Akon: The Truth Behind the Bars

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"Konvict is the genre," Akon emphatically tells *Billboard Magazine*. "When I first came out, it was all created in jail, so we called it that. It's gimmicky but it reminds me of the path I came from and how it changed my life" (qtd. In Mitchell).

Slam. The cold steel bars of the jail door clang shut on a young, dark-skinned man. A few seconds later, the prisoner whispers one word: konvict. This word, which creates a vivid image, opens most of Akon's songs, hinting at the common theme of incarceration. Jail and the context around mass incarceration, both at the national and international level, are central to Akon's brand as an artist. Recently, however, this brand came under fire because of Akon's alleged fabrication and exaggeration of his criminal past. Mass media latched onto this falsehood, which resulted in dire misunderstandings about Akon and his connection with the experience of incarceration. In other words, the mass media perpetuated a perversion of Akon's metaphor of jail to silence his deeper social critique of the African American experience in the United States.

Incarceration is fundamental to Akon's brand as a Hip-Hop artist. With the launch of his hit single "Locked Up" in 2004, Akon inserted himself into the public spotlight as a self-proclaimed criminal. He publicly boasted about his arrests for gun possession and car theft to gain notoriety in the Hip Hop community (Sisario). Akon goes as far as implying that he wrote his single "Tired of Runnin'" while incarcerated

(Akon). Akon's brand of criminality spans his musical and artistic works. For example, he acted in two movies: *Black November* and *American Heist*. In both films, he was the criminal antagonist (Champion). This branding worked for a few years as Akon gained the public eye as well as a fortune of 20 million dollars ("Akon Net").

Akon's veneration for incarceration, from flaunting his alleged arrest record to the name of his genre Konvict, was not unchallenged. In 2008, multiple sources, including the FBI, revealed that Akon was not the criminal he portrayed. *The New York Times* wrote a scathing review that included the contradiction that, though Akon claimed to have led an "extensive car-theft ring," he was never convicted (Sisario). Katherine Thompson of *The Huffington Post* wrote an article titled "Akon's History of Prison and Arrests Revealed as a Fake Marketing Tool," tagging it with the keywords "Akon Liar." In the article, Thompson reported that "police, court, and corrections records reveal that the entertainer created a fictionalized backstory that serves as the narrative anchor for his recorded tales of isolation, violence, woe, and regret." *The Guardian* went even further, quoting FBI special Agent Peter McFarlane who said: "Ah, this is bullshit. This guy is a phony. He's an arrogant SOB" (qtd. in Swash). These three cases represent the media outrage towards Akon's spotty criminal past. However, by drawing concern only to the inconsistency, the media created a smoke screen that confused Akon's words in an effort to distract from his real message; his message is *konvict*, not *convict*. The distinction is meaningful because, contrary to the media's interpretation, Akon's music is not an epic about his own experience in a literal jail, but instead, of his daily experience in socially constructed jails he and other African Americans face at the national and international level. He writes about the incarceration he felt as an African American in the United States

and his worldview about the shackles Senegal, his African country of origin, faces in the post-colonial African economic system.

Akon uses song to depict the harsh realities of growing up in racial "ghettos" within the United States. He graphically raps about police brutality and the disproportionate impact incarceration has on African American communities. Akon makes a point to address how these instances of inequality within the justice system effect young children. The three best examples of Akon's songs that highlight these domestic incarceration concerns are: "Tired of Runnin'," "Ghetto," and "Locked Up."

Akon's song "Tired of Runnin'" is a nostalgic letter to his girlfriend, a letter he composed in jail. He reflects on the reason he is in jail, blaming his incarceration on systematic racism and flaws in the criminal justice system. His opening verses are powerful social critiques, exemplifying Akon's experience in the ghetto:

> I'm sittin' on my porch, watching the law,
> As they ride past in they patrol cars,
> So tell me why I feel like the enemy,
> They're supposed to be here protectin' me…
> This gangsta life ain't no longer in me
> And I'm tired of runnin,'
> Tired of the runnin' from the law. (Akon, "Tired")

Akon presents an image in the lyrics of police making authoritarian patrols around a impoverished neighborhood while an African American man is trapped inside, terrified. Akon questions why law enforcement protects some while terrorizes others. By presenting this paradox of the justice system, Akon solidifies his position that his theme of konvict is not an isolated, personal experience (even though his use of his own name in the term suggests a level of internal imprisonment); konvict is a

transcendent experience for racially and economically oppressed communities of color in American "ghettos."

Akon expands on this "ghetto experience" in his song labeled "Ghetto" which draws the nexus between judicial and economic shackles. In the song, he builds on his already prevalent theme of police brutality and corruption when he sings that there are "teeth marks on my back from the K-9." He blames these teeth marks, both literal and metaphoric, on "crooked cops" that make children feel like "everyday is gon' be their last." In addition to the profound fear, Akon's song brings the term *ghetto* into the conversation. Julie Anne White, a linguistic academic, identifies that the term *ghetto* carries fierce stereotypes of violence since American ghettos have traditionally been a space of revolt against colonial and racial exploitation (273). The incorporation of *ghetto* into Akon's music analogizes the incarceration system and other societal shackles that disproportionately affect African American communities. As such, Akon includes examples of police brutality associated with the "ghetto experience" to draw attention to fear, a debilitating metaphoric jail imposed on minority communities.

The song "Ghetto" takes the conversation of incarceration one step farther by explaining economic walls that systemically disenfranchise poor communities. Akon sings that "these streets remind me of quicksand / when you're in it, you'll keep going down / and there's no one to hold on to / and there's no one to pull you out." This sense of helplessness results in a sense of "self destruction" and hopelessness because every luxury "comes and goes, even the life you have is borrowed." By writing that all material goods come and go and that life itself is borrowed, Akon complicates the second layer of his domestic jail: money. By creating an environment that perpetuates drug sales to "feed

the kids," the ghetto experience is rooted in economic inequality (Akon, "Ghetto"). Wealth comes in the form of another borrowed day and food on your plate. As a result, kids are taught by experience that material wealth is not an aspiration, but a wall; poverty is a divisive economic wall constructed by society to make an "us" and a "them." One of these group has interests in supporting the "jail keepers" while the other group is locked within the economic jail of the ghetto.

Finally, Akon's song "Locked Up" further explores the notion of incarceration in the context of a multi-national individual. Akon's first two lines are a powerful double entendre, a literary tool that Adam Bradley, an expert in Hip Hop lyricism, labels as "coded forms of communication, speaking to a select group of initiates with a shared set of cultural knowledge" (96). The double entendre in the song "Locked Up" is: "I'm steady trynna find a motive / why do I do what I do? / The freedom ain't getting' no closer." On the surface, the word "motive" is analogous with "inspiration" or "drive" to work or succeed, a shrug to the stigma surrounding immigrant workers. However, as Bradley identifies, those with shared cultural knowledge decode the word "motive" as a reference to the judicial system in which freedom is a privilege reserved for choice few. Akon narrates a story about how police officers stop him in a "random" patrol, resulting in Akon being "locked up." Once inside the jail, Akon laments that "they won't let me out" even though he has a family on the outside. As a result, incarceration not only perpetuates the theme that police prejudice creates a jail that limits freedom, but incarceration itself also separates families. By separating families, these judicial injustices create a cycle that passes the experience of jail down through the generations.

In these three songs, Akon writes about different jails that are part of the ghetto experience of, according to Chuck D, systematic "social silencing" (qtd. in Bradley and DuBois 793). However, unlike the popular media's portrayal and interpretation, the shackles Akon identifies span beyond his own experience. The experience of jail is due to systematic failures of the criminal justice system, economic walls, as well as family separation. However, because the mass media misunderstood Akon's brand of konvict, popular media discourses miss the fact that Akon is entering into the already contentious academic and social conversation around incarceration and race.

Akon's music works hand-in-hand with academics like Christopher Lyons and Becky Pettit who write about the "compound disadvantage" of race, incarceration, and wage growth. Their article parallels well with Akon's songs. For instance, in "Locked Up," Akon joins with Lyons and Pettit to bring attention to racial discrepancies in the justice system (Lyons 257). In his song "Tired of Runnin'," Akon unpacks these discrepancies by critiquing the relationship between incarceration rates and race. Lyons and Pettit, after conducting a social stratification study on Bureau of Justice Statistics records, found evidence of the extent of these discrepancies. The scholars found that one in three African American men can "expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime" (Lyons 258). Finally, Akon's song "Ghetto" speaks to the economic shackles that Lyons and Pettit confirm with their finding that African Americans have a 21 percent lower rate of employment after incarceration (257). Therefore, by focusing public attention towards superficial understandings of incarceration, popular media silences the deeper scholarly conversation about the jail-like confines of the racially prejudiced U.S. criminal justice system.

The second form of incarceration that Akon sings about, and that the popular media perverts, is the international jail. First, it is important to note that the concept of international Hip-Hop is not a new concept. James Spady, a Hip Hop academic, defines Hip Hop as a "global urban language" (128). Philippe Wamba, another Hip Hop historian and scholar, breaks Hip-Hop down as a collection of "diverse interconnections linking black music from around the world in an international cultural system" (251). Wamba praises Hip Hop's powerful ability to "link between African American and African musical traditions and liberation struggles" (270). This international and cultural bond is prevalent in Akon's home country of Senegal. For example, Senegalese rapper Simon Bisbi Clan has utilized work by artists like KRS One and Public Enemy to "give a voice to the voiceless youth" that are struggling with homelessness and poverty. He said that common themes in U.S. Hip-Hop gave Senegalese youth the channel to start developing their own "cultural voice." Similar to Simon Bisbi Clan, Akon writes songs that speak to the international Hip Hop community. However, he uses that international microphone to further his brand and social message of konvict. In his songs "Freedom," "Mama Africa," and "Senegal," Akon extends his image of the jail to include the international economic shackles that Senegal faces in the post-colonial African economic system.

Akon's song "Freedom" is a tribute to the isolation and social jail inflicted on immigrants within the United States. The song begins with the story of Akon's family who came "from Senegal, West Africa to St. Louis, Missouri." His father and mother "did the best with what they had." However, his family faced backlash from their community because everyone knew that they were the "foreigners from another town." Instead of giving up, Akon, in a verse of pure strength and determination,

exclaims that he won't give up until he gets that "freedom." His top priority as an immigrant is to break the shackles placed on him by the disdain of his community.

In "Freedom," Akon covertly pays homage to his African roots when he describes the way in which his father wanted to "change the world." He says that his pops "came down with his drum." The symbol of the drum is an international emblem that connects African and African American Hip Hop. Phillipe Wamba points out that this symbol has historical significance since slave owners forbade slaves from singing their traditional African songs (261). In the face of such adversity, these slaves created intricate beats that were expressive of their African heritage and culture. These polyphonic beats, according to LeRoi Jones, were a communicative symbol of the fight against colonial enslavement (25). Akon uses this symbol to expand the enslavement of African people to the enslavement of his country.

Akon further explores this international imprisonment in his song "Mama Africa." He writes that his old mother Africa has "so much love to share." But he also brings attention to the post-colonial divisions within Africa when he pleads that Africa "needs to unite." He lyrically complicates this message when he creates the following acronym:

> A: Is for all the love and the life took away
> F: Don't forget we were bought and trade
> R: Ripped from the land and shipped away
> I: is the inspiration we use to survive
> C: Have to see it with your own cries
> A: No play add it up and arrive. (Akon, "Mama Africa")

In this acronym, Akon urges his audience and other African Americans to not forget how they came to the United States. Slavery took away their

autonomous lifestyles when slave dealers "ripped [them] from their land." Therefore, when Akon writes that he wants to reunite Africa, he is speaking about melding the divides left by the slave trade. His last word of caution is that this movement must be organic since "you won't see it on your TV" because the media is a force controlled by the oppressor. As a result, even though the literal shackles of slavery have been broken, Akon still condemns the current jail that his "Mama Africa" is locked in.

Akon takes his international jail metaphor and makes it country specific in his song titled "Senegal." This song is arguably the most complex song by Akon. He begins with clear depictions of violence in Senegal. He writes about an older man that "cops shot down" and child soldiers "with automatic machine guns waiting for the war to get on their side." This violence, according to Akon, is "right in the ghetto." His use of the code word "ghetto" links his feeling of incarceration in U.S. ghettos with the same feelings of violent and fear Africa, thus expanding the comparison of the ghetto and a jail to the international sphere. However, the covert meaning of the song is hidden in the first two lines: "I'm from Africa. Home of the Goree Islands." By highlighting the Goree Islands in his song's introduction, Akon makes a direct reference to Senegal's modern colonial shackles, specifically those imposed by the United States.

The Goree Islands have deep historical and contemporary roots to slavery. Michael Ralph, a scholar that has studied the contemporary slavery, researched a specific event in these islands that happened in 2003, the same year Akon wrote "Senegal." During 2003, then President George W. Bush made a diplomatic trip to the Goree Islands (Ralph 203). Advance teams for President Bush began their security preparations which included the mass imprisonment of Senegalese villagers in their sandlot soccer field (203). Ralph writes that this mass imprisonment

along with “the technique of coercion used to subdue Senegalese peoples in that moment reproduced the way enslavement historically occurred on Goree Islands” (204). Therefore, when Akon mentions these islands, he is condemning the United States’ horrific imprisonment of his people. In so doing, Akon takes his metaphoric notions of an international jail and makes them concrete in a decisive social critique of the United States actions, a deeper theme missed by popular media discourses.

Akon’s successful theme of jail and konvict, once applied to domestic and international contexts, is impactful in two key ways. First, it enters Akon into the conversation of criminal injustice, economic injustice, and the effects that the creation of a ghetto has on young people. Second, the fact that Akon’s metaphor is not literal in the way that popular media portrays it gives Akon the authority to then critique the current media system that does not read between the lines; current media looks for the superficial dramatic gossip and misses the deeper message.

Akon’s usage of themes and metaphors associated with incarceration create a profound social critique of the African American experience in the United States. Craig Watkins, an economist and Hip Hop scholar, notes that Hip Hop is a social critique and social movement in of itself (qtd. in Forman 700). He writes that “the intensification of racial and economic polarization in the United States” has forced black youth to “mobilize their own discourses, critiques, and representations of the crisis-colored scenarios” in the form of rap (698). This social movement and critique is the deeper discourse that connects Akon’s songs. However, by discounting Akon because of his isolated history, this powerful social statement is lost and misconstrued.

When Akon’s brand of incarceration and convict are attacked, the popular media also enters into this conversation; the popular media

opens itself up to criticism. Erica Scharrer, a specialist in mass communications, proposes a potential solution for the media's influence on incorrect racial and ethnic perpetuation of stereotypes (171). She argues that readers, when presented with complex scenarios like Akon, need "media literacy" that encourages "an active and critical stance toward media" (171). This "media literacy" would enable Akon's audience to recognize the deeper impactful meaning of konvict.

Even though popular media questioned Akon's authenticity in 2008, his true intentions are clearer than ever. He has started an important charity that is focused on counteracting the economic shackles that Senegal faces. He started the charity Lighting Africa to counteract the power crisis in Africa. Akon chose power because electricity, according to Eastern African specialists Nyasha Kasek and Stephen Hosking, is the prerequisite for economic development and growth (114). Akon's Lighting Africa initiative would help absolve these shackles by "providing relief to the 600 million Africans that don't have electricity" (Akon Lighting Africa).

Akon's charity verifies that Akon is not trying to use his allegedly fabricated criminal as a "Fake Marketing Tool" like media such as *The Huffington Post* would have the world believe. Instead, Akon uses konvict and the metaphor of the jail to provide social critique of a domestic system that forces African American youths into economic and unjust shackles, from police brutality to disproportionate mass incarceration. Furthermore, Konvict stands as a broader critique of the economic and violent shackles that Africa, specifically Senegal, faces in a new age of economic imperialism. As a result, popular media is exposed as superficial and inaccurate that silences Akon's social critiques of systematic disenfranchisement of communities of color in the United

States. Therefore, Hip Hop is left as an authentic voice for the African American experience in the U.S. and broader world, a voice that is profound, powerful, communal, and loud.

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