

# A hip-opera in Cape Town: The aesthetics, and politics of performing 'Afrikaaps'

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## *Abstract:*

This paper looks into the aesthetics and politics of the 'hip-opera' *Afrikaaps*. *Afrikaaps* was produced in 2010 by a group of musicians and spoken-word artists from Cape Town and the rural Western Cape Province of South Africa. The show premiered at an annual Afrikaans cultural festival; it then had a three week-run at a theatre, located in a predominantly white, English-speaking part of Cape Town, followed by different sets of performance in South Africa and abroad and the documentary by a Cape Town film maker. Dylan Valley's (2011) film follows this group of local artists creating the stage production as they trace the roots of Afrikaans to Khoi-San and slaves in the Cape. The production aimed to 'reclaim and liberate Afrikaans from its reputation as the language of the oppressor, taking it back for all who speak it.' (Valley 2011) The paper presents an analysis of how visual and musical aesthetics converge in the performed production of history, as creolization, and ethnically-specific 'heritage', and how the self-stylization is employed in attempts at authenticating a recently asserted linguistic and cultural 'identity'.

## Introduction

*Coloureds kom van KhoiSan verstand<sup>1</sup>*  
(*Afrikaaps* song)

*Through popular art, expression is given to what  
people may not have known they had in common.*  
(Barber 1987: 48)

The timber of the music can be heard reverberating eerily, hauntingly with the beat of a drum. The curtains open to reveal the five performers, each one dressed in a different style: There is Blaqpearl, who wears a 'baby girl' style dress; Jitsvinger has dressed up in a suit made of old newspapers on which the words '*Suiwer Afrikaans*' were printed. Moenier Adams, on the other hand, looks like a picture perfect 'Sport Scene' or 'ID' shopper<sup>2</sup>. As the performers stand there on the Baxter theatre's stage in a half circle, the background is filled with Khoisan imagery, rock paintings with little men and bows and arrows, and what one would assume would be indigenous Khoisan music playing in the background.

*Wie is gjy?* (Who Are you) the other performers ask Moenier. Moenier stands there not knowing what to say, dumbstruck not knowing who he is while the earthy music continues to play in the background. 'Make child but don't have paper *geld* (money)', '*Kwaai* cell phone (cool), but no airtime'; the audience laugh while they all sing together, dancing around Moenier in the manner of *langarm*, considered both 'folksy' and formal ballroom

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<sup>1</sup> "Coloureds came from Khoisan knowledge."

<sup>2</sup> Fashionable chain stores among young people

style. *Wie is ek wie is gjy?* (Who am I, who are you?). Bliksemstraal, another one of the performers, starts singing: 'lawyers, doctors, moved out of the ghetto' to which Blaqpearl, the only woman among the cast, starts responding with her own: "Women with no straight hair *daais n straat meit*, no hair *nou wat is ek dan?*" (Woman with no straight hair, are nothing, no hair so what am I?). The diminutive young woman shows off her shaven head.

*Awe* ('Wotsup'<sup>3</sup>) Moenier greets the audience; the audience in their turn laugh at this 'slang' greeting. Moenier takes up this laughter and starts talking about how when one speaks 'like that' people always laugh. He gets serious, asking the audience '*Wiet julle dat die Khoisan was ook verantwoordelik vir die development van Afrikaans, baie vannie Afrikaans woorde ko van Khoisan woorde?*' (Do you know that the Khoisan was also responsible for the development of Afrikaans, a lot of the Afrikaans words are from Khoisan words?). The performers, each taking their turn, proceed to speak about the historical development of Afrikaans especially in Cape Town as well as how during the colonial era the communication patterns between colonists and the indigenous people gave rise to the development of Afrikaans.

They all start speaking Afrikaans in a 'Khoisan way', which they do by inserting 'clicks'<sup>4</sup> everywhere in Afrikaans words. It sounds at once exotic as well as familiar to the ear, to which the audience starts applauding in amazement. Maybe we need to re-appropriate the clicks back into Afrikaans, they say. As the audience applaud, Kyle Shepherd starts playing music on the piano and the performers start chanting *Coloureds kom va Khoisan verstand*'. When the song ends, I almost want to jump out of my seat in excitement. It feels like the performers have just sung a freedom song; that's how excited the atmosphere seems to be.

This is how Oliphant, who was at the time doing research on Afrikaaps and the everyday reproclamation of Afrikaans for her BA Honours project experienced the visual and musical aspects of the stage production of *Afrikaaps*.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2010, *Afrikaaps*, dubbed a 'hip-hopera', premiered at the KKNK (*Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees*<sup>5</sup>), an annual Afrikaans cultural festival that takes place in Oudtshoorn in the eastern inland reaches of South Africa's Western Cape province. A week later, the show produced by a group of musicians and spoken word-artists from Cape Town and the rural Western Cape moved to the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, where the production had a successful three week-run. Since then, *Afrikaaps* has been performed in the Netherlands in October 2011, and in different South African spaces, most recently during the 2012 December holidays in the *Joule City* studio space in Cape Town; the story of its production has been documented in a film directed by Dylan Valley, Fifteen *Afrikaaps* songs were compiled on a CD, and most recently an EP was launched with five audio and three video tracks. *Afrikaaps* has become a widely travelled icon of the visual and musical aesthetics, which are embraced by a new movement of local linguistic identity politics, aiming to 'reclaim and liberate Afrikaans from its reputation as the language of the oppressor, taking it back for all who speak it.' (Valley 2011)

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<sup>3</sup> The vernacular articulation of the all-South African expression 'What's up?'

<sup>4</sup> Click sounds are considered typical for the KhoiSan languages.

<sup>5</sup> Klein Karoo National Arts Festival

This cultural project presents an interesting case study, for a number of reasons, related to its empirical manifestations of aesthetics and politics, as well as contributing to the theorisation of performance, belonging, diversity, and the politics of difference in contemporary South Africa. *Afrikaaps* hit a nerve, or perhaps more than one. In this extraordinary multi-media production, the stage production being followed by a documentary film in 2011, and, more recently, the release of a music CD and multimedia EP, visual and sonic aesthetics converge in the performed production of history. Or as the lingo of contemporary South African public culture prefers: 'heritage'. Because, as statements by the producers and performers intimated from the start, *Afrikaaps* is a conscious effort of authenticating in and through performance a recently much asserted 'identity', which revolves around the reproclamation of a previously marginalised, 'non-standard' version of Afrikaans. This is not an entirely new enterprise. Yet, as we will show, the recent production of the 'hip-hopera' differs considerably from earlier attempts of bringing attention to this dialect and its speakers, which were embarked upon by Cape Town rappers in the 1990s. We will show that while the *Afrikaaps* production, similar to those hip-hop crews like *Prophets of da city (POC)* who were "blazing the trail for *gamtaal*" (Haupt 2012: 34), shout out loudly the demand and assertion to 'legalise' the (use of the) language, there is also a different dimension to it. Starting from the various naming of the dialect as either 'Afrikaaps' or '*gamtaal*' (originally a pejorative), we will argue that there is something critically new about the *Afrikaaps* production, which is the extent to which the (fragmented) story the performers tell delves deeply into the effervescent heritage dynamics of post-apartheid South Africa. The show traces the roots of Afrikaans back to the earliest inhabitants of the Western Cape, the Khoi herders and San foragers, and follows its development involving the slaves that were brought from the East (Asia as well as East Africa) to the Cape, through to the current speakers of the dialect, who are mostly 'Coloureds', associated with the vast townships of the Cape Flats.<sup>6</sup>

From its early performances, we became interested in how the visual and musical aesthetics of *Afrikaaps* feed into two, partly, connected identity discourses, which we investigated in separate research endeavours. Oliphant has been interested in how it is expressly linked to current efforts to reposition Afrikaans, the language, which has historically been associated with the political system of apartheid, and its roots in exclusive white Afrikaner nationalism. *Afrikaaps* is the aesthetics of a linguistic political identity claim that asserts the validity of different versions of the language, particularly the variants spoken by the Coloured working class on the Cape Flats, which have previously been dismissed as 'non-standard'. This has recently become a focus of related research in linguistic and popular culture anthropology (eg., Oliphant 2011; Kaaps in Fokus 2012).

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<sup>6</sup> A note on the use of racial categories in contemporary South Africa and in our scholarship is necessary: In common South African contemporary usage, 'Coloured' refers to people of mixed descent, who are being defined as a social group, or a 'community' in common parlance, and mostly speak Afrikaans as their first language. In the following, we use categories such as 'coloured', 'white' or 'black' without quotation marks because these socially and politically constructed racial categories continue to be used commonly in the everyday, and even resurge as actually-existing groups, re-constituted by postapartheid politics and bureaucratic practices of redress. While we do not wish to support the apartheid-induced definition and politics, this paper uses to the categories as they are commonly understood and used locally.

One the other hand, and this is Becker's chief interest in *Afrikaaps*, the performance presents interesting discursive reconstructions of a coloured 'culture' as based on 'KhoiSan knowledge', as one of the *Afrikaaps* songs goes and the concomitant claim-making politics. The present paper focuses primarily on the production as reclaiming, and an attempt of reconstituting presumably lost cultural forms of the 'Khoi' by contemporary urban residents of Cape Town. The discussion thus centres on *Afrikaaps* as an expression of heritage politics in contemporary South Africa.

The paper investigates how visual and musical aesthetics converge in the performed production of history in the *Afrikaaps production*, and how they are employed in authenticating efforts to proclaim and assert linguistic and cultural 'identity' in the contemporary context where public invocations of cultural heritage, difference, indigeneity and tradition have been gaining ever more prominence across South Africa. It is argued that *Afrikaaps* demonstrates the imbrication of culture and politics through performance. In contemporary South Africa cultural performance is actively employed in the negotiation of power relations; it is of special interest how performances mediate the bonding, the being and belonging to collectivities such as the nation, but also cultural or religious 'communities' through the performative mobilisation of 'heritage' in a contemporary cultural production.

The paper elaborates how the embodied, sensorial aesthetics become apparent in the *Afrikaaps* performance, documentary film, and non-commercial, web-based video clips, which have been produced by artists involved in the production. I take the connections of aesthetics and politics as a starting point, focusing on performance, style, spectacle and the materiality of the *Afrikaaps* hip-hopera as a contemporary cultural form, thereby incorporating, reconsidering, and transcending older concepts of 'culture'. This is attempted particularly through attention paid to aesthetics and performance, here: the role of music and its new forms, which embrace visuality.

The sonic and visual aesthetics of *Afrikaaps* are eclectic, at once fragmented and synergetic. The paper follows the subject's format and presents a dialogical journey, ranging from the production's musical and visual aesthetics, its travels across locations, through to its place in histories of South African conscious theatre and music traditions, and finally to a reflection of 'heritage dynamics' (Meyer et.al. 2008) and performance.

### **Sound and vision of *Afrikaaps*: An eclectic aesthetics**

On stage and off stage, as further explored in Dylan Valley's film (2011), the *Afrikaaps* performers are engaged in an eclectic conversation of sonic and visual aesthetics, including hip-hop, jazz and Ghoema sounds, rap lyrics, spoken word art, breakdance, and video installations. As the opening vignette demonstrated, all these forms are brought together by the artists in an absorbing conversation with each other. The performers bring their personal stories with the language to the stage, while at other moments join together in a chorus of key messages, such as the song, 'Afrikaaps is Legal', performed by the entire cast, with Bliksemstraal (Charl van der Westhuizen), otherwise best known as a breakdancer of note, as the frontsinger.

The history that the production tells about “the little-known story of Afrikaans” emphasises the Creole – it is not only a mix of eclectic aesthetics and genres, more importantly, it is in a continuous process of evolution; Creole being a constant flow of making new shapes – visual and sonic *scapes*, perhaps, in Appadurai’s (1991) understanding. However, at the same time, *Afrikaaps* makes historical and – at times essentialist – cultural statements, which emphasise the KhoiSan *origins*, which is further mediated through the narration of historically later moments, particularly slavery at the Cape in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These dimensions make for an ambiguous narrative. We will return to a closer investigation of its significance for understanding performance and cultural politics in contemporary South Africa. For now, let us take a look at the sonic and visual aesthetics of *Afrikaaps*.

*Afrikaaps* works through a consistent interplay of sound and vision. Whereas sound plays with a range of musical genres and language, the visual involves projection, dress, bodies and gesture.

The performers play instruments that range from the ‘traditional’ single-string musical bow of KhoiSan musicians, which was developed from their bow-and-arrow hunting tools to the free sounds of jazz piano, bass and drums. The most prominently ‘played’ instruments are their voices, though. The rhythm of their aural expressions moves between slow and fast where the slow harmonies of *ghoema* songs, borrowed from the Malay Choirs’ songs to banjo accompaniment build up into fast-paced rap tunes and the spoken-word tempo of the poets Jethro Louw and Blaqpearl. Language is central. Louw’s deeply-inflected rural Afrikaans juxtaposes the urban slang of the other performers with their characteristic mix of locally accented Afrikaans and English. Of particular interest is the ‘click scene’, described in the opening vignette. The performers engage in a rapid contest of inserting random click sounds in their contemporary Cape Flats Afrikaans, thus making it sound “reminiscent from the way my ancestors spoke”, as cast member Blaqpearl explained. (cited in Le Roux n.d.; c. 2011) This ‘KhoiSanisation’ of Afrikaans particularly points to the heritagisation of contemporary, newly asserted cultural and linguistic identities.

The embodied visual aesthetic is as varied as the sonic expression. On the one hand there are the performers’ creative use of sartorial strategies and simultaneous gestures. Veteran rapper Emile Jansen, sporting a big Afro, without fail wears a black t-shirt, branded with the activist slogan “Cape Flats Uprising” and does not shy away from showing the dirty finger. He is seen much of the time jumping and stomping across the stage in b-boy fashion. Sharing the stage and presenting a visual impression is the two-metre tall artist known as Jitsvinger, dressed in animal skins and expressing his intent to re-imagine Khoisan legends in rap. The most versatile sartorial performance is embodied by Blaqpearl, the only female cast member, who enters the stage dressed in a calf-length skirt, broad scarf around her shoulders with her head covered in a tightly wrapped *doek* – ostensibly depicting an early colonial era slave woman, she sheds these garments rather dramatically on stage until she emerges attired in a black leggings-and-tunic attire, proudly displaying her boldly shaven skull.

The other facet of the production's dramatic visual aesthetics are large digital projections, including photographs of the infamous 'courts', blocks of flats, of the poorest and most notorious Coloured townships on the Cape Flats. Many of the projections are historical. We see prints and etchings from the early colonial period at the Cape, street scenes, depictions of slavery, and of historical figures that have become significant in the postapartheid society's quest for indigeneity, most prominent among them Autshumato (also known as 'Harry die *Strandloper* (beachcomber)' and his niece Krotoa, who were key 17<sup>th</sup> century interpreters and cultural and political brokers at the time of the establishment of the Dutch settlement. An important document from the 19<sup>th</sup> century is projected in black-and-white; it demonstrates Afrikaans written in phonetic Arabic script. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is present in numerous film clips, which show earlier parades of the *klopse* carnival troupes and street scenes from earlier ostensibly creole Cape Town neighbourhoods. The use of the archives is not too critical, though; *Afrikaaps* also brings into play without comment clips from apartheid-era historical films, such as those produced for the 1952 Tercentenary of Jan van Riebeeck's landing at the Cape. These images are interspersed with video-ed interviews with expert authorities, the late University of Cape Town (UCT) academic Neville Alexander, and Patrick Mellet, introduced as a "heritage activist" who provide historical background.

The large-scale video installations of graphics, blown-up images and documents, and 'expert' voices of concerned academics and heritage activists, support and – it appears – authenticate the narrative. *Afrikaaps* is more than a staged production firmly directed by the Johannesburg-born, Amsterdam-based director Catherine Henegan; it is a conversation among the performers, with each other, the thoughts, and the audience.

*Afrikaaps* brought together a number of Cape Town musicians, dancers, poets and spoken-word artists. Born between the 1960s and 1980s, they belong to different generations, however each of them is an artist of note in their respective genres.

Emile Jansen, also known as Emile YX?, with his signature big 'Afro' hairstyle, is considered one of the godfathers of South African hip-hop; now in his mid-forties he embodies the 'old skool' cultural style of conscious Cape Flats rap. He has been involved in hip hop since 1982 as a b-boy, MC and graffiti artist. He was one of the founders of *Black Noise* in 1982, today the country's longest surviving hip hop band. Trained as a teacher, Emile is a full-time cultural activist, who has created numerous hip-hop events and projects. After the era of political anti-apartheid activism, school boycotts and street battles; nowadays he and Black Noise are involved in activities of a social nature geared at 'ghetto youth' from the Cape Flats through breakdancing workshops, b-boy competitions and other events. Emile is also a proliferate writer and has created magazines, documentaries, flyers, and 'how-to' hip-hop manuals. His sonic and visual style emphasises the 'community' of the urban 'ghetto'.

Quintin Goliath, known as *Jitsvinger* ('the Dope/ Cool One'), a lanky figure, has ostensibly altered the style of Cape Flats hip-hop. Of a younger generation than Emile, he was inspired in the mid-1990s, while still in school, by school tours undertaken by *POC (Prophets of da City)*, one of Cape Town's *old skool* bands, to raise awareness around issues such as drug abuse and education. As a rapper, poet and electric and acoustic guitarist, Jitsvinger has performed in South Africa and

internationally. His lyrics are exclusively in Afrikaans. Jitsvinger's visual style flaunts his identification with the KhoiSan movements.

Since 2007 Jitsvinger has repeatedly performed with the Khoi Khonnexion group and Jethro Louw, dubbed the 'official Kkoisan praise poet', who has also been a cast member of *Afrikaaps*. (jitsvinger website) Unlike the other members of the *Afrikaaps* cast, Jethro Louw was not born in Cape Town although today he too lives in one of the city's townships; he hails from Beaufort West in the arid Great Karoo region of South Africa. He is one of the country's most prominent spoken word artists, who uses the power of his words 'to bring back the discontinued heritage of his culture'. (Infesting The City 2011 website) The biography of this performer emphasises:

His work revitalises the legacy of stories and the wealth of storytellers of the KhoiSan people. For centuries, the members of this community have been silenced by the gun and the bullet and the wall. The results are a lack of formal skills and access to infrastructure to turn those skills into income resulting in a lack of identity and self-esteem. (Infesting The City 2011)

*Bliksemstraal* (bolt of lightning), a.k.a. Charl van der Westhuizen, is best known as a breakdancer of note, who has performed across the world. He is also a singer, songwriter and poet. His style is an eclectic mix of 'typically Cape Flats' – in some scenes of the production – he dances around the stage dressed in trackpants and matching top and a contemporary dreadlocked embodied appearance.

The music for *Afrikaaps* was composed, directed and performed by Kyle Shepherd, a fast-rising young Capetonian jazz pianist and saxophonist. Born in 1987, Kyle Shepherd has already performed across the world and in April 2012 released his third album, 'South African History IX'.<sup>7</sup>

*BlaqPearl* (a.k.a. Janine van Rooy) is the only female performer among the otherwise entirely male cast of *Afrikaaps*. She describes herself as a poet, rapper, musician and social justice activist. The diminutive young woman from Mitchells Plain has been involved in conscious hip-hop since the age of twelve when she started writing lyrics and hanging around her brother, who as 'Mr Devious' was a well-known performer of conscious rap and was killed in 2004 during gang warfare. With her shaven skull, this University of the Western Cape (UWC) graduate in Linguistics and Psychology makes a bold statement against the politics of hair among the Coloured populations (cf. Erasmus 2000). She chose the stage name *Blaqpearl* because she identified herself 'more with being black', and because of her identification with what she calls her 'Khoi heritage': 'That's where the "q" in Blaqpearl comes from. It's more of a click sound reminiscent from the way my ancestors spoke.' (cited in Le Roux n.d.; c. 2011)

The young singer Moenier Adams, using the stage name *Monox*, has been involved with the Malay Choirs and Klopse troupes of the Cape Town carnival from childhood. He was recruited into the *Afrikaaps* production when the other performers and

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<sup>7</sup> For his earlier album, 'A Portrait of Home' Kyle Shepherd was nominated for the SAMA (South African Music Award) 2011 in the 'Traditional Jazz' category. Kyle Shepherd performs solo as a pianist, with his band, and has played with leading South African jazz musicians, including the late Zim Nqawana, McCoy Mrubata, Hilton Schilder, Errol Dyers, and the late Robbie Jansen.

musicians, and Director Catherine Henegan, felt that they needed to incorporate components of the Ghoema music, so typically associated with the Western Cape musical tradition. Unlike the other cast members, who he considers to be ‘the serious ones’, Moenier has little interest in social and identity activism; in Dylan Valley’s *Afrikaaps* documentary he states that he was just in ‘for the fun’. Monox’s visual aesthetics make him appear as an ordinary young Cape Flats resident; his voice is harmonious and embraces the city’s older musical heritage.

*Afrikaaps*’s cast has continued to evolve during performances in different places; during a tour to the Netherlands in September and October 2011, performances took place in seven Dutch cities, including Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, and Amersfoort. In the Netherlands the show was presented in a reworked format and incorporated Dutch hip hop artists Def P (‘Nederhop’ pioneers) and Akwasi Ansah of Zwart Licht. During an evening at the University of Stellenbosch, just before their departure for Europe, on the other hand, the *Afrikaaps* artists were joined by a group of student performers from the university’s Social Anthropology programme. The Stellenbosch students, all but one ‘Coloureds’ – hence a racial minority among their university’s still overwhelmingly white student body, and calling their group *Urbanscapes*, brought interesting new dimensions to the fore as they danced and rapped in the university’s conservatoire, a rather drab stage more known for its demure classical concerts. Significantly, Stellenbosch University, historically South Africa’s elite academic institution for Afrikaners, has been for some years now the site of heated controversies about the future of Afrikaans in the academy.

## Spaces of performance

Spaces of performance, their social geographical location and architectural, visual aesthetics are crucial to understand the significance of a production such as *Afrikaaps*. The Stellenbosch spatial appropriation was decidedly ‘political’ in the current skirmishes over the future of Afrikaans. This was perhaps less obvious in some other venues where *Afrikaaps* has played, such as Cape Town’s Baxter Theatre Centre, regarded as one of South Africa’s leading sites of the performing arts in whose 660-seater main theatre *Afrikaaps* had a three-week successful run in April 2010. The ‘Baxter’, as the theatre complex is commonly known is very much part of the decidedly ‘English’ southern suburbs of Cape Town. Thus, it was perhaps a surprising choice for the first urban run of *Afrikaaps*. Similarly, the venue of the *Afrikaaps* shows Becker attended in December 2012 was more associated with experimental creativity than language and cultural battles. The **Joule City** multi-disciplinary studios, located in central Cape Town, are designed as a project to create meeting points and space for small arts organisations, filmmakers, designers, architects, cultural researchers, artists and writers. The audience that had made their way on these balmy summer evenings to the show in what has recently become known as ‘the fringe’ of the inner city appeared representative of Cape Town artsy intelligentsia, generally conversant in English more than in Afrikaans, for whom *Afrikaaps* has grown somewhat iconic since its beginnings.

The performance space where *Afrikaaps* had premiered in 2010, however was a chief site of post-apartheid language and cultural identity politics. The Klein Karoo

National Arts Festival (*Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees*), generally known by its acronym 'KKNK', has been held annually since 1995 in Oudtshoorn, a town in the Klein Karoo eastern inland of the Western Cape province. The KKNK is one of two annual Afrikaans cultural festivals, which have been established in South Africa after 1994 and have since grown immensely.<sup>8</sup>

Esther van Heerden (2009), who has studied Afrikaans cultural festivals, argues that the emergence of these festivals was owed to a 'crisis' of Afrikaner self-esteem and identification after the end of apartheid. Although Afrikaans retained its status as an official language under the new political dispensation, many Afrikaans-speaking Whites perceived the post-1990 democratic transition as posing a threat to Afrikaans language and culture. Historically, Afrikaners had laid exclusive claims to Afrikaans; the language had been appropriated and politicized as a key identity marker of the Afrikaners vis-à-vis 'culturally different' others despite the fact that a range of people in South Africa, especially the vast majority of those denominated 'Coloureds' spoke Afrikaans as their first language.

Van Heerden (2009: 15) following Stephanie Marlin-Curiel (2003: 69) maintains that the Afrikaans festivals originated in the realization that in post-apartheid South Africa, Afrikaner cultural survival depended much 'on an emphasis on historical ties with non-white Afrikaans speakers.' It was within this context that the Afrikaans-orientated festivals emerged as public spaces in which Afrikaners, black Afrikaans speakers, and South Africans in general could enter into conversation with each other. The 1995 KKNK festival guide described the purpose of the festival as "the rediscovery and resettlement of Afrikaans and all its cultural goods from and for all *Afrikaanses*. It becomes really a festival for the emancipation of Afrikaans". (Van Heerden 2009: 115)

Despite the imagination of an inclusive 'community' of Afrikaans-speakers, the KKNK festival has remained largely a space of white Afrikaners. The apprehension felt by the *Afrikaaps* cast on their way to the premiere in Oudtshoorn (as documented in Dylan Valley's film), was rather unsurprising: how would this audience receive a production, which openly questioned the received discourse about the origins of the Afrikaans language, and did so through a visual and musical aesthetics that played on perceived black and 'coloured' genres, such as hip-hop and ghoema?

### **A Creole Language: Afrikaans and its politicisation**

The *Afrikaaps* production's expressed aim was to reclaim the 'true' history of Afrikaans from the discourses that had arisen from the exclusive appropriation of the language as an identity marker of (white) Afrikaners. It showed in the layers upon

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<sup>8</sup> Van Heerden (2009: 97) reports that Nic Barrow, a prominent lawyer and businessman in Oudtshoorn, and Andrew Marais, former Public Relations Manager for the National Press (*Naspers*), first came up with the idea for an Afrikaans festival in 1993. Ticket sales at the KKNK escalated from 30 314 in 1995 to 128 927 in 2000 to about 191 252 in 2005. (van Heerden 2009: 6) The other annual Afrikaans festival is 'Aardklop', which was established in 1998 and takes place in Potchefstroom in the North of South Africa.

layers of song, dance and video installations how the language could be traced back to the encounters of the different groups within the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) founded settlement of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Among them were the local Khoi who established trade relations with the colonists and men from England, Germany and Scandinavia who were in service of the DEIC. After 1688, French Huguenots came to the Cape to escape religious prosecution; from 1658 already slaves were brought to the Cape from Angola, Madagascar and the East-Indian Islands.

It was through the encounters of these speakers of different Dutch, German and French dialects, the Khoi languages, Malay and Portuguese that gradually a new language, which became later known as Afrikaans came about. The *Afrikaaps* cast's repeated shouts to declare the language a 'Creole' is quite appropriate: Afrikaans has Dutch roots but it incorporates traces of all the languages that had been indigenous to, or had travelled to the Cape with their speakers from Europe, Asia and other parts of the African continent.

### **The language of the oppressor**

For much of the first two centuries when Afrikaans was spoken in South Africa, it was regarded as a language of marginal populations. It was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century's politico-cultural Afrikaner ethnically-defined nationalist claims expressed by the *taalbeweging* (language movement) activists that blatantly disregarded the multi-ethnic roots of Afrikaans and established the belief that Afrikaans was a 'white man's tongue'.<sup>9</sup>

Standard, *suiwer* ('pure') Afrikaans was simplistically equated with the language of the Afrikaners, while 'non-standard' varieties were neglected or frowned upon. *Kaapse Afrikaans* was often used to typify characters as 'non-white' in work written in standard Afrikaans (Van Rensburg 1999: 18; cited by van Heerden 2009: 60) As a consequence, 'Coloured' and 'black' Afrikaans speakers were increasingly alienated not only from Afrikaners, but also from Afrikaans as a result of Afrikaner Nationalism. During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Afrikaans became increasingly rejected as the 'language of the oppressor'.

### **Language, class, and the politics of performance**

Cape Town's politically outspoken coloured middle-classes overwhelmingly rejected the imposition of Afrikaans under apartheid. The political rejection extended into the intimacy of family and home when during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many coloured middle-class families switched to English as their primary language. There were however also indications as early as 1985 of, what a linguistic psychologist

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<sup>9</sup> This new movement deliberately ignored, for example, that many Afrikaans place names in South Africa originated amongst Khoi speakers and were equally oblivious to the contributions of slaves. eg., some of the first Afrikaans texts in the mid-nineteenth century were Afrikaans translations of the Koran in Arabic script and some Muslim schools had used Afrikaans as medium of instruction since 1869, years before the *Genootskap* established the first Afrikaans school in 1882. (Van Heerden 2009: 56)

called 'a popular movement in middle-class music and theatrical art to reclaim authentic working-class roots', where middle-class coloureds began to use the 'working-class dialect' (ie., *Kaaps*) in resistance theatre, using the language to portray 'parochial resistance to the imposition of juristic identity.' (Stone 1991: 134) Some of the coloured middle-class further turned to exploring the reclamation of, in Stone's terms, 'their own parochial origins'. (ibid.)

Post-1990, these early endeavours of a coloured 'roots' discourse were complemented by ambivalent and complex engagements, where white Afrikaans speakers, and particularly their politico-cultural associations such as the ATKV (*Afrikaans Taal and Kultuur Vereeniging*), began to embrace 'coloured' speakers of Afrikaans. Afrikaans, in the context of a strongly-felt dislocation after apartheid and the insecurities this brought for many white Afrikaans speakers (Steyn 2004: 70) was now hailed as an indigenous African language. The Afrikaans 'community' was now reconceptualised to include all the language's speakers. This conceptual move was captured in the neologism *Afrikaanses*, as opposed to 'Afrikaners', to indicate a social category that encompasses anyone who speaks Afrikaans or identifies with the language. Van Heerden (2009: 114-5) understands this as a strategic move to 'depoliticise' Afrikaans, and thus free it from its historical association with apartheid.

The above sketch indicated that in the Western Cape, the social life of Afrikaans, past and present, somewhat differs from the language's history in other parts of South Africa. Whereas elsewhere in the country, black people considered Afrikaans nothing more than a burdensome tool to deal with the harsh realities of life in the land of Apartheid, in Cape Town and its surrounds, 'a definite sentimental allegiance to the language exists', as Neville Alexander and Kathleen Heugh have it. (Alexander and Heugh 2001: 21) As alluded to already by Stone (1990), in the Western Cape the 'non-standard' version, known variously as 'slang', 'patois', 'Kaaps' or 'gamtaal', became an important signifier of assertion of local speakers. Theatrical and musical performances, too, used it as a marker of local identification and resistance from at least the mid-1980s. A prominent, early example for this is 'District Six', the ground-breaking Cape Town musical, written and produced by David Kramer and Taliep Petersen, which used the exemplary Creole language mix in ingenious ways.<sup>10</sup>

### **'Born on the Flats': From *gamtaal* to *Afrikaaps***

*Afrikaaps* thus is not the first occasion on which the version of Afrikaans spoken by working-class 'coloured' Capetonians takes stage in a cultural production and performance. While the language of Cape Town's majority population featured already on stage in the mid-1980s in productions such as 'District Six' and 'agit-prop' resistance theatre, a conscious use and social and political engagement with the language *as such* followed suit soon after Nelson Mandela's release from prison in February 1990. Particularly, already in the early 1990s some of Cape Town's original

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<sup>10</sup> 'District Six' had a seven-months run when it first opened in 1987 at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and was seen by over 350,000 people. (Kramer and Petersen 2007)

hip-hop crews employed codes that spoke to the experiences of young Cape Flats residents.

The bands *POC (Prophets of da City)* and *BVK (Brassie vannie Kaap)* played a particular role through their lyrics in *gamtaal*, as they referred to the Cape Flats version of Afrikaans.<sup>11</sup> Adam Haupt (2001: 171), who has written extensively on Cape Town hip-hop, shows that *gamtaal* has typically been associated with notions of the 'authentic' coloured working class; what is more, in effect, *gamtaal* has been a momentous ingredient of the stereotyping of Coloureds as embracing jollity and drunkenness, and associating with immorality, impurity and untrustworthiness (Erasmus 2001: 14, 17). To many, Whites and 'respectable' Coloureds alike, *gamtaal* is the language of the *skollie*, the imagined embodiment of Coloured gangsterism. The rappers of POC and BVK used the dialect explicitly to raise objections about the stereotyping of coloureds:

*Hulle wys altyd lelike prente van ons mense.  
Hoekom moet ek altyd 'n gangster of 'n klops  
Soos al wat ons sien in 'n koerant of TV's.  
Hulle trek hulle neys sê, 'Sies, jy's a low-class coloured'  
(Kaa van Storms, BVK, 1998; cited in Haupt 2001)*

*They always show ugly images of our people  
Why is that I always have to be a gangster or a 'klops' (carnival performer)  
Because that's all what we see in the newspaper or on tv  
They pull their noses and say, 'Shame, you're a low-class coloured'*

In the 1990s, Cape Town hip-hop crews positioned themselves in the spirit of black consciousness-inspired self-knowledge. At the turn from the 'old' to the 'new' South Africa, these early 'conscious' bands rapped against the ascription of the coloured communal categorisation, thus continuing the black consciousness resistance approach of most of the anti-apartheid coloured activists. In a POC track titled 'Black Thing', the band's MC, Shaheen Ariefdien, expressed this in no uncertain terms:

The term "coloured" is a desperate case of how the devil's divided  
Us by calling us a separate race.  
They call me "coloured", and say my blood isn't pure, but G,  
I'm not yakking my insecurity.  
So I respond to this and ventilate my mental state with Black  
Consciousness  
(Black Thing, POC, 1995; cited in Haupt 2003: 216)

When the rappers proclaimed, as Fat, an MC for BVK had it, the aim to prove that '*gamtaal* is legal' (Haupt 2001: 176), this was to be understood in the context of (re)claiming the 'black thing' in its local context. BVK asserted:

Yo man, what's up, kid. Let's do this for the honeys.  
That's not the way we *praat in die Kaap*.  
*Jy moet wys raak of waai want jou valse accent don' make you kwaai.*

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<sup>11</sup> The more cosmopolitan – multiracial - POC also rapped in non-standard versions of English, Xhosa and Zulu.

(*Laat Dit Rik*, BVK, 1998; cited in Haupt 2001)

*Yo man, what's up, kid. Let's do this for the honeys.  
That's not the way we speak in the Cape.  
You must wise up or wink 'cos your false accent doesn't make you cool.*

These lyrics of one-and-a-half decades ago still resonate in the more recent proclamations of *Afrikaaps*. Yet, something seems decidedly different. In the 1990s, Shaheen Ariefdien made a strong point about *gamtaal* as the language of township 'ghetto' youth:

We want to be street, you know? ... So if some middle class motherfucker comes, 'Oe *God, skollietaal.*' The shit's *not* for them, you know what I mean? I don't care if some white-ass dude at home thinks, 'Oh shit, look at this ... uncultured', you know? I want some kid from the ghetto to think, Naa, we can relate to that'. (cited in Haupt 2001: 178)

The conscious crews of the 1990s rapped in the Cape Flats *taal* with the aim of relating to their audience, and to 'uplift' (as the local lingo goes) the youth of the coloured townships by addressing with them issues of substance abuse, HIV&AIDS, and other 'youth development' concerns. They were also concerned about belonging and cultural and emotional citizenship. Bands like POC made explicit efforts of encouraging among Coloured constituencies a political sense of belonging to the nascent 'new South Africa'. (see, eg., Haupt 2001: 179)

'History' was not entirely absent from the lyrical argument promulgated by the rappers. In *Kaap van Storms* BVK countered the dominant discourse, for instance, that *onse mense* (our people) were hopeless 'bastards' since their ancestors were whites and slaves, who were given to substance abuse, gangsterism and violence; they did this by putting emphasis on a glorious past where 'our ancestors' were kings and queens:

But wait a minute, if you trust my story and not his story *sal jy sien.*  
My *voorvaders* was a king a queen and never knew drugs, guns of 'n *kantien.*  
*Hulle was altyd daar om God the bedien*  
(*Kaap van Storms*, BVK, 1998; cited in Haupt 2001)

*But wait a minute, if you trust my story and not his story then you will see  
My ancestors was a king a queen and never knew drugs, guns or a tavern.  
They were always there to serve God.*

The embrace of a discourse which emphasises the 'KhoiSan' origin of Coloureds is fairly recent though. The claims to a celebrated indigenous peoples origin, expressed by the *Afrikaaps* cast repeatedly with the slogan 'Coloureds *kom van KhoiSan verstand*', resonates in the individual claims to their 'KhoiSan' heritage made by several cast members in different contexts. The embodied aesthetics of contemporary KhoiSan cultural activism embraces, in fact: revolves around a dreaded (and rugged) appearance. As showed above, the visual and aural KhoiSan signification has been adopted by several of *Afrikaaps* performers.

In recent years, the identification with 'KhoiSan heritage' has become a prominent feature in the claim-making politics of South Africa's Western Cape province. The nascent political movement includes several ethn racially (Coloured) 'constituency'-

based lobby groups that argue that as the descendants of the 'first nations' of this part of South Africa they were entitled to land ownership restoration and protest their, perceived and real, discrimination. (see, eg., Khoisan) '

### **Structure of feeling: The aesthetics of Black Consciousness theatre**

Unlike much of the 1990s reclamation of *gamtaal*, the visual and musical aesthetics of *Afrikaaps* produce a felt sense of the past, which we can understand in terms of Raymond Williams' (1961) concept of 'structure of feeling' as 'a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression.' (Williams 1961: 48) Williams' original concept emphasised that the 'structure of feeling' in one sense was 'the culture of a period' and 'the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization' (ibid.). In the *Afrikaaps* production, the past presented appears mythical and composite, aimed ostensibly at creating a sense of an a-historical 'culture' of Coloureds and their language.

This places *Afrikaaps* in a particular tradition of theatre in South Africa, which was articulated by performers connected to the Black Consciousness movement's from the 1970s. Ian Steadman (1990: 212) argued that 'Black Consciousness enabled the practitioners of black theatre to create a 'structure of feeling' commensurate with the larger mythology of blackness prevailing amongst audiences.' The a-historical mythology created for theatre audiences often romanticised the past in attempts to recover it, which was partly responsible for the appeal, Black Consciousness theatre had for audiences of all social classes. Performance of poetry and chants, songs, shouts and proclamations were a prominent element of its aesthetic.

As this paper has demonstrated, *Afrikaaps* noticeably proliferated reference to the mythical KhoiSan past through imagery, historical narration and musical elements. Conspicuously, unlike in many other contemporary public culture narratives of coloured-ness and Cape Town urban history, the production contains hardly any reference to the more recent past of District Six, a myth of multiracial cosmopolitanism imagined e.g., in the well-known Taliep Petersen and David Kramer musicals.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Afrikaaps* and the everyday performance of 'being from the Cape Flats'**

Parallel to her research into the performance of the *Afrikaaps* production, Oliphant conducted research over several months in 2010 among young people from the Cape Flats area, where the (Afri)Kaaps language is mostly spoken today into how they negotiated their identity connected to the language, as well as the urban spaces of the Cape Flats.

The Cape Flats are a socio-historical as much as a geographical space on the perimeter of Cape Town. As Elaine Salo has argued, the racialised ghettos of displaced people, located on the sandy flats, generally between 15 and 30

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<sup>12</sup> Especially 'District Six' (1987) and 'Kat and the Kings' (1995).

kilometres away from the city and the urban neighbourhoods where many coloured Capetonians had lived prior to the forced removals under the apartheid 'Group Areas Act', imbued the racial category 'Coloured' with unique spatial and socio-economic meanings. (Salo 2003: 349) Nonetheless, Salo (2003: 348) postulates that in the decades following the apartheid forced removals, 'social webs have been painstakingly re spun in the dumping grounds'. For the 1980s already, Stone (1991: 134) argued that for the coloured working class of the Cape Flats 'their own communal identity also constitutes a self-developed panoply of folk institutions, ..., with cultural achievements in oral lexis, rhetorical skill, music and visual art.'

Oliphant worked with young women and men in their twenties, who had in common that they were 'Coloured' and had grown up in the townships of the Cape Flats. They were all successful in professional careers or postgraduate studies by now; some now lived in formerly 'white' parts of the city but continued to consider the Cape Flats 'home'. Her ethnographic fieldwork was interested in how they see the Cape Flats, often still uniformly dismissed as a desolate place, and how they relate to the marginalised Kaaps version of Afrikaans that they had grown up speaking. Oliphant (2010) found that these young women and men, who have no personal memories of life in the pre-removals urban spaces, such as District Six, had formed their social networks on the Cape Flats. This is the space where they experience a sense of community, which Oliphant's research found to be reflected in the young people's everyday and musical performance of 'being from the Cape Flats'. Irrespective of whether the young rap artists wrote their lyrics in Afrikaans or English, they assumed a pride in their differing linguistic background. On the one hand, they thus demonstrated pride in showing off, and connecting, their local history, place, and a linguistic perspective of the kind that the stage production and the filmed documentary *Afrikaaps* are attempting to bring forward. On the other hand, however, their performances in music and the everyday lacked any reference to the KhoiSan identity politics, so prominently displayed in the *Afrikaaps* production.

### **Notes in conclusion**

As Kelly Askew (2002: 14-5) writes, performance is always "contingent, emergent, undetermined, and susceptible to unrehearsed actions." This has become apparent in the convergencies and ruptures of performance as enactment in formal, marked events set aside from everyday life (such as the *Afrikaaps* artistic performances) and as the informal enactment of social categories in everyday life as studied by Oliphant in her field work with young, upwardly-mobile speakers of Cape Flats Afrikaans.

The young men and women, Oliphant worked with expressed little interest in mythical pasts and the associated authenticating aesthetics. The *Afrikaaps* production's celebration of the KhoiSan origins of coloured people and of the Afrikaans language, on the other hand, – where the performers are in constant motion around the stage, excitedly exploring with each other the 'clicks' origins of Afrikaans words, play the musical bows and visually embrace the KhoiSan imagery' - seems to fit in perfectly well with the effervescent cultural identity politics of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ethnically-specified 'heritage' dynamics appear to have replaced the black consciousness politics of earlier musical Cape Flats lingo activism as the icon of both content and aesthetics. The renaming of *gamtaal* as *Afrikaaps* by a new

generation of cultural activists<sup>13</sup> ostensibly resonates with an aestheticised culturalisation, moving the goalpost from an activism focused on claim-making from the ghetto to one that authenticates claims through the reclamation of (real or imagined) repressed forms of cultural and historical heritage.<sup>14</sup>

It has thereby also shifted perceptions of the senses and Cape Town as a city in the making. While crude generalisations about Cape Town 'not being an African city' have been dismissed as missing the beat of the city's complexities, they are often located in the historical experience of hurt and anger. As one of Cape Town's leading cultural activists has asked pointedly, 'whose tastes, smells, feelings, sights and sounds will come to prevail in defining the character and experience of the city' (Van Graan 2007: v), remains an open question, as much as the challenges of the politics of authentication through which mediated, particularly performative, cultural forms come to be framed as authentic and 'true'.

Fieldwork with young 'up-and-coming' people from the Cape Flats, as Oliphant dubbed them, confirmed the *Afrikaaps* documentary film's interviews with teenagers from coloured townships that the message 'Make (Afri)Kaaps legal' has powerful resonance. The question remains, which culturo-political discourses and aesthetics are going to frame the claim. While Oliphant's research did not indicate much interest in heritage dynamics among young upwardly mobile people from the Cape Flats, provisional evidence from circles of cultural activists and classroom discussions at UWC suggests that in the present moment the mythical 'KhoiSan' past has increasingly come to provide a structure of feeling among the coloured middle-classes, and those aspiring to join them. The sonic and visual aesthetics of KhoiSan imagery, as mediated through the contemporary urban cultural production, *Afrikaaps* apparently has clearly become more explicitly used in claim-making politics. Other examples include, among others, musical enterprises such as the now defunct *KhoiKonnexion*, or the three-part series of 'Khoi-San story' documentaries by Cape Town film maker Weaam Williams, dubbed 'Stories from the Caves'.<sup>15</sup>

After considering *Afrikaaps* in context, it has become apparent how this multi-media production's visual and musical aesthetics converge in the performed production of history, and how they are employed in attempts at authenticating a recently asserted linguistic and cultural 'identity'. We continue to be amazed how the shifting notions of inclusion and exclusion in Cape Town are mediated through sensual cultural forms and the aesthetics of sound and sight, which overlay each other in multiple ways.

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<sup>13</sup> Except for Black Noise founder Emile YX?, who comes from the same generation as those rappers, such as Shaheen Ariefdien, who in the 1990s laid claim to 'gamtaal'.

<sup>15</sup> More systematic research is required into the connections between the aesthetics of the performative narrative of the KhoiSan mythical past and contemporary coloured identity and claim-making politics. An interesting example in this respect is the aesthetic persuasion of the *Afrikaaps* song that calls on "KhoiSan" to "Kom" and "kry terug jou land" ("come, get your land back") used in a video clip of the encounter between the predominantly coloured 'Occupy' Rondebosch Commons movement and the South African Police in early 2012. (*Afrikaaps: Kom Khoisan!*)

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