This pressured many to assimilate and abandon their culture and now Fuse, along with several other affiliated
artists and business people, are aesthetically, sonically, and financially reclaiming their African heritage.  

Afropolitanism emerges as a way for Africans to publically engage in globalization. To dare to “market [their] cultures as well as [their] political transformations.” While the dichotomy between political transformation and commercial agency is false and culturally flattening, the privilege of Afropolitanism cannot efficiently operate as the only challenge to a derogatory Afro-pessimistic narrative. Additionally, offering up African cultural commodities, be they novelty or luxury, in response to the assumed over-saturation with African-American culture, plays into a white supremacist commodity culture that is already bent on authenticating blackness for its own consumptive purposes.

The concert I attended in London constituted and welcomed Afropolitan London. Both my Ghanaian-English friend and the inquisitive Nigerian-English stranger whose entry point to my American blackness was through her perception of “ghetto,” have participated in a cultural exchange that has been foregrounded by HiLife. As a product of black American plight, Hip-Hop – the sound of the modern ghetto – becomes a source of excitement and commercial/cultural entry for the Afropolitan who travels beyond the black plight of the home country and into a new one. The commercial distance between Hip-Hop and the social devastation from which it emerged results in an enamored emulation of Hip-Hop sounds and culture that is not necessarily connected to any fact of African-American experience.

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But are Afropolitans, and by extension Hiplife, merely what Dabiri refers to as an “African flavored version of Western convention and form?” My immediate response is no. Hiplife is a conscious Africanization of popular culture that cannot help but to rebuff western ethnocentrism as it has inherited from Hip-Hop a fundamentally black expressive culture. The assertion of an African modernity by Africans is undeniable important. A functional understanding of the African diaspora says that the imagined community of the Afropolitan can rightfully exist, as it does in their given localities, alongside tradition, ruralism and poverty. Diaspora says that complete pictures in which differing perceptions of black experience are equally yoked are necessary for any productive discourse on global blackness. In this way, Afropolitanism is just a contemporary way of saying ‘African diaspora’ that privileges those with a direct genealogical and cultural connection to the African continent.

The reading and misreading that occurred when the Afropolitan encountered the Black American in my 2013 example echoes to the first readings of Hip-Hop by Ghanaian migrants. The “ghetto” was not necessarily a direct link to poverty; she was not asking if I was poor. “Ghetto,” much like Hip-Hop, signifies a popular blackness, a novel state of being even when the perception is grounded in unrealistic and stereotypical behavioral expectations. Diaspora is the venue for these tensions, conversations and cultural innovations. It is the realm in which native tongues are formed, stripped, translated and reimagined. The movements that accompany these contemporary black sounds facilitate the cyclical reality of the African diaspora: a spiral continuously made and remade to meet its changing socio-historical contexts.

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