

FRUITFUL ROOTS

African Immigrants in Irish Hip-Hop

An essay by Ruben van Gaalen

‘Hip-hop is an African-American genre. Keyword: African. African immigrants. Africa as one. We’re all cut from the same cloth,’ Dublin-based rapper JyellowL replies to my question whether he feels that African immigrants are setting the bar in the current Irish hip-hop scene, during an interview recorded on Friday 28 April 2017 in the studio of his producer Chris Kabs. ‘Africans who migrate here, they bring it to the Irish people, to the Europeans. It’s something we own, something we created; it’s part of our culture,’ he further elaborated. To him it thus seems a natural phenomenon that African immigrants play a huge role in the local hip-hop scene. One year before the interview, American music website Pitchfork published an article that already stated that the Irish hip-hop scene was given a ‘new creative impulse’ by ‘a generation of African-born, Ireland-raised rappers [who] are using beats and rhymes to combat their adopted country’s entrenched racism and expand what it means to be Irish’.¹ That article formed the inspiration for a ten-day trip to Dublin, where I met up with three local, Nigerian-born hip-hop artists (Huva, JyellowL and Mythill Grim) to capture them on camera, in search for connections between Irish and African cultures through music.

Before we zoom in at those connections, we need to elaborate briefly on what is meant when we use this term. In order to do so, scholars and Mirjam de Bruijn and Rijk van Dijk have coined the metaphor of the bridge that provides a better anthropological understanding of the concept of *connectivity*. ‘A bridge connects, but it does much more. It links different places and different people, and creates new opportunities for the building of relationships economically, socially, politically and culturally,’ De Bruijn and Van Dijk state.² Furthermore they write about the metaphorical bridge that ‘as a link it appears to have a life of its own in the way it shapes relationships between land and water, between various people on either side, between the various economic endeavours of trade and transport, and between the everyday levels of (political, military and civic) means of control and supervision of a population’.³ Within this concept the link itself becomes an agent, which ‘transforms through time’. In this sense, to study connections one should not only look at the dots that are being connected, but at the connector itself. Only then we can shift away from a static approach, into the realm of lively dynamics. That being said, what is that dynamic, opportunity-creating dynamic link in the African-Irish hip-hop music of the three artists in this case study?

Considering JyellowL’s above mentioned statements on African being a keyword to the hip-hop genre, the young rapper – he turned nineteen two weeks after we met – seems to acknowledge what Halifu Osumare, Assistant Professor of African American and African

¹ D. van Nyugen, ‘From The Outside In: Meet the African Immigrants Who Are Legitimizing Ireland’s Hip-Hop Scene,’ (2016). See: <http://pitchfork.com/features/article/9853-from-the-outside-in-meet-the-african-immigrants-who-are-legitimizing-irelands-hip-hop-scene/>.

² M. de Bruijn and R. van Dijk, ‘Connecting and Change in African Societies: Examples of Ethnographies of Linking in Anthropology,’ *Anthropologica* 54.1 (Ottawa: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012): 45.

³ *Ibidem*.

Studies at University of California, meant by *the Africanist aesthetic* in global hip-hop culture. She defines this African-based aesthetic as ‘a processual mode of expressivity that privileges the negotiation of the self in the moment through a complex use of rhythmic timing, verbal or nonverbal rhetorical strategies, and multiple layers of meaning that draw from its sociocultural context and its audience’.⁴

This performative expressivity was termed as the Africanist aesthetic earlier by scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild. She writes that ‘hip-hop’s coolness, relaxation, looseness, and laid-back energy, [its] irony, and double entendre of verbal and physical gesture, [as well as its] dialogic relationship between performer and audience are all integral elements in Africanist art and lifestyle that are woven into the fabric of our society’.⁵ This self-expressive aesthetic extended itself through the history of Atlantic slave trade, an undeniable historical context in which African Americans ‘continue to work out their identities and vision of reality’⁶ until today. ‘The dance and music of the people, which calls for a life-affirming force in the African sense, was the primary method by which enslaved African peoples negotiated and commented upon their condition,’ Osumare writes.⁷ Scholar Tricia Rose, one of the leading specialists on hip-hop culture, called this expression of the self by African enslaved minorities ‘black diasporic practices’ in her book on rap music and black culture.⁸ Although it was developed in this African-American context, hip-hop culture all over the world finds its roots in this Africanist aesthetic. This concept forms the vantage point of this research, and is crucial to the understanding of the connections in hip-hop culture in general, and therefore of African-Irish hip-hop.

‘All I was looking for was a way to express myself,’ Tony Wilson (24), who will further be mentioned by his artist name Mythill Grim, speaks his mind sitting in a closed-off booth in P.Mac’s, a noisy bar on Stephen Street Lower, Dublin. After experimenting with other forms of expression that could be ascribed to a few of the basic elements of hip-hop culture⁹, like dance and graffiti, he found his voice in rapping in his late teenage years when hearing and copying his role model Tupac. ‘He [Tupac] expressed what I couldn’t say in words. [...] I feel it was all a journey for the music, and we’re still on that journey,’ Mythill Grim further reflects.

When he was nine years old, that journey took him from Nigeria to Dublin. Growing up in Tallaght, an area located in South-Dublin, as one of the few black kids he experienced difficulties. Around that time (2000/2001) the total of Nigerian migrants who moved to Ireland consisted of 2754 people.¹⁰ From 2002 to 2006 that population number has increased of over 80 per cent, from 8969 to 16,300. The majority of the Nigerians live in Dublin and its direct surroundings.¹¹ So at the time Mythill Grim moved to Dublin there was not yet a huge Nigerian (or African) community that already had settled.

On the first day he went to school [in Ireland], his English ‘wasn’t too great’, as he mentioned while telling me the story of the difficulties of growing up in Dublin.

⁴ H. Osumare, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 12.

⁵ B.D. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996): 51.

⁶ Osumare, *Africanist Aesthetic*: 12.

⁷ Idem: 13.

⁸ T. Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

⁹ A. Akande, ‘Code-switching in Nigerian hip-hop lyrics,’ *Language Matters*, 44:1 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 41.

¹⁰ J. Kómoláfé, ‘Searching for Fortune: The Geographical Process of Nigerian Migration to Dublin, Ireland’ (2005): 2. See: http://www.tara.tcd.ie/bitstream/handle/2262/2078/j_komolafe.pdf;sequence=3

¹¹ J. Kómoláfé, ‘Nigerian migration to Ireland: movements, motivations and experiences,’ *Irish Geography*, vol. 41, no. 2 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008): 225.

‘I was still kinda new, only two or three years in Ireland. On my first day I walked into class, a [Irish] kid just walked into me. Look, I’m from Africa; if you wanna fight, we’ll fight, but after we fight we’ll go our separate ways. But the kid was saying stuff like: “Where the fuck are you going, you nigger?” So I just pushed him to go away. He wasn’t really used to that, so pushed back. Then I pushed him really hard and he fell on the floor. Everyone in the class was like...[mimics kids who quickly return to their writing as if nothing happened]. Even the teacher didn’t say a word. So that vibe was really weird. In Africa you would get whipped or something. Later I understood why, they were all scared. And after school this kid was waiting for me, with maybe five, or six people. Guys with hoodies, who were not even in my school, but they’re with the kid. I start running, but they chased me all the way down. That was going on for a while, so I had to move school.’

On that new school, and later on, he experienced the same kind of difficulties, like often being called ‘nigger’ and getting weird looks. Further in the interview he touched upon the topic of racism as well, stating that ‘there’s a lot of underline type of racism in Ireland’ that he feels people just need to talk about. ‘You won’t feel it if your not to distinct. [...] Unless your skin is like mine, you will realize it,’ he adds. Although the topics he wants to address in his music are endless, he definitely wants to pay attention to the issue of race in Ireland.

Michael Falode (26), who raps under his stage name Huva, expressed, although in lesser extend, similar feelings during the interview we shot on Wednesday 26 April in a park in Dublin 1, the neighborhood where he grew up. The first two or three years after he moved from Nigeria to Dublin at the age of six, he was the only black boy in his entire school. ‘The only black kid in a mixed school seems kinda different,’ Huva said. Off record he told me that people were often giving him weird looks, which could make him feel uncomfortable during his first years in Ireland. ‘But,’ Michael adds, ‘the kids from my area where the kids from my school, the kids I hang out with.’ The family of one of the kids took him ‘as a son’, and that’s why he ‘got along so well and integrated easily’.

Before we started the interview in the studio of producer and artist Chris Kabs, Jeanluc Uddoh (19), also known as JyellowL, told me that it isn’t always easy being an African artist in Ireland. When asked about those difficulties he also spoke of racism in a more general sense: ‘I don’t think you can pick out a black person who has not experienced racism, whether they know it or not.’ He then adds a hypothetical example of a job application:

‘Say I have the exact same credentials as [...] Johnny, a typical Irish lad. We go for a job application. [I] put in my CV, he puts in his CV. Graduated with the same degree, same college, same level of experience, everything, and they pick Johnny over me. It’s not direct racism, but what’s the excuse there?’

By not giving a concrete example of his own experience – he came to Ireland five years ago, when Ireland in general, and Dublin in particular, witnessed a much more multicultural society – he seems to relate to a more overall cultural experience, which can be traced back, like stated earlier, to the historical context of the Atlantic slave trade. That is not to say

JyellowL never witnessed racism himself, but that he does seem to fit in with what Osumare meant by the conceptual frame she has called *connective marginality* within hip-hop.¹²

This framework ‘encompasses various social and historical realms that form the context for youth participating in hip-hop outside the United States’. Osumare further adds that these ‘spheres of social experience interconnect and overlap, partially facilitating the explosion of hip-hop culture internationally.’¹³ Within the concept of connective marginality, Osumare identifies four social realms that makes hip-hop’s African-American origin relatable for youth cultures all over the world: youthful rebellion, historical oppression, class, and culture. Of these four realms, according to Osumare, *culture* is the one with the smallest scope that connects to the African-American roots, ‘The Africanist aesthetic and the Americas has been associated with marginal peoples, and herein resides the relationship between race, class, and culture in this subject’.¹⁴ The resonance with the aesthetic of hip-hop is more apparent when a country has developed within that same ‘contested cultural terrain’.

The second social realm of connectivity, *class*, is an element that makes this hip-hop culture even more relatable outside the United States. The feeling among ethnic and immigrant groups of being a minority group, or ‘second-class’ citizen, nowadays is a worldwide phenomenon. Hip-hop has often been used as a protest voice that fights class differences and addresses poverty among marginal groups. This was already an element that created a strong link among different cultural marginalized classes in the Bronx of the seventies, when hip-hop was developed. The connection of class stays relevant when scaling up to the global stage, with often ‘uneducated youth’ all over the world relating to class inequalities.

This global connectivity is even more apparent in the third realm: historical oppression. The African-American experience becomes a ‘prototypical model’¹⁵ of oppression experienced in countries all over the world, which forms a crucial element in connecting youth communities of different cultures. In his latest single, ‘Cold In The Summer’, that was released two weeks after our conversation, but already previewed in the studio, JyellowL gives a good example of what Osumar means with this connectivity in historical oppression. ‘Black oppression is all the kids are learning, we can end it as long as we’re all determined,’ he raps. Further on he makes references to slavery, when he starts his chorus rapping: ‘Nobody’s chain, and me not wearing chains. Nobody’s putting chuckles on my hands. America, England, France booked us in advance. We keep running man, and I don’t mean to dance. We keep running man, it’s time to take a stance.’

The last, and largest realm of connective marginality is that of youth culture. The link of ‘youth’, or ‘youthful rebellion’ is present in every global example of hip-hop communities. The earlier mentioned protest voice of hip-hop is often very relatable to youth that struggle with the challenge of adult authority and social norms. As Olusegun Fariudeen Liadi and Olumuyiwa Omobowale write when referring to scholars as Bennett, Baker and Cohen, and Sarkar: ‘[...] the undertone of rebellion and resistance that characterizes rap music and hip-hop culture makes the music attractive to young people across cultures.’¹⁶

These four connections that are linked to the Africanist aesthetic, the core of hip-hop culture, made that hip-hop found it’s way globally in such a fast manner. Liadi acknowledges this phenomenon, and writes that this ‘global status assumed by hip hop has largely

¹² Osumare, *Africanist Aesthetic*: 69.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 70.

¹⁵ *Idem*, 71.

¹⁶ O.F. Liadi and O. Omobowale, ‘Music multilingualism and hip hop consumption among youths in Nigeria,’ *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 3.12 (Lagos: Academic Journals, 2011): 469.

transformed it into a transnational cultural product that manifests the globalization trends of (post-)industrial society'.¹⁷ According to the postmodern argument, Liadi writes citing scholars Connell and Gibson, the popularity of hip-hop 'exemplifies the deterritorialization of cultures and emphasizes how the rise of a particular cultural commodity is primarily a commercial phenomenon'.¹⁸ Despite that 'deterritorialization' of (material) cultures through hip-hop, the ways of expression are shaped by local contexts. Scholars like Bennett, Liadi and Osumare emphasize that hip-hop exist in various forms in different countries, where local and global elements are combined. In this sense, *re-territorialization* is crucial in understanding that dynamic of the 'global in the local' that becomes so apparent in hip-hop culture. If we then bounce back to the core of Osumare's concept of connective marginality that reaches out globally, we arrive at the self-expressivity of the Africanist aesthetic again. I argue that when re-territorialization occurs, it surpasses the local, and goes down to the expression of the self, better said: *identity*.

'I'm not only portraying the African. I'm showing every aspect of who I am, because I'm part Irish as well, regardless, because I grew up here. [...] I'm as Dublin as they come,' Huva said in the interview, regarding a question about what he wants to express in his music. Earlier on he spoke about growing up in a very music-orientated family, with his brother being quite a big afrobeat artist in Nigeria, a country that is known for its 'pulsing afrobeat'.¹⁹ One of the founders of the genre, Nigerian artist Fela Kuti, is referred to a lot in Huva's single 'Prize My \$oul', with also a clip of an interview with Kuti added to his own music video. Huva explained that he never forgets where he comes from, adding: 'People that stick to their roots, end up being more fruitful at the end.' But besides the Nigerian references, Huva said that the 'Dublin in him' would always come out. When I asked him what that meant, he explained that he has the Irish mentality, which he defined as cockiness. This is a characteristic that comes in quite handy when moving in the competitive hip-hop community.

Next to the African-Irish – or Nigerian-Irish – connections, the link with the global culture comes apparent in one if other songs, which is a remix of Drake's '5AM in Toronto'. The original song is an ode of the successful Canadian rapper to his hometown. Huva joined the game, and made a song called '5AM in Dublin'. 'It was just fun, music is all about enjoyment.' In this way Huva expressed his local context through a global phenomenon – it happened in a lot of cities all over the world.

The more global element of his music becomes also apparent through accent. 'When I'm with my Dublin friends I can talk Irish if I want. But this [in English] is how I want to talk to the world,' Huva elaborated on the use of accent in his music. Next to English, he also speaks Yoruba, one of the many local Nigerian languages. Since there are so much local languages in Nigeria, he feels that English is the most common language among Nigerians. He wants to talk in a language as many people as possible will understand. In this sense, *identity* is not only about who he is, but also about what he wants to represent. Self-expression and self-representation go hand in hand.

¹⁷ O.F. Liadi, 'Multilingualism and Hip Hop Consumption in Nigeria: Accounting for the Local Acceptance of a Global Phenomenon,' *Africa Spectrum* 1 (Hamburg, 2012): 5.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ D. van Nyugen, 'From the Outside In.'

For JyellowL this expression and representation of the self finds his form in what he calls ‘conscious hip-hop’. ‘Conscious hip-hop is when you rap about something meaningful; it’s when you actually think while you rap. It’s not when you just blur out anything that’s at the top of your head,’ he explained. ‘It is hip-hop in its true form.’ Later on he referred to the form that he was ‘against from time to time’, which was the music from ‘[those hip-hop artist] that talk about nonsense... drugs, and spread negativity and shit like that’.

These are the kind of cultural characteristics – like pimps, hoes, drug dealers - of commercialized hip-hop that Tricia Rose mentions when she stated: ‘Hip-hop is in a terrible crisis.’²⁰ Rose further stated that ‘hip-hop has become buried by these figures and “the life” associated with them’.²¹ In her book Rose slightly urges for a movement back to hip-hop ‘in its true form’. Nowadays, this trend is becoming even more visible, especially with the success of Compton-rapper Kendrick Lamar. Although being from Compton, where gangstarap originated, he becomes a commercial success with ‘real rap’, as his music is often labeled. In his single ‘Life Right Now’, JyellowL also refers to that, presenting himself as a conscious rapper and comparing himself to Kendrick Lamar: ‘They don’t want to hear no smart rapper, Kendrick Lamar rapper.’

Besides this representation of a conscious rapper, his music also expresses his Jamaican and Nigerian roots. ‘I do show that I’m Nigerian and Jamaican a lot. It’s gonna rub of anyway. [...] It’s ingrained in me,’ he refers to his Nigerian and Jamaican bloodlines. With hip-hop’s Jamaican dancehall influences, JyellowL feels that hip-hop culture was already inside of him. Next to that he ‘really keeps up’ with the Nigerian, and other African music scenes. Especially the earlier mentioned Fela Kuti, which he mentions a lot in his lyrics, and is a great inspiration to him musically. On top of that he spoke of Dublin is part of his identity as well, the city being an enabler for him. He made his first in Dublin. He has been through the schooling system in Ireland, from secondary to college. ‘I’m pretty much Irish, as my passport suggests,’ he stated. ‘I came to Ireland only five years ago, already have the Irish accent and shit.’

Less convinced of his Irish identity, Mythill Grim spoke in the closed booth in P.Mac’s: ‘I’m not Irish. I’m Nigerian. I might represent Dublin, but I wasn’t born here.’ Three months before the interview he released his single ‘Leave Me Alone’, which starts off with him rapping in Yoruba. In the interview he stated that the purpose of that song was to show people he is from. He has been in Dublin ‘long enough to sound Irish’, why Nigerian people sometimes think he does not speak his ‘own’ language. ‘That’s the fun part,’ he said while giving an example of sitting in a bar listening to Nigerians speaking Yoruba without them knowing he understood everything.

Later on, referring to Fela Kuti’s music – which is a returning subject with all three artists – Mythill Grim stated that the single could be considered his own version of afrobeat. ‘What if I was to do an afrobeat that wasn’t all about dancing, that actually would make you think? Real afrobeat is people like Fela Kuti; they spoke about real shit. So in a way I did it properly.’

²⁰ T. Rose, *The Hip-Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip-Hop and Why it Matters* (Washington: Basic Books, 2008): 1.

²¹ Idem: 3.

The self-expression of Mythill Grim, that expresses being an African in both language and influences, also is a reflection of him growing up in an Irish, and Christian culture, where he experienced racism in his first years as mentioned earlier. ‘What’s wrong with darkness? My skin is dark. If I’m being taught to love everything light, I might look at myself a little weird,’ he elaborated on the concept of dark and light – or good and evil – within Christianity. In his music, which, as his artist name suggests, could be labeled quite ‘grim’ or dark as well, Mythill Grim found a way accept himself, and to express himself as he is. ‘Now I’m comfortable,’ he reassured.

To return to ‘the link that has a life of its own’ that De Bruijn and Van Dijk spoke of regarding their concept of connectivity; this link in hip-hop music thus lies in the expression and representation of the self. As the examples of Huva, JyellowL and Mythill Grim show, all the dots that are being connected come together in this expressivity; which for them is put out best in hip-hop music. These dots consist of every aspect of who they are: their Nigerian (or African) roots; their Irish surroundings; their relation with a global hip-hop culture, and much more. Since we argued that this African-based expressivity is central to hip-hop, it makes hip-hop culture such a highly suitable framework for the study of connectivity. Especially in contemporary times, wherein digital and social media are highly present in everyday life, the reach of this global, commercial hip-hop culture reaches even further. Despite this still-expanding global culture, we should always keep in mind the re-territorialization that takes this scope all the way back to the human experience. ‘I’ll do the best I can to give you how I feel, because that’s what music is to me; it’s just how I feel,’ Mythill Grim concluded.

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