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## **Black Transnationalism and Diaspora in Hip Hop: An Analysis of Billy Woods' "Asylum"**

Rayli Dornan

"Some nights strange music plays, I lay in bed and listen," Billy Woods utters in his 2022 song "Asylum," from the album *Aethiopes*, positioning himself between Black transnationalism and diaspora and constructing a productive tension within the two frameworks.<sup>1</sup> There exists a critical perspective of the universally destructive effects of colonialism, as well as a collective Black cultural identity defined outside of the shared memory of slavery. This tension is not in opposition, but rather highlights the Black condition as borderless, regardless of the aesthetic methods of tackling Black collectivism as a phenomenon. Woods' "Asylum" is therefore a Black transnationalist and diasporic critique of colonialism, primarily achieved through pointed lyricism and sampling. Black transnationalism considers the political and cultural diasporic continuity among Afrodescendants that exists in spite of the effects of the transatlantic slave trade. Despite the shared diasporic continuity emphasized by Black transnationalism, there's a distinct focus on the identity evolution post-migration, delineating a tension between sustained connections and evolving cultural identities. Within this tension, there is a close examination of the identity formation that occurs after a migration of peoples, typically from their ancestral homeland. To better understand the context of "Asylum," it is necessary to evaluate its place within this scope.

Billy Woods has been rapping under most music fans' radar since 2002, prioritizing his anonymity and artistry over all else; thus, his advocacy tends to have less of an impact. Woods was born and now lives on the East Coast of the United States, but has spent much time in

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Woods, "Asylum," Genius Lyrics, 2022, <https://genius.com/Billy-woods-asylum-lyrics>.

Jamaica to visit his mother's family, and in Zimbabwe due to his father's activity in the liberation movement.<sup>2</sup> This automatically places the storytelling of "Asylum" in a position that is not fully American, yet not fully African either. It opens the album *Aethiopes* and immediately sets an unsettling and grave tone, developed through experimental techniques of sound manipulation and sampling, fitting well in the album's collection of other eerie songs. "Asylum" is fully concerned with diaspora, although its outward criticisms of slavery are rather purposefully easy to miss. Bayo Holsey theorizes that "while the experience of slavery may be at the root of ideas about a shared Black cultural citizenship and is therefore an implicit element of it, explicit memories of slavery are not always an integral part of these formations."<sup>3</sup> This idea seems to be an essential theme of Woods' work, in which cultural style connects a global Black population more intrinsically than a shared trauma. Woods does set up this connection through times of hardship, in this instance referencing colonial occupation in Zimbabwe, to show that while colonialism's effects may be universally catastrophic, there are ways in which a global Black population can prevail culturally in spite of limitations. The specific gravity of transnationalist and diasporic influence in this song is best understood by analyzing "Asylum" from start to finish, as its narrative results in a profound discussion of colonialism's effects.

"Asylum" opens with "I think Mengistu Haile Mariam is my neighbor," and subsequently sets up a scene of luxury inside a barbed wire fence, so as to consider captivity's relation to wealth within the Black identity.<sup>4</sup> Mengistu Haile Mariam was a dictator of Ethiopia who fled to Zimbabwe for political asylum after losing power, and was later found guilty of genocide.<sup>5</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> Dean Van Nguyen, "Time Goes By: Interview with Billy Woods," *Nerdtorius.com*, January 10, 2013, <https://nerdtorius.com/2013/01/09/time-goes-by-interview-with-billy-woods/>.

<sup>3</sup> Bayo Holsey, "BLACK ATLANTIC VISIONS: History, Race, and Transnationalism in Ghana," *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 3 (July 26, 2013): 504-518, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cuan.12017>.

<sup>4</sup> Woods, "Asylum" (2022).

<sup>5</sup> "Mengistu Haile Mariam," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mengistu-Haile-Mariam>.

is noteworthy not because of what Mengistu Haile Mariam did in Ethiopia, but because of how comfortably he seems to have lived in Zimbabwe. As his metaphorical neighbor, Billy Woods is describing an economically prosperous life, which is in stark contrast to the intense lack of freedom others are experiencing. Woods further supports this contradiction a bit further in the verse: “It’s been quite bad lately, high tension, galvanized steel security fencin’.”<sup>6</sup> This phrasing outlines a condition that is inescapable regardless of political power or income, as it is solely defined by being Black. It is crucial to note that the economic disparities exemplified by Woods and Mariam’s places in the story are not simply a result of individual actions but are deeply rooted in the historical structures of colonial exploitation that prioritize wealth accumulation at the expense of oppressed peoples. Following this thread, Woods subtly critiques colonialism, further affirming the power it still holds over Afrodescendants. The first moment of this critique is in the line “His bodyguard chews khat, spits black in the rhododendron.”<sup>7</sup> This is a sly reference, as it hints to Zimbabwe’s colonial name, Rhodesia. Of course, once that is understood, it is rather easy to see that the bodyguard spitting on this colonial history is critical. In this subtle act, Woods hints at the fragile safety contingent upon societal acceptance and the transient nature of havens, echoing the uncertainty faced by Afrodescendants in spaces that may offer temporary refuge.

Later in the song, Woods raps, “but a haven’s only safe as long as they want you around. Tomorrow it’s no tellin’.”<sup>8</sup> Under colonialist rule, and even after liberation, safety is offered with strings attached. This perspective on safety may make the controlled environment laid out in the song simply metaphorical, although it still produces a condition that feels inescapable. As

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<sup>6</sup> Woods, “Asylum.”

<sup>7</sup> Woods, “Asylum.”

<sup>8</sup> Woods, “Asylum.”

Georgine Clarsen argues, the potential and actual capacities of settlers to roam as autonomous sovereign subjects and, conversely, the circumscription and controlling of the mobilities of Indigenous and enslaved peoples are foundational to settler colonialism.<sup>9</sup> This highlights the universal lack of freedom found in colonial settlements. A diasporic consideration of Woods' song acknowledges that while the story is set in Zimbabwe, it is simultaneously in the United States, meaning that the Black condition transcends borders due to colonialism and the ways in which it limits Black mobility. This notion of constrained mobility underlines a transnational interconnectedness within the Black experience, further revealing the enduring legacy of colonialism in shaping and restricting movement across various global contexts. Thus, Woods' narrative transcends geographical confines, resonating with the struggles of Black communities worldwide. His song further illustrates the pervasive impact of historical systems of control and how they continue to reverberate and shape the realities and possibilities for Black individuals, not only within specific locales, but across borders. The parallels drawn between settler colonialism's control over mobility in Zimbabwe and its resonances in the United States reveal a universality of the Black condition, as the shared constraints and challenges imposed by historical colonial legacies on Black autonomy persevere.

To further contextualize Black mobility, consider Frantz Fanon's concept of the "collective unconscious" as it steadies the conversation in its transnationalist framework. The "collective unconscious" refers to the shared psychological experiences and traumas that are inherited by a particular group of people, often as a result of historical and systemic oppression.<sup>10</sup> Within Black mobility, the collective unconscious manifests as a shared awareness and memory

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<sup>9</sup> Georgine Clarsen, "Pedaling Power: Bicycles, Subjectivities and Landscapes in a Settler Colonial Society," *Mobilities* 10, no. 5 (July 8, 2014): 706–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2014.927201>.

<sup>10</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

of the historical injustices and barriers that have shaped the experiences of Black individuals and communities worldwide, particularly with the loss of sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> Fanon and Richard Philcox write that “in the colonial situation, culture, which is doubly deprived of the nation and the state, falls away and dies. The condition for its (culture's) existence is therefore national liberation and the renaissance of the state.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, hip hop emerged as a cultural renaissance for Afrodescendants in America, offering a platform for creative expression, resistance, and community-building in the face of limited mobility. For Black individuals, mobility has historically been constrained by systems of oppression and has imposed psychological and emotional limitations on Black individuals, shaping their perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. The collective unconscious therefore encompasses the shared experiences of displacement, marginalization, and resistance that characterize the Black diasporic experience. It reflects the deep-seated awareness of historical injustices and the enduring impact of systemic racism on Black mobility, as well as the transnationalist cultural exchanges that have been born from such struggles. Woods echoes these sentiments through his chorus: “Never told the truth in your life? Can't start now. Ever so slowly, slowly locked up in your own house.”<sup>13</sup> This showcases that limited Black mobility is not isolated to specific incidents or regions, but is rather a diasporic phenomenon that transcends cultural boundaries. The song’s use of sampling only further forges these connections.

Sampling, or the inclusion and reutilization of pre-existing works in new media, is not solely used as an accent in hip hop: rather, samples can inform the entirety of a song, or at least highlight its content by privileging repetition. Marcel Swiboda argues that sampling may be a

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<sup>11</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 170.

<sup>12</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 170.

<sup>13</sup> Woods, “Asylum.”

means of the African-American culturally specific “signifyin’,” in which quotation is used to mobilize rhetorical play, typically directed at other persons aware of the situational context. By framing sampling as a manifestation of “signifyin’,” a culturally specific phenomenon within African-American tradition, Swiboda shows how Black hip hop artists utilize sampling as a cultural language directed at those cognizant of the situational context.<sup>14</sup> In addition to effectively setting the unnerving tone of the track, Woods’ choice of sample “signifies” a relatively deep cut. The opening sample of “Asylum” is the Ethio-Jazz song “Gubelyé” by Alemayehu Eshete, from his album *Ethiopiennes*, recorded between 1972 and 1974.<sup>15</sup> By selecting a song that is so unknown and inaccessible to most American listeners, Woods indicates his connection to, and knowledge of, African music which is frequently drawn from throughout the rest of the album. Furthermore, Woods’ deliberate use of culturally rich samples not only showcases his deep-rooted connections but also establishes a space wherein musical traditions from all across the African diaspora converge. By employing such nuanced sampling techniques, he elevates the significance of his work beyond mere sonic appreciation, fostering a deeper connection to the intricate layers of cultural heritage woven into the fabric of his music. These samples then become points of reference to further support a transnationalist framework of thought, and upon listening, the tone of the song is immediately set.

“Gubelyé” is an aesthetically beautiful piece, consisting of racing piano keys that support Eshete’s Amharic vocals, later interrupted by a soft horn section. However, the sonic beauty of the track is unimportant considering its significance of its place in the song. Rather, it being

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<sup>14</sup> Marcel Anthony Swiboda, “When Beats Meet Critique: Sample-Based Hip-Hop as Knowledge-Practice,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 10, no. 1 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v10i1.3027>.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Denselow, “Alemayehu Eshete, Ethiopiennes 22 ‘More Vintage!’” *The Guardian*, October 11, 2007, sec. Music, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/oct/12/worldmusic.shopping1>.

Ethio-Jazz is evidence of a transnationalist exchange of cultural production, which Woods uses to illustrate a setting that is both African and American. Jazz has a highly diasporic history, and its narrative has not been based on a canon that exists solely within the United States and then exported internationally. Diasporic jazz has its own integrity, and rather than being exported, it has been invented through dissemination.<sup>16</sup> Woods continues to promote this pattern of jazz reinvention by combining contemporary experimental hip hop themes with more classical jazz elements from “Gubelyé,” highlighting the differences between diasporic music. Through the strategic use of sampling, Woods extends this discourse of diasporic reinvention within his music. By blending experimental hip hop with classic jazz elements from “Gubelyé,” he not only juxtaposes but also synthesizes divergent musical trends. This intentional fusion becomes a sonic representation of the contested narrative surrounding diasporic music, highlighting its evolution, adaptation, and reimagining across geographical and cultural boundaries. Woods’ sampling technique serves as a sonic metaphor, echoing the dialogue about the integrity and evolution of diasporic music, challenging notions of musical exportation, and emphasizing the creative agency of artists within these diverse musical landscapes. Then, there is a moment around the halfway point of the song, that, while not a sample, interrupts Woods in a significant way, continuing diasporic reinvention.

In this moment, the bouncing notes of saxophone almost drown out the lyrics entirely, showcasing an important connection between Africa and America through its sound. The obvious jazz influence grounds the listener back in the United States, serving as another reminder of the universal harm of colonialism. The fleeting yet impactful interlude of jazz within the composition symbolizes the enduring resilience and cultural exchange that transcends

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce Johnson, *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation* (New York: Routledge, 2020).



geographical boundaries. Woods is careful to layer the track, both lyrically and instrumentally, in a manner that discomforts his listeners, thereby further reinforcing the theme of the inescapability of colonial exploitation. To place this amongst other transnationalist works, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* provides a similar moment grappling with the hopelessness of occupation, as the protagonist discusses "he," the colonialist state: "Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."<sup>17</sup> This phenomenon that exists throughout diasporic artistic works is the struggle to preserve, create, and protect cultural identities amidst the destruction of nationhood. Reaching the song's finale, Woods dangles this hope above his listeners and solidifies its scarcity upon completion.

The outro of "Asylum" is a clip from the film *Kongi's Harvest*, in which this critique of colonialism is on full display. The 1970 Nigerian drama, written by Wole Soyinka, satirizes the tyranny that arose in many African nations following the decline of independent personal rule. In the sampled section, the character from the film says, "I must confess Kabiyesi, this detention seems to look well on you. But, so does captivity look well on a lamb we are fattening up for the feast."<sup>18</sup> This again highlights the lack of safety and comfort in Woods' imagined situation, where the character is no safer than an animal of prey under colonialism. This poignant excerpt not only illustrates the vulnerability and lack of security within Woods' narrative but also serves as a stark reminder of the historical realities of colonialism. By drawing from a scene that vividly portrays the manipulation and subjugation of Indigenous peoples, Woods extends the discourse beyond his personal narrative, shedding light on the broader implications of colonialism and its enduring impact on diasporic communities. The use of this cinematic reference amplifies the

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<sup>17</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 126-127.

<sup>18</sup> Woods, "Asylum."

themes of displacement, exploitation, and the persistent struggle against oppressive systems, resonating with the experiences of diasporic individuals navigating the remnants of a colonial past as a new identity is pieced together.

“Asylum” is a scathing critique that Billy Woods carefully crafted to aim at colonialism and its disastrous effects on global culture. Via the song’s lyrics, instrumental elements, and cultural connections, Woods deftly navigates the realms of Black transnationalism and diaspora. Positioned between these frameworks, the song embodies a tension that transcends conventional boundaries, delving into the legacy of colonialism while crafting a collective Black cultural identity that exists beyond the shared memories of slavery. The song resonates within the spectrum of Black transnationalism, echoing the enduring cultural and political continuum among Afrodescendants. Woods’ own experiences, straddling spaces in the United States, Jamaica, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, imbue “Asylum” with a liminality, a narrative neither wholly American nor entirely African. Through haunting experimental tones and unsettling techniques, the song subtly challenges explicit recollections of slavery while illustrating a cultural interconnection among the global Black populace. This musical narrative effectively critiques colonial legacies, economic disparity, and confinement. Woods’ strategic use of sampling becomes a sonic conduit, merging diverse musical traditions, challenging notions of musical exportation, and emphasizing the resiliency of artists within diasporic landscapes. Interruptive elements in the song, like the jazzy saxophone interlude and the poignant excerpt from *Kongi’s Harvest*, further amplify the inescapable echoes of colonial exploitation, magnifying themes of displacement, exploitation, and resistance within diasporic narratives. Ultimately, “Asylum” stands as a compelling fusion of lyricism and sonic manipulation that transcends borders, unearths shared struggles, and highlights cultural interconnectedness within the global Black

experience under colonialism and its legacies. As Woods raps, “it's ghosts in the building's bones, so many skeletons in the ground.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Woods, “Asylum.”

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